

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Emmanuel Macron est-il pro-serbe?

By Jean-Dominique Merchet / L'Opinion, July 15

The French President Emmanuel Macron visited Belgrade the 15th of July. It was the first official trip by a French head of state to Serbia in 18 years. It was an important step, but Macron – the author of the comment states – could have stayed in the Balkans longer than one day, in order to visit Serbia's neighbours too and mainly Kosovo. By going just to Belgrade, while Serbia-Kosovo dispute is far from being settled, he probably gave Kosovo's leadership the impression that he will take a more pro-Serbian approach in Belgrade-Pristina talks, as different quotes in his Belgrade speech at Kalemegdan might suggest.

Paukenschlag im Kosovo

By Vilma Filaj-Ballvora / Deutsche Welle, July 20

The resignation of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj, who will face questioning as a suspect of war crimes in The Hague, will give the President Hashim Thaci the chance to play once again the land swap card in talks with Serbia, Vilma Filaj-Ballvora, a journalist at Deutsche Welle, thinks. In accordance to the plan, Serbia will recognize Kosovo and annex its northern strip of land, mainly populated by Serbs, while Kosovo will get some municipalities in southern Serbia where Albanians represent the ethnic majority. Thaci and the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic support such deal. Ramush Haradinaj and the Franco-German axis fiercely oppose it.

Gov't of North Macedonia introduces action plan against disinformation

Xinhua, July 24

The North Macedonia government recently issued an Action Plan against disinformation. The aim is combating disinformation in order to enhance national security and the citizens' safety while defending democracy, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev told as reported by Xinhua. The Action Plan will be discussed by North Macedonia's institutions in the coming months. Fake news spread through social media and alternative news sources partly influenced the failed outcome of the referendum on naming dispute with Greece held in 2018.

After ISIS: how Kosovo is rehabilitating women and children repatriated from Syria

By Sara Manisera / The National, July 25

Several foreign fighters from the Balkans joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The highest number came from Kosovo and Bosnia Herzegovina. The presence of radical Islamic cells in the two countries can't be denied, but describing them as a safe haven for terrorists (as many media reports have done in the last years) is unfair. The National, a publication focusing on Middle East, posted an in-depth story contributing to break stereotypes about Kosovo. It reports about a programme developed by state authorities to repatriate and reintegrate families who left the country and went to Middle East battlegrounds. It is "a unique rehabilitation project involving psychiatrists, family psychotherapists, imams and female preachers called Mualime", wrote the author, Sara Manisera.

UK's Shrinking Role in Balkans Will Vanish Under Johnson

By Marcus Tanner / Balkan Insight, July 26

After the Brexit referendum in 2016, the Balkans have begun to be an even lower priority in the UK foreign agenda. With the premiership of Boris Johnson, they will be downgraded even more, explains Marcus Tanner, an editor at Balkan Insight.

Im Sog des Westens

By Keno Verseck / Der Spiegel, July 27

A growing number of young Bosnians are studying German because they think to move to Germany to look for jobs. An article published by Der Spiegel about the "German dream" or, in other words, the dramatic lack of opportunities and perspective for young citizens of the most war-torn Balkan country. This is not a local phenomenon, but a regional one where Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania are experiencing the biggest peacetime migrations ever. Each village has families who emigrated to Germany, Austria, Sweden etc.

Vukovar, il cirillico torna a far discutere

By Giovanni Vale / Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, July 27

The Constitutional Court in Croatia ruled that name plates in Vukovar, a town that was brutally sieged by the Serbian forces during the Balkan wars in the Nineties, must be displayed both in Croatian and Cyrillic alphabets. Bilingual plates were introduced in 2013 by the then progressive government, in order to comply with European standards about minority rights (Serbs represent one third of Vukovar population). Local politicians and citizens questioned the measure and held many rallies. For protesters, putting bilingual plates was an offense to Vukovar, widely viewed as the main symbol of Croatia's resistance to Serbia's aggression. The local council, controlled by conservatives, approved a new statute banning the facto the government decision about bilingual plates. The ruling by the Constitutional Court invalidated it.

