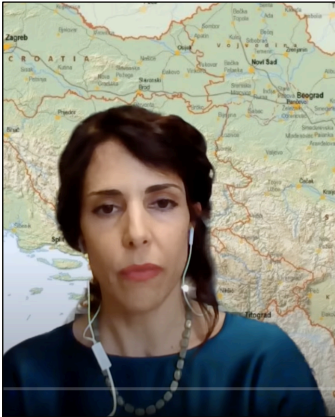


Serbia-Kosovo crisis

Emergence of an announced disaster

by Chiara Nalli,* Italy



Chiara Nalli
(Screenshot Visione TV)

(CH-S) The Italian journalist Chiara Nalli from "l'Antidiplomatico" decodes the conflict situation – often incomprehensible to us – in the north and south-east of Kosovo. It seems that the Serb and Albanian inhabitants do not get along. In this report from 31 May, the

deafening grenades injured several people, after which the authorities in Belgrade reacted immediately and sent the army to the border in case it had to intervene to protect the Serb communities in Kosovo.

Reasons for the Kosovo Serb protests

To understand the reasons behind the Kosovo Serbs' protests, one has to take a step back and first clarify that the municipalities involved in the events are among the ten Serb-majority municipalities (four in the north of the country and six in the south-east) for which the *Brussels Accords* of 2013 (and 2015) provide for a form of administrative autonomy never implemented by the authorities in Pristina, the so-called "Union of Kosovo Serb Municipalities" (ZSO – acronym in Serbian).

The non-implementation of the form of self-government agreed on as part of the plans to normalise relations and the escalation of tensions that began in the summer of 2022, prompted the Serbian municipalities to boycott the local elections of 23 April 2023 – in which the controversial mayors were elected – and in which only 3.4 percent of the voters, i.e. around 1,500 Albanians and only 13 Serbs, actually took part.

What the Serbs in northern Kosovo are now questioning is primarily the constitutional architecture within which the elections took place, and thus the lack of political legitimacy of the election results.

EU and NATO criticise Kosovar government

Moreover, it is true that the EU institutions themselves, while acknowledging the negotiation deadlock to set up the ZSO and the politically unsuccessful result of the April elections – fearing a new escalation – proposed an interim solution according to which the newly elected mayors should not take office in their municipalities on the scheduled date of 28 May.

This proposal was rejected by the Prime Minister of Kosovo, *Albin Kurti*, on the pretext that the elections had to be fully conducted within the framework of the country's constitutional legality.

reader gets a deeper insight into the conflict situation. It is still unchanged after two months, the problems persisting. How is it that almost 25 years after NATO's war against Serbia, which violated International Law, there is still no peace in Kosovo? The responsible protecting powers, the EU, NATO, but also the UN, why don't they solve the conflict?

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On Friday evening, 26 May, Serbia deployed army units along the defensive positions on the administrative border with Kosovo. The units were put on high alert and on Saturday morning, 27 May, a meeting of the Serbian *National Security Council* was held, the result of which was not announced.

As Italian media also report, the decision of the Belgrade government followed the riots which erupted in the municipalities of Zvečan, Leposavac and Zubin Potok when ethnic Serbs occupied communal buildings to prevent the installation of the newly elected Albanian mayors.

The intervention of the special forces of the *Kosovo police* with tear gas, smoke bombs and

* Chiara Nalli is an Italian expert on Balkan issues and specifically Kosovo – a region devastated along with Serbia by the arrogance and short-sightedness of NATO powers. "The West always measures with double standards. The problems in Kosovo and the Donbass prove that."

It is also true that the Kosovan government's extremist stance towards the inauguration of the new mayors and the violence used to deal with the protests have drawn much censorship from the international players involved:

In a joint statement, the US, France, Italy, Germany and the UK condemned Kosovo's decision to use police forces to enter municipal buildings and called on the authorities to stand down and work closely with the EULEX and KFOR missions; this was also stated by the spokesman of the *European Commission*, the NATO spokesman, the head of UNMIK (*United Nations Mission in Kosovo*) and the US ambassador in Pristina; while US Secretary of State *Anthony Blinken* called A. Kurti for an immediate halt to violent actions and to refocus on the EU-brokered dialogue with Belgrade.

EU negotiation rounds at a standstill

Indeed, the failure of the EU-brokered rounds of negotiations to create the ZSO, held in Brussels on 2 and 15 May 2023, has set the crescendo of tensions in recent weeks. So, the real question is what is behind the deadlock of negotiations and the resistance of the government of A. Kurti and what is the role the EU (and the USA) can play or have played in this context.

