

Kosovo Alert



The recent events

This week tensions in Kosovo have flared up. The deployment of Kosovo Special Police on Monday night in northern Kosovo was an action to take control over border posts Gate 1 and Gate 31 in the Serb dominated north Kosovo. Allegedly, international actors were not informed, though rumors say differently. The Special Police took control over Gate 31 but met well organized Serbian civic resistance (though according to some supported by paramilitaries) on their way to Gate 1. After violent clashes on Tuesday resulting in one fatal injury among the police and mediation from KFOR, the Special Police forces withdrew. The same day Gate number 1 was burnt down by a group of 50 unknown perpetrators. Currently KFOR has taken full control over both Gates and declared in restricted Military areas. The situation seems currently calm. International actors have unanimously condemned the violence.

Analysis

The Kosovo authorities have presented the action as intended solely to combat smuggling through Gate 1 and 31 and to enforce a boycott of Serbian products. In the background, several other reasons probably have contributed to the decision to take this action now.

1. The internal political situation. The Kosovo government is not popular, has not met IMF preconditions for essential loans, and the prosecution of former Kosovo Liberation Army members for war crimes has infuriated many Kosovo Albanians and destabilized the ruling party PDK. An attempt to restore sovereignty in the north was bound to mobilize popular support;
2. Deep frustration, both within the Kosovo government and the Kosovo Albanian public at large, with the lack of support from the international

community to help restore Kosovar rule in northern Kosovo. The Ahtisaari Plan, that was reluctantly accepted by the Kosovo Albanians, foresaw integration of northern Kosovo and extensive autonomy to the Serb minority. The autonomy has been granted, but the international institutional actors supporting the implementation of the Ahtisaari Plan, the ICO and EULEX, have not delivered on north Kosovo. Frustration is highest with the EU, that is bound to a status neutral approach due to five EU member states that do not recognize Kosovo (and 22 that do). The EU is paralyzed by the disagreement on status among its member states. This has seriously hampered EULEX deployment in the north and undermined credibility of EULEX. The current action was a signal to the international community that continuation of the status quo is not acceptable to the Kosovo authorities;

3. Serbia might get EU candidate status later this year. Both Albanians and Serbs seem to have the impression that this is a decisive momentum and that no concessions can be demanded from Serbia after the granting of candidate status. Thus 'Pristina' is of the opinion that now is the time to push, at a moment that Serbia might be inclined to give in because it will not like to jeopardize the EU decision on candidate status. This feeling is exacerbated by the fact that Kosovo's path to the EU is unclear and long.

Serbia has publicly shown restraint, so far. It has called upon the population in the north to stay calm. On the other hand, The Kosovo Special Police met violent resistance and Gate 1 was burned down by a large group of

unknown violent perpetrators. The timing of the action is very complicated for Serbia. Serbia is probably balancing between:

1. The need to show a constructive attitude towards Kosovo in order to achieve EU candidate status;
2. The wish to give in as little as possible to Kosovo while securing the granting of candidate status;
3. The need to continue to show to the Serbian public sufficient support to Serbs in Kosovo ;
4. The inability to fully control local Serbs in Kosovo.

Possible consequences

How these event unfold in the coming days is unclear but they can have the following consequences:

1. Increase interethnic tensions. The death of a Kosovo Albanian policemen has fuelled anti Serbian sentiments. Serbian media have reported two incidents of intimidating or violent behavior towards Serbs in southern Kosovo. These reports were as yet not confirmed by the Kosovar authorities. Within the city of Mitrovica, the main bridge has once more been closed by KFOR. Though people by foot are allowed to pass, they are advised not to do so. Allegedly, snipers have been seen on the roofs on the Serb dominated north side of the bridge.
2. Decrease the already very meager support for the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, both among Serbs and Albanians. In July, a first agreement was reached, but this was not greeted with enthusiasm. Both Kosovo Serbs and Albanians are concerned and distrustful towards the result of the dialogue and now more so than ever.
3. Whenever tensions grew, the reform process slowed down. There is no reason to believe that this would not happen this time. Many leading politicians, from both Serbian and Albanian side, use every opportunity

they get to stall the necessary reforms. It will fuel the already strong resentment of citizens vis-à-vis politics

4. Further discredit and diminish the role of the EU in Kosovo. EULEX is mandated to supervise both customs and Kosovo Police but allegedly did not have any role in defusing the tensions. Kosovar parliamentarians have called for the departure of EULEX. EULEX will have even more difficulties in working in the north but also in the rest of Kosovo.

