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## **Licence plates to kill?**

Event Analysis

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# Licence plates to kill?

Frauke M. Seebass\*

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## Introduction

On 9 September 2021, the government of Kosovo announced that it would not renew an interim agreement with Serbia on the use of licence plates bearing the status-neutral acronym “KS” for Kosovo, instead of the official “RKS” for Republic of Kosovo implying legal sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> The deal dates back to an agreement between Belgrade and Prishtina on Freedom of Movement from 2011 and was renewed in 2016 for another five years, at which point it was to be reviewed by the two parties. However, no such negotiations took place, and the government around prime minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti from the Self-Determination Movement party (*Lëvizja Vetëvendosje*, LVV) decided to create reciprocity based on the fact that since 2011, drivers of cars with “RKS” plates had to purchase temporary plates when entering Serbia. Consequently, cars with Serbian plates would have to buy temporary “RKS” plates when entering Kosovo as well.

The new measures were introduced on 20 September 2021. Consequently, tensions between the two governments flared up once more, and protests erupted at the Jarinje and Brnjak crossing points in north Kosovo. Serbian military patrolled the border and heavy artillery was spotted. At the height of the escalation, a police station in the north Kosovo Serb-majority town of Zubin Potok was set on fire.<sup>2</sup> Police officers from the European Union (EU) Rule of Law Mission EULEX as well as military personnel from the NATO mission Kosovo Force (KFOR), both stationed in Kosovo as part of international peace and stability efforts, were sent to the north. Simultaneously, the leaders of both countries were summoned to Brussels to find a solution for the dispute and deescalate the situation, with fears mounting that it could deepen ethnic animosities and political instability up to new violent conflicts. Facilitated by EU and United States (US) efforts, the conflict was defused shortly

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<sup>1</sup> Bami, Xhorxhina. 2021. Kosovo to Abandon Licence Plates Agreement with Serbia. *Balkan Insight*, 9 September 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/09/kosovo-to-abandon-licence-plates-agreement-with-serbia/>

<sup>2</sup> Musliu, Vjosa. 2021. Ceci n'est pas une licence plate. *Kosovo 2.0*, 27 September 2021, <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/ceci-nest-pas-une-license-plate/>

after it erupted, although no permanent solution for licence plates was found. In the months following the temporary agreement, several rounds of talks were scheduled, but no deal was reached as the negotiating parties did not even meet face to face in several occasions but had separate talks with the mediators. Mass protest broke out again in north Kosovo when the government announced on 1 September 2022 that all Serbian-issued plates of Kosovo residents would need to be replaced by Kosovar ones by the end of October, accompanied by tax and duty concessions. In the face of renewed violence, the decision was revoked on 28 October and replaced by a gradual implementation plan foreseeing completion by 21 April 2023. Meanwhile, reprimands and later fines were to be given to drivers refusing to replace their licence plate. This was met by protest and the consequent suspension of regional director of the Kosovo Police for the Serb-majority north of Kosovo Nenad Djurić, a move followed by mass resignation of Serb public officials including all ten Serb members of the Kosovo parliament, the majors of the Serb-majority provinces in the north, the one Serb minister in the cabinet, more than 500 police, 150 judges and other legal officers, as well as hundreds of municipal workers. Protests featuring harsh nationalist rhetoric ensued and several cars of Serbs who had actually complied with the new rules were subject to arson attacks.<sup>3</sup> Although a deal was finally reached in Brussels on 23 November, tensions remained high and Kosovo police presence was reinforced after attacks took place on preparations for local elections to replace the officials who had resigned. Although Prishtina affirmed that no paramilitary units were sent to the area, the head of Serbia's Kosovo Office Petar Petković reportedly considered the possibility of sending Serbian military into north Kosovo based on the 1999 peace agreement.<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, protests continue and local elections have been postponed.

