

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Date: 17 March 2019

Title: New Zealand mosque massacres revive old wounds in the Balkans

Source: Associated Press

Key words: Balkans, Religions, Nationalism.

Link: <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/new-zealand-mosque-massacres-revive-old-wounds-in-the-balkans>

Summary

The man suspected of being the perpetrator of recent mass killings in New Zealand was likely ideologically inspired by Serbian ultra-nationalism that led to ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in the Nineties. A report by the Associated Press.

Date: 20 March 2019

Title: Jovo Martinović: Repressionen gegen Journalisten nehmen zu

Source: Der Standard

Key words: Montenegro, Media, Freedom of Press.

Link: <https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000099895648/jovo-martinovic-repressionen-gegen-journalisten-nehmen-zu>

Summary

Interviewed in Vienna, where he received a media freedom prize, the respected Montenegrin investigative journalist Jovo Martinović said that media scenario in his homeland is quite worrying. The state wants to control the sector and attacks against journalists have increased over the last years, he highlighted. Rarely, judges convict perpetrators. Asked for a comment about Montenegro's bid to join the EU, the journalist stated that despite the country does not respect all the rules concerning rule of law and democracy, it should be co-opted in the club for geopolitical reasons.

Date: 22 March 2019

Title: A low-wage, high-tax trap in the Western Balkans

Author: Mihail Arandarenko

Source: Brookings Institution

Key words: Balkans, economy, poverty.

Link: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2019/03/22/a-low-wage-high-tax-trap-in-the-western-balkans/>

Summary

The combination between high labour tax and low income is a serious problem for all the countries of the Balkan region. It gives companies fewer incentives to hire high-qualified workers and broadens the perimeter of the informal labour market. Furthermore, it puts on low-income workers a higher tax burden due to the flat tax system introduced in the region years ago. A very interesting analysis by the Brookings Institution, a progressive American think-tank.

Date: 22 March 2019

Title: Karadžić, il “buon vicino” all’ergastolo

Author: Alfredo Sasso

Source: Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso

Key words: Bosnia Herzegovina, War Crimes, International Justice, Radovan Karadzic.

Link: <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Bosnia-Erzegovina/Karadzic-il-buon-vicino-all-ergastolo-193542>

Summary

On March 20, the (MICT - Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals), the United Nations court that carries out the remaining functions of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), sentenced Radovan Karadzic to life imprisonment for war crimes. The verdict puts an end to the case, but unfortunately the central idea of Karadzic - the holy and just war made by Christians against Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina - is still quite popular among Serbs in the Balkans, writes Alfred Sasso for the Balcani Observatory and Caucasus, an Italian authoritative publication reporting on the Balkans and the Caucasus.

Date: 24 March 2019

Title: The war in Europe that won't go away

Authors: Jeremy Bowen, Albana Kasapi and Dejan Anastasijevic

Source: BBC

Key words: Serbia, Kosovo, NATO, war, 1999.

Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-43230529/kosovo-pm-haradinaj-fully-against-border-changes>

Summary

The war between Serbia and Kosovo ended in 1999. The NATO air campaign forced Yugoslavia's troops to leave Kosovo and put the former Serbian province, now an independent State, under international administration. Despite the conflict is over, its legacy still has a big impact in Serbia and Kosovo, as well as on the two peoples' mind. A video report by BBC.

Date: 24 March 2019

Title: The NATO Bombing Of Yugoslavia

Author: Amos Chapple

Source: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Key words: Serbia, Kosovo, NATO, war, 1999, EU integration.

Link: <https://www.rferl.org/a/operation-allied-force-before-after/29831978.html>

Summary

On the day marking the 20th anniversary of the NATO air campaign in Milosevic's Yugoslavia, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty publishes a very interesting before/after photo inquiry, showing how certain places in Serbia and Kosovo looked like in war times (or even before) and how they look like today. A report confirming that sometimes pictures are a powerful tool to analyse changes occurred in a region, a country or a town.

Date: 27 March 2019

Title: UE-Serbie: l'adhésion est-elle une illusion?

Author: Xavier Martinet

Source: Radio France

Key words: Serbia, Kosovo, NATO, war, 1999, EU integration.

