



| Flash |

Kosovo-Serbia Tensions Reignite

F-2023-06-02a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: MEDIUM

Intelligence Requirements: Social Unrest, Military

June 2, 2023

Scope Note

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| Flash |**Kosovo-Serbia Tensions Reignite****› Key Findings**

- Ethnic Serbs in Northern Kosovo have been protesting the appointment of ethnic Albanian mayors in Serb-majority municipalities.
- The ethnic Serb protesters clashed violently with Kosovar police and the Kosovo Force (KFOR), a NATO-led international peacekeeping force.
- On Friday, May 26, 2023, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic placed the Serbian Armed Forces at its “highest combat readiness level” and deployed troops to the Kosovo border.
- Kosovo alleged that Serbia orchestrated the protests.
- The violent clashes and tension escalation prompted NATO to deploy an additional 700 troops to the region.

| Details

In April 2023, ethnic Serbs boycotted the snap local election, and only ethnic Albanian or other smaller minority representatives were elected to mayoral posts and assemblies.¹ On a turnout of less than 4 percent, four mayors of ethnic Albanian origin were elected in

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[hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/world/europe/kosovo-puts-voting-containers-serb-majority-areas-despite-boycott-2023-04-20/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kosovo-puts-voting-containers-serb-majority-areas-despite-boycott-2023-04-20/)

Serb-majority municipalities.² On May 26, 2023, the ethnic Serbs in the northern Kosovar town of Zvecan gathered in front of its municipal buildings to prevent the newly elected Albanian mayor from entering his office.³ Kosovar police used force to disperse the protesters, which led to international condemnation and an increase in tensions with Serbia. Since then, protests have been ongoing in multiple areas of northern Kosovo.⁴⁵

NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) troops have been attempting to impose order in the region. During the protests on Monday, May 29, 2023, at least 41 KFOR soldiers were injured.⁶ The troops have been present at the demonstrations imposing peacekeeping measures, such as the deployment of barbed wire and assisting local authorities.⁷ On May 30, 2023, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced that 700 additional troops would be deployed to northern Kosovo to help quell violent protests.⁸

| Analyst Commentary

ZeroFox's Geopolitical Working Group has been tracking the current situation, which is a continuation of the tensions which started in July 2022 after a number of ethnic Serbs began forming barricades in response to an announcement that citizens of Serbia who entered Kosovo would receive documents for entry and exit.⁹ As a result, a controversial

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[hXXps://apnews\[.\]com/article/kosovo-serbia-tensions-explained-ba6dd56730dc43e6637644afb5455fb8](https://apnews.com/article/kosovo-serbia-tensions-explained-ba6dd56730dc43e6637644afb5455fb8)

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[hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/world/europe/serbia-orders-army-kosovo-border-after-protest-clashes-2023-05-26/](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbia-orders-army-kosovo-border-after-protest-clashes-2023-05-26/)

⁴ [hXXps://www.dw\[.\]com/en/serbia-sends-army-to-kosovo-border-as-protest-escalates/a-65746078](https://www.dw.com/en/serbia-sends-army-to-kosovo-border-as-protest-escalates/a-65746078)

⁵ [hXXps://www.021\[.\]rs/Info/komentari/341908](https://www.021.rs/Info/komentari/341908)

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[hXXps://www.ansa\[.\]it/sito/notizie/mondo/europa/2023/05/29/kosovo-feriti-negli-scontri-41-militari-kfor-11-sono-italiani_ad29ae29-065e-4371-965d-da040866ealc.html](https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/europa/2023/05/29/kosovo-feriti-negli-scontri-41-militari-kfor-11-sono-italiani_ad29ae29-065e-4371-965d-da040866ealc.html)

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[hXXps://www.novosti\[.\]rs/vesti/politika/1243869/drama-stanovnika-zvecanu-kfor-nas-pretresa-decamogu-napolje-svuda-bodljikava-zica-foto-video](https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1243869/drama-stanovnika-zvecanu-kfor-nas-pretresa-decamogu-napolje-svuda-bodljikava-zica-foto-video)

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[hXXps://www.pbs\[.\]org/newshour/world/nato-to-send-700-more-troops-to-kosovo-to-help-quell-violent-protests](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/nato-to-send-700-more-troops-to-kosovo-to-help-quell-violent-protests)

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[hXXps://n1info\[.\]rs/vesti/gradjani-srbije-koji-dolaze-na-kosovo-dobice-dokument-za-ulazak-i-izlazak/](https://n1info.rs/vesti/gradjani-srbije-koji-dolaze-na-kosovo-dobice-dokument-za-ulazak-i-izlazak/)

deadline for the issuing of Kosovar license plates to ethnic Serbs and the ban on Serb license plates was postponed.

The debate regarding Serb license plates in Kosovo was reignited in November 2022, which led to a spiral of tensions culminating in a massive walk-out of ethnic Serb policemen, mayors, judges, and members of parliament from Kosovar institutions.¹⁰ Amid these tensions, the snap local elections were announced but later postponed until April 2023.

In December 2022, local tensions continued increasing when Serbia claimed it was considering sending 1,000 troops, citing the content of the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 as its legal background.¹¹ Protests also spread through northern Kosovo after three ethnic Serb policemen were arrested. The protesters formed barricades that lasted nearly a month, far-right demonstrators gathered in Belgrade and near the Kosovo border, and multiple small-scale shootings occurred, reaching the climax of the tensions which had been growing for six months. In February 2023, after negotiations throughout January, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti agreed to give Kosovo Serbs more autonomy.

| Implications

In the upcoming days, it is highly likely that protests in northern Kosovo will continue. Based on the current political rhetoric, indicators, and warnings, it is likely that tensions could continue to rise. However, it is improbable that the spiral of tensions could lead to conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. In the medium term, a continuation of tensions is highly likely due to the inability to solve the underlying ethnic tensions and the involvement of foreign powers on both sides of the conflict.

¹⁰ [hXXps://www.dw\[.\]com/en/kosovo-sees-overnight-violence-amid-political-uncertainty/a-64061455](https://www.dw.com/en/kosovo-sees-overnight-violence-amid-political-uncertainty/a-64061455)

¹¹ [hXXps://www.slobodnaevropa\[.\]org/a/petkovi%C4%87-sever-kosova/32168241.html](https://www.slobodnaevropa[.]org/a/petkovi%C4%87-sever-kosova/32168241.html)

| Appendix: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
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