
KOSOVO MOVES TO CREATE REGULAR ARMY OVER SERBIAN OBJECTIONS

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Kosovo's president has asked parliament to transform the country's lightly armed security forces into a regular army, a move that quickly drew objections from Serbian leaders who refuse to recognize Kosovo's independence.

Hashim Thaci submitted a draft law on March 7 saying that "the transformation of Kosovo Security Force into an army is a normal step of a sovereign and independent state."

"Such a legal initiative...aims at protecting territorial sovereignty and integrity, preserving peace, and defending" Kosovo, while contributing to the region's "peace and stability," Thaci said.

Thaci acknowledged that Kosovo's ethnic Serbian minority has opposed the legislation in what he said was a stand "known to originate from Serbia."

His plan to transform the existing security forces into a regular army would require a two-thirds majority for approval in parliament, and it would require support from Serbian lawmakers to cross that threshold.

Deputy Prime Minister, Branimir Stojanovic, an ethnic Serb, told RFE/RL that changing the mandate of the Security Force of Kosovo would be unconstitutional and that Serbian representatives will seek to respect the constitution on the matter. He said Thaci had not discussed the legislation with ethnic Serbian leaders.

Thaci linked the move to Kosovo's hopes of eventually joining NATO, and the bill's supporters said they would seek support in the international community.

"Kosovo is finally creating its army," Thaci said. "Such a legal natural transformation is fully constitutional and necessary so that the Kosovo Security Force formally starts the process of NATO membership."

Relations between Kosovo and Serbia have been tense following frictions in recent months, including Kosovo's bid to reopen a war crimes case against Serbia.

Kosovo declared independence in 2008 and the move has been recognized by 114 countries but not by Belgrade.

"Serbia will never agree with the formation of Kosovo's army," Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic told a rally in Mladenovac on March 7. Vucic is a candidate for president in elections to be held next month.

Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic said Belgrade will use all political means available to prevent Kosovo from forming a regular army. He said Pristina's "unilateral moves" fueled instability in the region.

While stirring opposition from Serbs, Thaci's plan appears to make no dramatic changes in Kosovo's existing security force, which was created in 2009 and has about 4,000 regular and 2,500 reserve forces.

His plan would increase regular forces to 5,000 and reserves to 3,000, and it would retain international military forces deployed in Kosovo to ensure its protection. About 4,500 troops from 31 countries have been deployed in Kosovo since June 1999.

Serbia, by contrast, has about 50,000 people in its regular military, not including reserves.

NATO leaders have been sympathetic to increased concerns about security in Kosovo with tensions flaring in the region.

Last month, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and Supreme Allied Commander for Europe General Curtis Scaparrotti in separate visits to Kosovo assured the country that the military alliance will maintain troops in the Balkan country "for as long as it's necessary."

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