### **Relations between Kosovo & Serbia**

The dispute over licence plates is only one on a long list of bilateral issues hampering cooperation since Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 in the aftermath of the 1998-1999 Kosovo War.<sup>5</sup> But inter-ethnic tensions between Serbs and Albanians in the area go back much further and were cemented after the end of the Balkan wars of 1912-1913 due to conflicting interests of the great powers of that time. The majority-Albanian Kosovo subsequently became a Serbian province in the Kingdom and later the Republic of Yugoslavia.<sup>6</sup> A non-Slavic and majority Muslim people, Kosovo-Albanians were mostly denied political, social and cultural representation during this time and forced to assimilate, relocate and endure

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<sup>3</sup> Bami, Xhorxhina. 2022. Kosovo Serbs Report Arson Attacks Amid Licence Plates Dispute, 16 November 2022. *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/16/kosovo-serbs-report-arson-attacks-amid-licence-plates-dispute/>

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Alice, and Zoran Radosavljevic. 2022. Kosovo police increase presence in north of country, Serbia reacts, 9 December 2022. *Euractiv*, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/kosovo-police-increase-presence-in-north-of-country-serbia-reacts/>

<sup>5</sup> Bami, Xhorxhina et al. 2021. 15 Years of Kosovo-Serbia Border and Trade Disputes. *Balkan Insight*, 30 September 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/30/timeline-15-years-of-kosovo-serbia-border-and-trade-disputes/>

<sup>6</sup> Malcolm, Noel. 1998. *Kosovo: A short history*. New York: Macmillan, 252-263.

repressions by Serbian officials. In 1974, a new Yugoslav constitution - aimed at suppressing nationalist movements threatening the republic's unity - was passed and for the first time granted the Albanians of Kosovo significant autonomy on all levels, from political to education and culture. However, Serb and Montenegrin inhabitants of Kosovo remained overrepresented in public positions and the province was the least developed in Yugoslavia by far. A newly emancipated generation of Albanian students started to engage in public protests against the poor conditions which quickly grew and spread. What began as resistance against neglect and cronyism was however soon reframed as interethnic conflict, bringing back to the surface ultranationalist voices demanding Serbian dominance over Kosovo, as well as pan-Albanian unification. As protests continued and were met with increasing arrests and violence, ethnic tensions grew inside the province and Albanians, finding themselves unable to assert their demands, were on the defence once again.<sup>7</sup>

After a phase of far-reaching autonomy, Albanian citizens were consequently subjected to all but total suppression under President Slobodan Milošević who took power in Serbia in 1989, aided by ultranationalist groups capitalizing on dominant narratives of Kosovo as the cradle of Serbian religion and national pride dating back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. This mystification goes hand in hand with a racist ideology and an Islamophobic religious fundamentalism which have repeatedly legitimised the systematic persecution of Kosovo Albanians since the Balkan Wars.<sup>8</sup> It was exactly this narrative and corresponding rhetoric that fuelled ethnic hatred and war crimes right up to genocide during the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Crucially, in this narrative there is not differentiation between Serbs regardless their origin and residence, meaning that intervention is legitimate wherever Serb communities live.

When the peace agreement signed for Bosnia-Herzegovina in Dayton in 1995 barely mentioned Kosovo, the protest movement which had so far mostly applied non-violent means and was fairly well-organised around the former president of the Kosovo Writers Union Ibrahim Rugova was dealt a harsh blow, and those demanding resistance by force gained popularity. The self-proclaimed Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) started attacking police stations and public offices and was met with mass executions by Serb security personnel. International actors tried to interfere in the ensuing spiral of violence, and when an ultimatum was not met by the Serbian administration, NATO forces started bombing military and other targets in Serbia proper, while almost the entire Albanian population was forced out of Kosovo and many were killed or are missing until this day. The United Nations (UN) estimate that up to 10,000 Albanians and 3,000 Serbs were killed in the years 1998 and 1999 in the conflict which was ended by the Kumanovo Agreement and UN Security Council Resolution 1244, establishing a UN protectorate and interim government on the territory. Retaliatory strikes against Serbs in Kosovo ensued and further fostered ethnic mistrust and segregation. In

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<sup>7</sup> Schmidt, Fabian. 2000. Menschenrechte, Politik und Krieg in Kosovo 1989 bis 1999. *Der Kosovo Konflikt. Ursachen-Verlauf- Perspektiven*. Klagenfurt: Weser, 187-195.

<sup>8</sup> Reuter, Jens. 2000. Serbien und Kosovo-Das Ende eines Mythos. *Der Kosovo Konflikt. Ursachen-Verlauf- Perspektiven*. Klagenfurt: Weser, 141-144.

