

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Index:

Associated Press: Macedonia's name change - what does the country have to do?

Financial Times: How Greece's Alexis Tsipras went from firebrand to statesman

Time: Macedonia's Name Change Deal Is a Triumph for the E.U., But Worrying for Democracy

Der Spiegel: Spiel's noch einmal, Wladimir

Kurier: Hashim Thaci: "Kosovo wird multiethnisch bleiben, Serbien auch"

The Guardian: Montenegro criticised over jail sentence for investigative journalist

Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso: Albania, it had to happen sooner or later

Balkan Insight: Bosniak Party to Challenge Serb Entity's Name

Balkan Insight: Judging Movies Reconnects Balkan's Divided Postwar Young

Date: 16 January 2019

Title: Montenegro criticized over jail sentence for investigative journalist

Author: Shaun Walker

Source: The Guardian

Key words: Montenegro; journalism; freedom of the press.

Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/16/montenegro-criticised-jail-sentence-investigative-journalist-jovo-martinovic>

Summary

A court in Podgorica found the journalist Jovo Martinovic guilty of drug trafficking and criminal associations. He was arrested in October 2015 while working for a French production company to film a documentary on arms trafficking in the Balkans. He already spent 15 months in jail. Montenegrin journalists and international committees for media freedom strongly criticized the court decision, saying that Jovo Martinovic's contacts with criminal figures were maintained for journalistic purposes and that the sentence is the evidence of Montenegro's negative record in terms of freedom of expression and media.

Date: 17 January 2019

Title: Spiel's noch einmal, Wladimir

Author: Keno Verseck

Source: Der Spiegel

Key words: Serbia; Russia; Putin; Vucic; Kosovo.

Link: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/wladimir-putin-in-serbien-russland-will-den-kosovo-konflikt-loesen-a-1248350.html>

Summary

The German magazine analysed Vladimir Putin's recent visit to Serbia. He was welcomed like a hero. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, greeted him by organizing a march in Belgrade to which thousands of people took part. However, Putin's popularity in Serbia does not mean – as it could seem – that he has an unlimited ability to influence politics in Belgrade. Belgrade cannot expect too much from Moscow to solve Kosovo issue and in terms of economic support, analysts quoted by Der Spiegel underlined.

Date: 21 January 2019

Title: Hashim Thaci: "Kosovo wird multiethnisch bleiben, Serbien auch"

Author: Jacques Demarthon

Source: Kurier

Key words: Kosovo; Thaci; Serbia; borders.

Link: <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/hashim-thaci-kosovo-wird-multiethnisch-bleiben-serbien-auch/400383104>

Summary

The Austrian daily newspaper Kurier published an interview with Kosovo's President, Hashim Thaci, made by Agence France-Presse. Thaci said he hopes that Kosovo and Serbia can arrange a deal by the end of the year. Asked about the option of partition, he did not give details. He only said that borders between the two countries should be open, so that the deal can represent a model for the whole Europe. Partition of Kosovo is a solution advocated by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and backed by Thaci himself. In accordance to Vucic's plan, Serbia will annex Kosovo's region where mainly Serbs live (the northern strip of the country), while regions of Southern Serbia where Albanians are the majority will merge with Kosovo.

Date: 22 January 2019

Title: Macedonia's Name Change Deal Is a Triumph for the EU, But Worrying for Democracy

Author: Angelos Chrysogelos

Source: Time

Key words:

Link: <http://time.com/5508640/prespes-macedonia-greece-eu-democracy/>

Summary

The author signals that both in Greece and in then FYROM violations of the rule of law and attempts to lure opponents of the Prespa agreement emerged during the ratification process. This is a clear contradiction for the EU, the main sponsor of the deal, since it defines itself as the world top exporter of democratic practices, the author assumes.

Date: 23 January 2019

Title: Bosniak Party to Challenge Serb Entity's Name

Author: Danijel Kovacevic

Source: Balkan Insight

Key words: Bosnia; Republika Srpska; ethnicities; discrimination.

