

Serbs protesting Kosovo independence attack US embassy in Belgrade

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Violence has flared once again in the former Yugoslavia, following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia on Sunday.

Around 200,000 demonstrated in central Belgrade Thursday night. Schools were closed and free rail transport provided for the official rally, which was addressed by Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica, who stood beneath a banner reading, "Kosovo is Serbia."

Following the peaceful protest, several hundred demonstrators broke into the US embassy, starting a blaze in one of its rooms. The embassy was closed at the time and no one was injured. The Croatian and British embassies were also attacked, without casualties. Riot police fired tear gas and beat protestors, leaving some bloodied on the ground.

Earlier, Kostunica had told the demonstrators, "Kosovo belongs to the Serbian people," while the crowd roared back, "We'll never give up Kosovo, never!" Ultra-nationalist leader Tomislav Nikolic said that the US and the European Union were trying to steal Kosovo from Serbia.

A deep undercurrent of popular hostility toward Washington has existed ever since the nearly three-month-long NATO air war against Serbia that was launched in March of 1999. The US-led campaign to split Kosovo from Serbia has raised anti-American sentiment to a fever pitch.

In the 1999 assault, US and British warplanes and missiles wreaked massive destruction in Belgrade, targeting basic infrastructure in the city, including bridges and electrical grids. Also hit were the Radio Television Serbia (RTS) station and the Chinese Embassy, where three Chinese citizens were killed.

Also on Thursday, there were unconfirmed reports of casualties after hundreds of protesters clashed with police at a separate protest rally in the Bosnian Serb republic (Republika Srpska).

Earlier in the day, hundreds of Serbian army reservists in uniform had pelted NATO-led troops with stones as they tried to cross the border point at Merdare, 30 miles northeast of Kosovo's capital Pristina. The Serb reservists' path was blocked by the Kosovo police, with the support of Czech troops from the NATO-led K-For force.

Serbia has condemned Kosovo's declaration of independence and its recognition by most of the Western powers as illegal

and illegitimate.

Since June 1999, following the bombing of Serbia by NATO forces, the Serbian province of Kosovo had been administered by the United Nations under Resolution 1244, which made no mention of independence and upheld the "territorial integrity" of Yugoslavia. But Washington has long made plain it would back Kosovan independence, in defiance of Russian and Chinese opposition, as part of its drive to secure its military and political hegemony in the geopolitically strategic Balkan region and strengthen its position in territories once part of the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union.

The European Union—with the crucial support of the UK, Germany and France—has been employed as a means of bypassing the UN Security Council and legitimizing Kosovo's unilateral declaration. The EU is, however, deeply split, with Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania and Slovakia amongst those opposing the declaration.

Thursday's demonstration came less than 24 hours after NATO forces reopened two border checkpoints that had been demolished by Serbian demonstrators. A crowd estimated at anywhere between several hundred and 1,000 people used bulldozers and explosives to remove the border posts at Jarinje and Brnjak, just 20 kilometres north of the ethnically divided city of Mitrovica.

The attacks were reported by some sources to have been carried out by Serbian paramilitaries in civilian clothes, forcing Kosovo police and UN customs officials to withdraw from the scene. The crossing was eventually closed by NATO's K-For troops in the area, led by the US and France.

Serb officials said the demonstrators were trying to prevent ethnic Albanian officials from setting up their own customs offices at the crossing points, as part of Kosovo's new international borders. A local Serbian mayor, Slavisa Ristic, said, "We cannot allow the institutions of a nonexistent state to be imposed on us with us paying taxes to some independent Kosovo. That is impossible."

Serbia's minister for Kosovo, Slobodan Samardzic, said the attack was "in accordance with the general [Serbian] government policies" to protect Serbia's territorial integrity.

"Belgrade has the intention to take over the customs in northern Kosovo," he said. "The customs points were intended

to become part of [Kosovo's] state border and we are not going to let that happen."

