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Russia in Review: September 22 – October 5, 2021

Serbia Creates Crisis in Northern Kosovo to Support the Resumption of a De-recognition Campaign against Kosovo

By George Barros

Serbian President Alexander Vucic exploited Kosovo's implementation of a new border crossing law to frame Kosovo Serbs as victims of ethnic discrimination and provoke a regional crisis on September 20, 2021. Kosovo's government-imposed license plate regulations requiring Serbian cars entering Kosovo to receive temporary Kosovar license plates – a reciprocal measure of how Serbian authorities have regulated Kosovar cars entering Serbia for several years – on September 20.¹ Kosovo ethnic Serbs blocked two border crossings with Serbia in northern Kosovo to protest this policy on September 20. Kosovar riot police deployed to the roadblocks and reportedly used tear gas against Serb protesters on September 20.² Vucic decried Kosovar police uses of force against ethnic Serb protesters, claiming that Serbs in Kosovo suffered a “brutal attack.”³ Likely ethnic Serb protesters committed arson against a Kosovo vehicle registration office that did not cause casualties on September 25.⁴

Serbia carried out provocative military demonstrations to escalate the situation. Serbia's defense minister said Serbian troops were ready to protect ethnic Serbs, raised Serbia's Armed Forces to its highest readiness level, and paid a high-profile visit to Serbian Army elements near the Serbia-Kosovo border



on September 23.⁵ Serbian forces deployed several elements near the Kosovar border from September 23 to 27, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, jets, and helicopters, likely as part of a force demonstration.⁶ Serbian military aircraft approached Kosovo's border for the first time since the end of the Kosovo War in 1999.

The Kremlin likely sought to intensify Kosovo Serb protests in Kosovo. Kosovo police detained and released two Russian journalists affiliated with the pro-Kremlin outfit Izvestia in Kosovo who attempted to cover the crisis there on September 23.⁷ The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on September 24 accusing Kosovo Albanians – the main ethnic group of Kosovo and a rival ethnic group of ethnic Serbs – of “information provocations” against the Russian journalists.⁸ The Russian Foreign Ministry accused Kosovar

media of using this incident to falsely accuse Russia of espionage. The Russian Foreign Ministry also accused Kosovar media of falsely blaming the Kremlin of provoking the situation in Kosovo. Kremlin media framed the protests in Kremlin-preferable terms to support longstanding Russian and Serbian efforts to undermine Kosovo's statehood.

NATO and Kosovo sought to de-escalate the crisis. NATO's peacekeeping mission in Kosovo (KFOR) announced on September 27 that it increased patrolling operations in Kosovo to deescalate tensions.⁹ KFOR stated it would not forcibly remove Serbian roadblocks.¹⁰ Kosovo's prime minister called for de-escalation and stressed that Kosovo's license plate regulations are not directed against ethnic Serbs.¹¹

The European Union (EU) brokered a temporary de-escalation on September 30. Kosovo Serb protesters dismantled roadblocks and Kosovo police withdrew from northern Kosovo simultaneously on October 2 after Serbia and Kosovo agreed to de-escalation measures in Brussels on September 30.¹² KFOR deployed peacekeeping elements to the two border crossing points to support the de-escalation arrangement on October 2.¹³ An EU-Serbian-Kosovar working group will meet on October 21 to attempt to develop a permanent solution within six months.¹⁴ Vucic may decide to escalate the situation again before then.

The EU additionally reversed its rhetoric on Serbia's reform backsliding on September 30. Vucic met with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyden in Brussels on September 30 – the same day Serbia, Kosovo, and the EU reached their temporary de-escalation agreement. After their meeting, Ursula von der Leyden commended Serbia's supposed progress on rule of law reforms.¹⁵ This was a significant inflection in EU rhetoric on Serbian reforms. The European Parliament's most recent report from March 2021 assessed that Serbia is backsliding on reforms.¹⁶ Serbia has not made significant

reforms since March 2021, contrary to Ursula von der Leyden's September 30 statement.¹⁷

Vucic likely escalated the crisis at this time to offset the following Serbian policy challenges:

1. **A US-brokered agreement to mediate Kosovo and Serbia's non-recognition dispute expired in September 2021.** The United States brokered a one-year agreement with Serbia and Kosovo in September 2020, under which Kosovo pledged to cease seeking membership in international organizations and Serbia pledged to cease its longstanding de-recognition campaign against Kosovo.¹⁸ This agreement expired on September 4, 2021, and is unlikely to be renewed. Kosovo began preparations in summer 2021 to resume campaigning to join international organizations in anticipation of the agreement's expiration in September 2021.¹⁹
2. **The EU intensified pressure against Serbia for its lack of reform progress in 2021.** The European Parliament's most recent resolution on Serbian reform progress from March 2021 noted a "lack of progress in many areas of Serbia's reform agenda" and argued that reforms are even backsliding in some areas.²⁰
3. **Serbia will hold presidential and snap parliamentary elections in April 2022.** Vucic seeks to maintain his strong position in Serbian politics following his party's landslide victory in Serbia's 2020 parliamentary election.