Numerous Migrants claim Croatian Police is pushing them back to BiH

Sarajevo Times, July 28

Croatia's police used brutal treatment to push back to Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) migrants who tried to cross the border between the two nations to reach the EU territory. NGOs blame Croatian authorities. The border between Croatia and BiH has become the main crossing point between the Western Balkans and the EU after Hungary built a fence along the Hungarian-Serbian border, as well as the Hungarian-Croatian one. There are around 30.000 asylum seekers currently in BiH.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

Haradinaj out: Kosovo reshuffled or unruffled?

The Prime Minister of Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj, stepped down the 19th of July. The decision came after he was summoned by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office (KSC), an EU-funded court established in 2015 to investigate alleged crimes committed by members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA/UCK), the Albanian guerrilla that fought against the Serbian forces during Kosovo war in 1998-1999 and at the same time was involved into a bloody internecine conflict until 2000. Haradinaj, one of the most powerful KLA military commanders, is suspected for war crimes, although the KSC, which functions under Kosovo law but employ international staff, has not indicted him so far.

Years ago, Haradinaj was accused by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for war crimes against Serbs and Albanians regarded as collaborators or rivals. Originally he was convicted, but then judges acquitted him. Trials he faced at the ICTY, whose mandate expired in 2017, were controversial due to reported intimidation or elimination of witnesses.

The Kosovar Prime Minister, who leads the Alliance for the future of Kosovo (AAK), a junior party in the ruling coalition, went to The Hague on July 25. Invoking the right to remain silent, he did not answer any questions made by prosecutors. To explain his resignation, he said that he did want to go in The Hague as a private citizen, to preserve Kosovo's institutions honour.

Haradinaj's resignation paves the way to snap elections. His decision to step down could be a calculated move, some commentators in Pristina argue. Divisions and rivalries have weakened the coalition. Since months, there are rumours about its collapse. It is important to keep into account that the government majority was weak since the beginning of the legislature (September 2017), just one seat. In the meantime Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) the strongest party in the Assembly (Kuvend) lost 12 members to the new Group of the Independent Deputies (GDP), plus one who went back to the AAK, her original party led by Haradinaj; giving the majority another seat in a 120-seat strong parliament.

Nevertheless the results delivered by the government are poor. Talks with Serbia are frozen, the big promise made by Haradinaj when he was appointed in 2017 (free visa for Kosovars to travel to Europe in 90 days) is unfulfilled, corruption is still very high and wages are not going up. Haradinaj chose to act as a responsible patriot to cover up the bad performance made by his government and re-energize himself, some analysts say. He will be once again the AAK candidate for the premiership.

Haradinaj is still praised for what he did as a KLA commander, but it is hard to think that people will take street to support him in case he will face a trial, as it happened in the past. Most of Kosovo's citizens are very young, and many of them have not experienced war times. They appreciate those who fought to give Kosovo independence, but their main concerns are jobs, opportunities and visas. Among the youth, there is a huge disappointment towards political parties, perceived as corporations selling benefits to customers (voters) and getting their own pockets well lined up. More than a national hero, Ramush Haradinaj is viewed by young Kosovars as a member of an élite who seized their homeland.

It is difficult to predict who will win snap elections. It is reasonable to expect a low turnout, as it was in in 2017 (41%). Telling how Haradinaj's resignation will affect talks with Serbia is a unpredictable as well. Haradinaj strongly opposes a land swap proposed by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and supported by Hashim Thaci, Kosovo's president and founder of the Democratic Party (PDK), the strongest force in the coalition. In accordance to Vucic's idea, Serbia will recognize Kosovo and annex its north strip of land, mainly populated by Serbs, compensating Kosovo with some territories in southern Serbia where the Albanians are the ethnic majority.

If the KSC will charge Haradinaj for war crimes, or if snap elections will turn into a disaster for him and his party, Thaci could play this card one again, should PDK will win a large amount of votes. To the contrary, if Haradinaj will be a king maker in the new Parliament, the land swap, rejected by France, Germany and Russia, could definitely fade away.

