

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Index:

The NY Times – Mike Pence, in Montenegro, assures Balkans of U.S. support. Article by Sewell Chan

The Guardian – Blocked in the Balkans: the refugees that Europe won't allow in.

DiePress – Trade war is threatening the Balkans. Article by Thomas Roser.

The Economist – Agrokor, the supermarket whose collapse threatens the Balkans.

Sputnik News – Splitting Kosovo in two: only way to solve deadlock or opening 'Pandora's box'?

The Guardian – Traffickers forge route to Europe in Black Sea. Article by Hannah Lucinda Smith and Catherine Philp.

Bild – Bulgaria wants to strengthen border protection against refugees.

Spiegel Online – Balkans experiencing more and more influence of Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

The Washington Post – Macedonia denies "intelligence ations" against irate Serbia.

The NY Times – Western Balkans leaders adopt plan to deepen economic ties.

Date: 2 August 2017

Title: Mike Pence, in Montenegro, assures Balkans of U.S. support

Author: Sewell Chan

Source: The NY Times

Key words: Balkans, U.S., Montenegro

Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/europe/pence-montenegro-markovic-nato.html>

Summary

In his visit to Montenegro, Vice President Mike Pence told the leaders of eight Balkan nations that the U.S. supports them. In his 19 minute speech at the Adriatic Charter Summit he welcomed Montenegro entrance to NATO stating that “your courage, particularly in the face of Russian pressure, inspires the world and I commend you for that” whilst he referred to Russia as an “unpredictable country that casts a shadow from the east”. The Vice President toned down President Trump’s rhetoric, as he once defined NATO “obsolete”, and embraced a more traditional American view of embracing NATO, and the EU. Some of the leaders present at the Summit are fairly new in their posts: Andrej Plenkovic, Croatia’s prime minister took office last October; Zoran Zaev, Macedonia’s prime minister in May; and Ana Brnabic, Serbia’s first woman prime minister came to office in June. However Vice President Pence stated: “You belong to a new generation of Balkan leaders, and this is a historic moment for progress in the western Balkans. I urge you with great respect to make the most of this moment”.

Date: 8 August 2017

Title: Blocked in the Balkans: the refugees that Europe won’t allow in

Author:

Source: The Guardian

Key words: Balkans, Serbia, migration, EU

Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/08/eu-refugees-serbia-afghanistan-taliban>

Summary

Between 2015-2016 the Balkan route brought about 1 million people into the EU, but since then borders have begun to be shut. According to the UN refugee agency 7,600 refugees currently live in Serbia, most in one of the 18 state-run asylum centre. Schools have begun to accept refugee children and integrate them with Serbian students. Darko Stanojkovic, a Serbian language teacher, stated that “the main difference is that migrant children carry with them more trauma, past-war-trauma, separation, loss ... a completely new country, language and social barriers, loneliness ... and the trauma of the future”. Despite the difficulties in integration, Juliana Kaljajic, another teacher, stated that “they are more motivated than any students I have worked with”. Even though Serbia is experiencing clear problems in the efficiency of its asylum office, out of more than 1,000 requests in 2016 only 70 were decided upon, one of the many migrants claims that countries could learn from Serbia. “In Afghanistan, no one cares for each other. In Turkey there were no schools. In Bulgaria we slept in forests. But in Serbia, the people support each other. They support my family too, I do not forget this”.

Date: 9 August 2017

Title: Trade war is threatening the Balkans

Author: Thomas Roser

Source: DiePress

Key words: Balkans, economy

Link: <http://diepresse.com/home/wirtschaft/economist/5265919/Auf-dem-Balkan-droht-Handelskrieg?from=suche.intern.portal>

Summary

The indignation for Croatia's new taxes on the import of fruit and vegetables, continues and unites. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo have issued an ultimatum to Zagreb requesting the drastic increase in charges for the issue of customs certificates. The price for a border sanitary inspection and its eventual certificate has skyrocketed from 12 to 270 euros, in the middle of the harvest season in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia. As "Euroblic", a Bosnian newspaper, titles "The Croatians want to destroy Bosnia", Serbia has announced the imposition of counter measures, and other countries threaten to follow. For the Croatian Minister of Agriculture, Tomislav Tolušić, the measure is not intended to harm anyone but "safeguarding the quality of food". These measures will most probably harm Croatia, as the country, during the Trieste Summit, agreed to create a common economic area with the rest of the region, and most importantly, Croatia exports more goods than it imports to its neighbours.