Vucic likely used the escalation against Kosovo to advance the following assessed Serbian lines of effort:

1. **Vucic seeks to set preferable conditions as Serbia prepares to restart and intensify its de-**

recognition campaign against Kosovo. Vucic seeks to dictate any future compromises with Kosovo following the expiration of the US agreement on Serbian-preferable terms.

2. **Vucic seeks to threaten Kosovo to not resume its campaign to seek admission into international organizations.** Serbia has not changed its political objective to deny the international recognition of Kosovo's statehood.
3. **Vucic seeks to alleviate EU pressure against Serbia for Belgrade's lack of reform progress.** The simultaneous timing of the EU's rhetorical shift on Serbian reforms and the Serbian-Kosovar-EU de-escalation agreement suggests Vucic may have used the escalation in part to angle for reduced European pressure on reform. The EU provides Serbia with a large amount of reform-tied financial aid.²¹ Serbia will likely leverage the joint Serbian-Russian

military exercises "Slavic Shield-2021" scheduled for mid-October 2021 to further pressure the EU to support Vucic's negotiating position against the EU on Serbian reforms and Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo. Russia will deploy advanced air defense weapon systems to Serbia in October 2021 for these exercises – a development which supports Russian efforts to establish a Russian military footprint in the Balkans.²²

4. **Vucic seeks to increase support among Serbian voters ahead of April 2022 elections.** A surge of Serbian nationalism in Serbia at this time can support Vucic's political standing ahead of these elections. Many ethnic Serbs have longstanding enmity with Albanians and view Kosovo as an illegal political entity. Vucic's maneuvers against Kosovo inflamed these sentiments.

Russia Around the Globe

1. **The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense and Turkish defense company Baykar signed a memorandum of cooperation to open a Ukrainian-owned drone maintenance facility for Turkish-supplied TB2 drones in Vasytkiv, Ukraine, on September 29.**²³ The service center will train Ukrainian specialists to maintain, update, and operate Turkish Bayraktar drones. Ukrainian officials stated that Ankara and Kyiv plan to open multiple such service centers in Ukraine in the future. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense stated that Baykar will fund a separate drone manufacturing plant in Ukraine in the future.²⁴ Ukrainian aerospace defense company Motor Sich signed a cooperation agreement with Baykar on September 24, likely in support of this plan.²⁵ Ukrainian forces

flew their first mission with the Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drone in Donbas in April 2021.²⁶ Intensifying Turkish-Ukrainian defense cooperation supports Ukraine's ability to challenge Russian pressure and advances Turkey's campaign to pressure the Kremlin in the Black Sea region.²⁷

2. **The Kremlin is likely conducting a recruitment drive for a previously reported deployment to Mali by Kremlin-backed private military company Wagner.** The Wagner Group's presence in West Africa would support the Kremlin's campaign to secure new economic resources, develop additional international military ties, and reduce Western influence in the region. The BBC reported details about the Kremlin's recruiting efforts on September 27.²⁸ Reuters previously reported that Wagner plans to deploy at least 1,000 personnel to Mali for

personnel protection and to train the Malian army.²⁹ Wagner's reported contract in Mali is likely more sensitive and sophisticated than the typical mineral protection services that comprise most Russian private military company (PMC) missions in Africa. The BBC reported that Wagner is only accepting Russian personnel and rejecting recruits from Crimea, occupied Donbas, or the Kremlin's proxy republics in Georgia. The BBC additionally reported Wagner is accepting a diverse range of military specialties and is prioritizing combat engineers and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) operators and mechanics above other combat specialties. France threatened to withdraw its military from Mali if Wagner fighters deployed to Mali – a development that would likely impede counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel region, as Wagner would be unlikely to fully replace the capabilities that French forces currently provide.³⁰

