

Serbian Train Incident

Background

Kosovo and Serbia experienced a crisis related to Kosovo's contested sovereignty in early 2017.

On 16 February 2008, the province of Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia following nearly ten years of NATO and United Nations control of the former-Yugoslavian territory. Following the declaration, Serbia vowed unyielding but peaceful resistance to the secession. By 2017, 114 countries recognized Kosovo's independence.

NATO maintained a constant peacekeeping force in Kosovo – Kosovo Force (KFOR) – starting in June 1999. The NATO presence followed a two-year war between Serbia and Kosovo (Crisis 430), wherein nearly 10,000 individuals were killed. A 78-day, NATO-led air bombing campaign brought an end to the conflict. KFOR was gradually reduced in size from an initial 50,000 troops in 1999 to 5,000 troops by 2011.

NATO became supportive of Kosovo's bid to join the European Union (EU), into which Serbia also sought membership. The EU supported and assisted Kosovo with missions and in-country representation since 2008. Serbia applied for membership in 2009 and subsequently tried to reach the EU-mandated benchmarks necessary for full membership.

In late-2016 and early 2017, tensions between Serbia and Kosovo increased due to two separate incidents. In December 2016, local Serbian authorities in Kosovo began building a wall in the town of Mitrovica, dividing the town between ethnic Serbians and Albanians. The construction was met with criticism and was halted. On 4 January 2017, a former Kosovan prime minister and guerilla commander, Ramush Haradinaj, was arrested in France. French police arrested him due to a Serbian warrant. The warrant for Haradinaj's arrest was issued based on Serbian claims that he committed war crimes during the 1998-99 war between the two territories. Kosovo maintained that Haradinaj had already been tried by the UN for war crimes and was acquitted.

Summary

On 14 January 2017, Serbia dispatched a train to Kosovo that was painted in Serbian national colors and decorated in Serbian nationalist images and slogans such as "KOSOVO IS SERBIA," triggering a crisis for Kosovo. Decisionmakers in Kosovo perceived the train—the first to travel from Belgrade to northern Kosovo since the 1998-99 Kosovo war—as a threat to Kosovo's sovereignty. They pledged publicly to prevent it from traveling into Kosovo's territory.

Edita Tahiri, the Kosovan government minister who held communication responsibilities with Serbia, condemned the act as a "provocation" that "endangers the sovereignty and territorial integrity and national security" of Kosovo. She called on the international community to halt the "illegal Serbian train." Kosovo's Prime Minister, Isa Mustafa, reached out to the United States and the EU in order to express concerns about the train. Meanwhile, Kosovo's special police forces massed at the border in preparation to stop the train if necessary—this action on 14 January amounted to Kosovo's major response. Kosovo's police movement prompted a crisis for Serbia, whose leaders gathered in a specially convened National Security Council session.

Serbia's Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vucic, ordered that the train be stopped as it approached Kosovo's border, falsely stating that ethnic Albanians in Kosovo had attempted to place bombs along the railway. He said of the incident, and the decision: "This was an ambition to provoke a conflict, to start a wider conflict in this territory that we consider as ours...It was my decision to stop the train in Raska to preserve the freedom and lives of our people, to prevent a wider conflict and show that we want peace." Serbia's president, Tomislav Nikolic on 15 January accused Kosovan Albanians of attempting to provoke "war," and noted that the two nations were "on the verge of clashes." Serbia's accusations constituted their major response to the crisis.

The decision to stop the train before it reached the Kosovo border reduced immediate tensions, but did not end the crisis, as both sides continued to levy accusations in its aftermath. Kosovo's president, Hashim Thaci, declared that Serbia was planning to grab a portion of northern Kosovo using the "Crimea model," referencing Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in Ukraine. Nikolic pointed to Kosovo's deployment of special police at the border as evidence of its desire for war. The U.S. Embassy in Pristina, for its part, issued a statement urging all sides to reduce dangerous rhetoric, adding that "Kosovo is a sovereign, independent country and we respect the right of Kosovo to manage who and what crosses its borders." Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov urged the EU to help defuse tensions.

Although NATO has thousands of troops stationed in Kosovo, NATO was not involved during the crisis. The EU, however, supplied mediation—which both nations utilized as their primary crisis management technique. Serbia's Vucic and Nikolic met with Kosovo's Thaci and Mustafa in Brussels on 24 January, in a negotiation session hosted by EU Foreign Policy chief, Federica Mogherini. A second and final round of talks, again in Brussels, occurred on 1 February, but ultimately failed to immediately ease tensions between the two states. In bombastic language, Vucic publicly blamed Kosovo for the collapse of talks. Mogherini, on the other hand, stated that she was "encouraged by the constructive engagement shown by both sides."

There were no further talks between Serbia and Kosovo regarding the train incident, and both sides toned down rhetoric thereafter. The crisis faded after the second round of negotiations in early February 2017.

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