

# STRATEGIC BALKANS

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## **A new party wants to break Bosnia's political deadlock using computer science**

*By Alicia Prager / Quartz, June 28*

Platforma za progres, a political movement recently founded, is trying to fix Bosnia and Herzegovina's political deadlock using computer modelling and data analytics to predict social processes and move policy forward, in a country where ethnic parties paralyse key reforms. Local elections in 2020 will be the first political test for Platforma za progress, mainly made of citizens born after 1985 and led by Mirsad Hadzikadic, the director of the Institute of Complex Systems at the University of North Carolina and a candidate in Bosnian presidential elections in 2018 (he took 60.000 votes).

## **Hungary's Growing Role in the Balkans**

*By Dénes Sáhyi / Hungary Today, July 1*

Hungary Today published an article about Budapest's growing role in the Western Balkans. Several factors drive it, among them the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, expanding trade, big infrastructural projects like the Belgrade-Budapest speed train, financed by China, and good personal relations between the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić, the President of Serbia, the most influential country of the Western Balkans.

## **Cheaper Roaming From Today Among the Western Balkan Countries**

*Novinite, July 1*

Prices for roaming services between North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina went down by 27% on July 1. By 2021, they will be completely eliminated. A research made by the Regional Cooperation Centre, a Sarajevo based body charged with enhancing regional cooperation in Southeast European, shows that many Balkan economists believe that abolishing roaming prices will help boost trade. In any case it will facilitate communications between and across different groups, allowing especially youth to be more interconnected.

## **Montenegro: The Leader Without Progress**

*By Nikola Cuckic / European Western Balkans, July 1*

Montenegro is the frontrunner of European integration in the Western Balkans. Accession talks are moving forward. 32 chapters out of 33 have been opened, and three are already closed. Yet, the last country report issued by the EU Commission is not so optimistic. In basic rights, public administration reform, media landscape and fight against corruption there is still a lot to do. Opposition parties accuse the government for not making enough reforms, while the government blames the opposition for refusing to cooperate in speeding them up.

## **North Macedonia's name deal was a historic success. But any Serbia-Kosovo land swap would be a repetition of historical mistakes**

*By Kristijan Fidanovski / New Eastern Europe, July 3*

Kristijan Fidanovski, a researcher at Georgetown University, explores the Western and Russian perceptions of the land swap between Serbia and Kosovo, an option proposed months ago by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and agreed in principle by the Kosovan Head of State, Hashim Thaci. In accordance to the plan, Serbia will include a strip of land in Northern Kosovo mainly inhabited by Serbs, while Kosovo will obtain Serbian municipalities south of the Ibar where the Albanians represent the ethnic majority. The author notes that the territorial exchange has no chances to succeed. France, Germany and Moscow oppose it, but the real factor against the plan is Russia, that persistently questions the legitimacy of the land swap and “can bury the land swap speculation once and for all” due to the influence it has on Serbia, the author writes.

### **Basta ricatti sui Balcani occidentali, l'Europa si pensi a 33**

*By Luisa Chiodi / Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso, July 4*

Luisa Chiodi, the director of Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso, a website covering in depth the Balkans and Caucasus, criticizes the EU approach to the Western Balkans. She writes that the EU thinks that once in, the Western Balkans could emerge as problematic partners as the Visegrad countries that now experiences some weaknesses linked to the rule of law and separation of powers. Actually, the opposite is true: whenever the enlargement process has slowed down, authoritarian trends have arisen in the region, Chiodi argues.

### **Mein Europa: Der Balkan - ungewollt oder unwillig?**

*By Ivaylo Ditchev / Deutsche Welle, July 5*

The violent dissolution of Yugoslavia brought to the creation of ethnic States in the Balkans. Ethnicity, as a principle orienting State policies, can jeopardize the future of the region. To avoid such scenario, the Western Balkans should go back to the Yugoslav spirit of openness and plurality, or even to the idea of a Balkan Federation, risen after the end of the Second World War but strongly boycotted by Stalin, Ivaylo Ditchev, a professor at Sofia University, writes in a long analyses about the Europeanization process in the Balkans.