2004, violence against Serbs escalated based on an unfounded rumour, and the international community's inability to stop it called into question the entire multi-ethnic statebuilding process. Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari consequently engaged in years of negotiations between the two sides and presented a new proposal in 2007 which was accepted in Prishtina but refused in Belgrade. Subsequently, Kosovo declared independence in 2008 in consultation with its Western allies but its status remains disputed and inhibits its sovereignty to this day.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Belgrade-Prishtina Dialogue and the role of the EU**

The countries of former Yugoslavia as well as Albania, the so-called Western Balkans, have had the perspective of joining the EU since the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003, and both the governments of Serbia and Kosovo have professed a commitment to this goal. After an independent investigation by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had found that the secession was not in violation of international law in July 2010, Serbia in close cooperation with the EU drafted a UN General Assembly Resolution which was adopted in September of the same year and laid the groundwork for an EU-mediated dialogue between the two governments. Negotiations were officially launched in 2011 and in addition to ensuring long-term peace and stability, they were to also prove the block's capacity as a global actor.<sup>10</sup> One of the first issues to be addressed was Freedom of Movement, and preliminary agreements were reached as early as July 2011. On licence plates, it concludes:

*“As an interim measure, the authorities in Kosovo will extend the validity of KS vehicle licence plates for an initial period of five years at the end of which the issue will be reviewed by the two parties (with the facilitation by the EU if required).”<sup>11</sup>*

In 2013, a comprehensive agreement was signed in Brussels, covering 15 concrete steps towards a normalisation of relations. The agreement was hailed as a success and according to some observers “transformed a frozen conflict into a melting one”.<sup>12</sup> However, the triumph was short-lived as progress consequently stalled and the parties used the agreement to generate political capital in their respective countries instead of actually implementing its provisions. As the five-year deadline for KS licence plates passed, a new agreement was signed and the so-called “sticker regime” introduced which required drivers moving between Kosovo and Serbia to “cover

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<sup>9</sup> Krasniqi, Gezim. 2012. Overlapping jurisdictions, disputed territory, unsettled state: the perplexing case of citizenship in Kosovo. *Citizenship Studies*, 16(3-4), 355-356.

<sup>10</sup> Troncotă, Miruna. 2017. Four Years of EU Mediation Efforts in the ‘Brussels Dialogue of the Deaf’: Analysing the Negotiations for the Association/Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo. *Statebuilding in post-independence Kosovo: Policy Challenges and Societal Considerations*, 216.

<sup>11</sup> Freedom of Movement. 2011. *Agreed Conclusions*, 2 July 2011, <https://dialogue-info.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Agreement-on-the-Freedom-of-Movement-2-July-2011.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Gashi, Shpetim and Igor Novakovic. 2020. Brussels Agreements between Kosovo and Serbia. A Quantitative Implementation Assessment. *FES Analysis*, 5.

relevant parts of the respective licence plates with two white stickers”.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, the validity of “KS” plates was extended for five more years alongside the official “RKS” ones issued by Kosovo authorities. Once more, the agreement was to be reviewed after five years, i.e., in 2021. However, like many others it has never been fully implemented, and as EU focus shifted away from the Western Balkans and their accession perspective receded into the distance, the process deteriorated and was halted altogether in 2018 due to mutual blockades and sanctions. The dialogue was relaunched in 2020 and institutionally upgraded with the role of a special envoy supporting the High Representative (currently former foreign minister of Spain Josep Borrell), a post that was given to former Slovak foreign minister and High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Miroslav Lajčák.<sup>14</sup> But the loss of credibility and leverage runs deep, and together with nationalist shifts in politics and rhetoric by both governments severely undermines any progress. A key problem is the role of the EU itself: As the initial success of the negotiations shows, the block has unique leverage and incentives in its position to bring the former warring parties into dialogue. But a number of shortcomings in the strategic approach limit its ability to act and instead hold the potential to harden the fronts even further.<sup>15</sup>

### **Kosovo Serbs**

The pivotal element of any solution are the majority Serb communities in Kosovo, particularly the four northern provinces North Mitrovica, Leposavić, Zvečan, and Zubin Potok. Their proximity to Serbia makes them especially vulnerable to the detrimental effects of the conflict between the governments. The same is true, albeit to a lesser extent, for all Serb and other non-majority groups in Kosovo, including Turks, Bosniaks, Gorani, and Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians (RAE). Many of them have been displaced during and after the war, and those who remained in Kosovo now live mostly segregated from the majority Albanian community. Even historically mixed cities such as Prizren are much less diverse today, and those wishing to return to their homes as provided under Resolution 1244 face economic hardship and ethnic tensions.<sup>16</sup> The Kosovo Constitution and the Law on Local Self-Government (LLSG) was substantially facilitated by the International Community, guaranteeing minority rights and representation, as well as the right to form associations, but a focus on (corrupt) political elites paired with a disregard of local realities has harmed a meaningful implementation. While many Kosovo Serbs are aware of the negative impact of Serbia’s confrontational policy towards Kosovo has

