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THE KOSOVO CRISIS AS A DESTABILIZING FACTOR OF EUROPEAN SECURITY

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Abstract

The Republic of Kosovo is a kind of “node” of problems not only in the Balkans, but in Europe in general. The recognition of Kosovo’s independence laid the groundwork for the destabilization of European security. Today, Kosovo is recognized mainly by the democratic states of the world. These are the countries that currently support Ukraine. In the non-support camp are Serbia, Russia and its few allies such as Belarus, as well as China with its satellites. Although the Kosovo problem is not so clear. Among the countries that do not recognize Kosovo are a number of states (Spain, Romania, Greece, Slovakia), which are wary of the fact that the “Kosovo precedent” may contribute to separatist movements and create problems for them.

15 years have passed since the declaration of independence of Kosovo. However, Belgrade and Pristina function from crisis to crisis. Recently, the usual crises have become somewhat more intense and have made the world talk about the possibility of another war in Europe. Today, the geopolitical consequences of Kosovo’s declaration of independence look quite pessimistic. The representatives of the EU and the USA, understanding the consequences of their actions, are trying to resolve this conflict at any cost in order to demonstrate to the whole world that the situation is under control. Currently exerting pressure specifically on the government of Pristina, these actors are trying to finally achieve full political normalization between Kosovo and Belgrade so that there are no further ethnic tensions in the region and a constant aggravation of the situation in the north of the self-proclaimed republic. Time will tell whether it will give significant results. However, it is possible to at least reduce the tension between Serbia and Kosovo by weakening the manipulative actions on the relations of these countries by Russia.

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Keywords: crisis in Kosovo, Serbia, aggravation of Serbian-Kosovo relations, USA, EU, Russia

КОСОВСЬКА КРИЗА ЯК ДЕСТАБІЛІЗУЮЧИЙ ФАКТОР ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКОЇ БЕЗПЕКИ

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Анотація

Республіка Косово – це своєрідний «вузол» проблем не лише Балкан, але Європи загалом. Визнання незалежності Косово заклало основу для дестабілізації європейської безпеки. Сьогодні Косово визнають переважно демократичні держави світу. Це ті країни, які зараз підтримують Україну. У таборі непідтримки – Сербія, Росія та її нечисленні союзники, такі як Білорусія, а також Китай зі своїми сателітами. Хоча не все так однозначно. Серед країн, які не визнають Косово є низка держав (Іспанія, Румунія, Греція, Словаччина), які остерігаються того, що «прецедент Косово» може посприяти сепаратистським рухам й створить для них проблеми.

З моменту проголошення незалежності Косово минуло 15 років. Однак, Белград і Приштина функціонують від кризи до кризи. Останнім часом звичні кризи стали дещо інтенсивнішими і змусили світ заговорити про можливість ще однієї війни в Європі. На сьогодні геополітичні наслідки проголошення незалежності Косово виглядають досить песимістично. Представники ЄС та США, розуміючи наслідки своїх дій, намагаються за будь-яку ціну вирішити цей конфлікт аби продемонструвати всьому світові, що ситуація знаходиться під контролем. Здійснюючи наразі тиск саме на уряд Приштини, ці актори намагаються добитися нарешті повної політичної нормалізації між Косово і Белградом аби у регіоні знову не були загострення на етнічному ґрунті і постійного загострення ситуації на півночі самопроголошеної республіки. Чи дасть це суттєві результати – покаже час. Однак, принаймні зменшити напруження між Сербією та Косово можливо, ослабивши маніпулятивні дії на відносини цих країн з боку Росії.

Фінансування. Стаття підготовлена за підтримки Європейської Комісії в рамках модулю Жана Моне «Спільна політика безпеки та оборони Європейського Союзу: виклики, пов'язані з війною в Україні» (ESEDEP) (№ 101127823 – ESEDEP – ERASMUS-JMO-2023-HEI-TCH-RSCH).

