

STRATEGIC BALKANS

Strategic Balkans – a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

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OVERVIEW JUNE 2018

After decades, Greece and Macedonia signed a pact over the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia which should become the Republic of North Macedonia. This ends a long-running dispute that has fostered nationalist feeling and undermined political stability in the region.

The reached agreement will fasten the accession of the country both to the European Union and NATO. Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, welcomed the result, stating “I now call on both countries to finalise the agreement reached by the two leaders. This will set Skopje on its path to NATO membership. And it will help to consolidate peace and stability across the wider Western Balkans”. Indeed, the European Union announced the starting of the accession talks with the Western Balkans on June 2019. The Prime Minister of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev said that his country will “proudly walk through the gates of Europe”, making new reforms to join the criteria required by the European Commission.

Eventually, in the next months, Macedonia will call a referendum to ratify the new name of the country in spite of the protests that raised in Greece where people, draped in the Greek flag, chanted “Macedonia is Greek” and shouted “traitors” as they attacked police with rocks.

To face incertitude and instability in the Western Balkan region, “the European Union should speed up the process of integration of the Western Balkan countries” declared the Hungarian Foreign Minister, Peter Szijjarto. In Bulgaria, the ruling coalition survived the second no-confidence vote called by the opposition; however, the strong accusations for the lack of progress in fighting corruption and organized crime is affecting the country stability as well as its integration to the Schengen area and the eurozone. Kosovo still feels itself to be isolated and Albania has become the largest producer of drug in the European Union. The right, itself denounces Albania to be transformed into “Colombia of Europe”.

In addition, new waves of migrants risk to create conflicts in the area. The Danish government had announced plans to set up asylum seekers centers in locations outside of the EU, such as Albania and Kosovo but also Serbia and Macedonia are negotiating. In an interview at the German Bild newspaper regarding the centers for migrants, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania, Edi Rama, said “We will never accept such EU refugee camps.”

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Date: 12 June 2018

Title: Greece agrees to recognize neighbor as North Macedonia

Author: Kerin Hope and Valerie Hopkins

Source: Financial Times

Key words: Balkans, Greece, Macedonia, name dispute

Link: <https://www.ft.com/content/5d1ff2d0-6e85-11e8-852d-d8b934ff5ffa>

Summary

Greece Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, and Macedonian Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, sealed an agreement over the name dispute in an hour-long telephone call. Greece has agreed to recognise its northern neighbour under a new name, the Republic of North Macedonia, thus ending a long-running dispute over rival claims to the name Macedonia that has fostered nationalist feeling and undermined political stability in the region. The name deal should accelerate North Macedonia's entry to the EU and to the NATO alliance. NATO's secretary general welcomed the agreement stating: "I now call on both countries to finalise the agreement reached by the two leaders. This will set Skopje on its path to NATO membership. And it will help to consolidate peace and stability across the wider Western Balkans". However, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, leader of the centre-right opposition New Democracy party in Greece, is a critic of the agreement saying, "it's a bad deal that includes unacceptable concessions on a national issue".

Date: 13 June 2018

Title: "Islam in Kosovo is European"

Author: Wieland Schneider

Source: Die Presse

Key words: Balkans, Kosovo, Islam, EU

Link: <https://diepresse.com/home/ausland/aussenpolitik/5446375/Der-Islam-im-Kosovo-ist-europaeisch?from=suche.intern.portal>

Summary

Haschim Thaci, President of Kosovo, is counting on Austria to promote the EU accession perspective for the Balkan states. In an interview with Die Presse, President Thaci covers different topics and arguments, with a special focus on the accession of Balkan states in the EU and the influence of foreign actors in the Western Balkan region. On this last topic he stated that Kosovo's population is the "most pro-Europe and pro-America" in the region, albeit the most isolated country. Furthermore, even though most of the inhabitants of Kosovo are Muslims, he said that "Islam in Kosovo is European" and that cases such as the extradited Turkish citizens "will never happen again". President Thaci also talked about the relationship with Serbia, stating that in Sofia he agreed with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic that "there was no way around an agreement. Dialogue is a difficult process that will cause headaches to all parties".

