

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Southeast European Youth wants a decent future

European Western Balkans, April 8

A Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung research maps wishes, desires and aspirations of young people in the Western Balkans. The study reveals how the youth issue in the region is a very serious one. Young people are unsatisfied with the jobs (often precarious) they have, they distrust old politics and still think to go abroad to look for better opportunities than those offered by their own countries. They also know how corruption delays development, but they tolerate the informal bribing system more than sex minorities. At least, young people in the region do think that Europeanisation is a positive perspective.

Dubrovnik 16+1 summit rolls the red carpet for China

Euractiv, April 10

China is building bridges and roads in the Western Balkans to make the region a crucial chain of the Belt and Road Initiative, the grand strategy aimed at creating new corridors to export Chinese goods to Europe. One the eve of the 16+1 summit, the forum gathering China and countries from Central Europe and the Balkans, held in Dubrovnik on April 11-12, Euractiv published a useful article to focus on what are the major Chinese projects in the region, how much they value and how the EU is perceiving Beijing's dynamism (quite badly one could say).

Montenegro fears China-backed highway will put it on road to ruin

By Valerie Hopkins / Financial Times, April 10

Among the biggest infrastructural projects supported by Chinese money in the Western Balkans is a 103 km highway connecting Bar, the main Montenegrin port, to northern Serbia. The project helps Montenegro to get a better access to Serbia's market, but costs are rising. The Montenegrin debt has jumped to 80% and if the State should default, China – the almost sole lender of the highway through its national Exim Bank – shall be compensated by access to Montenegro's land. A story that reflects how China's fresh and fast money shines at the beginning, but it can also become a trap.

Music School Keeps Divided Kosovo Town Rocking

By Sanja Sovrljic / Balkan Insight, April 10

Kosovska Mitrovica is Kosovo's divided city. Kosovo Serbs live in the northern districts, Kosovo Albanians in the southern ones. Few people cross bridges over the Ibar river, which flows in the town and marks the internal ethnic border. But the division is not absolute, there are those who try to break psychological and political barriers. Mitrovica Rock School, where young Serbs and Albanians play together, is a valuable example, joining the work of other NGO's.

Le massacre de Srebrenica, un «mythe», selon le coprésident de Bosnie

Le Figaro, April 12

The Serbian member of the Bosnian tripartite Presidency, Milorad Dodik, called the Srebrenica massacre a myth built by Bosnian Muslims and accepted by the international community. He said that while every nation has its own myths, the Bosnian Muslims, the largest ethnic group in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), do not have any. Thus they turned Srebrenica into their myth. On the 11th of July 1995, more than 8.000 Bosnian Muslims men were executed by the Bosnian Serb soldiers under the command of Ratko Mladic.

Dodik, whom before being elected as one of the three Presidents of BiH, served as Prime Minister and President of the Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity of the country, is a very divisive character. His words about Srebrenica reflects the goal he wants to achieve: keeping BiH social and political fractures to preserve his power among the Bosnian Serbs.

Mirjana Markovic, the 'Lady Macbeth' of War-Torn Serbia, Dies at 76

By Sam Roberts | The New York Times, April 15

The New York Times portrays Mirjana Markovic, Slobodan Milosevic's wife, who recently died in Moscow. She moved to the Russian capital to avoid prosecution in Serbia, where she was accused for corruption. "Mira" Markovic had a great influence in Yugoslav and Serbian politics in the 80s and 90s. Her hunger for power and her love for his husband are a good lens through which analyse the bloody history of the Balkans at the end of the XX century. "Ms. Markovic followed the Machiavellian formula of preferring to be feared rather than loved", the author of this obituary wrote.

How alternative health magazines advance Russia's soft power in the Balkans

Global Voices, April 19

Russian Doctor. Russian Herbalist. The Russian Encyclopedia of Health. These and other alternative medicine magazines are spreading fast in Balkan newsstands. Most of them are printed in Serbia. People can read articles about how to stay fit and what to eat to avoid cholesterol, but also stories about Putin's fungi diet or Russian greatest minds. A soft power approach to make the "Russian world" penetrate the region through health, one of the great influencing levers used by good lobbying campaigns.

