

STRATEGIC BALKANS

Strategic Balkans – a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

PRESS REVIEW AUGUST 2019



NATO Foundation
Defense College

Index

European Council on Foreign Relations: Europe's new agenda in the Western Balkans

Frankfurter Rundschau: Erste Regenbogenparade in Sarajevo - Angst vor homophober Gewalt

Deutschlandfunk: Ein Hotel als Ort der Begegnung

Le Parisien: Un char devant le stade de l'Etoile rouge de Belgrade, vives réactions en Croatie

Al Jazeera: China enters the Balkans

Balkan Insight: V4 to Carry Flame for Balkan Hopes of EU Membership

Balkan Insight: 'Day of the Disappeared' Marked Across the Balkans

Europe's new agenda in the Western Balkans

By Vessela Tcherneva / European Council on Foreign Relations, August 7

Over the last years, European officials have shown a certain cautiousness about the enlargement to the Western Balkans. Doubts are related to “Romania’s and Bulgaria’s difficult transformations into member states, with the rule of law deficits in Poland and Hungary, and with the lack of leverage that other member states and EU institutions have over these countries”, Vessela Tcherneva, the deputy director of the ECFR argues.

In an insightful analysis about focussing on the EU approach to the post-Yugoslav region and Albania, Tcherneva argues that Brussels must retune its core message to the region. “The EU should make clear that the onus is on Western Balkans countries to act responsibly. Their political maturity and choices, and not the box-ticking exercises that characterise the accession process, will set the tone of their relationship with the EU more than it has in recent decades”, the author stresses.

Erste Regenbogenparade in Sarajevo - Angst vor homophober Gewalt

By Adelheid Wölf / Frankfurter Rundschau, August 14

On the 8th of September, Sarajevo will host the first gay parade ever in its history. In a country where sexual minorities are discriminated and where religious and conservative values hugely influence people and politicians’ behaviour, the gay parade is a very important test. German politicians will go to Sarajevo to support those who will take part in the march. Luckily the event was without scuffles.

Deutschlandfunk: Ein Hotel als Ort der Begegnung

By Christoph Kersting / Deutschlandfunk, August 18

The German public radio posts a story about Hotel Gracanica, a hotel launched by a former Swiss diplomat, Andreas Wormer. He worked in the Swiss embassy in the postwar period and covered issues related to ethnic minorities, especially Roma people. He fell in love with Kosovo and Roma culture, so he started thinking to do something that could help both the country and Roma, who were caught in the middle in the conflict between Serbs and Albanians in the Nineties.

The idea he implemented is a nice tourist resort in Gracanica, a Serbian enclave not far away from the capital Pristina, where Serbs, Roma and Albanians work together. An example and a very useful meeting spot for Kosovo professionals.

Serbie: Un char devant le stade de l'Etoile rouge de Belgrade, vives réactions en Croatie

Le Parisien / August 27

Football is politics, and politics is football in the Balkans. Several media have reported that a T-55 tank was recently placed in front of the Red Star Belgrade stadium entrance. The tank was used by Serbian forces during the siege of Vukovar, a town in eastern Croatia. Thousands of people fled. Vukovar is considered “the Croatian Hiroshima” for the brutal storm it had to face.

Putting such tank in front of the stadium of the Red Star – whose supporters are considered very nationalistic – prompted angry reactions in neighbouring Croatia and elsewhere in the Balkans. Many perceived the move as a stupid provocation. Even supporters of Red Star are divided about the issue. Many of them criticized the choice of the team on social networks.

Questioned at a press conference, Serbia’s Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic said “there were no elements of a criminal act and therefore no reason for police intervention”, probably overlooking the political opportuneness of allowing the display.

China enters the Balkans

By Dimitar Bechev / Al Jazeera, August 28

Dimitar Bechev, a non-resident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, analyses the Chinese penetration in the Western Balkans. He argues that “China is not likely to stake a claim on regional security” and that “it will remain a geo-economic power”. Nevertheless, the challenge posed to the EU, the leading investor and stabilizer in the region, is serious. China’s investments in Europe’s southeast periphery are growing and are connected to the world most ambitious geopolitical project: the Belt and Road Initiative. “While Russia is good at playing the Slavic brotherhood card and loves to talk tough against the West, it lacks the economic heft to present a credible challenge. China, with a GDP of more than \$12 trillion, is in a different league”, Bechev writes.

