

STRATEGIC BALKANS

Strategic Balkans – a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

PRESS REVIEW MAY 2019



NATO Foundation
Defense College

Index

Paris Match: En Macédoine du nord, le pape François exhorte les Balkans à la concorde

RFI: Les Balkans, nouveau terrain de jeu pour la Chine aux frontières de l'Union européenne

Balkan Insight: How to Understand France's 'Bad Cop' Role in the Balkans

Der Standard: Nordmazedonien als einziges Land der Hoffnung auf dem Balkan

The Guardian: Bosnia is close to the edge. We need Europe's help

New York Times: 'Balkan Spring' Turns to summer, and Hopes for Change Dim

European Western Balkans: Few results to show, mostly: Commission's Reports on the Western Balkans

Associated Press: UN: Balkans faces alarming levels of air pollution

En Macédoine du nord, le pape François exhorte les Balkans à la concorde

Paris Match, May 7

Pope Francis landed in North Macedonia on May 7, after a one day visit in neighbouring Bulgaria. The leader of the Catholic Church, who arrived in the country after it solved the long-time naming dispute with Greece, praised the plural dimension of the Macedonian society. “The most precious and valuable heritage of the country is its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition”, he said. The Pope also exhorted local leaders, not only in Macedonia but in the whole Balkan region, to work more to forge stronger ties with the EU. His message comes in a critical time for the former Yugoslavia, a region plagued by corruption, threatened by democratic regressions and a bit forgotten by the EU.

Les Balkans, nouveau terrain de jeu pour la Chine aux frontières de l’Union européenne

Philippe Bertinchamps and Simon Rico / Radio France International, May 16

For a long time, China’s presence in the Balkans has been unnoticeable, but in recent years the Asian superpower has put itself centre stage. It has made massive investments in infrastructures and coal plants, making the Balkans a “Chinese luna-park” on the edge of the EU. A long radio reportage, in French, streamed by RFI.

How to Understand France’s ‘Bad Cop’ Role in the Balkans

Loic Tregoures / Balkan Insight, May 19

The political scientist Loic Tregoures analysed the French approach to the European enlargement. He argued that there are three main reasons explaining the “bad cop” posture of the French establishment. First, enlargement is not very popular in the country. “It brings back memories of the 2005 campaign for the referendum on the European Constitution, which was massively rejected, during which enlargement to Turkey and the ‘Polish plumber’ as a personification of the 2004 wave of enlargement were among the main topics”. Second, Macron has said since the beginning that the focus should be put on the reform of the EU institutions. As consequence, enlargement and other issues concerning Europe’s future have been side-lined. Third, recent developments in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia give grounds for the French worried position (and the Dutch and Danish as well) over corruption and the rule of law.

Nordmazedonien als einziges Land der Hoffnung auf dem Balkan

by Adelheid Wölfl/ Der Standard, May 29

The Austrian daily Der Standard published an article focusing on the EU Commission annual assessments on the Western Balkans. North Macedonia is the only country that is better rated, compared to the previous judgment. The EU Commission report states that improvements have been made in the sphere of rule of law and fight against corruption. Furthermore, the EU executive body appreciates the spirit of compromise between Albanians and Slavs that lead to the deal with Greece, Der Standard highlights.

Bosnia is close to the edge. We need Europe's help

By Aleksandar Brezar / The Guardian, May 29

The Bosnian journalist Aleksandar Brezar warned that Bosnia and Herzegovina existence is really in danger. Neighbouring Serbia is strengthening its military. Croatia, the other neighbour, is re-writing history. "There's a worrying trend towards whitewashing the country's second world war-era pro-Nazi Ustasha regime", he pointed out. Bosnia and Herzegovina feels threatened by these postures, as well as by the severe economic crisis that bites it. "Almost 25 years after the end of the war, Bosnian citizens are trapped in a hand-to-mouth existence, with some 23% estimated to be living at or below the absolute poverty line", Brezar stated, asking Europe for avoiding the collapse of his country. "More than ever, we need's Europe help".

'Balkan Spring' Turns to summer, and Hopes for Change Dim

By Mark Santora / New York Times, June 1

The author reported about the current protests in Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite contexts are different, all of these demonstrations are driven by the idea that regional leaderships are extremely corrupted and use the power to enrich themselves.