Ключові слова: криза в Косово, Сербія, загострення сербсько-косовських відносин, США, ЄС, Росія

Problem statement. In the summer of 2022, information about the opening of a “second front” in Europe began to spread in the European media. And we were not talking about a full-scale Russian invasion of the territory of Ukraine (which at that time had already achieved terribly impressive consequences), but about an armed confrontation between Serbia and the partially recognized Republic of Kosovo, which was avoided in August of the mentioned year. The European continent found itself on the brink of a new war on its territory, which would be extremely beneficial for Russia to distract the Western world from Ukraine. Therefore, the research of this subject remains relevant, especially in today's realities.

Analysis of previous research and publications. Over the past 15 years, a number of academic works have appeared on the issue in Kosovo. Both Ukrainian and

foreign researchers emphasized the complexity of this issue and the long duration of its solution due to its exclusivity caused by the leading actors of international relations: the USA, NATO, and the EU. Among the modern works of Ukrainian scientists, it is worth highlighting the works V. Orlyk (Orlyk, 2019), N. Ishchenko (Ishchenko, 2019), K. Yefremova and I. Maryniv (Yefremova & Maryniv, 2020), K. Shymkevych (Shymkevych, 2022), which, revealing the historical background of this crisis, consider both the position of the international community regarding the recognition of Kosovo and its subsequent course.

No less interest in this subject can be traced among foreign researchers (K. Bassuener (Bassuener, 2019), M. Galeotti (Galeotti, 2018), D. Bechev (Bechev, 2018)), who consider this crisis through the prism of the Russian Federation's influence on it, which is making maximum efforts to push Serbia and Kosovo head-on in order to distract the attention of European actors from the implementation of its plans for Ukraine.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the Kosovo problem in the new realities of international events, finding out how dangerous its unresolved issue is for the security of Europe.

Theoretical background. 15 years have passed since the declaration of independence of Kosovo. However, as the current state of relations between Belgrade and Pristina shows, they function from crisis to crisis. Recently, the usual crises have become somewhat more intense and have made the world talk about the possibility of another war in Europe. Before the EU could resolve the conflict provoked by the withdrawal of the Serbs from the Kosovo institutions through joint efforts with the USA, the crisis with car license plates arose. The issue of license plates has just been resolved, as tension arises in connection with the elections in the four Serbian municipalities of Kosovo, which were planned to be held on December 18. One gets the impression that the Kosovo problem will not have its logical conclusion.

The crisis in Kosovo is not as straightforward as it seems at first glance. The Serbian government, as well as the native Serbs themselves, perceived the desire of the Kosovar Albanians (who were in the majority at the time) to separate Kosovo and grant it the status of an independent state as national separatist sentiments and undermining the country's integrity. Therefore, it is clear that they could not allow this. In turn, for Kosovo Albanians, this desire was dictated by the policy of their oppression by the Serbian government.

In our opinion, the bifurcation point in the crisis in Kosovo is the death of Josip Broz Tito, the long-time Yugoslav helmsman, a Croat by nationality, whose post-war policy was aimed at creating a Balkan confederation, which would include Albania. However, in practice this policy was implemented, in particular, in restraining the resettlement of Serbs in Kosovo and providing this region with large subsidies, which contributed to the appearance of a large number of refugees from Albania itself (Lukianiuk, 2017).

In 1980, there were mass riots in Kosovo, from which the then-Yugoslavia became feverish on a national basis. In 1981, mass demonstrations took place, which later turned into an anti-Serbian uprising with dozens of wounded. The main demand was to give Kosovo the status of a republic. The government sent troops into the region and declared a curfew.

However, from year to year, the nationalist sentiments and speeches of Albanians grew. The situation worsened especially when Slobodan Milosevic came to power in Serbia in 1986, who initiated changes to the Serbian constitution that significantly limited the rights of the autonomous regions. The dissolution of the Kosovo parliament, the restriction of the Albanian language in all spheres of social and political life, including educational institutions, and the dismissal of Albanians from key government posts caused a long-term political crisis, mass strikes and inter-ethnic clashes (Lukianiuk, 2017).