Dejan Anastasijevic, Journalist and Witness to War Crimes, Dies at 57

By Massimo Calabresi / Time, April 26

Dejan Anastasijevic, a respected Serbian journalist who told Serbia's war crimes, passed away. He was 57. For those who covered and still cover the Balkans, Anastasijevic's works are key to understand regional dynamics during the war and in this long and complex post-war transition. The obituary published by Time, one of the magazines the journalist wrote for, stresses his balanced way of telling stories, as well as the fact that he was targeted for his reporting. "During the US-led bombing of Belgrade during the war in Kosovo, threats from Serbian security forces drove Anastasijevic and his family from Serbia to seek temporary safety in Vienna. He returned after the war to his apartment in downtown Belgrade. Later, his home was attacked with a hand grenade", Massimo Calabresi wrote for Time.

Auf dem Balkan gibt Europa den Ton an – nicht Putin oder Trump

By Alan Posener / Die Welt, May 1

The author analyzes the recent Franco-German initiative for the Balkans. In Berlin, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the French President Emmanuel Macron discussed with Balkan leaders and test chances to stabilization of the region. In particular, they focused on Serbia-Kosovo talks. The author thinks that the initiative, promoted by the two European heavyweights, sends a clear political message to the US, Russia and China, saying that the Balkans are Europe's courtyard and that it is up to Europe to solve disputes and problems in the region. Yet, doubts are casted on Europe's capacity to manage the issue, considering that Europe failed to prevent war in the former Yugoslav and needed US assistance to end them. The author also argues that the Europe that "Merkron" have in mind has not its power center in Brussels, but in the Council or even just in Paris and Berlin. It seems to be a critique for an approach that does not involve in the process all the EU members.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

Presidential elections in North Macedonia, a first political test after the deal with Greece

Stevo Pendarovski, born in 1963, is the new president of Northern Macedonia. Pendarovski, a member of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, the ruling party, got around 51,6% in the runoff, held on Sunday, the 5th of May. He defeated Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, the candidate of the conservative party VMRO-DPMNE, to which belonged Nikola Gruevski, the former Prime Minister who fled to Hungary in November 2018 to avoid a trial for corruption. Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova took 44,7%. The turnout was 46,7%, slightly more than the 40% constitutionally required to make the election valid.

The presidential elections were the first political test after the country solved the saga of the naming dispute with Greece (12th of June 2018), becoming Northern Macedonia and paving the way to NATO membership. Likely, North Macedonia will become the thirtieth member of the Alliance next year. The deal with Greece speeds up the European integration process too. The OSCE electoral observation mission praised the way in which elections were run, despite remarking that some legal aspects remain problematic.

The campaign was a sort of “second referendum” over the deal with Greece, approved by the Parliament in October 2018 after the failed referendum in September 2018, due to low turnout and propaganda by foreign actors. The deal with Greece highly polarized the 2 million post-Yugoslav nation, and is still a very divisive issue.

Pendarovski was the country’s chief negotiator for accession to NATO. By picking him as its candidate, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, led by the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, conveyed a clear message to the Euro-Atlantic community, showing a commitment to achieve NATO membership. It was a message for the electorate as well. The ruling party played the Euro-Atlantic card to convince voters that there are no other paths to enhance democracy, security and economic growth: either the West or isolation, in other words.

It was the same spin used during the 2018 referendum, hence it was risky. This time it worked again. On the one hand, the NATO membership ratification process, approved by nine NATO members so far, made people think that the path to the West is a real thing, not just a declaration of intent. On the other hand, Gruevski’s flight to Orban’s Hungary was a blow to the VMRO-DPMNE’s credibility and as consequence to Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova’s chances. She criticized deal with Greece, but she supported also the European integration.

