
KOSOVO LEADER HOPEFUL AHEAD OF TALKS WITH SERBIA

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Kosovos President Hashim Thaçi said Tuesday (24 January) that he hoped for long-awaited recognition from former foe Serbia as he left for a meeting in Brussels with Belgrades top leaders.

The European Union-brokered meeting comes as ties between the two Balkan countries have reached their lowest level since they opened talks to improve relations back in 2011.

Kosovos ethnic Albanian insurgents fought Serbian forces in 1998-1999 and the former province unilaterally declared independence in 2008, but Serbia denies Kosovos sovereignty.

Tensions have heightened in recent weeks but Thaçi voiced optimism before leaving for Brussels.

This is the opening of the final chapter of dialogue which will lead to mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia, he told reporters.

Earlier this month, Belgrade sent a train towards Kosovo painted in the colours of the Serbian flag, covered in the statement Kosovo is Serbia in multiple languages and decorated inside with Serbian Orthodox imagery.

Kosovo said it was a provocation. The train was stopped from crossing the border over fears it would be attacked, according to Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić

Members of Kosovos ethnic Albanian majority were also outraged by the arrest in France in early January of former prime minister Ramush Haradinaj, under an international warrant issued by Serbia.

Belgrade wants to try him for alleged war crimes committed against civilians during the 1990s conflict.

Relations have further deteriorated in the town of Mitrovica in northern Kosovo, where Serb authorities have started erecting a concrete wall on the banks of the Ibar river.

The walls construction, by a bridge that divides the towns Serb-dominated north and largely ethnic Albanian south, has angered Pristina, which says it is cementing the towns divisions and must be knocked down.

Ahead of Tuesdays meeting, Kosovos Prime Minister Isa Mustafa said the dialogue with Belgrade has no alternative.

Vučić and Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić are due to attend the talks.

Stanislava Pak, an advisor to Nikolić, told state-run RTS television they were expecting the intensification of dialogue and hope for the establishment of a red phone with Pristina so that concrete problems can be avoided in future.

Vučić said Monday that although he did not expect much from the Brussels meeting he still expected a calming of the situation and clear messages.

By EurActiv.com with AFP

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