In 1986, the first manifesto of the Serbian intelligentsia appeared with the demand to "dealbanize" the region. It was mentioned about the oppression of the rights of the Slavic population of the region, about the threatening Albanian extremism (insulting the state symbols of Yugoslavia, poisoning Serbian wells, burning fertile fields, destroying Christian

shrines and many other crimes against Serbs). Such actions of Kosovo Albanians were perceived by the Yugoslav government as genocide against the Serbs. Then Slobodan Milosevic brought troops into the territory of Serbia. On April 24, 1987, a huge number of Serbs gathered in the city of Kosovo Pole, who expressed a categorical protest against the Albanianization of the region, who demanded the strengthening of state power in the country, the protection of Serbian culture and Serbian traditions (Baburin, 2006).

Since 1990, an indefinite state of emergency has been imposed in the region, which was declared a republic by the local parliament in response to the elimination of autonomy by Belgrade. To which the Albanians later responded more radically – by creating the Kosovo Liberation Army (Polishchuk, 2022).

The situation began to escalate after the Yugoslav government began resettling Serb refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to the territory of Kosovo in 1996-1997. This led to armed conflicts between units of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Yugoslav police and army. From the beginning of 1998, these clashes took on the character of military actions, the Yugoslav army began to repress the civilian population, which at the end of 1998 and the beginning of 1999 had all the signs of ethnic cleansing (Skvortsov, 2005).

Slobodan Milosevic, who tried to prevent the division of his state, was accused by the West of carrying out ethnic cleansing and genocide of Albanians. Attempts to settle the conflict in Kosovo through negotiations with Albanian leaders mediated by Western powers in Rambouillet in February 1999 were thwarted by the leaders of the Kosovo Albanians, who said they would agree to sign a peace agreement with the leadership of Serbia only on the condition that Kosovo be granted independence. Milosevic resolutely rejected this ultimatum. Then the countries of the North Atlantic Alliance, on the initiative of the United States, began bombing Yugoslavia. As a result, with the beginning of the 21st century the security of the European region was under threat.

On January 31, 2006, at the meeting of the contact group at the level of foreign ministers of Russia, the USA, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the EU and NATO, the principles of negotiations on Kosovo were reached. Then it was stated that Kosovo cannot be returned to the administration of Serbia, cannot be divided and cannot be annexed to another state. As a result, on February 17, 2008, the parliament of Kosovo proclaimed it unilaterally. On the same day, the official symbols of the state – the coat of arms and the flag – were presented.

The international community is divided into two camps on the issue of recognition of Kosovo's independence. A number of countries, including the USA, France, Great Britain, Italy, Afghanistan and Taiwan, were among the first to recognize the independence of the Republic of Kosovo. By the end of 2008, another 63 countries recognized Kosovo as a full subject of international relations. As of February 27, 2017, the number of such countries was already 111 (Lukianiuk, 2017). On September 4, 2020, Israel joined such countries. On February 1, 2021, the countries established diplomatic relations. What is interesting in this case is that Kosovo, a territory with a mostly Muslim population, recognizes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which is contrary to the position of the rest of the Islamic world (Israel and Kosovo have established diplomatic relations, February 2, 2021).

Other states, including the permanent members of the UN Security Council, Russia and China, have spoken categorically against the recognition of Kosovo's independence, pointing to the power of the precedent, which can lead to further fragmentation of the world map. For the PRC to recognize Kosovo could create a dangerous precedent for Taiwan, Tibet and East Turkestan (Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region) (China 'deeply concerned' over Kosovo independence, 2008).

5 EU states opposed the recognition of Kosovo's independence: Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece and Cyprus. Spain's position was announced by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the country, Jose Manuel García-Margallo: "Spain will not recognize the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo until Serbia itself recognizes it. The

recognition of Kosovo means the recognition of the destruction of the internal constitutional law of the former Yugoslavia and international law.” The reasons for the position of the Spanish side lie in the separatist tendencies of its two provinces – Catalonia and the Basque Country. The same can be said about Slovakia, in the eastern regions of which a significant percentage of the population is Hungarians (southeast) and Lemka Ruthenians (northeast) (Spanish Foreign Ministry: Madrid does not recognize the independence of Kosovo, February 18, 2008).

