

STRATEGIC BALKANS

Strategic Balkans – a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

PRESS REVIEW FEBRUARY 2019



NATO Foundation
Defense College

Index:

The National Interest: Why China and Russia are Vying for Influence Over the Balkans

Atlas Obscura: What Language Do People Speak in the Balkans, Anyway?

Bloomberg: Nationalism in Europe Casts Shadow Over Balkan Healing Process

Die Tageszeitung: Balkan-Stabilität wird brüchig

Bloomberg: Serbia Tackles the Plunging Population Plaguing the Balkans

Neue Zürcher Zeitung: «Die Rolle Russlands auf dem Balkan wird überschätzt – und Chinas Einfluss unterschätzt»

La Croix: «Il n'y a pas de statu quo possible dans les Balkans»

Radio France: Orthodoxie: après Kiev, les églises des Balkans tentées par la dissidence?

Date: 7 February 2019

Title: Why China and Russia are Vying for Influence Over the Balkans

Author: Scott B. McDonald

Source: The National Interest

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

Link: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-china-and-russia-are-vying-influence-over-balkans-43852>

Summary

The author analyses Russia and China's tools to influence North Macedonia as an example of a wider attempt to vie for influence in the Balkans. The EU is the major supplier of funds, but the region desperately needs more investments, pipelines and infrastructures. Moscow and Beijing find a fertile ground to exert influence to push forward their geopolitical ambitions. "The Balkans will remain a major geopolitical frontier", the author writes.

Date: 11 February 2019

Title: What Language Do People Speak in the Balkans, Anyway?

Author: Dan Nosowitz

Source: Atlas Obscura

Key words: Balkans, identity, language.

Link: <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/what-language-is-spoken-in-the-balkans>

Summary

Languages can unite people, but also prompt divisions. The Balkans's history proves it. Languages are key to understand the attempts made over the years to unify the region, but also to understand the identity factors behind wars and crisis experienced by Europe's southeast corner. From ancient times to Tito's liberal policies for languages, up to the wars in the Nineties and post-war processes to redefine nationhood, Atlas Obscura, a website focusing on history and culture, proposes a detailed journey into the complex issue of languages in the Balkans.

Date: 16 February 2019

Title: Nationalism in Europe Casts Shadow Over Balkan Healing Process

Author: Andrea Dudik

Source: Bloomberg

Key words: North Macedonia, Greece, Balkans, nationalism, EU integration.

Link: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-16/nationalism-in-europe-casts-shadow-over-balkan-healing-process>

Summary

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference, the Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, said that he hopes the leaders in the Balkans will follow the path he walked on while negotiating with Greece over the name dispute. Zaev remarked that striking deals based on mutual comprehension is much more important than caring about polls and votes by blowing on nationalism. However, nationalists leaders are still very popular in the Balkans, Bloomberg notes. In Munich, Zaev also said that NATO membership – in theory unlocked by the deal with Athens – will attract new foreign investors in his country. He predicts extra investment of as much as 300 million euros a year. In 2017, the country received 181 million euros of investments, Bloomberg reports.

Date: 17 February 2019

Title: Balkan-Stabilität wird brüchig

Author: Erich Rathfelder

Source: Die Tageszeitung

Key words: Kosovo, Serbia, Balkans, EU, NATO, land swap.

Link: <http://www.taz.de/!5570905/>

Summary

The stability that has characterised the Balkans since the end of the wars in the Nineties – a stability secured by NATO and the EU – could be jeopardised if Kosovo and Serbia will agree on the land swap, the Die Tageszeitung, a German left-oriented newspaper, writes. It predicts that the US administration, which supports such deal, will increase pressures in the future to turn it from an option into reality. Anyway, the majority of political forces and population both in Serbia and Kosovo opposes the land swap.

Date: 26 February 2019

Title: Serbia Tackles the Plunging Population Plaguing the Balkans

Author: Gordana Filipovic

Source: Bloomberg

Key words: Serbia, Workers, Jobs, EU integration.

Link: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-26/serbia-tackles-plummeting-population-that-s-plaguing-the-balkans>

Summary

Like many other countries in transition, both from Southeastern and Central Europe, Serbia faces the contradiction between a rather steady economic growth and a lack of opportunities and good salaries for skilled young people. Due to migration to richer countries, Serbia has lost almost 5% of its population in the last decade. The Minister of Labor hired a team of economists and statisticians to face and contain this serious problem. Bloomberg reports about it.