- 3. Russia and Algeria began their first-ever joint ground forces exercise in North Ossetia, Russia, on October 3.** The Kremlin likely seeks to deepen its military cooperation with Algeria beyond arms sales to expand Russian military influence in Northern Africa and the Mediterranean Sea and supplant France as a military partner in several former French colonies, including Mali and Algeria. Approximately 80 Russian motorized rifle troops, likely of the 19th Motor Rifle Regiment, and approximately 80 Algerian servicemen began exercises in at the Tarsky Training Ground in North Ossetia, Russia, on October 3 that will last until October 12.³¹ Participants practiced basic tactical tasks, including conducting maneuvers in armored personnel carriers and small-arms live fire.³² Algerian servicemen additionally underwent Russian sapper, medical, and chemical, biological, radiological, and

nuclear (CBRN) defense training.³³ Signals elements of the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army conducted command and control exercises.³⁴ Russia has previously sold arms to Algeria but has not held military exercises.³⁵

- 4. Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) conducted the counterterror exercise "Peaceful Mission-2021" to improve interoperability among SCO members amid continuing fears of instability emanating from Afghanistan.** Over 3,400 personnel from SCO member states Russia, China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and SCO observer state Belarus conducted joint exercises at the Donguz Training Ground in Orenburg Oblast, Russia, from September 20 to 24.³⁶ The SCO has conducted "Peaceful Mission" every two years since 2003. The SCO postponed Peaceful Mission's 2020 iteration to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Belarus participated in Peaceful Mission exercises for the first time. Newly admitted SCO member Iran did not qualify to attend the exercises.³⁷ The main objective of the 2021 exercise was to improve cohesion in joint planning and execution of counterterror operations.³⁸ A regiment-sized element (2,000 personnel) of the Russian 2nd Combined Arms Army – likely including elements of the Russian 21st Motor Rifle Brigade, Russian Special Forces, and Aerospace Forces – participated in the exercise. The exercise's active phase simulated joint combined arms and airborne infantry operations to destroy simulated insurgent groups.³⁹ Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov met his Chinese, Indian, and Pakistani counterparts to discuss further SCO military cooperation and presided over a portion of the exercises on September 23 and 24.⁴⁰ Peaceful Mission-2021 was larger than its 2018

iteration.⁴¹ The Kremlin and the SCO likely tailored Peaceful Mission-2021 to prepare for potential anti-terrorist operations in Central Asia following the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Kremlin is intensifying international military exercises with Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and SCO members to increase Russian influence in Central and South Asia. The Kremlin additionally likely involved Belarus in Peaceful Mission 2021 to deepen Belarus' military integration into Russian-dominated structures.

5. **Ukraine's parliament passed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's anti-oligarch bill, a well-intentioned reform bill that could inadvertently advance Russian objectives to undermine the rule of law in Ukraine, on September 23.** The Ukrainian Parliament passed the bill with procedural violations that did not allow MPs to vote on the bill's amendments.⁴² The bill enables the Ukrainian president's National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) to identify and restrict "oligarchs" from political activity. The law defines an oligarch with broad criteria that describes many Ukrainian politicians.⁴³ Three major opposition parties – including both the pro-Euro-Atlantic integration "European Solidarity" Party and pro-Russian opposition "For Life" Party – denounced the bill as dictatorial, claiming it enables the president to bar any adversary defined as an "oligarch" from politics.⁴⁴ Reforming Ukraine's political system and reigning in the unchecked power of true oligarchs is important for Ukraine's institutional reform. However, this anti-oligarch bill, in its current form, concentrates an inordinate amount of power around the Ukrainian president. Ukrainian presidents could exploit the law as a political tool to repress opposition and undermine the rule of law in Ukraine. Such a development would

mark a setback in Ukrainian reforms and advance the Kremlin's campaign to prevent Ukraine from meeting reform conditions necessary to join Western structures, such as the European Union and NATO. Zelensky's Servant of the People Party removed Parliament Speaker Dmytro Razumkov – a previous Zelensky ally – on October 7 due to his opposition to hurriedly passing the anti-oligarch bill by violating procedures.⁴⁵

6. **The Kremlin secured a 15-year gas deal with Hungary, advancing the Kremlin's effort to divide the European Union and NATO and intensify economic pressure against Ukraine.** Russian state-owned gas monopoly Gazprom signed a 15-year gas deal with Hungary on September 27.⁴⁶ The deal stipulates that Russia will deliver up to 4.5 billion cubic meters of gas to Hungary annually for 15 years.⁴⁷ Gazprom stopped transiting gas through Ukraine to Hungary by using Russia's new TurkStream pipeline in violation of Gazprom's existing contract with Ukraine on October 1.⁴⁸ Russia's TurkStream pipeline, commissioned in 2020, diversified Russia's gas supply routes to Europe and enabled the Kremlin to leverage those routes for political gain – both by increasing Europe's reliance on Russian gas and by depriving Ukraine of gas transit fees. Hungary's decision to stop transiting gas through Ukraine also reduces Ukraine's ability to receive gas via reverse flows, an important method Ukraine has used to avoid buying gas directly from Russia since 2014.⁴⁹ Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline will similarly enable the Kremlin to increase Europe's energy dependency on Russia and bypass Ukrainian gas transit.