Link: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bosniak-party-to-challenge-serb-entity-s-name-01-23-2019>

Summary

The largest Bosniak (Muslim) party, the Party of Democratic Action, SDA, wants to change the name of the Bosnia's mainly Serbian entity, Republika Srpska (RS). It claims that RS authorities' practices discriminate Bosniaks and Croats, the other two Bosnia's constituent peoples. Thus, the name of the Serbian entity reflects its discriminatory politics. Authorities in Banja Luka, the capital of RS, said that the name of their entity is unquestionable.

Date: 24 January 2019

Title: How Greece's Alexis Tsipras went from firebrand to statesman

Author: Kerin Hope

Source: Financial Times

Key words: Greece; Tsipras; austerity; Macedonia.

Link: <https://www.ft.com/content/b4e52152-1f1f-11e9-b2f7-97e4dbd3580d>

Summary

When he became Prime Minister of Greece, Alexis Tsipras was a young radical leftist dreamer who wanted to challenge Germany and the whole Europe. Once in power, he gradually has changed its approach. "He has reinvented himself as a southern European pragmatist committed to being a co-operative EU partner", and as "a surprising anchor of Greek financial discipline", the author writes. Anyway, she remarks that commitment to maintain financial discipline and to look for a historic deal with Macedonia on the naming dispute have caused a drop in Tsipras' rate of approval.

Date: 28 January 2019

Title: Macedonia's name change - what does the country have to do?

Author: Konstantin Testorides and Elena Becatoros

Source: Associated Press

Key words: North Macedonia; name; change; Greece.

Link: <https://wapo.st/2SsZt9f>

Summary

An interesting FAQ about reforms that FYROM – now North Macedonia – has to make after that the Greek Parliament endorsed the Prespa Agreement. Passports, car plates, textbooks, monuments and trade are among the things that require updates and changes.

Date: 30 January 2019

Title: Albania, it had to happen sooner or later

Author: Nicola Pedrazzi

Source: Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso

Key words: Albania; protests; students; education system.

Link: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Albania/Albania-it-had-to-happen-sooner-or-later-192292>

Summary

On December 4, students' protests erupted in Albania. Students occupied universities and asked for a better education system. Nicola Pedrazzi interviewed a student leader, Gresa Hasa, 23. She remarked that the protests, still ongoing, are the biggest mobilization since the communist regime collapsed in 1991. She also said that the protest, not connected to any political party, is a driver to change Albanians politics. It has been made by factions so far, she said, arguing that students' protests show that it can be made by ideas too.

Date: 30 January 2019

Title: Judging Movies Reconnects Balkan's Divided Postwar Young

Author: Sonja Borgmann

Source: Balkan Insight

Key words: Cinema; movies; festival; young.

Link: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/01/30/judging-movies-reconnects-balkan-s-divided-postwar-young-01-28-2019/>

Summary

Balkan Insight reports about a project, "Rethinking Films," aimed at connecting and training students in the Balkans in film literacy skills. Young people from all over the region meet themselves during film festivals, watch movies and then choose those that will compete for youth award in each single festival. DocuFest in Kosovo, along with the Pancevo Film Festival in Serbia and the Pravo Ljudski Film Festival in Bosnia and Herzegovina, promote the "Rethinking Films", a tool to overcome post-war walls and create genuine dialogue among young people in the region.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

The Greece-North Macedonia accord: Balkans do produce good history

On January 25, the Greek Parliament ratified the Prespa agreement with North Macedonia, signed on June 27, 2018. It provides that North Macedonia, previously known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), turns its name into Republic of North Macedonia, or simply North Macedonia. Beside this, the agreement sets a range of conditions and reforms to secure fruitful relations between Athens and Skopje, previously poisoned by the naming dispute, one of the long-lasting diplomatic headaches in the post-Cold War Europe.