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<sup>13</sup> *Arrangements concerning the finalisation of implementation of 2011 freedom of movement*, 14 September 2016, <https://dialogue-info.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Arrangements-concerning-the-finalisation-of-implementation-of-FoM-14-September-2016.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Armakolas, Ioannis et al. 2021. Introduction. *Local and International Determinants of Kosovo's Statehood Volume II*. KFOS, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Hajrullahu, Arben. 2019. The Serbia Kosovo dispute and the European integration perspective. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 24(1), 101-120.

<sup>16</sup> Petrick, Daniel. 2022. Return to Kosovo: The Serbs Who Re-Embraced Their Hometown. *Balkan Insight*, 14 January 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/14/return-to-kosovo-the-serbs-who-re-embraced-their-hometown/>

on their lives, many feel threatened by the transition of competencies towards the government in Prishtina and hold on to the parallel structures provided by Belgrade which inhibits their integration into Kosovo structures. Especially the language divide and education with Serbian textbooks deepens the gap in shared narratives and memories between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo. In the face of a perceived threat to their existence in the country, Kosovo-Serbian identity formation has become more conservative and one-dimensional, focusing on religious and territorial identity.<sup>17</sup> As time passes, the increasing segregation fosters stereotypes and animosities especially among young people who mostly have no interaction or common language with their counterparts. While the older generation maintains memories of living together in pre-war times, younger generations grow up on stories of violence and loss and have become the main perpetrators of interethnic harassment.

The parallel institutions and consequent lack of authority on the part of Kosovo's administration results in insecurity on all levels particularly for citizens living in the northern provinces. Organised crime structures flourish here and are entangled with local politics and business. The party representing the Serb-majority communities in the Kosovo parliament, Serbian List (*Srpska Lista*), has direct links to Belgrade and does not hide its unwillingness to cooperate with Kosovo's political institutions. As such, they do not represent the interests of Kosovo Serbs and have little legitimacy among them. A small number of Kosovo-Serb political figures such as former mayor of Leposavić Nenad Radosavljević, leader of the Kosovo-Serb initiative and political party SDP Oliver Ivanović, and successor to the Serbian minister in the Kosovo cabinet Nenad Rašić resist against the adverse influence of Belgrade and try to establish separate positions for Kosovo Serbs. However, their opposition to the dominant structures earns them insults and rejection, and in the case of Ivanović even murder.<sup>18</sup>

In a recent op-ed for *Balkan Insight*, civil society activist Milica Andrić Rakić from the New Social Initiative in North Mitrovica emphasizes that the protests are not only a reaction to new legislation on licence plates but also based on a common feeling among Kosovo Serbs that they are being sidelined under the current administration in Prishtina and that central parts of their identity are being devaluated.<sup>19</sup> According to her, frustrations run high in view of "a ferocious legalist" who "wanted it all but had nothing to give", referring to Kosovo's prime minister Albin Kurti whose party has been fighting Serbian influence since before independence and, now in government, shows little inclination to accommodate the needs and calm the fears of Kosovo Serbs and other non-majority groups. Rakić

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<sup>17</sup> Fort, Emilie. 2018. From power-sharing arrangements to identity building: The case of Kosovo Serbs in Kosovo. *Ethnopolitics*, 17(5), 503ff.

<sup>18</sup> Dragojlo, Saša and Perparim Isufi. 2022. Serbia Blasts Kurti as 'Scum' in Row Over New Kosovo Minister. *Balkan Insight*, 2 December 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/02/serbia-blasts-kurti-as-scum-in-row-over-new-kosovo-minister/>

<sup>19</sup> Andrić Rakić, Milica. 2022. For Kosovo Serbs, It's Not Just About Licence Plates. *Balkan Insight*, 9 November 2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/11/09/for-kosovo-serbs-its-not-just-about-licence-plates/>

Andrić concludes rather pessimistically: “From what I’ve seen in the past few days in terms of the deep misunderstanding of the community’s position and motives, along with easy binary conclusions, I cannot say I am confident it will happen.”