### **Les Balkans sont victimes de la fuite des cerveaux**

*By Marion Dautry / La Croix, July 8*

Low salaries, lack of perspectives, political frustration are the factors that are causing a brain drain in the Balkans. Young talented people are leaving their countries. In Bosnia Herzegovina, 80.000 people moved abroad between 2016 and 2018, and 1.2 million of Serbs – out of a population of 7 million – think of leaving the country, in accordance to a recent study.

## REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

### **Albania: the long-term political mess**

Municipal elections were held in Albania on June 30. The Socialist Party (PSSH), that rules the country since 2013, scored a very large victory. Actually, a very easy victory, due to the boycott of the vote by the Democratic Party (PD) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), the two main opposition forces. Since mid-February, they are organizing protests – sometimes turned violent – against the Prime Minister and socialist leader Edi Rama. They accuse him of corruption, tell he rules the country through the support of the organized crime and call for snap elections. The PD and LSI boycott is a chapter of this plot.

So far, Edi Rama has staunchly refused to leave, saying the opposition only wants to overturn Albania's legitimate government. He chose to hold elections anyway, despite opposition stance and a decree to cancel elections signed on the 8th of June by the President of the Republic, Ilir Meta, the LSI founder. Meta motivated the move saying that conditions to hold democratic and inclusive elections lacked and citing the need to reduce political tensions in the country. He proposed Edi Rama to postpone elections in October. The Prime Minister ruled this option out. Furthermore, the Socialist Party triggered the process to impeach Meta. The President, appointed in 2017 through the votes of Socialist deputies, is now saying that the government has created a “deep state” that is damaging democracy.

Turnout was very low, under 20%. Even in socialist stronghold, like the capital, Tirana, or the southern city of Vlōre, people preferred to stay at home. The Prime Minister is losing the grip on power. The OSCE/ODIHR electoral mission issued a very critical report. It stated that elections “were held with little regard for the interests of the electorate”.

Meanwhile, on the 18th of June the European Council rejected the EU Commission recommendation to start accession talks with Albania, likely due to the current political chaos in Tirana. It was a severe blow to Rama's ambitions to move the country closer to the EU. Under his government, the country has embarked on crucial reforms – the most challenging one was in the justice sphere – to absorb European criteria. The ongoing institutional crisis could vanish all of these efforts.

The standoff is rooted in the imperfect democracy emerged in Albania in 1991, after the collapse of the communist dictatorship, the toughest and most paranoid one beyond the Iron Curtain. Gazmend Kapllani, an Albanian journalist and writer living in Chicago, recently wrote a clever comment on this aspect, published by **Balkan Insight**. In his view, the failure of the Albanian post-communist leadership to address the violent past of the country has spread the idea that under communism everybody was victim and perpetrator at the same time. Such approach has paved the way for moral nihilism,

somehow preserving the communist way of doing politics (destroy your enemy). “30 years after the fall of the Stalinist regime, political rivals in Albania still see each other not as political adversaries with whom they should fiercely compete, following some democratic norms, but as enemies who have to be annihilated by all means”, Kapllani wrote.

Nicola Pedrazzi, an Italian journalist who has lived for some years in Tirana, shares the same view. In a reportage from Tirana published by *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso* in May, he observed that the Albanian transition has not been shaped by a serious attempt to get rid of the past and create since the beginning a functioning liberal democracy. As consequence, political parties mainly represent groups of interests whose main purpose is occupying the power at central or local level to distribute power and benefits. The Socialist Party won election in 2013 and 2017 because it promised to break this insane habit, but Edi Rama has lacked ambition to fulfil the goal, Pedrazzi wrote.

Albania can't rely only on the EU to adjust and improve his democracy. The main solution of the Albanian issue must primarily come from Albania itself. A wind of change must blow.

