

STRATEGIC BALKANS

Strategic Balkans – a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

PRESS REVIEW NOVEMBER 2017



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Date: 2 November 2017

Title: Serbia torn between EU attraction and China ambitions

Author: Vladimir Kruij

Source: Financial Times

Key words: Balkans, Serbia, China, EU, investments.

Link: <https://www.ft.com/content/f1570558-bffb-11e7-b8a3-38a6e068f464>

Summary

Serbia has one of the fastest economies in Europe, especially due to the country's ability to attract foreign investment, especially from China. Data shows that Serbia accounts for half of the €3.3 billion in trade volumes between China and the Balkans. Furthermore, "the government also announced that it expects to open 10,000 jobs through a joint €300m project with the China Road and Bridge Corporation for the construction of an industrial park in Belgrade". For China, the Balkans represent a gateway to larger European markets. Nevertheless, as discussed at the Belgrade Security Forum, Europe remains Serbia's most important foreign trade partner, regardless of the EU failure in offering credible alternatives to Chinese investments. The EU needs to alter this trend, as Serbia is the only country in the region where people perceive EU accession as a bad thing. The Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy, Johannes Hahn, made a step in the right direction stating: "Serbia belongs in Europe and will soon become part of the European family".

Date: 4 November 2017

Title: EU failure in Balkans "a call to China and Russia" says Macedonia president

Author:

Source: Telegraph

Key words: Balkans, Macedonia, China, Russia, EU.

Link: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/04/eu-failure-balkans-call-china-russia-says-macedonia-president/>

Summary

During an interview, Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov, stated that the failure of the EU to engage and invest in the Balkans has left the door open to Chinese and Russian strategic interests. In his view, the EU is stuck in a 20th century mindset, with petty internal squabbles that have left it unable to meet the current challenges of this century. The lack of a long-term vision strategy in the Balkans by the EU is represented by the failure to invest into an east-west infrastructure corridor connecting the Adriatic and Black seas, focusing instead on a north-south corridor connecting Greece and Serbia. "Now we are in a situation where we are using Chinese money and credits to build a European corridor transiting the territory of Macedonia. This is the paradox". The rising influence of Russia, China and Turkey in the Western Balkans has become a renewed focus. UK security officials warn about the risk of Russia meddling in Macedonian politics in a bid to frustrate its efforts away from the Euro-Atlantic sphere, simultaneously China keeps investing through its "16+1" scheme.

Date: 13 November 2017

Title: Balkans need legal reform to boost economies, IMF says

Author: Reuters

Source: US News

Key words: Balkans, Reforms, Economy, IMF.

Link: <https://money.usnews.com/investing/news/articles/2017-11-13/lack-of-funding-bad-loans-limit-credit-growth-in-western-balkans>

Summary

In one of its reports, the International Monetary Fund stated that in order to deal with bad loans, to speed up judicial reforms and to improve bankruptcy and insolvency laws, Balkan countries need to develop a legal framework, hence improving their economic prospect. Jorg Decressin, the IMF European Department Deputy director stated, “sound institutions and a sound judiciary are essentially the source of all business transactions and economy”. This is a main reason why foreign banks, at the moment, still see limited prospects in the region, leading local banks to curb funding abroad and relying on self-funding. “Weak judiciaries make banks weary of lending for fear that debts will not be recovered”. Despite a positive economic growth rate, exceeding 3 percent, the region is behind in comparison to its European peers, the first example of this is the fact that incomes are 30 percent of those in the euro area.

Date: 17 November 2017

Title: In the Balkans, the forces of pious chauvinism speak louder again

Author: Erasmus

Source: The Economist

Key words: Balkans, Serbia, Greece, Nationalism, Far-right, Religion.

Link: <https://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2017/11/resurgent-right>

Summary

As the Balkan wars of the 1990s came to an end, the region was thought to be under Western influence, as every country wanted to be part of the EU. However, in recent times religiously inspired nationalism and ultra-nationalism have returned to Southeastern Europe, growing more visible every day. The latest case shows a video posted by Golden Dawn, a Greek far-right party, celebrating the consolidation of relations with the Serbian Radical Party, and establishing a common front against Islamic and liberal globalization in their region. Both parties draw deeply on religious rhetoric, rejecting alien cultures and immigrants, welcoming closer relations with Russia and reacting positively to the election of Donald Trump. Neither party represent the mainstream of their respective countries, however Golden Dawn has 16 deputies, and the Serbian Radicals took 8% of the vote in the last Serbian elections. “Happily neither the political life of the Balkans, nor even the religious life, begins or ends with these strident voices. But they are undoubtedly being projected with greater confidence, as though for the first time in a couple of decades, history was on their side”.