Link: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/les-enjeux-internationaux/serbie-4>

Summary

Right after the 20th anniversary of NATO air strikes in the former Yugoslavia, the French public radio issued a podcast focusing on Serbia's contradictory stance on those events. The state official memory is merely based on the idea that NATO campaign was a criminal act aimed at punishing the Serbian people and give somebody else the control over Kosovo. There are no considerations about the atrocities committed by the Milosevic regime in Kosovo. The status of the former Serbian province, still unsolved, is also a big obstacle on the way to the EU membership. If Belgrade will not recognise Pristina's independence, there are no chances to join the European club, experts interviewed in the podcast say.

Date: 30 March 2019

Title: Serbia Won't Recognize Crimea as Russian Due to Possible Comparison to Kosovo

Source: Sputnik

Key words: Serbia, Russia, Kosovo, Crimea, Ukraine.

Link: <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201903301073681124-serbia-crimea-russia/>

Summary

Despite having strong relations with Moscow, Serbia will not recognise Crimea as part of Russia's territory, the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said during an interview with Rossiya 24 TV. "If we did this today, an analogy would be drawn to Kosovo. They would say that under the same principle, Kosovo is independent and we do not have a right to fight for it anymore", Vucic argued.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

For the Balkans, NATO: an oldie but a goldie

On April 1, Albania celebrated ten years of NATO membership. Still a country in transition, Albania finds in NATO not only a crucial security provider, but also a chance to have a bigger say in international affairs. Contributing to international peacekeeping missions is one of the tools offered by NATO.

NATO is important for Albania, and vice versa. It is in Albania that the Alliance is going to build its first air base in the Balkans. NATO will invest around 50 million euros to upgrade the Albanian Air Force base located in Kucova, a town once known as Qyteti Stalin (Stalin City). It has become a graveyard for Soviet and Chinese-made MiGs, definitely dismissed in 2005 (since 2009 the Albanian air space is protected by Italy and Greece's Air Forces). For many analysts, the step made by NATO in Albania is a way to counter Russia's aggressive stance, culminated in the annexation of Crimea in March 2014.

Albania's membership gave NATO the chance to "Atlanticise" the Adriatic, too. That is because, on the same day Albania joined the alliance, Croatia did it as well. After their accession, only one Adriatic segment - the Montenegrin one - was left outside NATO umbrella. The line was shut in June 2017, when Montenegro officially became the 28th NATO member.

The Western Balkans are the region where NATO's capacity to enlarge is at work. Results achieved in recent years show that the Alliance, despite its core mission has changed after the end of the Cold War, still preserves its attractiveness and NATO's enlargement is not yet over. Also North Macedonia and Kosovo wish to join it, perceiving NATO as a chance to foster both security and democracy.

Northern Macedonia is due to join the alliance very soon, maybe in 2020. The recent end of the long-time naming dispute with Greece paved the way for full membership. Meanwhile, the Accession Protocol was signed in February.

For Kosovo, NATO is just a very distant dream so far. In the former Serbian province, an independent state since 2008, but not yet a UN member, political conditions to join the alliance still lack. The recent bill on the future transformation of the Kosovo Security Force into Kosovo Armed Forces was of course another obstacle, set up by the Institutions in Kosovo themselves. Anyway, the Alliance plays an important role in the country through KFOR, widely recognized as a stability factor, whereas the US presence in Camp Bondsteel under COMKFOR is an additional bilateral guarantee.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Serbia stay out because both countries do not plan to become members of NATO in the foreseeable future. For Belgrade, the 1999 NATO air campaign is still an open wound. As for BiH, the attempts to join NATO are vetoed by Milorad Dodik, the historical leader of the Bosnian Serbs, now a member of the country's tripartite presidency.

Several analysts foresee that Serbia and BiH, or rather a part of it, the Serbian entity (Republika Srpska), likely will remain under Russian influence, although this should not be overestimated.

Belgrade has commercial and military links to Russia, but the EU largely remains its first economic investor and there is a good level of dialogue with NATO. Moreover the Serbian tradition, despite all the touted cultural and religious brotherhood with Moscow, is one of a friendship at arm's length.

Also BiH has a positive co-operation with the alliance. Its army contributes to NATO peacekeeping missions since 2009. The BiH Army was created in 2004 through the unification of ethnic military forces - one Serb, the other Muslim-Croat - that fought each other during the 1992-1995 war. SFOR, the NATO-led mission that operated in the country from 1996-2004, was key to enable the process and train future BiH Army members and is still a key stability factor, also through the periodical KFOR exercises to reinforce SFOR if needed.

Some analysts stress that NATO is orchestrating a plan to surround Serbia - that has the strongest army in the region - and the Bosnian-Serbs, as it seems evident just looking at a map. Albania, Montenegro, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Greece and Bulgaria are all NATO members. North Macedonia will join the alliance soon. It is an statement that must be put into its real context.

