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A confrontation in Northern Kosovo

On the 28th of May, Kosovo special operations police units entered the territories in the northern strip of the country, mainly inhabited by Serbs, to arrest several people – both Serbs and Albanians, but also Bosnians – heavily involved in criminal activities.

The operation lasted few hours, but reignited tensions between the two countries. Serbian authorities accused Pristina of harassing the Serbian population living in northern Kosovo, where Belgrade still exercises political influence despite the deal between Serbia and Kosovo, brokered in 2013 by the EU, partly dismantled the Serbian “parallel institutions”. Under the so-called Brussels Agreement, the Serbian police and justice in Northern Kosovo, once depending on Serbian government, have been integrated in Kosovo’s governmental structures. However, the process still has to be properly implemented. Apparently, Belgrade could do more to make it work.

Kosovo authorities’ decision to dispatch the special police in the North to tackle organized crime – very powerful also in that part of the country – might appear as a move to show that Kosovo does have full control on the whole national territory. The Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, put the army on full alert after Kosovo’s police operation. A muscular gesture against a muscular circumscribed action.

The day before the operation, Vučić delivered an important speech in Belgrade’s Parliament. “We need to recognize that we have been defeated. We lost the territory”, he said. “We have two options – to normalize relations by reaching an agreement or to maintain a frozen conflict”, he added. Such words suggest that Vučić is trying to make the Serbs accept the reality that Kosovo will not be part of Serbia anymore, as the Serbian Constitution and the UN 1244 resolution still state. However, Vučić will not recognize Kosovo’s independence without having secured that the Serbs who live there will be granted large administrative autonomy, as agreed in 2013.

The Brussels agreement foresees the establishment of a Community of Serb Municipalities (not very different from the autonomy that South Tyrol/Alto Adige has in Italy), but Pristina has not fulfilled its

obligations. The Kosovar President, Hashim Thaçi, recently said that if the Community of Serb Municipalities was created, a second Republika Srpska will emerge. It will be a camouflaged partition, in other words. The declaration seems not to perceive the difference in institutional and political robustness between the two situations: largely in favour of Kosovo.

Both Serbia and Kosovo block the implementation of the 2013 agreement and keep the tension high. Such behaviour does not imply the intention of starting a new conflict that would be detrimental and unsustainable. Instead, the two leaders want to assure their public opinions that they will do whatever they can to protect national interests, while behind the scenes they look for the right time to make a historic deal to definitely settle the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. Serbia will establish full diplomatic relations with Kosovo; Kosovo will give Kosovo-Serbs rights and implement administrative autonomy.

The recent police operation carried out while Vučić was briefing the Serbian Parliament, and Vučić's consequent decision to put the army on full alert, are chapters of this screenplay, as well as the recent plan – now a bit eclipsed – for a land swap or Thaçi's idea to call a referendum on the union between Kosovo and Albania.

Serbia and Kosovo's specular tactics are also oriented to involve the US in the game. Vučić and Thaçi think that the EU alone cannot be an effective mediator, since the current Commission will not embark in any risky move before the expiration of its mandate (in autumn) and the Franco-German axis is extremely weak, due to Macron's internal problems and Merkel's declining star. Hence, they want to involve the US as a second patron for their historic deal.

In the last months, the American President, Donald Trump, expressed the will of facilitating the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. However, the US mood is still a bit unclear. On the one hand, it makes sense that the world biggest superpower goes back to the Balkan arena to end a story – the Serbia-Kosovo dispute – in which it had been deeply involved in the Nineties. On the other hand, Trump's approach, in theory open to the land swap, could create a contrast between the US and the EU (both Macron and Merkel reject a land swap). In that case, it will be difficult to unlock the "Balkan cold war".

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