Protests show also people's frustration towards the EU approach in the region. The reporter noted, "many in the Balkans had hoped that the prospect of joining the European Union might reinforce fledgling democracies. But with officials in Brussels absorbed in fending off threats from nationalists within the bloc, the European Union's chief interest in the Balkans appears to be stability, even at the cost of democratic institutions, critics say".

Few results to show, mostly: Commission's Reports on the Western Balkans

By Aleksandar Ivkovic / European Western Balkans, June 1

After European elections, the EU Commission released the annual reports about Western Balkans integration perspectives. The picture has not drastically changed compared to last year assessments. The Balkan Six must do more in fields like justice, corruption and rule of law. Reforms in Serbia and Montenegro, the only two countries that have opened accession talks so far, slowed down. Kosovo and BiH still lag behind. Instead, the Commission praised North Macedonia and Albania, recommending the Council to open accession talks. North Macedonia seems to have some better chances. The current political chaos in Albania, where the opposition (conservatives) is boycotting the Parliament and accusing the government (socialists) of corruption, could affect the decision of the Council.

UN: Balkans faces alarming levels of air pollution

Associated Press, June 3

The UN Environment Program released a study on air quality in the Balkans. A worrisome scenario emerges. The air pollution is five times higher than the EU national and guidelines level, the Associated Press reported. Main polluting agents are old generation coal-fired power plants and inefficient domestic heating, a problem concerning the whole region.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

European elections, as viewed from the Western Balkans

Recent elections for the European Parliament (EP) were observed with a certain attention in the Western Balkans. Even if the vote and the new composition of the EP cannot have a strong impact on the EU enlargement agenda, but[still] there are some hopes that it could produce at least some new stimulus.

The post-electoral scenario is still very fluid, if not confused. The European People's Party (EPP) and the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), the two largest groups at the EP, lost around 40 seats each. Instead, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and the Greens scored a very good result, increasing the number of their representatives. Likely, they will have a stronger say in the process that will lead to the appointment of the new EU Commission, that will assume office in autumn. The leaders of Serbia and Kosovo are those who are waiting more carefully this step, caring particularly about Federica Mogherini's successor as the head of the EU diplomacy.

Both the Greens and ALDE – the Greens in particular – are pro-enlargement. This could be an opportunity for the Western Balkans, but it should not be overestimated. For instance, the party of the French President Emmanuel Macron, La République En Marche, is an important member of ALDE, but it is not clear if it will warmly support an enlargement strategy. Analysts in Pristina predict that Macron will slow down his recently revived Balkan agenda and visa liberalization for Kosovo, mostly because of the victory achieved in the popular vote by the Rassemblement National – the extreme right party led by Marine Le Pen who does not support enlargement and staunchly criticizes EU institutions “If France was hesitant towards visa liberalization before the results of the elections, one can only imagine the pressure on Macron now that he has lost the elections at the European level to Marine Le Pen,” Taulant Kryeziu, founder of the Pristina-based European Policy Institute of Kosovo (EPIK), told [Prishtina Insight](#).

Populist parties dominated the race also in Poland and Italy, but contrary to the French landscape, it does not seem that there will be severe consequences on enlargement strategy to Western Balkans. Law and Justice, the Polish party currently in power and the big winner of the European elections, advocates the Europeanization of the Balkans, while the Italian far-right party, Lega, headed by Matteo Salvini, has not shown a clear no-enlargement approach so far. It is only against Turkey's accession, a topic now frozen due to the democratic regression in the country.

In general, there are not high expectations in the region about the capacity of the new EU Parliament to revolutionize the chessboard. The ALDE and Greens remarkable performances are not enough to hope for a surge. A very sceptical view was expressed by Vesko Garčević, a former Montenegrin

ambassador to NATO and OSCE, in an [article](#) published by Balkan Insight. Garčević argues that the composition of the new EU Parliament will not change a stagnating enlargement strategy. The EU leaders, he writes, now focus more on stability than on democratization processes, and this is a contradictory choice, considering that in the region the demand for democracy, transparency and freedom is growing, as protests in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania indicate. “Merkel and Macron have put the stability of the region as a priority in this moment, which can be seen as a supporting gesture to those in power and a cold shower to all who still protest against governments in Belgrade, Podgorica or Tirana”, Garčević thinks. He also notes that the [new French Strategy for the Balkans](#) launched by Emmanuel Macron “does not even mention the future EU membership of the Western Balkan countries”.