Date: 10 August 2017

Title: Agrokor, the supermarket whose collapse threatens the Balkans

Author:

Source: The Economist

Key words: Balkans, Croatia

Link: <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21726073-how-did-firm-had-near-monopoly-food-go-bust-agrokor-supermarket-whose-collapse>

Summary

The State ownership of food-and-retail chain, in Croatia, has the potential to depress the entire region, ruining the optimism created by tourism and signs of accelerated growth. Agrokor, funded by Ivica Todoric, has been the biggest private business in Croatia and the western Balkans, it owns 700 Konzum supermarkets across Croatia and it's active throughout the region. Agrokor comprises 143 firms which employ almost 57,000 people. In April, under a specially passed law, the State became the administrator of the business as it faced huge debts. The problems began when, in 2014, Agrokor bought a faltering Slovenian retail giant, Mercator, financing the acquisition through borrowing. The Russian Sberbank is the biggest single creditor, Agrokor owes it 1.1 billion euros, and has initiated a cause for fraud against Todoric. The total debts of the company amount to at least 6.74 billion euros, and Ante Ramljak, "who is winding up the group", says that if the group was to collapse 500,000 people could be affected by it, and that "Croatia's economy might shrink by 10% or more. According to the European Bank for

Reconstruction and Development, the conglomerate's outstanding obligations are the equivalent of almost 15% of Croatia's GDP".

Date: 12 August 2017

Title: Splitting Kosovo in two: only way to solve deadlock or opening 'Pandora's box'?

Author:

Source: Sputnik News

Key words: Kosovo, Serbia, Balkans

Link: <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201708121056404339-kosovo-partition-proposal/>

Summary

Kosovo is still the subject of a territorial dispute between Serbia and the Republic of Kosovo, as the latter unilaterally declared independence in 2008, whilst Serbia continues to claim it as part of its territory. In an article published for Blitz media, the Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic stated that the only solution to solve the long-running conflict in the region is to carve up Kosovo into Serbian and Albanian parts. However, Stefan Surlic, researcher at Belgrade University, believes that the Kosovo issue is a 'Pandora's box' that no one dares to open. In his view nobody in Pristina would agree to divide the northern region, handing it to Serbia, and leaving the rest to the Kosovo Republic. "They would be more willing to discuss the exchange of the Serbian-populated northern Kosovo for Serbia's Albanian-populated Presevo Valley". The fears are that the division of Kosovo will spur on the idea of a 'Greater Albania', spilling over to the neighbouring countries.

Date: 16 August 2017

Title: Traffickers forge route to Europe in Black Sea

Author: Hannah Lucinda Smith and Catherine Philp

Source: The Guardian

Key words: Black sea, smuggling

Link: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/traffickers-forge-route-to-europe-in-black-sea-as-mediterranean-crossings-from-libya-and-turkey-to-italy-and-greece-fall-sharply-zkjqsb7r9>

Summary

In order to avoid detection and authorities trying to stop them, people traffickers bringing migrants to Europe have shifted their routes and have now opened a back door through the Black Sea. The Bulgarian navy chief of staff, Captain Georgi Penev, commented that "migration [into Bulgaria] is mostly coming through the land border [from Turkey] at the moment. But we could see an increase on the sea route because of the crackdown in the Aegean". The Romanian authorities, on the other hand, report a fivefold increase in the number of people, 2,500, trying to enter the country illegally in the first six months of 2017. As the more traditional routes have seen a surge in the monitoring by authorities, new ones are surging, such as the western Mediterranean crossing between North Africa and Spain and both sea and land routes through Bulgaria and Romania, bordering the Black Sea. The efforts to close

other crossings, such as the Mediterranean, could bring the Black Sea to turn into one of the next “major people-smuggling hub”.

