
KOSOVO LEADER SAYS RUSSIA WON'T STOP SERBIA COMPROMISE

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Kosovo's leader said Tuesday that Serbia's traditional backer Russia had promised to support eventual reconciliation between Belgrade and Pristina, removing one potential obstacle in stalled talks.

President Hashim Thaci said that he spoke to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in November, in the first-ever meeting between the two sides, on the sidelines of centennial commemorations for the end of World War I.

"I asked him very directly -- what would Russia's reaction be if Kosovo and Serbia reach an agreement? His reply was that he will support it," Thaci said at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington.

"His reply was that we cannot be greater Serbs than the Serbs. I cannot say I was impressed, but I would really welcome if he keeps his word," he said.

Russia enjoys veto power on the UN Security Council and has strong cultural and political ties to Serbia, which has campaigned to shut Kosovo out of the United Nations and other international organizations since it declared independence in 2008.

Kosovo, whose population is mostly ethnic Albanian, broke away from Serbia after a bloody 1998-99 guerrilla campaign and bombing by NATO, which continues to station a peacekeeping force in Kosovo.

EU-led talks for reconciliation have made little headway. US President Donald Trump recently wrote a letter offering US assistance to broker a deal.

But Thaci also faces opposition at home, with Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj rejecting the president's idea for territory swaps with Serbia.

In Washington, Thaci said that land swaps would be "part of a broader peace agreement" and insisted: "There will be no borders based on ethnic lines."

"I am convinced that this will close once and for all the war between Kosovo and Serbia and open a safe way for membership in NATO and the EU" for both countries, he said.

He pointed to the recent resolution of the decades-old name dispute between Greece and Macedonia, which agreed to rename itself the Republic of North Macedonia, as a sign that deep feuds can end.

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