Date: 21 November 2017

Title: Balkans: Council of Europe, stalled reconciliation

Author: Erasmus

Source: ANSA

Key words: Balkans, Reconciliation, EU.

Link: http://www.ansa.it/europa/notizie/rubriche/altrenews/2017/11/21/balceni-consiglio-deuropa-ricongiunzione-in-stallo_a8dd162c-4139-43eb-8a92-fc4a85d70939.html

Summary

Nils Muiznieks, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, in one of the documents that evaluates the level of reconciliation in the region in the last decade, stated: "I am worried that the reconciliation process has stalled and that increasing ethnic divisions and a polarization in the region are replacing this process". He invites the political leaders to "work together to address the issues of the past and forge a common vision for the future". The Commissioner is particularly worried about the denial of genocide, the glorification of war criminals and attempts to rehabilitate people involved in crimes committed during the war, historical revisionism, the inflammatory discourse of certain political leaders and the persistent ethnic segregation in schools. According to Muiznieks, political leaders must set aside their short-term goals and focus on strengthening social cohesion instead of amplifying ethnic divisions. Despite the important advancements made in the region, the recent signs of regression are likely to jeopardize the progress made so far.

Date: 22 November 2017

Title: NATO and EU call for "reconciliation" in the Balkans

Author: Le Figaro

Source: Le Figaro

Key words: NATO, European Union, Ratko Mladic, Reconciliation, Balkans

Link: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2017/11/22/97001-20171122FILWWW00216-l-otan-et-ue-appellent-a-la-reconciliation-dans-les-balkans.php>

Summary

NATO and the European Union called for "reconciliation" in the Balkans after the sentence of former Bosnian Serb military leader Ratko Mladic for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. "This shows that the rule of law is working and that those responsible for war crimes must be held accountable" said NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in a statement. "I hope that this judgment will encourage the region (Balkans) to move towards the path of peace and reconciliation," said Mr Stoltenberg, pointing out that Mr Mladic was guilty of "appalling crimes against civilians", especially in Srebrenica during the summer of 1995. The European Union urged all the Balkan countries to "honour the victims" of war crimes and to work for "reconciliation" in the region.

Date: 22 November 2017

Title: Ratko Mladic jailed for life over Bosnia for genocide

Author: BBC News

Source: BBC News

Key words: Balkans, ICTY, Ratko Mladic.

Link: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42080090>

Summary

Ratko Mladic, former Bosnian Serb commander, has been convicted on 10 of the 11 charges presented by the UN tribunal, sentencing him to life imprisonment. After 16 years on the run, Mladic was brought to trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 2012. The Tribunal found that the former commander “significantly” contributed to the genocide in Srebrenica in 1995, as well as war crimes and crimes against humanity. Mladic, 74, was escorted out of court after shouting at the judges, “it’s a lie. Everything you said in this courtroom is a lie”. The victims and their relatives present in a memorial centre near Srebrenica erupted in cheers as the sentence was read out, however others said that Mladic deserved a harsher sentence. A native of Sarajevo was not so optimistic, “The verdict won’t make any changes. What we need to fight now is the legacy of the war – we’re still living it”.

Date: 26 November 2017

Title: Genocidal warlords, savage Mafiosi – Carla Del Ponte has hunted them all

Author: Michael Sheridan

Source: The Times

Key words: Balkans, ICTY, Carla Del Ponte.

Link: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/genocidal-warlords-savage-mafiosi-carla-del-ponte-has-hunted-them-all-mntdpv8dx>

Summary

“I’m satisfied. He was the highest-ranking person to be convicted for the crimes in the Balkan wars. It’s a relief for the victims”, this is the statement made by the former anti-mafia prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, as Ratko Mladic was found guilty of genocide. Del Ponte claims that the majority of war criminals adhere to an idea of territorial conquest backed by ethnic superiority ideology, or else they are motivated by sheer lust for personal or clan power. “Those I saw were ministers, generals... when you see them, they don’t look as if they just came from prison; they are well dressed, they speak and carry themselves like cultivated people. However, when you know – because you have the dossier – what responsibility they bear, you want to see physical signs of their criminality but you don’t see any. And the lie. Always”. When asked whether justice should be traded with peace, she has no hesitations in replying. “There’s no peace without justice. Without justice there’ll always be someone who remembers. There’ll always be someone who will seek revenge”.

