

Tensions remain high after clashes on Kosovo-Serbia border

Ante Dotto
9 August 2011

Tensions remain high after violent clashes broke out again at the end of last month on the Kosovo-Serbia border. On July 25, a special unit of the Kosovo Police launched an unprecedented night raid aiming to take over two posts on the border with Serbia that still remain under international control. In response, Kosovo Serbs set up road blockades the next day, and, as tensions escalated, burnt down one of the border posts on July 27.

The unilateral, NATO-enforced “independence” of Kosovo from Serbia in February 2008 has left fundamental issues like national territory unresolved. As is the case throughout the Balkans, borders that divide people have been deliberately imposed, serving the self-interest of the imperialist powers. That is why every incident like this has the potential to run out of control, threatening wider regional conflagration.

The newly formed western protectorate incorporated many ethnic Serbs, concentrated north of the town of Mitrovica to the border with Serbia and geographically divided from the rest of Kosovo by the river Ibar. The two crossings, and much of the north, have been out of the control of the central government in Pristina since Kosovo declared independence. A virtual Serb self-government operates in the area.

At the time, Serb demonstrators also burnt the posts down, refusing to recognize a border that would separate them from Serbia. They also claimed that the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo contravened United Nations Resolution 1244 passed in 1999, which upheld the “territorial integrity” of Yugoslavia.

Since the creation of Kosovo, officials from the European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX) and

ethnic Serb members of the Kosovo Police have manned the posts, known as Jarinje and Brnjak, or numerically as 1 and 31. Custom duties have not been collected, nor passports stamped at the two crossings. Serbia has banned the entry of products from Kosovo.

In response, the Kosovo government introduced its own ban on imports from Serbia on July 20, in an attempt to prevent goods entering northern Kosovo and forcing the population there to turn to Pristina. The action of July 25 was an attempt to enforce the import ban.

It is also the result of frustration with the European Union (EU) and EULEX on the part of Pristina officials, and their Washington backers. The EU has been split over the issue of Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence with five EU member states opposed, fearing its effect on separatist movements in their own countries. As a result, the EULEX mission has remained “status neutral”, rendering it less effective in the eyes of pro-independence elements in Kosovo.

Begin Collaku, an adviser to Kosovo’s Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, said EU inaction over Kosovo’s “lawless north” forced it to take unilateral action. However, former United Nations Regional Representative in Mitrovica, Gerard Gallucci, who is also a member of the advisory board of the mediation organisation Transconflict, said that the operation by the Kosovo Police was “a provocation, a way to prevent diplomacy and negotiations. It probably had some sort of quiet support from the major international supporters of Kosovo.... it’s hard to believe that PM Thaci would move in such provocative manner without some sort of encouragement or a blind eye from the US Ambassador in Pristina.”

The extremely volatile nature of the situation was shown by the remarks of Serbia's minister for Kosovo, Goran Bogdanovic, who declared, "Thaci is sending warmongering messages, raising tension and inciting conflicts. His statement that he will not give up on north Kosovo and that no one will prevent him from doing so cannot be interpreted in any other manner but as warmongering."

Serbian Defence Minister Dragan Sutanovac met with US Assistant Defence Secretary Alexander Vershbow on August 4 and said that any unilateral measure that attempts to change the situation in northern Kosovo by force was "completely unacceptable".

Thaci insisted there can be no return to the state of things prior to July 25 incident—the demand raised by the Serbian protesters. He answered the renewed suggestions that Kosovo should be partitioned with a thinly veiled threat that "every country in the region has its own Mitrovica", referring to the city divided into a predominantly Serbian north and Albanian south.

An important factor behind Belgrade's stance is fear of separatist tendencies elsewhere in Serbia. Two most notable examples are the northern autonomous province of Vojvodina, which has a large Hungarian speaking population, and the largely Muslim Sanzadak region.

Serbian foreign minister Vuk Jeremic said that if Serbia gives in to Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, the country's other regions could follow suit, adding, "If we give in to Albanian separatists, this will not be the last unilateral declaration of independence in Serbia."

One sign of clearly sharpening tensions is the reinforcement of 700 soldiers, requested by NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) commander general Erhard Bühler, the first batch of which arrived in Pristina on August 3. There have been talks of another 700-strong reserve battalion preparing for deployment in Kosovo. They will join some 6,000 existing KFOR troops.

At the time of writing there are initial reports that an agreement has been reached regarding the situation in the north between the Kosovo government and KFOR on the one hand, and KFOR and Serbian officials on the other. While details are still not clear, any agreement might at best prevent the escalation of violence but leave fundamental issues, interwoven into the very fabric of Kosovo, unresolved.

Since the unilateral declaration of independence three and a half years ago, Kosovo has been recognized by only 77 countries. Russia, China, India and most states in Africa and South America do not recognise it. In comparison, more UN members recognise the state of Palestine.

Kosovo has been unable to gain admission to many international bodies, with far-reaching consequences for all aspects of daily life and business. Commerce documents are not recognized overseas, insurance for Kosovo is among the most expensive, there are no international postal or telephone codes, there are extra legal barriers and economic fees for exports, athletes are unable to compete abroad, etc. Visa-free travel is only possible in four neighbouring countries and Haiti. As a comparison, Afghan passport holders can cross 22 borders without restrictions.

Kosovo remains one of the poorest regions in Europe. Unemployment is variously put at between 50 and 70 percent and almost 40 percent of people live in poverty. Corruption is widespread. Thaci is now being investigated for operating what amounts to an organized crime syndicate, with allegations of murder, trafficking of women, narcotics and human organs.

Imperialism is wholly responsible for the catastrophe that has been created in the region. The only progressive solution to the mishmash of ethnic and religious identities and imperialist intrigue in the Balkans is the united, international fight by the working class against the twin evils of nationalism and communalism.



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