Date: 15 June 2018

Title: Federal Criminal Police Office: Situation in the Balkans “very sensitive and threatening”

Author: Die Presse

Source: Die Presse

Key words: Balkans, migration, asylum centers, EU

Link: https://diepresse.com/home/ausland/eu/5447313/Bundeskriminalamt_Situation-am-Balkan-sehr-sensibel-und-bedrohlich?from=suche.intern.portal

Summary

The chief of the Human Trafficking and Trafficking Office at the Federal Criminal Police Office, Gerald Tatzgern, stated that the situation in the Balkans is “under control”, but in view of the potential of new migrant flows from Turkey it becomes “very threatening” and “very sensitive”. One has to be very careful so that the millions of refugees currently present in Turkey don’t cause a new crisis like the ones experienced in 2015/2016. Tatzgern speaks of around 50.000 to 60,000 asylum seekers present in the Balkan region, as well as siding against the Austro-Danish project to set up asylum centers outside of the EU. The Danish government had announced plans to set up asylum seekers centers in locations outside of the EU, such as Albania, Kosovo but also Serbia and Macedonia are negotiating. Nevertheless, the Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn highly criticized the plan, stating that he would “resist this initiative with all his might and fight it to the last drop of blood”, as the asylum centers plan has “nothing to do with the idea of European solidarity”.

Date: 15 June 2018

Title: Name dropping in the Balkans

Author: Florian Bieber

Source: Foreign Affairs

Key words: Balkans, Macedonia, Greece, name dispute, agreement, EU, NATO

Link: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/greece/2018-06-15/name-dropping-balkans>

Summary

Since Macedonia declared its independence it has had a dispute with Greece over its name as Greece believes Macedonia might claim Greece’s eponymous region in the northern part of the country. Greece is in a position of power as it can veto Macedonia’s entry in the EU and NATO. A new, moderate government in Macedonia combined with Greece’s desire to improve international reputation helped push the deal and now Macedonia will be called the Republic of North Macedonia. Macedonia will hold a referendum to ratify the name change, and if it passes Macedonia’s entry into the EU and NATO will be ratified by Greece. Factions in Greece, Macedonia and the EU along with Russia are against the deal, although Macedonians want to join the EU and its government wants to reduce Russian influence. If the name dispute is solved, it could help solve other disputes in the Balkans and speed up European integration in the area.

Date: 23 June 2018

Title: Greeks clash with police over Macedonia name deal

Author: Karolina Tagaris

Source: The New York Times

Key words: Balkans, Greece, Macedonia, name dispute, agreement, protests.

Link: <https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2018/06/25/world/europe/25reuters-greece-macedonia-name-protests.html>

Summary

In order to end decades of dispute between Greece and Macedonia, the two countries signed a pact this month to change the former Yugoslav state's name to North Macedonia, nevertheless the political move has caused protests on both sides of the border. In fact, dozens of Greeks clashed with police in Thessaloniki when they tried to storm the presentation of the ruling party Syriza which was called "The Macedonia issue: benefits of the agreement and prospects for the Balkans". Some protesters were draped in the Greek flag and chanted "Macedonia is Greek" and shouted "traitors" as they attacked police with rocks. Police was deployed in riot gear and responded by shooting rounds of tear gas. Greeks contest Macedonia's name saying it implies territorial claims over the Greek province of Macedonia, as well as stealing ancient Greek culture and civilization. Recent polls show up to 70 percent of Greeks objecting to the name compromise.

Date: 25 June 2018

Title: Budapest calls for swift integration of the Balkans into the EU

Author: Le Figaro.fr

Source: Le Figaro.fr

Key words: Balkans, Hungary, integration, EU, enlargement

Link: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2018/06/25/97001-20180625FILWWW00308-budapest-plaide-pour-une-integration-rapide-des-balkans-dans-l-ue.php>

Summary

The European Union should speed up the process of integration of the Western Balkan countries, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said. In view of the progress made by the most advanced of these countries in fulfilling the accession criteria, even Serbia and Montenegro should not be able to enter the EU before 2025 at the earliest. "The EU needs to be enlarged as quickly as possible," said Peter Szijjarto. "We would like to see the Union at 28, 29 30. The Western Balkans is a region from which tensions could emerge," he said.