7. **Russia and Belarus' defense ministries issued incongruous statements on whether Russian units have redeployed from Belarus to Russia after the conclusion of the strategic exercise Zapad-2021.** The Belarusian Ministry of Defense claimed on September 29 that all Russian elements that deployed to Belarus to participate in Zapad-2021 completed their redeployment from Belarus back to Russia.⁵⁰ The Russian Ministry of Defense previously stated on September 27 that it plans for Russian redeployments following Zapad-2021 to take until mid-October 2021.⁵¹ The Russian Ministry of Defense has not

issued a statement claiming it has completed its redeployment from Belarus as of October 6. ISW assessed that the Kremlin sought to leverage the Zapad-2021 exercises to advance efforts to establish a permanent Russian ground forces presence in Belarus.⁵² Some Russian forces likely remain in Belarus despite the Belarusian MoD's claims.

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³⁹ Belarusian, Indian, Kazakh, and Chinese motorized rifle elements defeated simulated enemy forward elements while Russian Mi-24 attack helicopters provided air support to Russian tank elements. Russian, Indian, Pakistani, and Kyrgyz special forces elements conducted a joint heliborne assault. Unspecified Chinese artillery elements reinforced two Russian self-propelled artillery and rocket artillery battalions to form a joint Russian-Chinese missile and artillery force. Russian and Kazakh pilots conducted joint air combat tasks using both Russian and Kazakh Su-25 bomber jets. Unspecified Russian air defense units destroyed enemy UAVs and air defense systems. ["The Main Stage of the Joint Anti-Terrorist Command and Staff Exercise of the SCO 'Peaceful Mission' Took Place in the Orenburg Region,"] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, September 23, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12385267@egNews; ["More Than 70 Artillery Systems Will be Used at the International Exercise in the Orenburg Region,"] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, September 21, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12385007@egNews.

⁴⁰ ["Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation Armed Forces General of the Army Valery Gerasimov Arrived at the Troops of the Central Military District,"] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, September 23, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12385253@egNews.

https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12385253@egNews.

⁴¹ "Peaceful Mission-2018" involved approximately 3,000 personnel and 500 pieces of equipment. ["The Active Phase of the SCO Peaceful Mission 2018 Exercise Began in the Chelyabinsk Region,"] August 29, 2018, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12193216@egNews.

⁴² Yuriy Tarasovskiy, ["The Verkhovna Rada Adopted a Law on Oligarchs,"] *Liga Business*, September 23, 2021, <https://biz.liga.net/ekonomika/all/novosti/verhovnaya-rada-prinyala-zakon-ob-oligarhah>; Valeria Shpineva, ["There Was a Conflict between the Speaker and the MPs at the Rada Conciliation Council,"] *Lenta*, October 4, 2021, https://lenta.ru/news/2021/10/04/razum_rady/; Alyona Mazurenko, ["The Rada Approved the Law on Oligarchs,"] *Ukrayinska Pravda*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2021/09/23/7308164/>.

⁴³ The bill describes an oligarch as an individual meeting at least three qualifications: politically active, has significant influence over the media, is a sole business owner, a manager of a monopoly, or has assets exceeding roughly \$110,00 USD. Yuriy Tarasovskiy, ["The Verkhovna Rada Adopted a Law on Oligarchs,"] *Liga Business*, September 23, 2021, <https://biz.liga.net/ekonomika/all/novosti/verhovnaya-rada-prinyala-zakon-ob-oligarhah>.

⁴⁴ Tanya Polyakovskaya, ["No Votes Were Cast: Three Factions in the Rada Did Not Support the Law on Oligarchs,"] *Unian*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.unian.ua/politics/ne-dali-zhodnogogolosu-u-radi-tri-frakciji-ne-pidtrimali-zakon-pro-oligarhiv-novini-ukrajina-11554789.html>.

⁴⁵ "Ukrainian Lawmakers Vote to Remove Parliament Speaker Razumkov," *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-parliament-speaker-razumkov-fired/31497427.html>.

⁴⁶ "15-year Contracts Signed for Supplies of Russian Gas to Hungary," *Gazprom*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.gazprom.com/press/news/2021/september/article538440/>.

