



## **Red Flag Alert for Genocide**

### **Serbia**

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention is issuing a **Red Flag Alert** for Serbia for the potential of a renewed conflict in the Republic of Kosovo. Throughout December 2022, military tensions were steadily rising between the Republics of Serbia and Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008 but has yet to achieve full recognition by the United Nations and the international community.

What initially started with a decision by the government of Kosovo in November to replace Belgrade-issued license plates in Serb-majority areas has quickly escalated to direct conflict between Serb protesters and Albanian police in the Serb-majority area of Mitrovica. Protesters blocked several main roads near the border crossing with Serbia following the arrest of a Serb ex-officer accused of attacking ethnic Albanian police. Local elections scheduled for December 18th were postponed due to fears of election violence. As of December 26th, the government of Serbia has put its troops on high alert, sparking fears of a second war in Kosovo and another war in Europe alongside the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The 1999 Kosovo War was one of the brutal civil wars that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. In the decade preceding the war, Kosovo lost its autonomous status within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic increased state oppression of Kosovar Albanians. The war was marked by grave human rights violations, such as torture, rape, extrajudicial killings, and the deliberate targeting of civilians. Serbia utilized paramilitary units, some of whom had been present in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Bosnian War and genocide from 1992 to 1995. Entire families were killed by these units, including young children and the elderly. This pattern, among other atrocities, suggests that Serbs committed genocidal violence against Kosovar Albanians. The Humanitarian Law Centre Kosovo published a list in 2014 stating that 13,517 people were killed during the year-long war, including 8,661 Kosovar Albanians. An estimated 4,500 victims were missing following the end of the war, and today nearly 1,700 are still unaccounted for and presumed dead. NATO has an ongoing peacekeeping mission, the Kosovo Force (KFOR), present in Kosovo to mitigate unrest and prevent a second full-scale war.

Tensions between Serbian and Albanian civilians often carry over to international cultural and athletic events, particularly during football matches. In October of 2014, a Euro 2016 qualifying match in Belgrade between the Albanian and Serbian national teams was abandoned after a flag bearing an insignia for a “Greater Albania” – including Kosovo – was dropped by a remote controlled drone. Recorded videos of the ensuing riot show Albanian players being assaulted with plastic chairs, flares, and bottles from Serbian supporters in the crowd. In December 2022, during the FIFA 2022 match between Serbia and Switzerland, Serbia supporters carried flags bearing fascist insignia and sang nationalist songs calling for violence against Kosovar Albanians. The songs, repeating the line “Kill, kill, kill the Albanians,” were noticed by FIFA officials, who finally issued a public order for the violent chants to stop around the 77th minute mark of the game. This show of Serb ultranationalism was displayed during the match with Switzerland to intimidate two Swiss players with familial ties to Kosovo.

The ongoing security situation in Mitrovica raises concerns about a renewed war and genocide, especially given Russia’s strong support for Serbia and its interests in the region. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has turned away from the EU and NATO in his second term and appears immune to international condemnation, which means he may feel he has the impunity to act unilaterally in Kosovo.

The current situation bears similarity to the beginning of the war in 1998, which started as clashes between Serbian police and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The ensuing genocide devastated the broader Albanian community and has left an ongoing trauma, with many survivors still waiting for justice. Survivors of wartime rape still struggle with the stigma and the shame of the violence they faced. Throughout this current crisis, Serbia requested approval to send its own police and military to the region for the first time after the war according to UN Security Council resolution 1244, while Kosovo has requested direct intervention from peacekeepers stationed in the region. This request made by the Serbian government was declined by NATO's mission to Kosovo on January 8th.

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention recommends that NATO increase the funding for the current KFOR mission and insist that representatives from the governments of Serbian President Vučić and Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani negotiate a preliminary ceasefire. While negotiations are underway, we urge the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect to work with both countries within a genocide prevention framework. We further implore Russia to put pressure on Vučić to refrain from launching another European war with predictably devastating consequences. The Lemkin Institute commends the efforts of US envoy Gabriel Escobar and EU Miroslav Lajcak in meeting with representatives in Pristina and Belgrade. We fully support their work and encourage the US and EU to continue these diplomatic visits even after the current situation has been calmed. Proper third-party peacekeeping cannot be sustained without accountability.

The needs of all of Kosovo's citizens, including both Serbs and Albanians, must be taken into consideration. At the societal level, there is a strong need for a robust genocide prevention training program. This includes age-appropriate education at the primary school level to help young children address their nation's history in a safe environment and trauma-informed genocide prevention measures for survivors of the first war and their communities. Furthermore, sustainable peace cannot be maintained without a truth and reconciliation process for acknowledging and transforming the difficult history of the recent past.