

STRATEGIC BALKANS

Strategic Balkans – a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation
PRESS REVIEW DECEMBER 2017



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Date: 4 December 2017

Title: Croats ‘make a hero’ of dead war criminal

Author: Adam Sage

Source: The Times

Key words: Balkans, Croatia, ICTY, Slobodan Praljak, war-crimes.

Link: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/croats-make-a-hero-of-dead-war-criminal-5b8qhphqr>

Summary

Andrej Plenkovic, the prime minister of Croatia, referred to the verdict that involved Slobodan Praljak conviction as a “deep moral injustice”. Statement that has been highly criticized by Serge Brammertz, chief prosecutor at the UN Yugoslav tribunal. Mr Brammertz has been angered by the show of support across Croatia towards the ex-commander, sentenced to a 20-year sentence for crimes against humanity, as candles and flowers have been placed in his honor. The chief prosecutor stated: “It would have been hoped that Croatian officials and media would act more responsibly and promote acceptance of the facts but that unfortunately is not what we are seeing. Instead, among many there is again a refusal to respect the judicial process and the facts proved, and claims that convicted war criminals are heroes”.

Date: 5 December 2017

Title: Kosovo’s president wants int’l mission to leave country

Author: Associated Press

Source: Fox News

Key words: Balkans, Kosovo, International Mission.

Link: <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/12/05/kosovos-president-wants-intl-missions-to-leave-country.html>

Summary

Hashim Thaci, the president of Kosovo, openly called for international missions to leave the country, as well as complaining about the process to join the EU. The president declared to the security force troops that the “time of the international missions in Kosovo has passed”. Further stating that the numbers operating in Kosovo are “unjustified”, and that now “accountability for our path, for the present and the future is in our hands”. A U.N. mission has governed Kosovo since June 1999, after NATO’s 78-day air campaign. As the country has declared its independence in 2008, it has been recognized by 114 countries.

Date: 6 December 2017

Title: Yugoslav army 'helped Ratko Mladic evade capture for 15 years'

Author: Hannah Lucinda Smith

Source: The Times

Key words: Balkans, Ratko Mladic, Yugoslavia, ICTY, war-crimes.

Link: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/yugoslav-army-helped-mladic-evade-capture-for-15-years-7nmc6z3jd>

Summary

In 1996, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia issued a warrant for the arrest of Ratko Mladic. He was only caught in 2011, in a village north of Belgrade. A Serbian court redacted an indictment against 11 people alleged to have helped Mladic evade capture. The accusations indicate that the Yugoslav army helped Mladic during his 15 years on the run. "It reveals that he has whisked to a military base in Belgrade by a former friend and colleague in the Yugoslav army in 2002 and spent the next four years shuttling between apartments in the city". In 2006, as the State of Serbia was founded, a number of high-ranking figures related to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia had been arrested, including former president Slobodan Milosevic. Mladic fled from Belgrade into the countryside, staying the house of a cousin, Branislav Mladic, until his arrest there in May 2011. The Serbian government previously declared the indictment a state secret, as it might damage the country's international reputation.

Date: 8 December 2017

Title: The Balkan co-operation at the Belgrade Summit

Author: Thomas Ciboulet

Source: Les Yeux au Monde FR

Key words: Western Balkans, European Union, co-operation

Link: <http://les-yeux-du-monde.fr/actualite/europe/32331-la-cooperation-balkanique-a-lhonneur-lors-dun-sommet-a-belgrade>

Summary

On December 8th, Tsipras (Greek Prime Minister), Borissov (Bulgarian Prime Minister), Tudose (Romanian Prime Minister) and Vucic (Serbian President) met in Belgrade to discuss co-operation and integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union. Their meeting follows a previous Summit that took place in Varna (Bulgaria) last October. The four leaders then agreed to meet again at the end of 2017. The first thing that can be learned from this Summit is a diplomatic renewal between the Balkan countries, which now make co-operation a priority. Recall that less than a century ago, Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia / Yugoslavia were waging war to control Macedonian territory. In addition to the willingness to cooperate to promote European integration, other projects are underway and were discussed during the two quadrangular summits. The construction of railway lines to link Thessaloniki to Varna, Ruse (Bulgaria) or Belgrade; the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline, which is to connect gas from Azerbaijan and Turkey to Italy via northern Greece and Albania; a new urban plan for Belgrade or the Interconnector Greece-Bulgaria (IGB) which will promote energy cooperation between the two countries mentioned.