Date: 28 February 2019

Title: «Die Rolle Russlands auf dem Balkan wird überschätzt – und Chinas Einfluss unterschätzt»

Author: Andreas Ernst

Source: Neue Zürcher Zeitung

Key words: Russia, China, EU, Balkans.

Link: <https://www.nzz.ch/international/balkan-china-unterschaetzt-russland-ueberschaetzt-sagt-eu-hahn-ld.1465275>

Summary

The Russian role in the Balkans have been overestimated. To the contrary, China can exert a greater influence. It has lots of money, more than Russia, to channel into infrastructural projects. It also has a model to penetrate the region. It has just to copy the strategy it pursued in Africa, states the European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy Johannes Hahn, interviewed by the Swiss daily Neue Zürcher Zeitung.

Date: 2 March 2019

Title: «Il n’y a pas de statu quo possible dans les Balkans»

Author: Marie Verdier

Source: La Croix

Key words: Balkans, France, Macron, EU integration.

Link: <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Europe/Il-pas-statu-quo-possible-Balkans-2019-03-02-1201006049>

Summary

Interviewed by the Catholic daily La Croix, the French Minister for EU Affairs, Nathalie Loiseau, admitted that over the last years her country has not paid enough attention to the Balkans. During the war period and in the aftermath of the wars, Paris was very committed to the region. Then it forgot it. It is time to focus back on the Balkans, Loiseau stated, telling that the President, Emmanuel Macron, will soon visit Serbia and that the French Development Agency has recently opened an office in Belgrade, serving the whole region.

Date: 2 March 2019

Title: Orthodoxie: après Kiev, les églises des Balkans tentées par la dissidence?

Author: Xavier Martinet

Source: Radio France

Key words: Balkans, Religions, Ukraine, Orthodoxy.

Link: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/les-enjeux-internationaux/orthodoxie>

Summary

Radio France broadcast a report about the potential consequences that the rupture in Ukraine’s orthodoxy could have in the Balkans, mainly for the Serbian Orthodox Church. Montenegro and Macedonia’s orthodox churches, that are under Serbia’s church jurisdiction, could claim autocephaly – that is to say juridical autonomy – after that the Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, gave it to the Kiev Patriarchate recently. Before this move, Kiev Patriarchate, which broke ties with the Russian Orthodox Church early in the Nineties, was considered by the Patriarch a non-canonical church. His decision was challenged by the Moscow Patriarchate and its Ukrainian branch, still the largest religious community in Ukraine in terms of parishes and priests. Bartholomew has changed his view due to the pro-Russia posture held by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church - Moscow Patriarchate during the war between Kiev and Moscow.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

Protests in the region: why the EU must care about them

In recent weeks, street protests have broken out in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania. First demonstrations started in Serbia at the beginning of December, and they still go on. Every Saturday, citizens parade in central Belgrade, as in other cities of the country. Initially, they demanded more media freedom and more protection for opposition politicians (the protests began after the beating of Borko Stefanovic, a leftist politician). However, the mood has gradually changed. Now protesters question the whole political action of Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's President and founder of the Progressive Party (SNS), in power since 2012.

Demonstrators, who say they are not supported by any political parties in terms of logistics and money, accuse the President and his party, which has the absolute majority in the Parliament and rules almost all the municipalities of the country, of having built an authoritarian State through tightening its control over justice, media and law enforcement agencies. The slogan of the movement is One out of five million (Jedan od pet miliona). It recalls what Vucic said when protests broke out. "I will not accept demonstrators' demands, even if they will be five millions".

In Montenegro, protests erupted in early February after a controversial banker, Dusko Knezevic, accused the President Milo Djukanovic and his ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), in power since the Nineties, of corruption, cronyism, abuse of office and murky financial deals. Investigative journalists and opposition politicians have told many times that those opaque relations between politics, business and organised crime jeopardize Montenegro's democracy.

Like in Serbia, protests are peaceful, held on Saturdays and mainly coordinate by civil society. Demonstrators ask for Djukanovic's resignation, saying he is the patron of Montenegro's ill system. They also claim that high-ranking judges cover up politicians' dirty games. Djukanovic has ruled out to leave, denying accusations against him and his party. He said that protests are legitimate, unless they become violent.

In Albania, protests began on the 16th of February, after a scandal-plagued plan to build a ring-road around the capital emerged. Prior to that, the country had been shaken by huge demonstrations launched by students. They asked for cutting high fees at universities and improve the public education, badly administered according to them.