Some commentators have forecast a "second Kosovo" in the province's four northernmost Serb-dominated districts, including the northern half of Mitrovica, which is policed by Serbian security forces and dependent on Belgrade for social provisions such as health care and pensions.

In Mitrovica, where Serbian students have been organizing daily protests, three cars were damaged in a grenade attack near the office of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe on Tuesday.

There is already talk of partitioning Mitrovica along the Ibar river, which divides the city's Albanians and Serbs. The *Christian Science Monitor* cited former US diplomat James Hooper, of the International Law and Public Policy Group, as stating "The reality is that the north is lost to Kosovo, just as Kosovo is lost to Serbia."

He added, "US and European peace facilitators have treated northern Mitrovica and the area north of the Ibar River as a de facto part of Serbia since the NATO war ended in 1999, all the while piously proclaiming the need to maintain Kosovo's territorial integrity."

According to Balkan expert R. Bruce Hitchner of Tufts University in Medford, Mass., also cited by the *Christian Science Monitor*, "Unless NATO forces decide to cross the Ibar in force on behalf of the new Kosovo government, a de facto partition will result."

Earlier in the week, the Serbian parliament passed a resolution condemning Kosovo's declaration of independence and formally annulling the acts of the Pristina government as illegal under international law. Serbia's interior ministry has also filed criminal charges against Kosovo Albanian leaders, accusing them of proclaiming a "false state" on Serbian territory.

Serbia has withdrawn its ambassadors from the US, France, Turkey and Austria and has threatened to withdraw envoys from other countries backing the territory's secession. Speaking at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on Monday, Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic said his country would fight "tooth and nail" to have the independence declaration overturned, warning that those countries that had recognized Kosovo had set a dangerous precedent. "By the actions of some European member states, every would-be ethnic or religious separatist across Europe and around the world has been provided with a tool kit on how to achieve recognition," he said.

He continued, "Does anyone in this room think that the Kosovo Albanians are the only group in the world with a grievance against their capital?"

Serbia's stance has been echoed by Russia, which warned that EU recognition of Kosovo would damage relations between itself and the 27-nation bloc. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the EU's appointment of a task force to

administer Kosovo's police, customs and justice system was illegal.

"The EU, unilaterally, without any approval from the UN Security Council, is sending a mission to Kosovo to provide for the rule of law," he said. "There is bitter irony ... in this, because the mission is ... being sent in violation of the highest law—in violation of international law."

In an effort to legally square its provocative actions, the EU has argued that Kosovo is a unique case and that Serbia lost its right to govern the province because of its earlier repression of the Albanian majority.

But such justifications for independence can equally be employed regarding who should control the Serb-dominated areas in northern Kosovo. And they are already being utilized by separatist and nationalist movements in Europe and internationally.

Kosovo is "a lesson in how to resolve conflicts of identity and membership, peacefully and democratically," said Miren Askarate, spokeswoman for the Basque regional government in northern Spain, while Mehmet Ali Talat, leader of the Turkish Cypriots, said, "I salute the independence of Kosovo. No people can be forced to live under the rule of another."

On Wednesday, senior Palestinian official Yasser Abdel Rabbo suggested the Palestinians should follow Kosovo's example and declare statehood if current peace talks with Israel failed. "Kosovo is not better than Palestine," Rabbo said. If the whole world has embraced Kosovo's independence "why shouldn't this happen with Palestine as well?"

While rejected by Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas, such statements have caused grave unease in Israel, which has thus far refused to take a position on Kosovan independence. An unnamed Israeli official has said Israel would take its time in formulating its attitude. "We believe such issues should not be determined by unilateral steps but through negotiation," he said, warning of what he called "possible repercussions in this area."

Meanwhile, the BBC reported that some Kosovan Albanians are opposed to any involvement by the UN, EU and the major powers in Kosovo's affairs "though they remain a small minority. For now."

Albin Kurti, a former student activist who now leads the Vetevendosje (Self-determination) movement, has condemned EU-administered "independence" as a betrayal of full sovereignty and has called for Kosovo's future to be determined in a referendum, without any reference to the UN or the EU.



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