Date: 13 December 2017

Title: A gigantic canal will connect the Danube with the Mediterranean

Author: Die Presse

Source: Die Presse

Key words: Balkans, Macedonia, Serbia, Greece, cooperation.

Link: <https://diepresse.com/home/ausland/welt/5337688/Gigantischer-Kanal-soll-Donau-mit-dem-Mittelmeer-verbinden?from=suche.intern.portal>

Summary

Macedonia, Serbia and Greece want to connect the Mediterranean with the Danube by building a canal that would connect the three countries. The waterway will connect the Danube through its tributary Morava (also Great Morava), which flows below Belgrade into the Danube, with river Vardar/Axios, which flows west of Thessaloniki in the Aegean Sea. If the project was to be completed, it would be one of the longest channels in Europe. In early February, Alexis Tsipras, Greek Prime Minister, described the construction of the canal as a project that “could change the geography of the Balkans”. Giannis Boutaris, mayor of the northern Greek port city of Thessaloniki, stated, “(Macedonia) President Djordje Ivanov has played a video that shows this dream of the channel”. The plan has an estimated cost of 17 billion euros and could be completed within six years, if investors were found. Chinese companies have already shown interest.

Date: 19 December 2017

Title: Putin: Serbia may become key transit hub for Russian gas if joins Turkish Stream

Author: Sputnik News

Source: Sputnik News

Key words: Balkans, Serbia, Russia, Turkish Stream

Link: <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201712191060142570-serbia-transit-hub-gas/>

Summary

Russian President Vladimir Putin said that if Serbia was to join the Turkish Stream gas pipeline project, it could become an important transit country for Russian natural gas. After meeting in Moscow with Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic, Putin stated that the “relations (between the two countries) are developing, first of all, in the sphere of the economy. The trade turnover is growing, direct investments are also on the rise”. The volume of Russian gas supplies to Serbia may reach 3.5 billion cubic meters by 2022, and starting from 2018, Gazprom will increase annual gas supplies to Serbia to 2 billion cubic meters. The Turkish Stream aims to construct two conduits of the main gas pipeline at the bottom of the Black Sea, to deliver gas directly to the Turkish market and the other for transit gas supplies through Turkey to European countries. The annual capacity is 15.75 billion cubic meters of gas each, the first portion is expected to be put into operation by March 2018, while the second in 2019.

Date: 23 December 2017

Title: Yugoslavia Tribunal leaves rich legacy, but ‘immense’ challenges remain

Author: Marlise Simons

Source: NY Times

Key words: Balkans, ICTY,

Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/23/world/europe/yugoslavia-tribunal-hague.html>

Summary

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia indicted 161 people, heard from nearly 5,000 witnesses and met for 10,800 trial days over its 24-year life. However, when the Tribunal was created it lacked money, staff, investigators, and without an armed police of their own to carry out arrests. Michelle Jarvis, a deputy to the chief prosecutor, described the situation as “everything we do all day, every day, is difficult, there’s no precedent, there are no straight answers”. Nevertheless, the ICTY has done incredibly important work. It introduced terms like ethnic cleansing and “mass rape as a weapons to destroy lives”, notions confined to experts, in everyone’s vocabulary, and other courts followed the ICTY pioneering work. Furthermore, as stated by Hrvoje Klasic, a history professor at the University of Zagreb, the trials have produced enormous amounts of evidence and uncovered the kind of archives that would help people in the region accept what happened in the wars and start the reconciliation process. UN secretary general, António Guterres, said, “accountability has taken root in our collective consciousness”, but international criminal justice was still a “long-term undertaking”.

