

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Date: 4 February 2018

Title: Thousands of Greek nationalists protested in Athens against the use of the name “Macedonia”

Author: Silvia Álvarez

Source: El Mundo

Key words: Balkans, Greece, Macedonia, protests.

Link: <http://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2018/02/04/5a77323422601d28568b456e.html>

Summary

According to police sources, almost 140.000 people protested today in Athens against the inclusion of the term “Macedonia” in the definite name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Since the first hours of the morning thousands of people travelled toward Athens, paralyzing the capital, and proclaiming that “Macedonia is Greece”. Amongst those present were former Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras of New Democracy – the opposition party – representatives of the Greek Orthodox Church and the famous Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis. In spite of the optimism around the negotiations of the name of the Balkan country, the Tsipras Government faces a serious internal problem, starting with his partner of Government the Independent Greeks (ANEL), who oppose any solution that includes the word “Macedonia” in the name of the Balkan country. For many greeks, the use of that name by the former republic, in addition to usurping a historical reality, the Macedonia of the great Greek conquer Alexander the Great, could lead to future territorial claims towards the northern Hellenic region.

Date: 6 February 2018

Title: The EU seeks to regain influence in the Balkans

Author: Financial Times

Source: Financial Times

Key words: Balkans, EU, enlargement, Jean-Claude Juncker.

Link: <https://www.ft.com/content/70c4b524-0b33-11e8-839d-41ca06376bf2>

Summary

European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker presented a strategy presenting what it would mean to expand the EU to six countries in the western Balkans, the aspiration for some of the six is to join the bloc by 2025. Mr. Juncker stressed that this is only an “indicative date”, as the strategy mentioned how all of this six countries show “clear signs of state capture”, with ties to organized crime, corruption at every level of government and widespread meddling in the media. The Balkan countries governments do not simply need to pass legislations, they have to implement it. Furthermore, no country will join the EU until it has resolved disputes with neighbors, setting an ultimatum to countries to settle disputes or accept outside arbitration. The cooperation of the western Balkans countries, which are geographically surrounded by EU members, is important for the EU’s efforts to control migration. However, for the Balkan states, many are inclined to doubt the EU’s sincerity after waiting at the door for years; only 26% of Serbs now think EU membership would be a good thing.

Date: 6 February 2018

Title: A way forward for the Balkans?

Author: Florian Bieber

Source: Foreign Affairs

Key words: Balkans, EU, NATO.

Link: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/southeastern-europe/2018-02-06/way-forward-balkans>

Summary

Over the past year, many incidents in the western Balkans have raised concerns that the region might be in for renewed conflict, sending a message to the U.S. and the EU that leaving the Balkans outside of the Euro-Atlantic organizations carries significant risk. The integration of Montenegro within the NATO members, and the EU's recent strategy show a renewed interest in the region. The EU has identified the region's problems, however the proposed responses "lack teeth". The context of the region shows an intricate geopolitical situation. First, the EU is not a single actor, and it must consider the different and at times divergent positions of its members. Second, the democratic decline of the region has been complicated by an informal strategy of maintaining stability. Third, the renewed rivalry between Russia and the EU and U.S. is intertwined with rising authoritarianism in the Balkans. Fourth, the bilateral disputes, such as over borders, the rights of ethnic minorities, etc. If the EU fails to provide its strategy with the adequate instruments, it will fall to the U.S. to increase the pressure to implement reforms in certain countries.

Date: 16 February 2018

Title: In the Kosovo question, Europe's contradictions become visible

Author: Wolfgang Böhm

Source: Die Presse

Key words: Balkans, Kosovo, Europe.

Link: <https://diepresse.com/home/ausland/eu/5373423/In-der-KosovoFrage-werden-Europas-Widersprueche-sichtbar?from=suche.intern.portal>

Summary

As the tenth anniversary of Kosovo's independence approaches, Ulrike Lunacek, former Austrian politician, is publishing a book on Europe's relations with Kosovo. In this publication, the author recounts the contradictions that exemplify the shortcomings of the common foreign policy of the 28 Member States. Proof of this is the fact that five EU countries have failed to recognize Kosovo. "The EU has done a lot in terms of human, institutional and financial matters – but in the end it is not enough at the political level, because it is weaker than it could be because of the disagreement between the Member States. [...] It is clear that even Kosovo will not find peace unless the divided ethnic society is led under a common European umbrella". The former politician is very aware that corruption is widespread in Kosovar society and its institutions, which together with organized crime, pose the biggest barriers to the country's development. "If the influence of the EU in the Balkans fades, it fuels a more massive engagement of Russia, but nowadays also Turkey, China, Saudi Arabia or other Arab states".

Date: 16 February 2018

Title: Kosovo: a decade of independence and an endless odyssey towards the rule of law

Author: Andrea Rizzi

Source: El País

Key words: Balkans, Kosovo, independence, geopolitics.

Link: https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/02/15/actualidad/1518710965_914082.html

Summary

The 17th of February 2018, marks the 10th anniversary of the declaration of independence of Kosovo, a small country with huge geopolitical importance. On the one hand, the pulse between the West (generally favourable) and Russia (firmly opposed); on the other, the contrast (acute within the West itself) of the liberal instincts and defense on human rights to the interests of maintaining territorial integrity; underlying all, the religious question, in a territory of overwhelming Muslim majority, but headquarters of monasteries of great value for Orthodox Christianity. For all these reasons, it is of special interest to try draw up a balance sheet of its journey in this decade. The negative elements are obvious and serious. Freedom House placed Kosovo in the 122nd place, after Zambia and before Mozambique. Corruption, illegal trafficking, criminality of various kinds and impunity corrode Kosovar society. Unemployment is rampant and the municipalities north of the Ibar River, inhabited by Serbs, continue to live a parallel life. The picture is bleak, but there are also encouraging elements.