The official representative of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized that their foreign policy is based on the principle of respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of states. That is why Greece did not recognize Kosovo and does not recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Greece denied the statement..., September 11, 2023).

The position of these countries was quite understandable, because the case with Kosovo could become a “chain reaction” for other peoples who lived in their majority in the territories that constituted the territorial unit of these countries.

Ukraine did not recognize the independence of Kosovo. One of the reasons for this is to some extent the fear that Ukraine will be accused of inconsistency in its position on territorial integrity (In “Sluha narodu” explained why Ukraine..., September 2, 2022). In addition, the recognition of Kosovo for the Ukrainian state would mean a weakening of its position on Crimea (Briedikhina, 2022). Although the Ukrainian government has taken certain steps towards actual recognition. In particular, in 2020, Ukraine recognized the passports of this state (Kraliuk, 2023).

According to Ukrainian researchers K. Yefremova and I. Maryniv, non-recognition of Kosovo by Ukraine is a certain compromise with Serbia. Ukraine does not recognize the independence of Kosovo, and Serbia does not recognize the annexation of Crimea (Yefremova & Maryniv, 2020:19).

During 2017-2019, 15 countries (CAR, Palau, Madagascar, Solomon Islands, Comoros Islands, Commonwealth of Dominica, Suriname, Liberia, Sao Tome and Principe, Guinea-Bissau, Burundi, Papua New Guinea, Lesotho, Grenada, Togo), who recognized the independence of Kosovo, withdrew this recognition (Already 15 countries have withdrawn their visas to Kosovo, August 26, 2019). In our opinion, pressure on these countries from the side of Russia and China, which actively cooperate with the countries listed above, was not avoided here.

According to the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, as of the beginning of January 2023, more countries did not recognize Kosovo’s independence (106 countries) than recognized it (84 countries) (The President of Serbia called the countries..., January 5, 2023).

Taking the position of the “uniqueness” of the case of Kosovo, the “Western” bloc of states was forced to work to strengthen the principle of state sovereignty, and as far as Europe is concerned, to strengthen the norms of the OSCE Helsinki Final Act on the inviolability of borders in post-war Europe. In particular, the unconditional validity of these norms is confirmed in the decision of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the EU countries regarding Kosovo. The logic of the principle “the exception proves the rule” consistently puts countries that have recognized Kosovo’s independence in the position of opponents of any attempts by other separatist movements and parties in “frozen” conflicts to use it as a precedent. The self-proclaimed leaders of Kosovo themselves find themselves in a similar situation – from now on, being in the “league” of sovereign states, they will be directly interested in preserving this principle.

Thus, in 2014, the Russian authorities, which did not recognize the independence of Kosovo, used this precedent as one of the justifications for recognizing the independence of the Republic of Crimea, which unilaterally separated from Ukraine and was later incorporated into Russia.

In his speech on March 18, 2014, V. Putin stated: “The Crimean authorities relied on the well-known Kosovo precedent, which our Western partners created themselves, so-called, with their own hands, in a situation completely similar to the Crimean one,

recognized the separation of Kosovo from Serbia as legitimate, proving to everyone that no permission from the country's central government is needed for a unilateral declaration of independence... We hear from the same United States and Europe that Kosovo is, they say, another special case. What, according to our colleagues, is its uniqueness? It turns out that during the conflict in Kosovo there were many human victims. Is this a legal argument or what? The decision of the International Court of Justice does not say anything about this at all. And then, you know, it's not even double standards anymore. This is some strange primitive and straightforward cynicism. You can't adjust everything so rudely to your own interests." (Address by the President of the Russian Federation, 2014).

Thus, the Russian authorities themselves demonstrated their commitment to double standards and outright cynicism. She demonstrated to European countries and the USA her "voracious appetites" for foreign territories, to which they practically closed their eyes at the time. As a result, this contributed to the start of a full-scale military invasion by Russia on the territory of Ukraine (February 24, 2022) and thereby destabilization of the European and international security system.

