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Recent Mayoral Elections in Northern Kosovo Sparks Political Unrest

Background

Since November of last year, the Serbian minority living in northern Kosovo have remained without mayors. This arose after Serbian representatives in four Kosovo provinces decided to resign following the Government of Kosovo's decision to replace license plates issued from Serbia that date back to the pre-independence era with those of Kosovo, regarding this move as illegal. Although a compromise was eventually reached, whereby the Government of Kosovo agreed to cease taking further actions related to the re-registration of vehicles, and Serbia agreed to stop issuing license plates with Kosovo cities, mayoral positions have remained vacant.

Fallout

To fill the vacant spots, early mayoral elections and two municipal assembly elections were held 23 April in four northern municipalities of Kosovo inhabited by a majority of Serbs— North Mitrovica, Zvečan, Leposaviq, and Zubin Potok, as required by the country's constitution and legal requirements. Immediately following the announcement of the elections, the Serb majority party – Srpska Lista (Serbian List), made calls to the Serb community to boycott them, which resulted in only 1,567 voters, or 3.47 percent of the electoral body's participations, as reported by the data of the Central Electoral Commission.

Regardless of the low turnout of Serbs, the elections proceeded, resulting in the election of four mayors – all from ethnic Albanian parties.

After the election results were announced, the Serb community denounced them, stating their refusal to cooperate with the new mayors who do not represent them. The Serb community maintains their refusal to take part in any proceeding elections until their demands for the formation of an association for semi-autonomous Serb municipalities (ASM) are met, as previously agreed upon in an already decade-old EU-led dialogue process for normalization of relations between Pristina and Belgrade.

Unsurprisingly, Belgrade decried the results of the elections, also refusing to accept them, regarding them as “undemocratic and illegal”. The so-called QUINT countries – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Germany, also expressed their concerns with the results of

the elections, stating that while they were conducted legally, they did not constitute a lasting political solution for the municipalities because of the Serb boycott.

Despite the protests from ethnic Serb leaders in Kosovo and expressed concerns from QUINT countries, the newly elected mayor of North Mitrovica Erden Artiq, who comes from the ruling party of Prime Minister Albin Kurti, was sworn into office 18 May. The winners of elections in the other three cities have yet to be sworn in, and it remains unknown when they will take office, considering that parallel institutions financed by Serbia are located in the buildings of these municipalities.

Ethnic Serb leaders in Kosovo have protested the swearing-in of Artiq, referring to it as the beginning of an “invasion of the north.” At a news conference held 19 May, for example, Serbian List Deputy Head Igor Simic described the swearing-in of Artiq as “the invasion of the north” and warned that it “will end when the Serbs decide.” He cautioned that although he and his party managed to preserve the peace and prevent Serbs from responding to provocations by Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti, he added that the Serbian people “will defend themselves by all means” if things continue, without however being specific. Serbian Defense Minister Milos Vucevic suggested that 28 May is the “deadline” when Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti “plans to physically take over” the four municipalities in the north of Kosovo.

In a joint statement from QUINT states, they stressed that “There should be no actions or initiatives...that do not serve the people or that could heighten tensions” and that “All parties should refrain from the use of force or actions that inflame tensions or promote conflict.” This past Monday, while visiting Pristina, two U.S. senators – Chris Murphy, a member of the foreign relations committee, and Gary Peters, who sits on the armed services committee, also stressed to prime minister Albin Kurti that the ASM should be formed this year, reminding him that Kosovo's accession into NATO and the EU remains contingent on accepting a Western-brokered peace deal with Serbia.

Implications

The Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue remains the key issue in the Western Balkans. Progress to implement the EU-brokered deal to normalize relations between the two countries remains slow, and often faces setbacks, the most recent being the recent mayoral elections in northern Kosovo. Both countries have made little effort to imple-

ment the plan agreed upon in Ohrid, North Macedonia last March. Kosovo's failure to establish ASM remains the main stumbling block in the normalization process. The most recent events in northern Kosovo have sparked political and security concerns as the situation has escalated, possibly causing a disruption in the normalization process, but also peace.

Bosnian Serb Leader Strengthens Ties with Russia

Despite protests from the EU and US, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik met with Russian President Vladimir Putin this past Monday in Moscow reportedly to discuss expanding economic cooperation relating to gas prices and the development of a new pipeline. Bosnia and Herzegovina, a country that remains ethnically divided, does not yet have a unified foreign policy, with Republika Srpska leaning towards Russia and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the EU and US.