Date: 27 November 2017

Title: Kosovo's Plan B: If not accepted into EU, join Albania?

Author: Sputnik News

Source: Sputnik News

Key words: Balkans, Kosovo, Albania, EU.

Link: <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201711271059477160-losovo-albania-unification-referendum/>

Summary

Sources from Sputnik News claim that if Kosovo fails to reach international recognition of its independency by February 2018, date that will mark ten years from its declaration of autonomy from Serbia, it will hold a referendum on joining Albania. President Hashim Thaci stated that Kosovo's borders with Albania should be opened, following the example of the European Union. A source that didn't want to be revealed stated: "for Europe, the Albanian factor is a nightmare, as it simultaneously affects five countries in the Balkans (Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo). Albanians are aware of this, and this awareness makes them stronger. And if we add the support of the US, and, moreover, Turkey, then what else can we expect". As the International Court of Justice determined the legality of Kosovo's independence, the republic has received 114 diplomatic recognitions as an independent state, two of which have been formally withdrawn.

Date: 29 November 2017

Title: The Serbian steelworks that portrays the Chinese landing in the Balkans

Author: Juan Diego Quesada

Source: El País

Key words: Balkans, Serbia, China.

Link: https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/11/27/actualidad/1511814740_781440.html

Summary

The former State steel company was first an icon of communist Yugoslavia, then a sign of modernization and reconciliation with the U.S.A., as the American company US Steel bought the company in 2003. However, Serbia rebought the steelworks for a symbolic fee of 1 euro after that the American company had to withdraw due to the impact of the crisis in the global steel market. Today, Serbia sold the steelworks to the Chinese company HBIS Group for 46 million, symbolizing the growing influence of China in the region. Chinese interests in the region inevitably clash with those of the EU. The main difference between the two is that whilst the investments coming from the EU are long and bureaucratic, China is able to raise loans and financing immediately, something that the EU cannot guarantee. In the words of Borja Lasheras: "It is clear that in the region, where there were two actors that seemed preponderant like Europe and Russia, there now is a third, China".

Date: 29 November 2017

Title: Central and Eastern Europe, China's bridgehead on the Old Continent

Author: Sylvie Kauffmann

Source: Le Monde

Key words: China, Europe, Silk Route

Link: http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/11/29/l-europe-centrale-et-orientale-tete-de-pont-de-la-chine-sur-le-vieux-continent_5221808_3232.html

Summary

Xi Jinping's China understood that at the beginning of the twenty-first century there are two Europe: the old and the new. In this vision, the first appears restive, full of prejudices, encamped on a past grandeur, which it claims to protect; the second is becoming more eager for progress. And the new China loves the new Europe. In 2011, the former Chinese Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, met the leaders of sixteen countries in this part of the Old Continent. Ten were recent members of the European Union (Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and the three Baltic republics), Croatia would join in 2013, the remaining five were non-EU Balkan countries - Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro. Since then, the "16 + 1" summit, managed directly from China, is an annual ritual.

Date: 30 November 2017

Title: Croatia mourns – for a war criminal

Author: Keno Verseck

Source: Le Monde

Key words: Balkans, Croatia, ICTY.

Link: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/slobodan-praljak-kroatien-wuerdigt-den-kriegsverbrecher-nach-selbstmord-a-1181117.html>

Summary

When the ICTY confirmed ex-General Slobodan Praljak sentence to 20-year in prison, the former commander stated, “Slobodan Praljak is not a war criminal, I reject your judgement!”, and followed by drinking poison in court. This public suicide caused worldwide headlines as well as shaking Croatia and the whole Western Balkans region. In Croatia, the Prime Minister and the Parliament expressed condolences to the family, whilst President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic praised Praljak as “a man who preferred to take his own life instead of living for acts that he was convinced he had not committed”. Southeast Europe expr Florian Bieber believes that these reactions reflect the general narrative in the region, were ICTY judgements are accepted only if they coincide with the own nationalistic point of view. A confirmation of this diagnose can be seen in the reactions in Serbia and in Bosnia Herzegovina. Serbian head of state Aleksandar Vucic condemned his Croatian counterpart and complained about the “double standards of the EU”.

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