

# The Return of War with Serbia?

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In a recent onslaught against the Kosovo Albanians, the Serbian authorities have gone over from strong albeit diplomatic statements to threats.

If Kosovo declares independence unilaterally, Belgrade will take extreme measures - seal the borders, impose a trade embargo and return its troops to the province to restore Serbia's territorial integrity.

Dusan Prorokovic, Serbia's state secretary for Kosovo, said this in an interview with the Serbian media, which was promptly re-printed by The New York Times. If he had made this statement at a regular session of the Serbian cabinet, it could have been passed for routine domestic debates, but now it may cause a major row not only between Belgrade and Pristina, but also between Russia and the West.

True, the Serbian officials were quick to refute this statement. First, Serbian Charge d'Affairs to Russia Jelica Kurjak said in Moscow that Serbia was not going to make war with anyone, and that both the president and the prime minister had expressed this position many times. Later, Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic spoke much in the same vein.

It is obvious that Serbia is not going to fight with Kosovo. How can it return its troops to the territory, which is protected by the NATO-led 16,000-strong KFOR (Kosovo Force) contingent of peace monitors from 35 countries? It is also clear why this statement was made. Having no more pressure leverage on Pristina, whose independence is a resolved issue, the cornered Belgrade is resorting to threats in the hope they may produce the desired effect.

But Prorokovic has gone too far, and Serbian President Boris Tadic is not likely to be happy with his revelations. The head of state and other parties to the conflict are trying to save face but without much success. The Albanians have rejected compromise options like the Belgrade-proposed even greater degree of autonomy for Kosovo with the IMF membership and access to the World Bank. Making up more than 90% of Kosovo's population, they want independence for the province, and the sooner, the better.

In summer, it seemed that Kosovo would unilaterally secede from Serbia before the parliamentary elections in November. After all, the policymakers have to report on their performance to the voters - more than 90% of them favor independence. Moreover, they enjoy impressive support from Washington - both George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice have said that there is no alternative to the Pristina-sought option.

Now the proclamation of independence has been suspended - everyone is waiting for December 10, when the contact group reports to the UN Secretary-General. There is no hope for progress at the talks until then. Pristina has already announced that after

December 10, Kosovo will act as an independent state. An official from the Kosovo UN mission predicts that a week after the deadline about 60 states will recognize Kosovo's independence, among them the United States, Britain, France, Albania, Baltic nations, Switzerland and Muslim countries. Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Bulgaria, Hungary and Russia will definitely vote "no."

For its part, Serbia has pledged itself to sever diplomatic relations with all allies of the Albanian Kosovars, but this is hard to believe. This sounds similar to the recent threat about another armed invasion. Hoping to enter the European Union, Belgrade is not likely to have a big squabble with the West.

Surprisingly, Belgrade's threats tend to be much more effective than its diplomatic efforts in dealings with the West. The U.S. media are seriously painting apocalyptic scenarios for the province - the UN plan may lead to another nightmare; after the declaration of Kosovo's independence, the Serbian north will secede from the province; the Serbian police will don Serb uniforms; the Albanian militants will attack not only the northern hotbed of Serbian resistance but other vulnerable enclaves, which are still heavily populated by Kosovo Serbs.

The Wall Street Journal predicts that the UN peace monitors will not be able to stop this new wave of violence, just as they failed to do this in 2004. Judging by all, until mid-December we will hear quite a few threatening statements from Serbian officials, all the more so since they are falling on fertile soil.

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