Greece had always accused the neighbour of usurping a name (Macedonia), a symbol (the Vergina Sun) and a character (Alexander the Great) considered part of the Hellenic cultural heritage. For this reasons, it vetoed several times NATO's enlargement to FYROM and accession talks between the EU and the Balkan country.

The ratification of the Prespa agreement made by the Greek Parliament ended the dispute. Skopje's Parliament already endorsed it.

The Greek Parliament approved the Prespa agreements with a narrow majority: 153 MPs voted in favour, 146 rejected it. The Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras had to face the opposition in Parliament, but also in the streets. Several demonstrations took place against the effort to strike a deal with Macedonia.

Endorsing the agreement was a challenging path for FYROM, too. On September 30, a referendum on the deal resoundingly failed. "Are you in favour of NATO and EU membership, and accepting the name agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and Greece?" was the question [quote from the referendum official question, note of the Editor]. The turnout was less than 50% constitutionally required. Only 37% of voters went to polls.

Such disastrous outcome, not foreseen by any pollsters, depended on a complex cocktail of reasons. The first one is the surge of patriotic-nationalistic feelings, inflated by the global nationalistic wave affecting various countries. Russia's propaganda and its ability to manipulate or radicalise people's feelings through the web contributed to sink the referendum as well. Low turnout among the Albanian community is another factor that should not be underestimated. The Albanians, who represent 25% of FYROM's population, perceived the naming dispute as a fight between Greeks and Slav-Macedonians, and did not care too much about it, despite being pro-NATO and pro-EU.

The West approach also influenced the failure of the referendum. NATO, the US and the UE put Skopje in front of a crossroads: Prespa or never-ending isolation. Not that it was not true, but they over-pressured the country, and people perceived it as a Diktat.

Despite the setback, the FYROM Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, a social democrat who took power in 2017, did not give up. Since the referendum was not binding, he pledged to bring the deal in Parliament, which in October voted a motion to initiate the process aimed at changing the Constitution to absorb the Prespa agreement. The two third majority required was just reached. In the 120 seats Parliament, just 80 MPs voted in favour of the deal with Greece.

Pushing forward to process, despite a strong parliamentary and street opposition: this is the worthy lesson of this story. Over the last years, leaderships in South-Eastern Europe have hardly never challenged nationalism. Courage has lacked. Too often, leaders even exploit nationalism – combined

with some Caesarism – to build their little fiefs. This is how Nikola Gruevski, the former FYROM Prime Minister, who fled to Hungary to avoid a trial for corruption, tightened his grip on power with some cross-border complicity. For staying in power, he preferred to keep the dialogue with Athens frozen, building big statues of Alexander the Great and courting nationalism.

Tsipras and Zaev made another choice. They thought that freeing their countries from the naming burden was more important than any drop in their own rate of approval, also because it can be used as a springboard for useful economic agreements. The deal with Skopje, coupled with social-economic frustration, could cost Tsipras a lot in terms of votes ahead of general elections in autumn. He is supposed to lose the majority. However, he secured the agreement anyway.

North Macedonians will vote in 2020. Thus, it is still unclear if the name change will mean an electoral blow for Zaev. Anyway, for the Prime Minister it was the only choice to make, since the country would face “existential dangers” outside the Euro-Atlantic area, as he recently stated.

One of the first positive consequences of the ratification of the Prespa agreement is the signing of the protocol for North Macedonia’s accession to NATO. Symbolically, Greece was first country to ratify it. In addition to that, the EU should open negotiations for North Macedonia’s accession rather soon.

In terms of geopolitical games, the Greek-North Macedonian agreement is a success for the EU and for NATO, now able to re-launch their initiative in the region and curb the influence of Putin’s Russia, which tried to mobilise its leverage in both Macedonia and Greece to derail the agreement.

The agreement is not just a Balkan success story, proving that even in the Balkans something remarkable can happen, but it is important also to stabilise NATO southern flank, some analysts argue. Dusan Reljic, head of the Brussels Office of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), said for example that it is difficult “to predict the future trajectory of Turkey under President Erdogan”. The country is a NATO member, but flirtation with Russia has become more intense in the last years.

