
SERBIAN LEADER: WE WILL 'PROTECT OUR PEOPLE' SHOULD UN PULL OUT OF KOSOVO

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Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has warned of the dangers should the United Nations follow through on a reported U.S. call for an exit strategy for the UN peacekeeping mission in Kosovo.

Vucic on October 17 said the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers from Kosovo would leave his country no choice but to "protect" the ethnic Serbian population living in its former province, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008.

He did not specify what action Serbia could take in Kosovo should the peacekeeping mission, known as UNMIK, be terminated.

But he said that "the departure of UNMIK, as well as the formation of the Kosovo Army, would lead Serbia into a terribly difficult position in which we no longer have the choice, nor the right to choose or do anything else but to protect our country and our people.

Reports earlier said the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, had called on the world body to exercise its authority and initiate a strategic review of UNMIK to develop an exit strategy."

"For a number of years, the UN mission in Kosovo has stood out as an example of how the UN has successfully managed a complex conflict, Haley was quoted as writing in a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres last week.

Kosovo's success, marked by 10 years of independence this year, should be a cause for celebration and a symbol of the great contribution of the UN to peace and stability in Europe," added Haley, who has announced she will step down from her post by the end of the year.

The United States UN mission did not immediately respond to a request by RFE/RL to authenticate the letter and did not comment on Vucic's remarks.

Serbia lost control over Kosovo in 1999 after a NATO bombing campaign to stop the killing and expulsion of Albanians by Serb forces during a two-year counterinsurgency war.

UNMIK's peacekeeping mission was launched the same year to help ensure conditions for a peaceful and normal life for all inhabitants of Kosovo and advance regional stability in the Western Balkans.

Kosovo's independence has been recognized by more than 100 countries, but not by Serbia.

The two sides in 2013 committed to EU-mediated talks to resolve their differences, but little progress has been made.

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