Dodik, who is already on the US Treasury Department's sanctions list since 2022 for alleged corruption, undermining the Dayton peace accords, and threatening the stability of Bosnia and the wider region, is considered a threat to the stability of the region as he continues to seek the strengthening of ties between Russia and the Serb-dominated entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The US and EU have harshly condemned the leader, reiterating that no ally should visit Russia as it continues its aggression in Ukraine.

After Kosovo, Bosnia is considered the second biggest political and security concern in the Western Balkans. Recently, BiH's newly appointed ambassador to the United Nations – Zlatko Lagumdžija, warned that Russia President Vladimir Putin is continuing to interfere in the Western Balkans to provoke a second conflict in Eastern Europe to distract the West from his war in Ukraine. However, Russia's failures in Ukraine is weakening its leverage in the region, providing the US and EU with an opportunity to reassert its influence. Bosnia, who was granted candidate status last December, is regarded as vital part of the EU's strategy to bring greater stabilization to the region, and to develop a common front against Russia. EU Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi reiterated this recently at a news conference in Sarajevo, stating, "We need Bosnia-Herzegovina to be our ally."

North Macedonia Compares Bulgaria to Russia

Recently at the Council of Europe summit in Reykjavik, Iceland, Bulgarian Vice President Iliana Ytovo and North Macedonia Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski exchanged verbal attacks at each other, demonstrating that relations between the two countries remain strained. Kovachevski likened Bulgaria to Russia following Ytovo's remarks about

concerns of the rights of Bulgarians in North Macedonia.

Addressing the rights of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia's constitution, remains a critical issue in determining the country's accession in the EU. After waiting nearly 17 years, North Macedonia was granted candidate status last July following a compromise that was reached between Skopje and Sofia. North Macedonia agreed to amend its constitution to recognize the Bulgarian minority, and in return, Bulgaria agreed to remove its veto on EU membership talks. It was further agreed that the two countries would work through remaining sticking points such as improving the progress on the implementation of the Friendship Treaty signed between the two countries in 2017 that address controversial historical and educational issues, and Bulgaria's recognition of the Macedonian language, both of which remain highly contested.

In spite of being eager to join the EU, North Macedonian citizens are against the negotiating framework that the government negotiated with the EU, as reflected in a recent opinion poll conducted by the Institute for Political and International Studies in Skopje. Reportedly, 55.7% of citizens are against the negotiating framework, 28.1 % support it. The poll also highlighted how some 62% of Macedonians believe that the negotiating framework leads to the "Bulgarianisation" of the country, while 54.4% of Albanians in the North Macedonia are convinced that the negotiating framework guarantees the Macedonian identity.

North Macedonians, along with a number of EU officials, reportedly find the negotiated framework unfair, placing Skopje at a clear disadvantage. North Macedonia has already overcome many challenges in joining Western organizations, the biggest in 2019 when Macedonia changed its name to North Macedonia to settle a dispute with Greece, which eventually led to Skopje's admittance into NATO in 2020. It remains to be seen whether the government of North Macedonia will be able to garner enough support to bring about the necessary constitutional changes on which its EU bid remains contingent on.

Two Pipelines Approved in BiH

On 11 May, the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina approved the building of two new pipelines to supply gas from Russia and Azerbaijan via Serbia and Croatia. The first pipeline – the New Eastern Interconnection gas permits for the purchase of gas from Russia that would be delivered via Serbia. Reportedly Russian Gazprom will participate under an agreement signed in 2021 by the Serbian public company Srbijagas and Gas-Res, a company owned by the Bosnian entity of Republika Srpska. Gazprom is expected to fund the project at an estimated construction cost of 250 million euros. What remains uncertain is how the ownership of the pipeline will be regulated.

The second pipeline – the Southern Interconnection is expected to pass through Croatia and deliver gas from Azerbaijan to Bosnia. This project is supported by the US and EU, viewing it as a means to reduce Bosnia’s dependence on Russian gas. The 180 – kilometer will cost roughly 100 million euros, and will likely be financed by a loan from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Both projects received overwhelming support amongst the Council of Ministers, who view them as beneficial for all Bosnian resident.

However it remains unclear whether these projects will be given the official green light to proceed, as members of the BiH Presidency Zeljko Komsic and Denis Becirovic, reportedly stated that they would not support these projects, although it is not yet clear why. It also seems doubtful that the Eastern Interconnection project with Russia will be permitted, as it is completely contrary to the EU and US’s official policy, which is to move completely away from dependence on Russian energy sources.