

U.S.-Russia row over Kosovo escalates with Moscow aid shipments

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Russia is sending humanitarian supplies worth \$1.7 million directly to Kosovo Serbs, challenging the authority of the US-backed government in Pristina.

Pristina, Kosovo -- In the days following Kosovo's declaration of independence, a billboard was erected depicting a boxer in stars-and-stripes shorts knocking out his hammer-and-sickle opponent. The imagery may have been crude, but the message was clear: Kosovo's newly declared statehood represented a "victory" for the US over Russia.

Not so fast.

Two new developments have prompted concerns that what started as a disagreement between the two powers over international law could escalate into a proxy stand-off in the territory.

Moscow last week began sending humanitarian aid to Kosovo's Serbs, bypassing the US-backed government in Pristina. As cargo planes left Russia for Belgrade, a Russian news agency quoted an anonymous Kremlin source warning that the situation in Kosovo has not yet reached its "hottest phase." That followed Washington's announcement last month that it would begin arms shipments to Kosovo.

Until now, Russian solidarity with Kosovo Serbs in opposing Kosovo's independence has been limited to international forums – such as President Vladimir Putin's meeting with President Bush in Russia this weekend. But the arrival of Russian humanitarian aid in Kosovo last week marks Moscow's first direct challenge to the Kosovo government's authority on the ground, bolstering Serb opposition to the ethnic Albanian government.

Belgrade welcomed the aid from its biggest ally. On receiving the first consignment last week, Serbia's minister for Kosovo, Slobodan Samardzic, told reporters in Belgrade: "We are grateful to Russia for its material and moral support."

But in Kosovo, some Serbs are less emphatic in their praise for Russian aid. Although a Russian flag hangs in the main square of Serb-dominated north Mitrovica, not far from a mock gravestone for Mr. Bush, among the community there is suspicion of Russian motives. "It's a stunt to boost the Radicals in the [May 11 Serbian elections]," says one man, who refused to give his name.

Miki Dasic is a prime recipient for the Russian aid. The Serbian farmer lives with his family in the ramshackle village of Brestovic in western Kosovo, enduring months without running water and reliable electricity. He eats only what he can produce, and his children are educated at home. But he fears that help from Russia could be more trouble than it is worth.

"Personally, I am against this Russian aid," he says. "We need proper economic help, not presents. But it's time America respected the Russians; they are not weak anymore. The Albanian people are slaves of America. If the Russians provoke the US, it's possible something very bad will start here."

His fears are mirrored in Kosovo's Albanian community. Gezim Ajupi sells flags from a small stall in central Pristina. He offers three designs - the Albanian national flag, the new Kosovo flag, and the Stars and Stripes.

"America is very good for Kosovo, and it's better to be with the USA," he says. "They have helped us with weapons. Maybe Russia will give weapons to the Serbs. Anyway, whatever happens, the USA will have the last word."

Analysts believe that as long as Kosovo's Serbs feel that they have the support of a major world power behind them, their opposition to the ethnic Albanian government will intensify. The result, they warn, will be a protracted conflict that could explode into violence if Pristina tries to impose its will in Serbian areas.

"To integrate the Serbian areas will require a robust military presence, and the international community is not willing to do this," says James Lyon of the International Crisis Group, which advocates broader international recognition of Kosovo's independence. "Russia has nothing to lose in the Balkans, and can only win. Putin has clawed his way back to the top, and can now throw his weight about. On issue after issue, Moscow has shown it is not averse to conflict with the West."

Russia is showing no signs of abandoning its campaign to undermine Kosovo's fledgling independence. Moscow has pledged to send more consignments of aid before the end of this week, bringing to the total value of the relief shipment to \$1.7 million. It has also warned that it will block Kosovo's bid to join the UN.

"We have done all we can to derail the plans of the rapid and broad recognition of Kosovo's independence," Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov told the parliament last week.

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