The focus of the negotiations in May should have been to discuss concretely the prerogatives and limits of the ZSO after the framework agreements of February and March 2023. Instead, the Kosovan government totally rejected the draft ZSO statute drawn up by the responsible negotiating team.

And not only that: dissatisfied with the content of the statute, the members of the government in Pristina unilaterally disavowed the role of the team which, as we recall, was expressly entrusted with this task by the *Brussels agreements* of 2013 and 2015, which defined its competences and mandate (a mandate which, moreover, was not limited to the submission of the draft statute, but should have extended its role to the founding process up to the actual constitution of the association of municipalities).

The government's stance in Pristina was even stigmatised by EU officials, who pointed out that the team's repudiation was not keeping up with the spirit of the envisaged dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina and the principles embodied in the 2013 and 2015 normalisation agreements. In fact, the draft statute presented in



Serb distribution in Kosovo according to the 2005 OSCE report. (Picture J. Patrick Fischer/wikipedia)

Brussels derives directly from these agreements, which, moreover, have been accepted and ratified by the institutions in Pristina (although they have not been implemented in practice, using the pretext of conflicts over the country's constitutional charter).

The basic points Belgrade authorities want implemented focus on the ownership and management of all public assets (infrastructure and natural resources) located on the territory of the municipalities concerned, as well as the possibility to receiving funding directly from the Serbian state budget.

Resistance to the "Union of Kosovo Serb Municipalities"

The Kosovar side, on the other hand, has insisted and proposed their own model of ZSO, worked out directly by the government in Pristina, which would effectively strip the association of municipalities of all executive and administrative powers and limit its role to cultural, social, and educational tasks within the institutional framework already provided by the existing constitution.

All this despite repeated appeals from the highest levels of European and American diplomacy (and even the *UN Security Council*) to urgently conclude the agreement on the ZSO, and regardless of the concerns of several parties

over the imminent deadline for the appointment of the new mayors, rightly seen as the trigger for a new spiral of incidents. Pristina clearly did not consider these warnings. Why?

How is it possible that a country of the size of Abruzzo [11,000 square km, edit.], totally dependent on technical and financial assistance from its foreign partners (US and EU) and lacking independent institutions and an army (since they are subject to the complex surveillance system of the UNMIK mission), can adopt such a ruthless negotiating stance even at odds with its own supporters? [...]

While it is evident that an escalation of unrest in northern Kosovo could also be “convenient” for the authorities in Pristina, as it would provide them an excellent excuse to suspend negotiations and thus prevent the formation of the ZSO. It is also clear that the only force that can prevent such a drift is the Western political bloc, understood as the aggregate of local interests and institutions involved. So how did the current situation come about?

How did the current situation come about?

Rewinding the tape and looking at the statements of Western diplomacy on the one hand and the actions of the government in Pristina on the other, one gets the impression of being in a kind of “international comedy” in which the Western countries make recommendations “ex cathedra” but do not exert any concrete pressure, while the representatives of the government in Pristina act like some arrogant but popular son-in-law who has nothing to fulfil, describing themselves as “the most democratic country in the region” and “a factor for peace and freedom in the Balkans”.

While the Belgrade government has faced a kind of polite rubber wall at the diplomatic level for several months, on a purely practical level things have been moving in a direction that is disadvantageous for the Serbian people.

The boycott of the municipal elections on 23 April is in fact only the tip of the iceberg: it is an opportunity to bring into the political debate a whole range of difficulties (or even grievances) suffered by the Serb population in Kosovo.

Abuses suffered by the Serbian population in Kosovo

It is worth mentioning here the reform of the *expropriation law* introduced by the government in

Pristina, which aims to facilitate the confiscation of land for the construction of military and/or police facilities and all related infrastructure, with an indefinite extension to the surrounding areas. The reform also comes amid a process of militarisation of northern Kosovo through the construction of new military bases that began last year.

The looming scenario is precisely that of forced expropriation of land that Serbs have inherited for generations, with the goal of occupying the area militarily. These are historic lands (including churches and cemeteries) the ‘surviving’ Serb population (50,000 out of around 200,000 in the early 1990s) has no intention of giving up.

If you consider that discussions about the expropriations have been going on for months, you can understand the level of desperation reached by the Serb population of Kosovo. As far as the EU and the USA are concerned, however, one can say with certainty that the equidistance promoted at the formal level is far less implemented at the ground level.