### **Self-determination, democratic transformation and regional stability**

As Andrić Rakić’s statement suggests, one reason for the ongoing escalation is the political leadership in both countries. President of Serbia and long-serving high-level politician Aleksandar Vučić began his political career under Milošević as a member of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and in a fast ascent became minister for information in 1998. When the Kosovo War ended and Milošević was overthrown, he remained a prominent opposition figure before becoming a more moderate and outwardly pro-European actor in 2008 as a member of the newly established Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*, SNS). Vučić’s rise began as deputy prime minister starting in 2012; he then served as prime minister until 2017, and was consequently elected to his current office. While his government upholds its European ambitions in theory, he has also deepened Serbia’s partnerships with Russia and China and become a populist leader eroding democratic institutions and drawing much of his appeal and power from presenting himself as the guardian of Serb interests in Kosovo. His inflammatory rhetoric predicting hostile actions of the leadership in Prishtina up to the expulsion and annihilation of Serbs, combined with his influence over the Serb structures, particularly in north Kosovo, have fuelled protests and assaults there, giving him the opportunity to present himself as a peacemaker towards the international mediators, while his rhetoric has in fact fuelled much of the unrest in north Kosovo.<sup>20</sup>

As Vučić served as Milošević’s information minister, now-prime minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti was deeply involved in the student protests in Prishtina and soon became one of their most prominent leaders. He was arrested by Serbian police in 1999 and imprisoned for subversive activities by the very regime Vučić represented. It is therefore not surprising that the relationship between the two is more than strained. To this day, the Serbian president represents the narrative that Kosovo is inseparable from Serbia, while Kurti is one of the most uncompromising defenders of independence. It is not for nothing that the latter’s party, which he co-founded, is called Self-Determination Movement. This former activist group has been fighting foreign domination since the 1990s, first and foremost from outside - from Serbia and international, in their view neo-imperialist structures - but also from within in the form of corrupt politicians who have supposedly sold out the country and its citizens for their own material benefit.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Kulić, Milica. 2020. Populist Communication in the Post-Truth Age: A Comparative Analysis of Treatment of Journalists by Donald Trump and Aleksandar Vučić. *Journal of Regional Security*, 15(1), 83-89.

<sup>21</sup> Schneider, Henrique. 2017. Lëvizja Vetëvendosje! – Oligarchien- und Systemkritik im Kosovo. *Forum für Mittelost- und Südosteuropa*, 1 March 2017, <https://www.fomoso.org/mosopedia/recherchen/levizja-vetevendosje-oligarchien-und-svstemkritik-im-kosovo/>



Since February 2019, his party in coalition with the party Dare (*Guxo*) of President Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu, has commanded an absolute majority in parliament and unconditionally opposes corruption and nepotism, while also opposing attempts from Belgrade to undermine Kosovo's sovereignty. At the same time, the party and its leadership pursue a pan-Albanian nationalism which dates back to before the Balkan Wars and regard Kosovo as an Albanian state. Since the beginning of his term in office, Kurti has made no secret of the fact that negotiations with Belgrade are of secondary importance to him and that, in his view, all citizens of Kosovo are subject to its central government and must abide by its laws. This uncompromising legalistic attitude, however, alienates Kosovo Serbs who find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place and suffer from both policies. In addition, his government actively supports the glorification of the Kosovo Liberation Army disregarding the testimonies of war crimes by the group against civilians. The omnipresent UÇK symbol and tribute to martyred local KLA leader Adem Jashari whose entire family was executed by Serb forces in 1998 clearly demonstrate that reconciliation is a long way away.<sup>22</sup>

A central point of contention between the governments in Prishtina and Belgrade, which is directly connected to the licence plate dispute, is the agreement on the establishment of an association/community of Serb majority municipalities (ACSM) in Kosovo as determined in the 2013 Brussels Agreement. A 2015 agreement on establishing the association was ruled anti-constitutional by Kosovo's Constitutional Court, calling for substantial amendments. The precedent set by the Serb-majority entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Republika Srpska with its constituent power fuels fears of further destabilization and political dysfunctionality.<sup>23</sup> However, many local Serbs perceive this as an excuse aimed at denying them their rights to self-determination and representation.<sup>24</sup> These perceptions are further fuelled by nationalist and fear-mongering rhetoric from both governments, which have especially gained momentum since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

