
KOSOVO PRESIDENT SAYS NO ETHNIC LAND SWAP AS SERBIA PEACE DEAL STALLS

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Kosovo's president has denied that a potential peace agreement with Serbia would involve redrawing the border along ethnic lines amid fears that such a deal could re-ignite conflict between the two neighbouring states.

Nearly two decades after the end of the Kosovo War, simmering tensions remain. Kosovo's recent decision to form an army has angered Serbia and alarmed Kosovo's Serbian minority, while the fledgling state still relies on a Nato-led force for protection.

Hashim Thaci held a tense meeting last week with his Serbian counterpart, Aleksandar Vucic, mediated by the EU, to try to kickstart stalled negotiations. Without a deal, neither country can achieve its goal of EU membership.

Kosovo declared independence in 2008 but is still not recognised by Serbia, Russia, and several European powers including Greece and Spain.

The possibility of a land swap has alarmed several EU leaders, including Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, who fear it could revive hostilities.

It comes nearly 20 years after a Nato bombing campaign ended the conflict in Kosovo, paving the way for its independence from Serbia.

Mr Thaci, who was in Paris to attend commemorations of the centenary of the end of the First World War, told The Telegraph that the occasion underscored the need for a just and sustainable peace in the Balkans.

But as he spoke, Serbia marked the centenary by holding large military drills in an apparent show of force amid rising tensions with Kosovo.

The live-ammunition manoeuvres, dubbed "The Century of Winners," involved 8,000 soldiers, 100 battle tanks and MiG-29 fighter jets supplied by Russia, Serbia's long-standing ally.

Serbia has also demanded the end of a 10 per cent tax imposed by Kosovo on Serbian goods.

Mr Thaci insisted that the land swap would not amount to ethnic cleansing, in spite of fears in both countries. There will be no division of Kosovo. There will be no borders based on ethnic lines. Kosovo and Serbia will remain multi-ethnic in spirit and in reality, he said

The First World War was triggered by a crisis in the Balkans following the 1914 assassination of

Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria by a Serb nationalist in Sarajevo, now the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The bad peace agreements after the First World War led to further conflicts and further wars and that is why we are precisely determined to have a good agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, Mr Thaci said.

The Kosovan president urged European leaders to help finalise a deal with Serbia before EU elections in May, which may give more power to anti-immigration parties, opposed to EU expansion.

If not, he said, Europe would miss a historic opportunity. However, Emmanuel Macron, the French president, has said there is no wish to enlarge the bloc in the near future.

Mr Thaci reiterated Kosovos position that no peace deal is possible unless Serbia □ and Russia □ recognise it as a sovereign state.

He said the border would be determined by state commissions from Kosovo and Serbia.

Mr Thaci also warned that, without a peace deal, Islamists could become more powerful in Muslim-majority Kosovo.

If there is no agreement, then there will be a vacuum that will be used by ideologies that are non-Western.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/11/14/kosovo-president-says-no-ethnic-land-swap-serbia-peace-deal/>

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