Date: 17 August 2017

Title: Bulgaria wants to strengthen border protection against refugees

Author: Bild

Source: Bild

Key words: Balkans, Bulgaria, Refugees, Frontier

Link: <http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/fluechtlingskrise/bulgarien-will-grenzschutz-gegen-fluechtlinge-verstaerken-52885736.bild.html>

Summary

The Bulgarian Minister of Defence, Krasimir Karakakhanov, stated that his country’s military will be strengthened in order to ensure the protection of its borders and to fight against illegal immigration. The plan is thought out to divide the border into five different sections to be controlled by the armed forces, also increasing and improving surveillance with video cameras and drones. “In each of these zones, we will send a company of the armed forces to guard the corresponding frontier”. The border with Turkey, which has been almost entirely closed by barbed wire fences, and the country’s geographic participation in the Balkan route, which refugees are trying to use to get to Western Europe, are the reasons for these new strategies. The Minister moved on to affirm that the EU has failed in its attempts of closing down the Mediterranean route for refugees, stating that “we should deploy NATO or EU forces in Italy and Greece and defend the external borders of the European Union by force of arms”.

Date: 22 August 2017

Title: Balkans experiencing more and more influence of Turkey and Saudi Arabia

Author:

Source: Spiegel Online

Key words: Balkans, Turkey, Saudi Arabia

Link: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/balkan-kurz-warnt-vor-einfluss-der-tuerkei-und-saudi-arabiens-a-1163877.html>

Summary

Due to the growing influence of Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the Balkans, Austria’s Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz has been calling for an acceleration to include the Western Balkans in the EU. Independently of the current challenges being faced by the EU, such as Brexit, the refugee crisis and Islamic terrorism, the Balkan region should not remain out of sight. Kurz stated that in Sarajevo or Pristina, “women would be paid to go out to the street in full veil to change the street image. In the Balkan region we encounter new young states where tensions among themselves, as well as between different ethnic groups have been increasing again. In the view of the Austrian Foreign Minister, “we

must therefore continue to play an active role in this region, which is so important to the EU, to support reforms and the fight against radicalization and to provide a credible EU perspective”.

Date: 22 August 2017

Title: Macedonia denies “intelligence actions” against irate Serbia

Author: Associated Press

Source: The Washington Post

Key words: Balkans, Macedonia, Serbia, intelligence

Link: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/macedonia-denies-intelligence-actions-against-irate-serbia/2017/08/22/0a508fd4-875d-11e7-96a7-d178cf3524eb_story.html?utm_term=.74ad5e46a967

Summary

On the 20th of August Serbia withdrew its embassy personnel from Skopje based on intelligence reports of unspecified “very offensive acts” planned against Serb interests in Macedonia, without making direct reference to espionage. Macedonia rejects such claims. Foreign Minister, Nikola Dimitrov, claims that Macedonia “did not intend, order or commit intelligence actions” targeting Serbia or any other country in the Balkan region. The Foreign Minister Dimitrov stated that Macedonia’s only offensive “is the offensive for development of friendship in the Balkans”. Macedonia and Serbia have drifted apart as the former country new left-wing government took over in the spring, replacing an administration seen as more pro-Russian.

Date: 26 August 2017

Title: Western Balkans leaders adopt plan to deepen economic ties

Author: Associated Press

Source: The NY Times

Key words: Balkans, economy

Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2017/08/26/world/europe/ap-eu-albania-western-balkans.html>

Summary

In Durres, Albania, Prime Ministers from the Western Balkans agreed on a 115-point plan to improve their regional economic cooperation in the effort for joining the European Union. The meeting was held between the countries of Albania, Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Montenegro, whilst the EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn and World Bank Vice President Cyril Muller also attended the meeting. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama stated that the plan would create a “fundamental transformation of the movement of goods, service, capital, qualified employees to make the region more attractive to investment, flexible in commercial exchange and speed up its economic growth and wellbeing along the road to the EU”. Johannes Hahn noted the increase in the exchange of goods between EU and the six Western Balkan countries, doubling in the

last decade to a value of 46 billion euros, however bilateral ties in the region have not changed. “The creation of an economic area is something supporting (their) European aspiration, but that also helps the countries for a better perspective”.

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