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## Increased Militarization of Kosovo Signals Diplomacy is Failing

### Background

For the past several months, the Balkans Monitor has been tracking the growing tensions between Belgrade and Pristina that peaked last May, when a violent protest erupted in northern Kosovo leaving many NATO's KFOR soldiers, Kosovo police officers, and protestors wounded. Unsurprisingly, both sides blamed the other for inciting the violence. What was surprising, however, was the response of many Western leaders, who single handedly placed the blame on Kurti and his government for having failed to head to their previous warnings on holding off on the elections to avoid "stoking ethnic tensions". As previously reported, last April, Kosovo Serbs boycotted local elections, paving the way for ethnic Albanians to take control of the local councils in the four Serb-dominated provinces with as little as 3 per cent turnout. Despite the low turnout and lack of legitimacy of the newly elected mayors, Kurti insisted on instating the newly elected mayors in the local municipal offices. As Kosovo police escorted the newly elected mayor into Zvecan's municipal office, local ethnic Serbs attempted to prevent them from entering the building. In response, Kosovo police fired tear gas to disperse ethnic Serb protestors, sparking violent retaliation, including four police vehicles set ablaze.

Although Belgrade and Pristina were publicly reprimanded for the violence in northern Kosovo, it was the latter who received the blunt of the blame. Following the violence, the EU and US harshly responded to Kurti and his government. The US, for example, cancelled Kosovo's participation in joint military drills, while the EU introduced sanctions that will cost businesses an estimated 500 million euros.

Meanwhile, Serbia received no similar punitive measures by either the EU and US. In a BBC interview 10 July, Kurti accused the West's response as "being soft with Serbia" in order to "try to move it out from influence of [the] Kremlin." Many Kosovars reportedly feel betrayed and "thrown under the bus" by some of the country's staunchest supporters.

### Kosovo's Response

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Kosovo would seek out alternative security measures, as the West's

inaction with Serbia has placed the country in a security dilemma in terms of who it can depend on for its defense needs. Türkiye has willingly come forward to fill the security void. Prestina's alleged purchase of five drones and other military equipment, including vehicles from Türkiye, along with the country's announcement on social media of a dramatic increase of its soldiers and military budget, all signal the Kosovo government's willingness and readiness to develop a security policy independent to NATO and the EU to pursue its own national interests with the growing perceived threat of western leaders increasingly siding with Serbia. As of now, KFOR, continues to be the country's primary security institution with 4,500 troops provided by 27 allied and partner countries.

### Serbia's Response

Immediately following Kurti's announcement, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic angrily informed that Serbia would be cancelling all planned drone purchases from Türkiye. Shortly after, the state secretary at the Ministry of Defense in Serbia, Nemanja Starovic publicly expressed the country's concern about the fact that some NATO member states, including Türkiye, were actively helping to support and equip Prestina's Kosovo Security Force (KSF) that openly acknowledges the aim of transforming into a full-fledge army. Currently, KSF consists of a lightly armed security and civil defense force made up of 3,4000 troops. Within the next ten years, Prestina has expressed the intention to increase this number to 5,000 and 3,000 reservists.

Recently, Serbia's Minister of Defense, Milo Vucevic shared how on PRVA TV that Türkiye's sale of five drones to Pristina blatantly violated UNSCR 1244 and the 1999 Military Technical Agreement from Kumanovo. The Agreement states that KFOR can be the only military formation in Kosovo-Metohija until a return of Serbian forces. The Minister also pointed out that drones are an offensive weapon, representing further evidence of Kosovo's underlying intentions.

### Western Leader's Response

NATO has also heavily criticized Kosovo's recent drone purchase, arguing that Pristina did not have primary authority over its airspace, only KFOR did. A statement that recently came out by KFOR stated that only the "Kosovo Force (KFOR) Commander has the primary authority for airspace over Kosovo." The increasing militarization of

Kosovo indicates the attempts to resolve matters diplomatically with Serbia through the Ohrid Agreement are failing.

### **The Bottom Line**

What has become readily apparent, especially within these past few months, is that the current EU-led dialogue process is failing – to build trust between Belgrade and Pristina, to ensure technical agreements made over a decade ago are applied, and to produce an implementation plan for the supposedly historic Ohrid Agreement reached earlier this year. At present, the EU and US remain without any plans on how to restore stability in the North, other than make calls for Pristina to reduce the number of its KFS troops. Even in the event that Pristina caves to pressure from Western leaders to reduce the number of its troops, the EU and US have no vision of what governance in the North should look like after such a withdrawal. Finally, the EU and US have no idea on how to restore the credibility of the dialogue process, leaving Belgrade and Pristina in a dangerous situation that could lead to deadly missteps. As analysts suggest, there will be no peace without a solution to the problem of political authority in North Kosovo. Furthermore, there will be no further progress in the EU-led dialogue process as long as there remains a lack of clarity on the reality of the international border between Kosovo and Serbia.