V4 to Carry Flame for Balkan Hopes of EU Membership

By Srečko Latal, Edit Inotai, Miroslava Germanova, Rob Anderson and Claudia Ciobanu / Balkan Insight, August 29

Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia, the V4 Countries, plan to champion the cause of EU enlargement within the new Commission to overcome “enlargement fatigue” that has emerged in Brussels – and in Paris – in the last years.

While it is admirable that countries who benefited from the enlargement in 2004 are now trying to stress that the Balkans Six deserve the same path, doubts are cast on how V4 stance can work. “The V4 do not have enough lobbying power to push it through,” said Istvan Szent-Ivanyi, former Secretary of State at the Hungarian foreign ministry and ex-Hungarian ambassador to Slovenia, quoted by Balkan Insight.

Democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary are another open question. Both countries promoted reforms, especially in the justice field, that are at odds with the liberal values promoted by the UE treaties. Authors of the article signal that advocating enlargement with such a pedigree will be very hard.

Another point concerns Poland influence in the Balkans. “Despite a general consensus among both the Polish political class and the general public that the Western Balkans belongs in the EU, Polish interests in the region are mainly limited to tourism. The country’s investment in the Balkans is tiny”, authors note. Since Poland is the V4 heavyweight, its limited action in the region downplays V4 expectations to raise the issue of the Balkans in Brussels.

‘Day of the Disappeared’ Marked Across the Balkans

By Anja Vladisavljevic and Perparim Isufi / Balkan Insight, August 30

A total of 1.638 people are still listed as missing from the war in Kosovo, 1.892 in Croatia and 7.206 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the three countries, events and ceremonies were held to highlight this tragic issue, Balkan Insight reports (text plus pictures).

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

US re-engaging with a special envoy to the Balkans

After several years, the US state department restored the position of special envoy to the Balkans. Matthew Palmer, deputy assistant secretary of State overseeing the Balkans and Aegean region, was appointed as the US envoy late in August.

The move signals a new commitment for the stability of the region. The stalemate in the Serbia-Kosovo talks, as well as Russia and China's efforts to increase influence in the region, worries the State department, oriented to take the initiative in the Balkans and to press the White House to feel more engaged. To many observers, Donald Trump's interest in solving the Serbia-Kosovo dispute seems connected only to the US presidential elections in 2020.

Many US diplomats, already serving during the war between Belgrade and Pristina in 1998-1999, perceive Kosovo as an unaccomplished mission, and think that time has come to act. Matthew Palmer, who served twice in the US embassy in Belgrade and is married with a Serbian wife, is one of these diplomats advocating a full re-engagement. His appointment does not come all of a sudden. In the last months, the US has been intensively involved in solving the naming dispute between Greece and FYROM, now North Macedonia. Furthermore, the US President Donald Trump wrote a letter to the Serbian and Kosovar Presidents, Aleksandar Vučić and Hashim Thaçi, urging them to normalise bilateral ties.

Serbia-Kosovo talks will be Palmer's priority, as he stressed in a recent interview with Tanjug, a Serbian press agency. He said that he hopes that Kosovo will revoke the 100% custom tariffs on Serbian imported goods and that Belgrade will stop as well delegitimizing Kosovo by blocking its access to international organizations, as it happened for example with Pristina's attempt to join Interpol in autumn 2018. For Palmer, these are the conditions to resume talks.

The US action should not be carried out in isolation. In the last years, Brussels has managed the Serbia-Kosovo hot file with mixed results. It facilitated the so-called Normalisation Agreement in 2013, through which Serbia partly dismantled its parallel structures in northern Kosovo, while Kosovo promised to give Serbian minority a large autonomy by establishing the Association of Serb Municipalities. Another relevant achievement for the EU is the creation of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office (KSC), based in The Hague, charged with screening potential war crimes committed by former members of Kosovo's guerrillas. However, the final goal – Kosovo recognition by Serbia and the creation of the Association of Serb Municipalities – has not been scored, despite a strong personal commitment by Federica Mogherini, the outgoing EU top diplomat.

She has given Serbia-Kosovo talks high priority, engaging in a very intensive shuttle diplomacy. It is a heritage that should not be wasted.