To add some more uncertainty in this scenario, it should not be forgotten that snap elections are expected also in Serbia (probably by late 2019 or Spring 2020, according to Vucic's statements). Likely, nobody will seat at the negotiating table or do something significant in the coming months.

Balkans: Turkey mon amour

In mid-July, Turkish embassies promoted several events in the Balkans to mark the third anniversary of the coup attempt on the 15th of July 2016. Organized by a fraction of the Turkish army, it failed. Photography and art shows, religious ceremonies, marches and sport competitions took place in Sarajevo, Pristina, Skopje, Belgrade and other cities in the region, [Balkans Insight reported](#).

Support and solidarity shown in the region towards Turkey suggest that influence and popularity it has gained in the last decade in Europe's south-eastern corner resist, despite Erdogan's growing authoritarian trend and the fact that dialogue between Ankara and Brussels has become rather cold.

Ankara has intensively invested in the Balkans over the last ten years, promoting cultural ties, infrastructural projects, flight connections, education, trade and tourism to improve its image and clout in the region. Ahmet Davutoglu, the former foreign minister of Turkey, has been the master of this charm offensive, aimed at reconnecting Turkey to the old Ottoman space, yet without imperial ambitions. Davutoglu's main goal was presenting his country as a modern, dynamic and developing Islamic democracy.

One of the engines of Turkey's strategy in the Balkans was the network of schools, universities and cultural association belonging to Fethullah Gülen, a very influential preacher advocating a balanced combination of Islam and democracy, East and West, heritage and future. His movement, Hizmet, has many structures in the Balkans.

Hizmet was key to support Erdogan's ascent to power in 2001. However, the pact between Erdogan and Gülen slowly collapsed. Gülen started criticizing Erdogan's growing hunger for power, while Erdogan began to accuse Gülen to create a "deep State" to pursue a regime change in Turkey. After the coup attempt in 2016, Erdogan brutally dismantled Gülen's network – labelled as a terrorist organization – in Turkey. He then asked Balkan authorities to deport members of Gülen's network who work in the region.

This stance, coupled with democratic backlash in Ankara and a flourishing entente between Ankara and Moscow, marked by energy joint projects and now also by military deals (Turkey recently bought S-400 missiles from Russia), worry Western officials. Turkey's presence in the region is perceived more and more as a problem. Ankara looks like a competitor than an ally.

However, Turkey's ambitions in the Balkans should not be overestimated. Ankara's investments and trade projects have a limited impact in the Balkans compared to those run by the EU. The financial downturn that hit Turkey last year even slowed them down.

Resistance made by Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania to Erdogan's pressures to hand over Gülenists, seen as an external interference, is another sign telling that Ankara's influence is far from being hegemonic. Gülenists are rather appreciated in the region since their vision of Islam matches with Balkan traditional way to Islam, which is moderate, despite cyclical media reports focusing on some radical cells in the region have spread the idea that the Balkans are a safe haven for jihadists.

For sure, Turkey's authoritarian twist and intense relations with Moscow should be carefully observed by the West. Yet, Turkey still sticks to the Western approach in the Balkans. And, so far, has not sought any coordination with Russia in region. Turkey supports EU integration and NATO-led stability architecture, to which it contributes with soldiers and resources. Commitment to guarantee peace and cooperation in the Balkans was confirmed by Erdogan himself, while visiting Sarajevo on July 8-9 to attend a South East European Countries Cooperation Process (SEECP) meeting.

A research issued in March by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) remarked that a priority for Turkey's diplomacy is stability in the Balkans, a region that *"is part of its geographical and emotional hinterland"*, due to the fact that *"many citizens of Turkey have ancestors that came to Anatolia during the Balkans wars of the early twentieth century"*. The research also pointed out that *"Erdogan finds in the Balkans the prestige that he does not have elsewhere in Europe"* (and maybe the Balkans praise Turkey because they do not feel well-rated in Brussels), suggesting that Europe should stop questioning so intensively the approach of Turkey – a difficult partner, but a partner – in the Balkans. To the contrary, Brussels should work to involve Ankara more in the stabilization process.

Matteo Tacconi

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