⁴⁷ "15-year Contracts Signed for Supplies of Russian Gas to Hungary," *Gazprom*, September 27, 2021, <https://www.gazprom.com/press/news/2021/september/article538440/>.

⁴⁸ Gazprom has a contract with Ukraine to transit 24.6 million cubic meters of gas per day through Ukraine until September 2022. Russian gas transits to Hungary through Ukraine ended on October 1.

Hungarian and Kremlin news claimed that Russia resumed gas transits to Ukraine on or after October 3, however this claim is false. Approximately 200,000 cubic meters per hour of gas transited from Ukraine to Hungary on October 3, however this was not a true Russian gas transfer. Gas flows from Ukraine to Hungary on October 3 were not true Russian gas transits but reexports of gas that European gas traders kept in Ukrainian gas storage facilities. ["Gazprom Stops Gas Transit to Hungary Through Ukraine,"] *Novoye Vremya*, October 1, 2021, <https://biz.nv.ua/economics/gazprom-prekratil-tranzit-gaza-v-vengriyu-cherez-ukrainu-novosti-ukrainy-50186747.html>; ["Director of GTS Operator Denies That Gazprom Resumed Transit Through Ukraine to Hungary,"] *Radio Svoboda*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-makohon-hazprom-ne-vidnovliuvav-tranzyt-cherez-ukrainu/31491555.html>; ["Gazprom Did Not Resume Gas Transit Through Ukraine to Hungary,"] *UNIAN*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.unian.ua/economics/energetics/gazprom-ne-ponovlyuvav-tranzit-gazu-cherez-ukrajinu-v-ugorshchinu-novini-sogodni-11565718.html>; ["Russia Stopped Gas Transit to Hungary Through Ukraine,"], *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, October 3, 2021, <https://rg.ru/2021/10/03/rossiia-ostanovila-tranzit-gaza-v-vengriyu-cherez-ukrainu.html>; ["Gas Transit Through Ukraine to Hungary Has Resumed,"] *Ukrainian National News Information Agency*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.unn.com.ua/uk/news/1946671-tranzit-gazu-cherez-ukrayinu-do-ugorschini-vidnovleno>; ["Gas Transit to Hungary Via Ukraine Has Been Resumed, According to the Operator,"] *Ukrayinska Pravda*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2021/10/4/7309272/>; ["Ukraine Says When the Gas Transit to Hungary Stopped,"] *Prime Agency of Economic Information*, October 3, 2021, <https://1prime.ru/energy/20211003/834865019.html>; ["Date of Gas Transit Cessation Through Ukraine Announced,"]

Lenta, October 3, 2021, https://lenta.ru/news/2021/10/03/tranzit_gaza/; ["Gazprom Has Stopped the Transit of Natural Gas to Hungary Through Ukraine,"] *Ukrainian Transition System Operator*, October 1, 2021, <https://tsoua.com/news/gazprom-prypynyv-tranzyt-pryrodnogo-gazu-v-ugorshhynu-terytoriyeyu-ukrayiny/>.⁴⁹ Ukraine can still receive reverse flows from Slovakia and other European states, however. Myroslav Liskovych, "Ukraine-Hungary Spat: Russia Doing Everything to Pit Neighbors Against Each Other," *Ukrinform*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-polytics/3325594-ukraine-hungary-russia-doing-everything-to-pit-neighbors-against-each-other.html>; ["Ukraine Will Reorient Gas Imports From Hungary to Other Directions,"] *RIA Novosti*, October 1, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20211001/gaz-1752689012.html>; ["To Poland, Slovakia and Romania: Ukraine Will Reorient Gas Transit Through Hungary,"] *TV 24*, October 1, 2021, https://economy.24tv.ua/ru/polshu-slovakiju-rumyniju-ukraina-jekonomicheskie-novosti-ukrainy_n1755746.⁵⁰ ["The Last Russian Military Contingent Left Belarus After the Zapad-2021 Exercise,"] *Belarusian Military Information Agency*, September 29, 2021, <https://vayar.mil.by/news/140695/>.⁵¹ ["Ulyanovsk Paratroopers Returned to Points of Permanent Deployment After Participating in Joint Strategic Exercise 'Zapad-2021,'"] *Russian Ministry of Defense*, September 28, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12385898@egNews.⁵² The Kremlin permanently deployed Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) and S-300 air defense systems to Belarus before Zapad-2021 began in late August 2021. George Barros "Russia in Review August 18 – August 31, 2021," *Institute for the Study of War*, September 2, 2021, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-review-august-18-august-31-2021>.