However, some observers think that the State department will pursue its own agenda, side-lining the EU. Most doubts are on the stance about the land swap; an option promoted by Vučić and agreed in principle by Thaçi months ago, but then vanished. Reliable sources on the State department tell that several diplomats involved in the Balkans accept the territorial exchange as a card to play, if it will effectively break the stalemate, prompting recognition of Kosovar sovereignty by Serbia. However, the land swap is strongly rejected by Germany, the only EU nation – partly backed by France – that has tried to re-engage in the Balkans in the last years. Russia too does not look favourably at such scheme.

The next dates that will shape Palmer's agenda will be: the general elections in Kosovo (October 6) and Serbia (March or April 2020) and the confirmation of Josep Borrell (a Spanish politician who served as the Speaker of the EU Parliament years ago) by the European Parliament as EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs.

Elections in Kosovo: Haradinaj-Thaçi duel

The Kosovar President, Hashim Thaçi, set the 6th of October as the date for snap elections, after the government collapsed in July due to the resignation of the Prime Minister, Ramush Haradinaj. He left after he was summoned as war crime suspect by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office (KSC) – the EU-funded court investigating alleged crimes committed by members of the Albanian guerrilla during the war and post-war period from 1998 to 2000.

Haradinaj, a former UCK commander, said he resigned because he wanted to appear in The Hague, where the KSC is located, as a private citizen in order to preserve Kosovo's institutions honour. He tried to enhance his profile as responsible patriot ahead of elections, where he will run again as a candidate for the premiership. The chances he will keep his post are not necessarily high. According to polls, the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), the party he leads, will get only 12-14%. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), Thaçi's party and the main partner of the outgoing coalition, should win more or less the same amount of votes.

People are frustrated with the government. Failure to tackle corruption, a plague for the tiny and extremely poor Balkan country, impacted directly on the big promise made by the PDK-AAK electoral coalition in 2017 campaign to liberalise visa with the EU. Fighting corruption is the second condition on visa by the EU after the accomplished border demarcation agreement with Montenegro.

Moreover the stalemate in talks with Serbia for normalising diplomatic relations eroded the credibility of the government, which had promised to make it a priority. One more reason that undermined the coalition strength resides in the personal rivalry between Thaçi and Haradinaj, rooted in war time) and brutally re-emerging during talks with Serbia. Thaçi favours the land swap proposed by the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, while Haradinaj rejects it, re-proposing the cleavage between a political leader and a heroic fighter. Diplomatic sources reveal that Thaçi and Vučić had actually produced a draft that was ready to be signed once the exact lines delineating precisely the new border near several villages had been defined.

The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and Vetëvendosje! (Self-Determination) are topping the polls. They both are supposed to get 20-22%. Over the last two years, they have intensively cooperated in Parliament against the government. There are rumours about their intention to form a coalition after the vote. However, their ideological platforms are deeply different on several issues, like economy and Serbia. The LDK, that formed a government with PDK in 2014-2017, took part in dialogue with Belgrade. Self-Determination, a nationalist movement, opposes it and still pushes for unification with Albania.

Another aspect that creates tensions between the two parties is the legacy of Ibrahim Rugova, the founder of the LDK and the champion of the nonviolent fight against Serbia in the Nineties. Albin Kurti – the Self-Determination front-runner – strongly criticized Rugova’s passive resistance at that time. As a student leader, he organized violent protests against Serbian authorities in Kosovo. The LDK asks Kurti to pay homage to Rugova’s tomb on the Velanja Hill in Pristina, a thing that Kurti has not yet done.

The glue between LDK and Self-Determination could be a common coordinated effort to dismantle the “state within a state” created by PDK over the years. Thaçi’s party has ruled the country since its independence in 2008, filling institutions and state agencies with its members, who have accumulated power and privileges, say both Albin Kurti and Vjosa Osmani, the LDK candidate for the post of prime minister, the first woman who runs for such a position in Kosovo. However, anger against PDK is not enough to form a stable coalition, and for sure PDK and AAK do not want to be losing power. They have resources to mobilize voters and influence talks to form the government. One thing is certain: whoever will rule the country will face the burden of talks with Serbia. Fixing Kosovo depends on it.

Matteo Tacconi

With the support of the Balkan Trust for Democracy.



**STRATEGIC
BALKANS**