On 30 April, the official *Facebook* page of the *Kosovar Security Forces* (KBS) reported that Italian police officers were training some KBS units as part of a bilateral agreement between Italy and Kosovo; such exercises follow those already conducted in Italy in 2022 and focus on the management and the suppression of mass gatherings.

The timing has never been better. But riot control is not the only area in which the KBS receives training from its western partners. The KBS units were supposed to take part in the joint NATO exercise “Defender of Europe ‘23” in the Balkans, during which defence capabilities of the Balkan region against a possible Russian attack were to be tested by 23 June.

It is important to point out that the participation of the KBS in the joint exercises of the NATO bloc has a much broader meaning than the pure and explicit technical and military preparations which are aiming at transforming these security forces into a real army, which is also legitimised by a high degree of political-military relations with its most important allies, the USA and NATO.

Violation of a UN resolution

It is worth remembering that the deployment of armed forces on the territory of Kosovo violates

UN Resolution 1244, according to which the only armed formation allowed to operate in this area is KFOR.

It is therefore clear that political, economic, and military relations between Kosovo on the one hand and the EU, US and NATO on the other hand are moving in a direction that is certainly less neutral than what is emerging from the official talks during which the western bloc seems only partially involved as a referee in Balkan affairs. For this reason, the current crisis is not only largely predictable, but also controllable.

From this observation, it is easy to understand that the direct involvement – or, if you will, interference – of the western bloc in the Balkan dynamics can also be explained in terms of an anti-Russian function. Also, part of the war against Russia is the enormous pressure being exerted upon Belgrade to comply with the sanctions imposed by the EU/US.

Enormous pressure on Belgrade

In addition to *what we already reported*,¹ we would like to point out that in May 2023 the *European Parliament* adopted a resolution against Serbia deploring its failure to impose sanctions against Russia (including its failure to restrict the broadcasting of *Sputnik* and *Russia Today*) and condemned the close ties between the two countries. This despite the fact the Serbian government made it clear on numerous occasions that it cannot undertake any measures that would seriously harm its own national interests, while at the same time providing full technical cooperation with the EU institutions so that Serbia does not become a platform used to bypass sanctions by other countries.

It is no coincidence either that one of the most succinct public statements made by the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman recently concerned the pressure exerted upon Serbia over the sanctions issue.

In a 24 May comment, *Maria Zacharova* said: “We know how hard the West is trying to force our Serbian friends to abandon cooperation with Russia. The pressure exerted on them is unprecedented [...]. The whole spectrum of blackmail, sanctions, threats is used, all in the worst European traditions” – with the conclusion that:

“No one in the West – who pursues a neo-colonial policy – will prevent Russia and Serbia [...] to develop a mutually beneficial cooperation and contribute to strengthen peace and stability in the Balkans.”

Statements that may be welcome to those who appreciate a world shaped by equal multi-lateral relations, but in fact throw an entirely unnecessary spotlight on a country like Serbia completely encircled by NATO allies.

Possible development of the current crisis

For those wishing to envision a possible development of the current crisis, this is perhaps precisely the nexus to consider: Serbia’s geographical location, which is technically inaccessible to its allies and therefore undefendable.

Using common sense, one might think that an armed confrontation in such a context would not only be tragic but also entirely unnecessary. Therefore, one might realistically lean towards the hypothesis of Serbia’s slow “absorption” into the sphere of Western interests – starting with economic interests – to be implemented with a “carrot and stick” approach: pressure, favours and perhaps some internal destabilisation manoeuvres. A broad strategy in which Kosovo and the protection of its Serb-majority territories could be a valuable bargaining chip.

When writing this article (on 31 May), further violent clashes took place on the morning of 30 May, during which some 30 KFOR soldiers, including 11 Italian soldiers, were wounded. As a result of these developments, late in the afternoon of 30 May, NATO Secretary General *Jens Stoltenberg* announced the deployment of 700 additional soldiers to protect stability in the region and the exclusion of the Kosovo *Security Forces* (KBS) from the joint exercise “Defender of Europe ‘23” as a sanction against Kosovo for provoking an unnecessary escalation of tensions.

Source: *L’Antidiplomatico*, https://www.lantidiplomatico.it/dettnews-crisi_serbiakosovo_genesi_di_un_disastro_annunciato/5871_49832, 31 May 2023

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ https://www.lantidiplomatico.it/dettnews-vertice_serbiakosovo_a_bruelles_belgrado_tra_ue_e_tutela_degli_interessi_nazionali/5694_49534/