



## Increase in Tensions in Serbia-Kosovo Relations Quickly Averted

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The attempt by the government in Pristina to amend the documents and vehicle registration plates of northern Kosovo Serbs and their opposition to these intentions led on 31 July to increased tensions. They were eased the next day thanks to quick EU and U.S. action. The incident was smaller in scale than similar tensions last year. Such events may be repeated in the future until these issues are normalised, but the prospect of resolving the dispute remains uncertain.

### What happened in the recent incident?

The increase in tensions in Serbia-Kosovo relations involved trucks blockading roads in the north of Kosovo on the way to Jarinje and Brnjak. From the perspective of the government in Pristina, these are border crossings between Serbia and Kosovo, but from the point of view of the authorities in Belgrade, they are checkpoints on an administrative line separating the rest of Serbia from its autonomous region of Kosovo and Metohija. Both points are on the territory of municipalities inhabited mainly by Serbs. The third crossing point to Serbia, in Merdare, lies beyond these municipalities and was not blocked. The incident was accompanied by shots from a firearm. This caused the dispatch of Kosovo police to these points, as well as the NATO KFOR international mission in Kosovo to be put on a state of readiness.

### What was the source of the tensions?

The cause of the incident was the announcement by the government in Pristina that additional Kosovo-issued documentation, available at the border crossings, would be needed to pass through them, including for residents who had documents issued in Serbia or vehicles with Serbian registration plates issued for municipalities in Kosovo. This regulation would therefore mainly affect Serbs from four municipalities in the north of Kosovo (out of ten in Kosovo with a majority or a significant Serb population) who commonly use Serbian-issued documents and registration plates. By opposing what they consider an interim

administration in Pristina, these residents are reluctant to accept dictates by Kosovo institutions or regulations in their municipalities. This approach by the Serb population in Kosovo is supported by the government in Belgrade.

### How were the tensions relieved?

The de-escalation of tensions between the Kosovo government on one side, and the Serbs in the north of Kosovo and the government in Belgrade on the other came about thanks to swift action from the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the U.S. embassy in Pristina. Albin Kurti's government postponed the decision on license plates and documents for a month on the condition that the blockades from the roads to the Serbian border would be removed, which has already occurred. Kurti attaches less importance to dialogue with Serbia than his predecessors, as his leftist-nationalist [Self-determination Movement \(Vetëvendosje\)](#) won the [parliamentary elections in 2021](#) by proposing independent decisions on issues related to state sovereignty, among other things. However, regardless of the composition of the government in Pristina, it does factor in the view of the U.S., which played a key role in Kosovo's independence in 2008.

### How does the incident fit into Serbia's relationship with Kosovo?

The issue of license plates used by Kosovo Serbs is one of the newest open questions in relations between the two countries. [The previous edition of this dispute in September 2021](#), which started after the announcement of the

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intention to change the regulations, lasted almost two weeks and escalated to the sending of a special police unit of Kosovo to the northern part of the country and posting of Serbian troops on the border. These contentious issues, including the postponement of the establishment of the Association/Community of Serbian Municipalities on the basis of the 2013 Brussels Agreement, are part of a permanent crisis in relations between the two countries, ongoing since Kosovo's unilateral secession from Serbia and recognition of independence by most Western countries.

### **What is the role of the EU in the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia?**

The Union is the patron of the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, which has been ongoing since 2011. The talks aimed at developing technical solutions to facilitate the life of the inhabitants are in practice a form of a peace process,

and their subject often relates to [the north of Kosovo](#). In the past, [achievements in talks with Kosovo have helped Serbia to progress in European integration](#). Today, though, it is difficult to achieve success through this dialogue, as the pace of integration in Serbia is determined by its problems with democracy and the rule of law, including corruption and lack of freedom of the press (in both of these matters, it is weaker than Kosovo). On the other hand, encouraging Kosovo to engage in the dialogue by offering a perspective of rapprochement with the EU has little leverage because the Union—contrary to the European Commission recommendation of 2018—has not abolished the visa regime applicable to this country's citizens. A positive decision of the Member States on this matter should be one of the elements of a new opening in the EU's enlargement policy and would strengthen the Union's credibility in the Balkans.