Now North Macedonia has six months to “review the status of monuments, public buildings and infrastructures on its territory”, taking “appropriate corrective action” to ensure respect for the Hellenic cultural patrimony, as the Prespa Agreement foresees. North Macedonia will also have to change passports and car plates. A bilateral commission will work to amend textbooks.

Protests in Serbia: for Vucic, an opportunity to speed up the process to join the EU

Every Saturday, since December 8, civil society and political parties from the opposition organize protests in central Belgrade against Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's President since 2017 and leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), in power 2012. The SNS has a comfortable majority in Parliament and controls all but three municipalities in the country.

Demonstrators say that Vucic has built a system of power that recalls Russia, Turkey or Hungary's authoritarian democracies. They argue that the SNS has taken over the courts, law enforcement agencies and media, using them against opponents.

Media freedom, in particular, is a very sensitive topic for protesters. They accuse Vucic to use the state radio-TV as a party branch. In addition to that, they cast doubts on the independence of media owned by oligarchs close to the power.

So far, street protests have not concerned Vucic. After all, these are not mass protests. It is hard to think that they can bring radical changes in the political sphere. Polls carried out in recent weeks show that the SNS has a strong lead over opposition. Knowing it, Vucic could call early elections to confirm his party in power and cool down protesters' enthusiasm.

Protests are not only about Vucic's style of power. They signal a huge discontent in Serbian society. The country's economy is growing, but it is still very precarious. Young talented people are leaving Serbia more and more, due to the lack of opportunities. The Kosovo question remains unresolved, slowing down accession to the EU. However, while trying to anchor his country to the EU, the Serbian president looks for a strong relationship with Russia. On the 17th of February, the Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Belgrade. He was welcomed like a hero. Thousands of people marched in Belgrade to homage to him. The opposition believes that the SNS paid people to gather in the capital.

For Vucic, protests are not only a nuisance, but also an opportunity to push away Serbia from the limbo in which it is stuck. The only way is seizing membership of the EU, the historic goal that Vucic wants to achieve and the reason why in 2008 he and his predecessor as President, Tomislav Nikolic, chose to leave the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the party symbolizing Serbia's ultra-nationalism. At that time, the Parliament had to vote for the ratification of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU. The SRS was against it. Vucic and Tomislav Nikolic voted yes, left the SRS and founded the SNS, presenting it as a conservative, pro-European and modern party. Such move revolutionised the Serbian political market, allowing the right to take power for the first time after the fall of the Slobodan Milosevic regime in October 2000.

Since then, although it has made some progresses, Serbia is still in a quagmire. The meaning of recent protests goes beyond the criticism towards Vucic's hunger for power. They sound also as a clear request to put an end to a never-ending transition. The way to get out is speeding up the process to join the EU, the space in which Serbia can become a stable and prosperous country.

It is not a choice between the EU and Russia. Serbia has the right, as other countries do, to develop its relations with Moscow, based on historical and cultural factors, as well as on economic benefits, although the EU largely remains the first investor and commercial partner of Belgrade. Speeding up the process to join the EU primarily means that the country must solve the Kosovo issue. Many analysts argue that there is only one way to do it: recognizing Kosovo's independence and get self-government

for Serbs living there in exchange, as wanted by the EU, which mediates the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo.

The country, when Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic were arrested and handed over to international justice, already showed that it can make courageous choices. It can succeed once again. Yet, the EU should help Serbia more. It must give Belgrade robust incentives, draw a clear road map for accession and develop a communication strategy aimed at persuading Serbia that ending in such way the Kosovo dispute is not an unbearable Diktat, but an opportunity for a better future. The happy end of the Greek-Macedonian dispute can work as a benchmark, telling that the EU can get good results in the Balkans and that sometimes the region – to paraphrase Winston Churchill – can avoid a surplus in history production.

Matteo Tacconi

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