More than a new balance in Brussels’ Parliament, if there will even be a new one, and more than the appointment of the new EU Commission, re-energizing the enlargement strategy depends on new ideas for the governments. The scheme followed by the EU in the Balkans – using carrot and stick to push local leadership to make reforms and establishing democracy – cannot work in a scenario marked by the need for stability. A new fresh strategy is needed, but who will forge it?

Meanwhile, the Commission issued her annual reports on the Western Balkan countries. They had to be published in April, but were postponed after European elections. The reports highlight once again that many more efforts must be made to tackle corruption and strengthen the rule of law. However, the Commission recommended the launch of EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania as soon as possible. At least, some encouraging news.

A confrontation in Northern Kosovo

On the 28th of May, Kosovo special operations police units entered the territories in the northern strip of the country, mainly inhabited by Serbs, to arrest several people – both Serbs and Albanians, but also Bosnians – heavily involved in criminal activities.

The operation lasted few hours, but reignited tensions between the two countries. Serbian authorities accused Pristina of harassing the Serbian population living in northern Kosovo, where Belgrade still exercises political influence despite the deal between Serbia and Kosovo, brokered in 2013 by the EU, partly dismantled the Serbian “parallel institutions”. Under the so-called Brussels Agreement, the Serbian police and justice in Northern Kosovo, once depending on Serbian government, have been integrated in Kosovo’s governmental structures. However, the process still has to be properly implemented. Apparently Belgrade could do more to make it work.

Kosovo authorities’ decision to dispatch the special police in the North to tackle organized crime – very powerful also in that part of the country – might appear as a move to show that Kosovo does have full control on the whole national territory. The Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, put the army on full alert after Kosovo’s police operation. A muscular gesture against a muscular circumscribed action.

The day before the operation, Vučić delivered an important speech in Belgrade’s Parliament. “We need to recognize that we have been defeated. We lost the territory”, he said. “We have two options – to normalize relations by reaching an agreement or to maintain a frozen conflict”, he added. Such words suggest that Vučić is trying to make the Serbs accept the reality that Kosovo will not be part of Serbia anymore, as the Serbian Constitution and the UN 1244 resolution still state. However, Vučić will not recognize Kosovo’s independence without having secured that the Serbs who live there will be granted large administrative autonomy, as agreed in 2013.

The Brussels agreement foresees the establishment of a Community of Serb Municipalities (not very different from the autonomy that South Tyrol/Alto Adige has in Italy), but Pristina has not fulfilled its obligations. The Kosovar President, Hashim Thaçi, recently said that if the Community of Serb Municipalities was created, a second Republika Srpska will emerge. It will be a camouflaged partition, in other words. The declaration seems not to perceive the difference in institutional and political robustness between the two situations: largely in favour of Kosovo.

Both Serbia and Kosovo block the implementation of the 2013 agreement and keep the tension high. Such behaviour does not imply the intention of starting a new conflict that would be detrimental and unsustainable. Instead, the two leaders want to assure their public opinions that they will do whatever they can to protect national interests, while behind the scenes they look for the right time to make a

historic deal to definitely settle the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. Serbia will establish full diplomatic relations with Kosovo; Kosovo will give Kosovo-Serbs rights and implement administrative autonomy.

The recent police operation carried out while Vučić was briefing the Serbian Parliament, and Vučić's consequent decision to put the army on full alert, are chapters of this screenplay, as well as the recent plan – now a bit eclipsed – for a land swap or Thaçi's idea to call a referendum on the union between Kosovo and Albania.

Serbia and Kosovo's specular tactics are also oriented to involve the US in the game. Vučić and Thaçi think that the EU alone cannot be an effective mediator, since the current Commission will not embark in any risky move before the expiration of its mandate (in autumn) and the Franco-German axis is extremely weak, due to Macron's internal problems and Merkel's declining star. Hence, they want to involve the US as a second patron for their historic deal.

In the last months, the American President, Donald Trump, expressed the will of facilitating the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. However, the US mood is still a bit unclear. On the one hand, it makes sense that the world biggest superpower goes back to the Balkan arena to end a story – the Serbia-Kosovo dispute – in which it had been deeply involved in the Nineties. On the other hand, Trump's approach, in theory open to the land swap, could create a contrast between the US and the EU (both Macron and Merkel reject a land swap). In that case, it will be difficult to unlock the “Balkan cold war”.

Matteo Tacconi

With the support of the Balkan Trust for Democracy.



**STRATEGIC
BALKANS**