Date: 19 February 2018

Title: The difficulties of exchanging territory in the Balkans

Author: The Economist

Source: The Economist

Key words: Balkans, borders, Bosnia, Albania, Serbia, Kosovo, Greece.

Link: <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2018/02/economist-explains-11>

Summary

The borders situation in the Balkans is, frankly, a mess. Leaders in those Yugoslav wars saw ethnic cleansing as the best way to create nation-states unpeopled by troublesome minorities. Recently Serbian authorities proposed a discussion about an exchange of territory with their Kosovo Albanian counterparts. If Kosovo and Serbia begin serious talks about a redrawing of their borders, the impact in the Balkan region could be profound. Bosnian Serb leaders would hold a referendum on the future of the Republika Srpska; Bosnian Croats would follow suit; and Bosniaks would then fight to prevent dismemberment of their shared country. Serbia would clamp down on Bosniak nationalists in Sandzak who dream of incorporating that region into a Greater Bosnia. Meanwhile Albanians in western Macedonia and Montenegro would demand to join a Greater Albania. Proponents of that idea would also like to incorporate parts of northern Greece, whereas Greek nationalists would demand part of southern Albania.

Date: 20 February 2018

Title: Jean-Yves Le Drian interview with Ivica Dacic

Author: France Diplomatie

Source: France Diplomatie

Key words: France, Serbia, accession, Pristina, reforms.

Link: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/serbie/evenements/article/serbie-entretien-de-jean-yves-le-drian-avec-ivica-dacic-20-02-18>

Summary

Following the publication of the European Commission “Western Balkans Strategy”, on February 6th, the Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs of France, Jean-Yves Le Drian, reiterated the country’s commitment in favor of the accession of Western Balkans countries to the European Union when these countries will fulfill the necessary conditions. Ivica Dacic, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, recalled that the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, under the auspices of the European Union, is essential for the long-term stabilization of the entire region and must lead to a normalization of the relations between the two countries on the basis of a global consensus. The two Ministers also discussed about the Summit between the European Union and the Balkans which will be held on May 17th in Sofia. Mr. Le Drian hoped that the Summit would promote a “positive agenda” for the Western Balkans, based on concrete measures EU should take to support the efforts expected by those states as part of their European rapprochement.

Date: 21 February 2018

Title: Merkel sees Macedonia taking steps on path to EU

Author: Reuters

Source: The New York Times

Key words: Balkans, Macedonia, Germany.

Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2018/02/21/world/europe/21reuters-germany-macedonia.html>

Summary

On Wednesday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated that Macedonia is making progress in its bid to join the EU, praising recent reforms by Skopje and the prospect of settling its name dispute with Greece. At a joint news conference in Berlin with Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, Chacellor Merkel welcomed the recent judicial reforms in the former Yugoslav republic and the steps to improve transparency. "It is also necessary because it is part of the conditions for moving ahead with talks on EU membership". She also welcomed the progress over the name dispute with Greece, which has thwarted Macedonia’s ambitions to join NATO and the EU. Over this issue, Merkel stated: “I am very pleased and relieved that [...] there is movement in the talks. In the last 10 years, the solution has not been as close as now and it would be wonderful if the remaining difficulties can be bridged”. Prime Minister Zaev said: “For Macedonia, there is no alternative to NATO and EU membership. There is no alternative for the whole region”.

Date: 22 February 2018

Title: Lavrov not ruling out Russia mediating of Serbia-Kosovo dialogue.

Author: Sputnik News

Source: Sputnik News

Key words: Balkans, Serbia, Kosovo, Russia, EU.

Link: <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201802221061885294-lavrov-russia-kosovo-serbia-mediation/>

Summary

Sergey Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister, stated that he did not exclude Russia's joining the European Union in the mediation of the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. "Speaking about the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, we, as I have already mentioned, have expressed confidence in the European Union, including at the UN General Assembly". Lavrov arrived at Belgrade's to hold a meeting with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, mentioning the importance of Serbia's military neutrality as a factor of stability in the Balkans and Europe. "We, of course, welcome Belgrade's efforts in developing ties not only with the European Union, but also with the Eurasian Economic Union. In the military and political area, Belgrade cooperates both with NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, remaining committed to the principle of neutrality [...] we are convinced that this [neutral] status remains one of the most important factors of ensuring stability in Balkans".

Date: 23 February 2018

Title: Greek parliament agrees to the privatization of the port of Thessaloniki

Author: Stefano Carrer

Source: Il Sole 24 Ore

Key words: Balkans, Greece, ports, privatization.

Link: <http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/mondo/2018-02-23/ok-parlamento-greco-privatizzazione-porto-salonicco-165229.shtml?uuiid=AEfvTx5D&fromSearch>

Summary

The Greek parliament has ratified the privatization of the port of Thessaloniki: an important piece of the reform plan requested by international creditors in the framework of the third "bailout" program from which the country should exit next summer. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of Ohlt, operator of the second Greek port, passes for 1.1 billion euro to an international consortium that includes the German private equity company Deutsche Invest Equity Partners, the French container operator Terminal Link and the Cypriot Belterra Investments controlled by the Russian-Greek Businessman Ivan Savvides. The consortium has agreed to invest over 650 million euros to improve port facilities and associated infrastructure over the 34 year duration of the concession. The state privatization agency is now proceeding with plans for the privatization of the port of Alexandroupolis (also in the north of Greece, with ample potential for development as a terminal for natural gas and exports to the eastern Balkans) and nine others regional ports. The control of the main port, Piraeus, has already passed to the Chinese of Cosco.

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