Assessment

While acknowledging the frustrations among Kosovo Albanians regarding the north, the decision to deploy Kosovo Special Police in the north was neither right nor wise. Kosovo authorities are not welcome in northern Kosovo and actions like this only increase distrust towards the Kosovar state. The priority should be to include people from northern Kosovo and not to include territory or to enforce Kosovo sovereignty. The best way to do this is through optimal performance of all government institutions towards the Serb minority in the south and openness to Serbs from the north, improving living conditions for all people and improving relations and increasing communication with Serbia. A sustainable solutions for north Kosovo will not be a quick fix.

For now the current situation seems to only have losers: Kosovo has lost international credit . It did not manage to restore control over customs. Serbia has lost international credit because it did not prevent a violent reaction. EULEX is probably the biggest loser, because it did not have any visible role, and through EULEX, so is the EU. Serbs in south Kosovo lose, because interethnic tensions have risen, which will affect their (perceived) security. People in north Kosovo and along the river Ibar once again experience the negative consequence of higher politics, in which politicians do not aim to improve the lives of people.

The EU could potentially contribute enormously to improving the situation in the north.

The current situation has been the result not only of the conflict of 1999 but also of 12 years of internationally endorsed segregation along the river Ibar. People in northern and southern Kosovo live in two different realities and there is hardly any contact nor understanding of the other's position across the river. The independence of Kosovo was supported by most western countries, but the Ahtisaari package did not include a realistic plan for northern Kosovo. Through recognizing Kosovo, and deploying international missions there, the International Steering Group and the EU member states (including those that have not recognized Kosovo as independent state but did support EULEX) have a responsibility to support sustainable peace and sustainable development and one cannot work for sustainable peace with only part of a country. The EU through the enlargement process and additional facilities has huge potential to change the situation. But some changes within the EU are needed to realize the potential. The EU needs to be explicit about the precise meaning of the preconditions of 'good neighbourly relations' and 'regional cooperation' in the specific context of Kosovo and Serbia and it needs to clarify the EU accession path of Kosovo. It also needs to have a clear position on north Kosovo. As long as it is ambivalent towards north Kosovo instead of stabilizing the situation, it is postponing stabilization. Internal EU dynamics must not hamper EU peace building efforts, but must support them.

Recommendations

1. All parties should refrain from unilateral moves and should condemn all violence;
2. EU high representative Lady Ashton should explicitly condemn the unilateral action of the Kosovo authorities;
3. EU member states should agree on a unified approach towards Kosovo. The easiest way for this would be for the five

non recognizing countries to recognize Kosovo. The EU should be clear about the specifics of regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations in the Kosovo context.

4. EU member states should provide EULEX with the means and political leverage to restore rule of law and security in north Kosovo. Otherwise either the mandate or the mission should be changed.
5. The dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia should immediately be reopened and continue to focus on the solutions of technical problems. The negotiating teams should promote the dialogue towards their own constituency. They should discuss possible solutions with those most effected by the problems and should be transparent on the progress of the dialogue.
6. Urgent and immediate measures should be taken to prevent harassment of the Serb minority in south Kosovo;
7. KFOR should continue to control the Gates 1 and 31 until the situation has calmed down, but in the mid term control of these Gates should return to the previous situation. Changes have to be agreed upon in negotiations and should not be unilaterally enforced. If this does result in a change, creates a precedence for the future.

IKV Pax Christi, Utrecht, July 29, 2011

Our commitment

IKV Pax Christi works for peace, reconciliation and justice in the world. We join with people in conflict areas to work on a peaceful and democratic society. We enlist the aid of people in the Netherlands who, like IKV Pax Christi, want to work for political solutions to crises and armed conflicts. IKV Pax Christi combines knowledge, energy and people to attain one single objective: there must be peace!

IKV Pax Christi is working in Kosovo since 2000 and has worked on interethnic dialogue in the city of Mitrovica since 2001.



More information:

Jitske Hoogenboom, senior programme officer Kosovo

Hoogenboom@ikvpaxchristi.nl

+31 6 53 22 27 13

Office address:

Godebaldkwartier 74

NL 3511 DZ Utrecht

Mailing Address:

PO Box 19318

NL-3501 DH Utrecht

Telephone: +31 (0) 30 233 33 46

Fax: +31 30 268 81 99

Website: www.ikvpaxchristi.nl

E-mail: info@ikvpaxchristi.nl