### **A new geopolitical reality!?**

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo has regained momentum in the perception of Western mediators. Russian influence and the vulnerability of the Western Balkan states to geopolitical crossfire of narratives and alliances are perceived as a threat to political stability, which is why engagement and pressure on the negotiations have increased.<sup>25</sup> A new French-German proposal for a permanent solution of the dispute has been submitted to the two governments and is currently under review. Although the proposal is not public,

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<sup>22</sup> McKinna, Anita. 2012. The Vetëvendosje Movement in Kosovo: an increasing focus on nationalism. *Balkananalysis* (02), 1f.

<sup>23</sup> Stankovski, *Role of the EU in framing and reframing the Belgrade-Prishtina Negotiations*, 378

<sup>24</sup> Fort, *The Case of Kosovo Serbs in Kosovo*, 508

<sup>25</sup> Melzer, Ralf. 2022. Mehr als Folklore. *IPG Journal*, 8 December 2022, <https://www.ipg-journal.de/regionen/europa/artikel/mehr-als-folklore-6376/>

it has become known that it is apparently based on the former treaty between Germany and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and thus provides for recognition *de facto*, but not *de jure*. This should at least pave the way for international recognition of Kosovo and its participation in various international organisations. The main driver however seems to be the will of the two EU leaders to see a quick solution and thus increased stability in Europe that the Dialogue so far did not provide.

The Serbian leadership is coming under increasing pressure because of its close ties to Russia, which is directly related to the Kremlin's support in the dispute over Kosovo's status. Narratives of Russia and Serbia regarding extraterritorial claims are closely intertwined, making it difficult for the leadership in Belgrade to pursue alternative paths. While Serbia has co-sponsored several UN resolutions condemning the aggression, the pro-Russian narrative in public communication has held steady since the Russian invasion began. Accordingly, an increasingly geopolitical EU must offer tangible alternatives and a clear European path. Whether this is feasible within Vučić's system, however, remains questionable, given his abusive comments of any Kosovo Serb trying to engage with the central government.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, the Kurti administration must also review its nationalist and supposedly legalistic refusal to compromise and reach out to those Serbs in Kosovo who are interested in finding a solution, despite Belgrade's duplicity.<sup>27</sup>

### **Conclusions & Outlook**

The conflict over licence plates between Belgrade and Prishtina has been a central point of contestation since Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, and the current tensions around a final solution to the issue have been going on for over a year. Despite renewed efforts by the mediators to resolve the conflict, the fronts and especially the rhetoric have hardened further. Clearly, it is about much more than licence plates, namely the answer to the question whether Albanians and Serbs can live together peacefully in Kosovo. The resignation wave of Serbian civil servants was a major blow to inter-ethnic cooperation and security, and although many observers blame Belgrade for coordinating this action, it also reflects frustrations of ordinary citizens who fear for the preservation of their identity and representation.

Without pressure from the EU, the government in Belgrade has no incentive to settle the dispute, but even benefits from Kosovo's limited statehood since parallel structures in Kosovo secure its influence. In this way, the ethno-territorial division is further enforced and integration into Kosovo's administrative structures prevented. An important key to overcoming this and all other conflicts that followed the wars in Yugoslavia is to question dominant narratives on all sides and establish

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<sup>26</sup> Dragojlo and Isufi, *Serbia Blasts Kurti as 'Scum' in Row Over New Kosovo Minister*

<sup>27</sup> Albahari, Natan. 2022. Beyond the status quo: A perspective from Serbia on relations with Kosovo. *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 December 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/beyond-the-status-quo-a-perspective-from-serbia-on-relations-with-kosovo/>

a shared understanding of these events. Serbs everywhere must emancipate themselves from the centuries-old territorial claims in order to fight state capture by the government in Belgrade. The government of Prishtina on the other hand has to accept that Serbs - and other non-majority groups - are part of society, and grant them the protection and rights guaranteed in the constitution. Kosovo Albanians must recognise the multi-ethnic history of their country and engage with those communities in a meaningful reconciliatory dialogue that acknowledges historic ties and shared memories. Now that Kosovo's future is in their hands, it is not only up to the government in Prishtina, but also to civil society and ordinary citizens to pave the way for a truly multi-ethnic community where licence plates are, at best, the last cause for tension.

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