Date: 26 June 2018

Title: In Albania, “money from drugs has become the money of politics”

Author: Libération

Source: Giovanni Vale and Jérôme André

Key words: Albania, trafficking, drug, politics, integration

Link: http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/06/26/en-albanie-l-argent-de-la-drogue-est-devenu-l-argent-de-la-politique_1662137

Summary

The heavy suspicions of collusion between the socialist government and drug traffickers are likely to weigh on the country's EU accession negotiations. Nowadays, Albania is the largest producer of drug in the European Union. On the eve of the 2017 legislative elections, the opposition tried to react to denounce this permeability between political power and local mafia. The right, itself discredited by corruption cases, decides to boycott the Parliament and denounces Albania of having transformed itself into the “Colombia of Europe”. Corruption cases, scandals linked to organized crime and other failures of Edi Rama's “ruthless war on drugs” have not prevented the Commission from calling on member states to open accession negotiations to the European Union. But will the process of integration, this “cure” hoped for by the Prime Minister, be enough to kill corruption and organized crime?

Date: 27 June 2018

Title: Albania refuses to host EU migrant reception centers – Prime Minister

Author: Sputnik News

Source: Sputnik News

Key words: Albania, accession, European Union, migrants

Link: <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201806271065818205-albania-migrants-eu-statement/>

Summary

In an interview at the German Bild newspaper regarding the centers for migrants, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania, Edi Rama, said “We will never accept such EU refugee camps”, adding that such camps would dump “desperate people somewhere like toxic waste that nobody wants.” The possible start of the EU membership talks with Albania is now approaching, although there is no consensus within the Union on the issue. Indeed, the French President Emmanuel Macron stated that before any further enlargement, the EU needs to implement a reform on the functioning of its institutions.

Date: 28 June 2018

Title: Macedonian PM Zoran Zaev: EU accession talks a 'historic decision'

Author: Boris Georievski

Source: Deutsche Welle

Key words: EU, Western Balkans, accession, Macedonia

Link: <https://www.dw.com/en/macedonian-pm-zoran-zaev-eu-accession-talks-a-historic-decision/a-44449196>

Summary

After the announcement of the accession talks of the European Union with the Western Balkans nations, the Prime Minister of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev said that his country will “proudly walk through the gates of Europe.” The decision is a historic one and the negotiation will start on June 2019. In the meanwhile, the country will work on implementing the criteria required by the European Commission for the accession. In particular, the European Union is asking more focus on the following key areas: judicial reforms, tackling corruption, intelligence, security services and public administration. The Prime Minister also thanked Germany for the support to the Western Balkans countries in order to establish a stronger regional cooperation. Concerning the objections of France and Netherlands, he declared that “The consolidation of the EU will be complete when the union accepts the Western Balkan countries that fulfill the necessary conditions in its family — including the Republic of Macedonia, of course.”

Date: 29 June 2018

Title: Bulgarian government survives no-confidence vote

Author: Associated Press

Source: The Washington Post

Key words: Balkans, Bulgaria, Boyko Borisov, accusations, EU

Link: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/bulgarian-government-survives-no-confidence-vote/2018/06/29/11dd57ae-7b7d-11e8-ac4e-421ef7165923_story.html?utm_term=.96d79d8c07a7

Summary

Bulgaria's ruling coalition, GERB, survived the second no-confidence vote called by the opposition which accused the current government of failing to deal with surging crime and to guarantee the rule of law. The 240-members of the parliament rejected the motion in a 131 to 104 vote, with five lawmakers absent. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov government only came to power last year, but the spectacular daylight escape from Sofia's main prison by two inmates, the assassination of public figures that remain unsolved and a reported rise in crime has not only alerted local opposition, but the EU as well. Brussels has repeatedly criticized Bulgaria for the lack of progress in fighting corruption and organized crime, which is seen as a hurdle to its aspirations to join the visa-free Schengen area and the eurozone. Nevertheless, the GERB party dismisses the accusation claiming that the socialist cannot provide an effective alternative and were only trying to cast doubts on the country's image.

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