First of all the Serbian Armed forces are significant only in the Western Balkans: by sheer numbers Bulgaria and Romania together are much stronger. In any wargame Serbia can be defeated without any encirclement. Secondly, political influence does not need geographic proximity as Chinese, Gulf or Russian initiatives show clearly.

But the decisive argument is that, despite nationalistic propaganda and Russian connections (that are much more ramified and less visible in the region and beyond), RS and Serbia's elite know that the status quo is better preserved by NATO through a professional, practical and functioning dialogue. This means also keeping an eye on illegal weapons, both cached and trafficked, and on potential terrorist networks. Despite some allies' undiplomatic declarations, NATO respects Serbia's neutrality and develop relations with both the West and Russia. The Serbian double track is not a decisive factor that can jeopardize NATO's work to secure the Southern Region and does not exclude in future its participation in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council of NATO or in peacekeeping operations.

In Serbia, NATO air strikes are still a taboo

The state official ceremony for the 20th anniversary of the start of the NATO air campaign (24/03/1999) against Milosevic's Yugoslavia (a rump made of Serbia and Montenegro), was held in Niš, the third biggest Serbian city, heavily bombed in 1999.

The President Aleksandar Vucic and the Prime Minister Ana Brnabic attended the event. Vucic said that Serbia, a small nation ready to sacrifice itself (but also to start a reconciliation), was attacked by the most powerful countries in the world. His words, in line with those of his predecessors, reflect a view embraced by a large part of Serbia's political élite as well as from the society. Twenty years have passed since NATO bombed the country, but those events still nourish sour memories and a sense of humiliation.

Another prominent member of Serbian current leadership, the Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin, typically blamed NATO even with more emphasis than the President. Vulin said that NATO bombing, that lasted for 78 days, was the last crime of the XX century.

In Niš, Vucic also mentioned the number of victims caused by NATO air strikes. He said that 2.500 civilians lost their lives, many more than those estimated by Human Rights Watch (approximately 500). The number told by Vucic cannot be verified, since Serbia has never provided official statistics for the victims of NATO bombing. For some observers, it is a deliberate choice: overestimating the death toll can keep people's frustration and victimhood high.

Unfortunately, too little attention is paid to the reasons that induced NATO to intervene in former Yugoslavia. The public discourse around the Kosovo war and NATO's bombing still does not take into sufficient consideration the repression carried out by the Milosevic regime against Kosovar Albanians in the former Serbian province, as well as the fact that NATO, despite some mistakes (a hospital hit in central Belgrade, 4 victims; Chinese embassy, 3 casualties), as well as questionable choices (notably the bombing of Serbia public TV, 16 deaths, or of the bridges on the Danube, blocking most of the river), restricted strikes to military targets, as recently underlined by NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg.

The Belgrade regime attitude towards journalists and dissent during the NATO campaign is another aspect which has not been inquired enough so far. On those days, whoever expressed critic views about the government could be arrested, beaten and even killed. The assassination of the publisher and journalist Slavko Curuvija on April 11, 1999, the Orthodox Easter, symbolizes that in those 78 days dangers did not come only from the sky and only from NATO.

Despite political manipulations, lack of numbers and carelessness about some aspects of the 1999 context, Serbs' negative view of NATO's bombings and NATO as a military organization is real and cannot be ignored. Very few people in Serbia think that NATO air campaign was legitimate and necessary. Even those who at that time opposed Milosevic and hoped that NATO strikes could overthrow him, criticize the Alliance's offensive and believe that the West could try to solve the Kosovo dispute with other means.

Such resentment is reflected in every poll about a future NATO membership for Serbia. The latest poll, carried out by the Institute for European Affairs, shows that 79% of them opposes NATO membership and 64% would not accept NATO's apology for the 1999 bombardments.

However, Serbia and NATO are not enemies anymore. Serbia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 2006. Relations with NATO deepened in 2015, when an Individual Partnership Action Plan with the Alliance was signed, i.e. the highest level of cooperation with NATO for any non-member. Relations between the KFOR and the Serbian General Staff are professional and smooth concerning the management of UNSC Resolution 1244 and the Military Technical Agreement. The alliance on its part fully respects Serbia's wish to be neutral and have strong relations with Russia, despite the current very troubled dialogue between NATO and Moscow.

Matteo Tacconi

With the support of the Balkan Trust for Democracy.



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