Unlike those in Serbia and Montenegro, demonstrations in Tirana have been very tense. The first protest turned violent. People attacked the building hosting the office of the Prime Minister, Edi Rama, a Socialist, demanding his resignation. Fifteen people were injured, including five police officers. The opposition approach marks another difference between the protest in Albania and those in Serbia and Montenegro. In Serbia and Montenegro, opposition does not have a direct role in anti-government marches. In Albania, protests are called and coordinated by the Democratic Party (DP) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), the two opposition parties.

Several media have written that a "Balkan Spring" is blooming. It sounds as a forced attempt to drag protests marked more by differences than similarities into the same framework. Those in Albania, for example, seem more a fight for power than a surge for democracy.

It is not a Balkan Spring, but the European Union should care about these protests. Beyond political disputes, a common trend emerges. There is a growing popular discontent for how these countries are ruled. Albanians, Serbs and Montenegrins are tired of corruption, insufficient democratic standards and lack of economic opportunities. In short: they feel trapped in a limbo. Central European countries joined the EU in 2004, fifteen years after the collapse of communism. Almost thirty years after the collapse of Yugoslavia, and twenty since the last regional conflict (Kosovo), the Western Balkans are still in the waiting process. It begins to be an excessive time politically and socially.

So far, the European enlargement has been primarily perceived in the post-Yugoslav space as an economic opportunity more than a chance to build a real, working democracy. Supporting the hunger for democracy - showed by recent protests - is an opportunity for Europe to reassert its mission in the Balkans and let pass its model before those promoted by other players, like Russia or China, interested in gaining influence in the region.

The Serbia-Kosovo land swap: hot news or hot air?

The idea of a land swap between Serbia and Kosovo has recently come back, after a period during which it was not hot news anymore. On February 19, the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dacic, said that Serbia's official proposal to find a final agreement with Kosovo is definitely based on territorial exchange.

Many observers argue that the most likely scenario is that Serbia will annex districts in Northern Kosovo where the Serbs are the majority, giving Kosovo areas in Southern Serbia mainly populated by Albanians. However, Dacic did not specify how borders will be modified.

Recently, also the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic, has spoken about the need to find a lasting and stable compromise with Kosovo. He did not mention the land swap, but many journalists and analysts think that he perceives it as the best way - maybe the only one - to strike a deal with the neighbour. Interviewed by the Italian news agency ANSA, he said that Serbia and Kosovo are condemned to find a compromise. He said that the Serbs and the Albanians are the largest peoples in the Balkans, thus it is important that they look for a settlement to foster their own stability, as well as the regional one.

The land swap is not a geopolitical fantasy anymore, as it appeared to be months ago. The US, for example, are open to such a compromise. In a comment published by Deutsche Welle, the former German diplomat Christian Schwarz-Schilling wrote that the US President Donald Trump could pursue a deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the division of influence between the two powers in the Balkans. According to this theory, Kosovo would join NATO, after having solved all the issues with Serbia, while the latter would remain under Russian influence. As for the EU, the other big player in the region, despite objections made by several member countries, it could accept it if it will meet legal standards, a diplomatic source tells.

However, implementing the land swap will not be easy as it could appear. Vucic and Dacic have to win people's support. Surveys show that the majority of Serbs oppose the territorial exchange. The scenario in Kosovo is the same. People do not want it. Furthermore, in Pristina there is a clear divergence in the political arena. The President Hashim Thaci does not rule out the land swap, but the Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj strongly opposes it.

Many observers think that the land swap is not a good idea because it could open a Pandora's Box in a region where redrawing borders has always brought political disasters. Bosnian-Serbs could claim independence and the Greater Albania theory could gain ground, for example.

Moreover a possible land swap would impose on Serbia the uneasy task to absorb Northern Kosovo, a region where over the last years criminal powers have become very powerful and capable to have influence even in Belgrade.

Finally both regions, for the reason that they host sizeable minorities, would lose their relatively privileged status if re-united to their respective motherlands. Especially Northern Kosovo would lose international funding and several NGO's who are the main local job-provider.

To sum up, the land swap is for sure the easiest and faster solution to settle the Serbia-Kosovo diplomatic rebus, but it also seems that problems that it could create are more than those it could solve.

Matteo Tacconi

With the support of the Balkan Trust for Democracy.



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