Mission accomplished, one would say. However, the low turnout – higher than 40% needed but low in absolute numbers – shows that people are not so excited by the historic deal with Greece. High unemployment, low salaries, corruption, and a weak rule of law are still under-addressed issues. The accession to NATO and the promise of democracy are not enough to win people's heart. Efforts to anchor the country to the Western community must be coupled with deep and serious reforms aimed at improving life conditions. Without reforms, the pro-West commitment can turn into a mere slogan to keep power.

Recent developments in North Macedonia tell something to the EU as well. They prove that the EU should care more of involving people in European integration. People in North Macedonia and in the entire Balkan region feel the EU has slowed down its commitment for the Balkans in the last years. This stirs up disappointment and frustration, if not anti-EU mood. The usual top-down approach should be combined with a bottom-up one to avoid important setbacks, very visible within the EU.

China reaffirms commitment to make the Western Balkans a gateway to Europe

The eighth annual EEC-China summit was hosted by Croatia, in Dubrovnik, on the 11-12th of April. For the last time, it was called 16+1, because a new member – Greece – joined the club, now rebranded as 17+1.

Athens is already a member of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the ambitious Chinese project to create new trade routes to export its goods to the West. Beijing plans to make the Balkans a gateway to the EU. Athens has close relations with the region. Joining the CEE-China Forum seemed a logical choice for Greece, but it also shows that China – or at least China’s money – is attractive, especially for the Western Balkans countries, that desperately need cash to improve their poor infrastructure. Ahead of the Dubrovnik gathering, Agence France Presse (AFP) quoted a study by the European Investment Bank to highlight that “*between 2007 and 2017 Beijing announced 12 billion Euros in loans for construction projects in the 16 countries, one third of which were earmarked for Serbia, followed by Bosnia (21%) and Montenegro (7%)*”.

In Dubrovnik, China confirmed its commitment to invest in infrastructures in the whole region. An announcement about contracts to build the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway is due to come soon. The same railway could be extended via North Macedonia to the Piraeus Port, managed by the Chinese shipping giant COSCO, a crucial spot for Beijing’s grand strategy. China is eyeing Croatian ports, too, in particular the Rijeka port. Alongside that of Trieste, in Italy (so far the only Western European country joining BRI), it could become a northern Mediterranean hub for the BRI.

Other major projects are already undergoing, like the 103 km highway connecting Bar, Montenegro’s main port, to northern Serbia. Build by the Chinese Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), Beijing’s constructions giant, it is mainly financed by its Exim Bank, a state loan provider. The project – valued 1,3 billion Euros – is becoming too big for a tiny State like Montenegro. The Financial Times reported that the borrowing from China “has sent the country’s debt from 63% in 2012 to almost 80%”. In case of default, China can be paid back through access to Montenegro’s land.

The Montenegrin case reveals that China’s cash money could jeopardise the Western Balkans financial stability, EU officials warn. Brussels is concerned “*over the socioeconomic and financial effects some of China’s investments can have*”, the EU commissioner to Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, told AFP. Also Chinese investments in coal plants have been put under scrutiny by the EU. They are not strategic. They just help to forge good relations with local governments and get the green light for major infrastructural projects. Politicians in the region welcome such investments, that keep old plants alive and save jobs, but also consensus. Such scheme is much more preferable than that

proposed by the EU, which asks to do more to phase out coal in order to comply with European environmental criteria.

Do the Western Balkans think that China is better than the EU? Are they becoming more and more fascinated by the Chinese way, that combine fresh money and authoritarian rule at home? It is hard to answer yes. The Asian superpower's contribute in terms of FDI in the Western Balkans is still rather thin compared to that of the EU, which still keeps a 70% quota. And despite democracy standards have decreased in the region over the last years, the Western Balkans have absorbed some acquis communautaire and feel very comfortable under NATO umbrella. Nevertheless, China's dynamic posture in the Western Balkans and in Central Europe as well, testify that the Asian giant plays a role in the old continent. This cannot be underestimated; neither European politicians should complain loudly because of China's assertive behavior, as it happened recently, showing they think that the Western Balkans are Europe's own courtyard. Europe is a big democracy, and democracies accept challenges and global competition, if possible by taking action.

Matteo Tacconi

With the support of the Balkan Trust for Democracy.



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