Date: 28 December 2017

Title: Cloud of corruption hangs over Bulgaria as it takes up EU presidency

Author: Jennifer Rankin

Source: The Guardian

Key words: Balkans, Bulgaria, EU, corruption.

Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/28/bulgaria-corruption-eu-presidency-far-right-minority-parties-concerns>

Summary

On January 1, Bulgaria, the poorest and “most corrupt” country in the EU, according to Transparency International, will pick up the rotating presidency of the bloc. The chairman of the Centre for the Study of Democracy, Ognian Shentov, stated, “no one (in Bulgaria) is prosecuting political corruption, there are no ex-government officials in jail. We have reached a stage of state corruption which we describe as state capture”. A study by his organization shows that 1.3 million people, out of a population of 7.4 million, are thought to have taken part in a corrupt transaction. Important anti-corruption cases include the situation of Lukoil, Bulgaria’s only oil supplier, and the story behind the collapse of the country’s fourth largest bank, Corporate Commercial Bank in 2014. More than a decade after joining the EU, Bulgaria is still subject to special monitoring by Brussels, and the presence of far-right minority parties in government has caused alarm.

Date: 27 December 2017

Title: Croatian sentenced to 14 years in prison for war crimes

Author: Spiegel Online

Source: Spiegel Online

Key words: Balkans, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bosnian war, war-crimes.

Link: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/bosnien-krieg-kroatin-azra-basic-wegen-kriegsverbrechen-verurteilt-a-1185224.html>

Summary

Azra Basic, former soldier of the Bosnian-Croat army has been sentenced to 14 years in prison for war crimes, in what is the highest sentence ever imposed on a woman in connections with crimes of the Bosnian war. The 58-year-old has been found guilty by a court in Sarajevo of committing crimes against Bosnian Serb civilians in northern Bosnia in April 1992. The court justifies the sentence due to the “special cruelty” of the accused. Judge Sead Djikic described that the murder of a prisoner weighed particularly heavily, furthermore, the court in Sarajevo ruled that Basic had tortured a dozen of prisoners in the region of the city of Derventa. Alone or with other military personnel, these prisoners were beaten, and crosses scratched on the skin, especially on the back and forehead, according to the judge. After the end of the war, Azra Basic had emigrated to the United States and disappeared. At the request of the Bosnian judiciary, she was arrested in 2011 and handed over to Bosnia-Herzegovina at the end of 2016.

Date: 30 December 2017

Title: “Batman” Borisov, the Bulgarian prime minister that will guide the EU (for six months)

Author: Alessandra Muglia

Source: Corriere della Sera

Key words: Balkans, Bulgaria, EU, Boko Borisov.

Link: http://www.corriere.it/esteri/17_dicembre_30/batman-borisov-premier-bulgaro-che-guidera-ue-per-sei-mesi-acee478a-ed50-11e7-99fc-afe197c02437.shtml

Summary

Boko Borisov will become the leader European Council from the 1st of January 2018. Under his rule, Bulgaria has found some type of stability after the fall of communism; however, he’s been criticized for his ineffectiveness in the face of an endemic corruption and his past marked by the shadows of relations with organized crime. Borisov will use his new EU appointment to improve his personal image and to try to include Bulgaria in the Schengen area first, and then in the euro-zone. Bulgaria hasn’t opposed to the EU politics relevant to the shares of distribution of migrants between member states, and the nation slogan has been “Unity is strength”. The Borisov government wants to stand as a mediator to unblock the reform of asylum right by June, as well as improving the relations between the EU and Turkey and to help the integration of the Balkan countries in the EU. His main objective, however, is to maintain the migratory agreement signed with Turkey in 2016, which has reduced the flow of asylum seekers from the Middle East to the EU.

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