Understanding the difficulty of reaching a full-fledged compromise in the relations between Serbia and Kosovo, Russia is interested in creating a force conflict in the Balkans, which should divert the attention of Europeans from the war in Ukraine.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine served as a grim reminder that Europe's unresolved problems could flare up again. The escalation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia at the end of 2022 served as a cause for concern among the European guarantors. In November 2022, Kosovo Serbs withdrew from state authorities, political institutions and the police in the northern municipalities of Kosovo. It was a protest against Pristina's decision to re-register car numbers. The Kosovo authorities resorted to such actions on August 1 last year, when they planned to replace Serbian license plates with Kosovo ones. In addition, the Government of Kosovo has decided to introduce temporary documents for all citizens of Serbia entering/leaving the territory of Kosovo. At that time, the Serbs reacted extremely negatively – they erected barricades, blocked movement at some checkpoints on the administrative border between Serbia and Kosovo. Under pressure from the EU and the US, Pristina postponed the introduction of new rules until September 1, and then postponed it again. On November 1, 2022, the Kosovo police issued the first warnings to drivers using Serbian license plates.

After that, Aleksandar Vučić ordered the army to be on high alert. A few days later, the Serbs staged a demarche in the authorities in the northern municipalities. And again, the symptoms were temporarily suppressed by the active intervention of the EU and the USA (Pressure on Kosovo..., June 7, 2023).

With tensions rising in the Balkans at the end of 2022, Germany and France have made resolving the outstanding issues between Serbia and Kosovo their top priority for 2023.

At the end of 2022, France and Germany appointed their special envoys to engage with Serbia and Kosovo, and held an EU-facilitated dialogue to settle the dispute between the two countries. The proposed Franco-German agreement consisted of nine articles and was based on a document known as the Basic Agreement of 1972. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and French President Emmanuel Macron believed that France and Germany's experience in dealing with highly sensitive issues after World War II could help Serbia and Kosovo normalize relations. They suggested that countries establish permanent missions, which are similar to embassies but operate at a lower level, as a starting point.

The most important part of the Franco-German proposal is that Kosovo and Serbia were to develop good neighborly relations with each other on the basis of equal rights. The Franco-German proposal offered a financial reward with a deadline of spring 2023 and guaranteed that France and Germany would push for both Serbia and Kosovo to join the EU.

The Franco-German plan satisfied Kosovo because it removed an obstacle to membership in the Council of Europe, the UN and the EU, allowing Kosovo to be

recognized by the five EU countries. However, it turned out to be unacceptable for Serbia, despite the proposed EU investment and the possibility of quick accession to the EU. This position of Serbia was explained by the reluctance to recognize the independence of Kosovo (Kahal, 2023).

However, at the beginning of January 2023, a certain concession of the President of Serbia A. Vučić in this matter is observed. He stated that he is ready to accept the concept of an agreement on the normalization of relations with Kosovo, proposed by France and Germany. Under the plan, Serbia would no longer object to Kosovo's membership in any international organization, and Kosovo would agree to the creation of a new body that would have the right to speak for all 10 Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo. Both countries also undertake to support each other's accession to the EU, as well as "continue the dialogue through the mediation of the EU to conclude a legally binding comprehensive agreement on the normalization of relations".

On the initiative of the EU, which has acted as a mediator in the negotiations between the countries since 2011, on February 27, 2023, Aleksandar Vucic and the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, agreed to meet in Brussels and discuss ways of implementing European proposals. After all, the previous negotiations between Vučić and Kurti turned into disputes and mutual accusations (Serbia and Kosovo discuss EU plan..., February 27, 2023).

May 26, 2023 marked the beginning of a new stage in the tense relations between Serbia and Kosovo. This time the escalation turned out to be much sharper, and the reaction of Kosovo's international partners was a surprise for the partially recognized state. It was on this day that a rally of pro-government political forces was planned in Belgrade, where Vučić addressed his supporters. In his evening address, the Serbian president once again complained about Pristina's illegal actions and the suffering of Serbs in the self-proclaimed republic. On May 30, 2023, clashes broke out with the police in Zvečan, Kosovo, after Serbian demonstrators attempted to occupy the local administration and prevent the appointment of a new Albanian mayor. On the same day, the Armed Forces of Serbia were put on high alert (Pressure on Kosovo..., June 7, 2023).