## **Macron: another lost occasion for the Balkans**

At the recent EU-Balkans summit, hosted by Poland, the Franco-German divergence about enlargement emerged again. In Poznan, the dynamic town in Central Poland where European leaders met Balkan heads of state and government on the 3-5th of July, the French President Emmanuel Macron told once more that any further enlargement should be pursued only after a comprehensive reform of the European governance. He thinks that EU territorial expansion would leave decision-making even more unwieldy. For him, a larger Europe means more vetoes and much slower changes. Likely, this is the reason why he forced the EU Council to postpone the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, already recommended by the Commission. Holland backed France.

The German chancellor Angela Merkel agrees with Macron about the need to give the EU better and faster decisional mechanisms, but has another view on Western Balkans. “As we know, the accession process lasts very long, and we have enough time to re-evaluate our own cooperation”, she emphasized. The Polish President Andrzej Duda, the host of the summit, echoed Merkel. The Balkan countries should not be asked to participate in a race «where they cannot see the finish line», he said.

Poland and other members of the so-called Visegrad Group (Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia) support the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, but they also are the main problem in the EU, at least for Macron, because they oppose any federative development in the EU, advocate non-liberal values and block the decision-making process, if not aligned with their interests. V4 countries are an obstacle for strengthening Europe’s role in immigration sphere, but also for curbing emissions, for example. Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary recently vetoed an ambitious package that if approved would have cut CO2 emission to zero by 2050 in Europe. Poland and Czech Republic, still very dependent on coal, told that for them respecting the EU roadmap is impossible, unless being hugely funded to convert their economies. Hungary is not coal-hungry anymore, but supports the neighbours claim.

Negotiations to appoint the new President of the European Commission strengthened Macron’s view about the V4, which took the most hawkish posture among countries that shelved the candidature of Frans Timmermans, a progressive Dutch politician who has served as vicepresident of the Commission in the last five years. For Paris and Berlin, he, and not Ursula von der Leyen, was the best choice for the EU top job. However, the V4 opposed Timmermans, arguing that he has used his rule of law portfolio in the Commission as a stick to hit Central Europe. Any recommendations he has made to avoid reforms not in line with the EU principles – for example, justice reforms in Poland and Hungary – have been perceived by the V4 as an attempt to interfere in domestic affairs.

As The Economist remarked in one of its latest editions, “as the leaders of Hungary and Poland attack the independence of their judiciaries it seems quaint to argue that negotiating membership would instil democratic habits in countries with long memories of dictatorship”. Macron shares this concern. He thinks that the Balkan Six are still very vulnerable democracies, very exposed to authoritarian trends. Hence, enlargement can wait.

Macron eyes also the French public opinion, and this should not be underestimated. Enlargement is not very popular in France. “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”, the French political analyst Loic Tregoures recalled in an op-ed he wrote for Balkan Insight, explaining Macron’s “bad cop” role.

Such attitude is unjust, wrote Wolfgang Ischinger, a German diplomat, in a comment posted by The Politico: “If the EU can’t offer a credible path to accession, it will lose any leverage it has in the region. Conditions, to be sure, have to be strict. But they also have to be fair: when countries fulfil the criteria set by the EU, they should not be held back by domestic considerations in national capitals», thinks Ischinger, who served as the European negotiator in Bosnia and Kosovo crisis. This is also Merkel’s view. Anyway, considering that Angela Merkel’s star is fading, it is difficult for her to convince Macron that reforming Europe and enlarging Europe are compatible challenges.

Meanwhile, the French President is due to visit Serbia in mid-July. In the last 18 years, no French head of State has made a trip to Belgrade. At least, it means that Paris does understand that it has to commit in the Western Balkans, to play a role on the ground. Over the last years, it has not been so active in the region, as confirmed by its glaring absence in NATO’s KFOR (Kosovo Force) since 2014.

**Matteo Tacconi**

*With the support of the Balkan Trust for Democracy.*



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