It is clear that the president of Serbia would not give an order for the army to cross the administrative border with Kosovo. Since, it would threaten him with the loss of the status of a favorite of Brussels, as well as the accusation of starting an escalation. In addition, it is necessary to take into account the fact that, in fact, Serbia does not need a war, because then Belgrade will be "unlocked" from European funds and European integration will become even more distant than it is now. Without European money, Vučić's political life will quickly end. If it were not for the support of Russia and the People's Republic of China, Serbia would hardly have resorted to such intimidation to start military operations.

These events were perceived by the leadership of KFOR, NATO, the United States and the European Union as absolutely unacceptable. As a result, the representatives put all the responsibility for the escalation on Pristina and the government of Albin Kurti. American Ambassador Jeff Gauvener bluntly stated that the Kosovo authorities are to blame for the outbreak of violence. His words echoed those of US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, who also said the actions of the Kosovo government led to the escalation. Blinken advised Albin Kurti to focus on peace talks under the auspices of the EU and not to provoke instability.

The US position was shared by Italy, Great Britain, Germany, and France, which are members of the so-called Quinta (an international informal entity created in 2016 to address global security, political, and economic issues). They issued a joint statement condemning the attacks on EULEX representatives in Zvečan and the decision by the Kosovo authorities to allow mayors of Albanian origin to access municipal buildings with the help of the police. Separately, the countries have expressed concern that Serbia has put its army on high alert. The statement also calls for restraint and wishes to avoid sharp rhetoric (Pressure on Kosovo..., June 7, 2023).

So, as we can see, in this situation, Pristina became the only guilty party. The pressure of the guarantors of Kosovo's independence (the USA, the EU) on Pristina shows that more decisive and specific actions in resolving the conflict between the parties will be required from the Kosovo authorities. Vučić will not rest until Kurti announces the start of the process of forming the Association of Serbian Municipalities. This will be a big concession that Belgrade will be able to use in its interests to continue to demand other steps in its direction from Pristina.

In this way, the USA and the EU wanted to solve two tasks – to force Kosovo to fulfill the terms of the Brussels Agreement and the Implementation Annex; keep Serbia away from the Russian Federation and its hybrid influences. However, EU and US attempts to appease Serbia and pull it away from Russian influence have failed, causing further destabilization in the Balkans. The fact that Serbia refused to participate in all rounds of EU sanctions against Putin can serve as a clear example of what (Kobzar, 2023).

Conclusion. Today, the geopolitical consequences of Kosovo's declaration of independence look quite pessimistic. As already mentioned, this precedent, created by major Western powers led by the USA, has a dualistic nature. The Kosovo example is used today by Russia to justify the capture and occupation of Ukrainian territories. The Kosovo precedent today threatens the integrity of many countries of the world (Spain, Greece, China, etc.). In addition, the presence of a high level of crime in the region itself, the lack of its own anti-criminal bodies lead to further destabilization not only in the Balkans, but also in the whole of Europe. To stabilize this problem, the European Union and the USA are making significant efforts to reconcile Serbia and Kosovo.

Representatives of the EU and the USA today are trying at any cost to resolve this conflict in order to demonstrate to the whole world that the situation is under control. Currently putting pressure on the Pristina government, these actors are trying to finally achieve full political normalization between Kosovo and Belgrade, so that there is no further ethnic tension in the region and a constant aggravation of the situation in the north of the self-proclaimed country. Will everything be as fast as the USA and the EU expect – no. After all, it is unlikely that Serbia will give up part of its territory. Even if Serbia joins the EU, the issue of confrontation with Kosovo will not disappear. If there are no permanent concessions to Serbia from the EU and the US, and to what extent will they be ready for this? Time will show. At the moment, we see that the problem with Kosovo is no longer just a problem, it is a really serious threat to security in Europe.

In our opinion, the resolution of the conflict is possible under the condition of weakening the Russian Federation, which is trying to exert maximum influence on the destruction of the relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and the development of mechanisms for permanent control over this problem.

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