

# STRATEGIC BALKANS

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### [Montenegro to Grill Albania Over River Power Plants](#)

*Samir Kajosevic / Balkan Insight, September 13*

Albania plans to build 14 small hydro-power plants on the river Cijevna, that starts in Albania but mostly goes through Montenegro. Podgorica asked for explanations, but in vain. Environmentalists in Montenegro are protesting, reports Balkan Insight, recalling a 1997 protocol prohibiting to develop projects in cross-bordering natural areas without informing neighbouring countries potentially affected by these projects.

### [EU Envoy for Belgrade-Pristina dialogue to be appointed after Borrell's hearing?](#)

*European Western Balkans, September 27*

Josep Borrell, the Spanish politician picked to lead the EU diplomacy, is supposed to appoint a European special envoy for Serbia-Kosovo talks. “*He or she should at minimum be (either current or former) minister of foreign affairs with relevant knowledge of the region and credibility both in Belgrade and Pristina, as well as Brussels and Washington*”, the website European Western Balkans writes. The move seems to be the European answer to the recent appointment of a US Special Representative for the Western Balkans, Matthew Palmer, whose priority will be Serbia-Kosovo talks. Washington’s diplomacy is keen to take the initiative, the question is for how long.

### [Dans le camp de migrants de Vucjak, une crise humanitaire aux portes de l'Europe](#)

*By Julia Dumont / Info Migrants, October 3*

The French website Info Migrants reports about the situation around Bihac, the town in Bosnia and Hercegovina affected by a new chapter of the refugee crisis along the Balkan routes. Despite Hungary closing its borders to Serbia and Croatia in 2016, migrants still cross the Balkans to find their way to Western Europe. Around Bihac there are hundreds of them. Their conditions are bad and the Croatian police pushes them back brutally when they try to cross the border.

### [Pompeo warns about Chinese influence in Balkans](#)

*By David Brunnstrom / Reuters, October 4*

Reuters published a detailed wrap up about the visit to Montenegro and North Macedonia made by the US state secretary Mike Pompeo early in October. He discussed the role of the two countries in NATO. In Montenegro, he announced that the US are due to finalise a deal for \$36 million worth of light tactical vehicles. In North Macedonia, he expressed doubts about China's penetration strategy in the region. "*I warned of the risks of Chinese investments in sensitive technologies and China's bribe-heavy strategy to secure infrastructure deals*", he said.

### [Alliance for Serbia refuses dialogue with government, wants direct talks with EP](#)

*European Western Balkans, October 8*

The EU is trying to facilitate a dialogue between the government and opposition in Serbia. Since several months, weekly protests are organized in Belgrade and elsewhere in Serbia against the President Aleksandar Vucic and his Progressive Party (SNS), ruling the country since 2010. The Alliance for Serbia, an umbrella organisation gathering several opposition parties, accuses Vucic and the SNS to have established an autocratic regime. It also told it will boycott parliamentary elections due to be held in March 2020. The EU tasked Eduard Kukan and Knut Fleckenstein, two former MEPs, with starting talks between the ruling coalition and the Alliance for Serbia in order to defuse tension. However, despite appreciating the EU effort, Alliance for Serbia said it does not want to discuss with the government.

### [Orbán's Griff nach dem Balkan](#)

*By Alexander Dworzak / Wiener Zeitung, October 8*

A long article by the Wiener Zeitung focuses on Hungary's growing influence in the Balkan region. The Orbán government is making investments in Slovenia and North Macedonia, mainly in the media sector. The author argues that these investments are not based on a market strategy but are aimed at supporting politicians like the former prime ministers of Slovenia and North Macedonia, Janusz Jansa and Nikola Gruevski, who shares Orbán's views about "illiberal democracies". Gruevski fled North Macedonia to avoid a prison sentence for corruption and was accorded asylum in Hungary.

### [Sarajevo-Belgrade Highway to facilitate crucial developments](#)

*Daily Sabah, October 9*

Works to build a crucial stretch connecting Serbian and Bosnian highways on the Belgrade-Sarajevo line began on Tuesday, October 8. Turkish companies will build the segment. Controversies rose between Belgrade and Sarajevo about the route, but Turkey mediated to find a final agreement exercising its dialogue-provider role in the Balkan region. The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attended the ceremony marking the start of the works.



## REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

### **Kosovo: a change with a view**

Snap parliamentary elections were held in Kosovo on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October. Results could mark a historic change, since parties born from the ashes of the KLA, the guerrilla who rose up against the Serbian rule in 1998-1999 war, seem to be ousted from power after a long time. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), the most influential among “war parties”, has ruled the country in the last 12 years. Its leader Hashim Thaci, the guerrilla political leader, is now the President.

The great winner of the vote, Self-Determination (Vetevendosje, VV), a faction that supports unification with Albania and promotes Social-Democratic recipes in economy, wishes to form a coalition with the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), that has its roots in the non-violent resistance against Serbia in the Nineties.

VV got 25,5% of the votes, obtaining 31 seats. LDK took 24,82%, securing 30 seats in the new Parliament. Together, they can have a slight majority in the 120-seat assembly. In order to make it more stable, they will try to include in the coalition the parties representing Bosnian, Egyptian and Roma minorities. They have 10 reserved seats in the Parliament, as many as those awarded to Serbian parties. The Srprka List, a Belgrade-controlled faction, won all of them.

After parliamentary elections in June 2017, the PDK, the real loser of last week’s elections, agreed a coalition deal with the Alliance for the future of Kosovo (AAK), headed by Ramush Haradinaj, a prominent KLA commander, who was then picked as prime minister.

A parliamentary majority was secured only through the support of the New Kosovo Alliance (AKR), led by Behjjet Pacolli, a controversial tycoon who then became the minister of foreign affairs, and by some independents. In last week’s elections, it engineered an electoral list with the Social Democratic Initiative, whose leader Fatmir Limaj was another well-known commander of the KLA. However, the Pacolli-Limaj faction failed to reach the 5% threshold.

The Haradinaj government collapsed in July, when the prime minister resigned after he was summoned by international justice as a suspected of war crimes. In snap elections, the AAK got 11,5% and 4 seats, while the PDK took 21,2% and 25 seats. Both Haradinaj and Kadri Veseli, the PDK front-runner, he himself a top KLA commander, admitted defeat.

The Haradinaj government has not delivered any of the great promises made when it took office, among them free-visa regime for Schengen area. Little has been done also to tackle corruption, a plague for this country, the poorest and the youngest in the Balkans. Half of the population is under the age of 25. Most of the young people voted VV or LDK, that campaigned to push war parties out of power.

Both Albin Kurti and Vjosa Osmani, the VV and the LDK front-runners respectively, accused the former KLA commanders for having failed Kosovo, spreading corruption at any level of the administration.

Albin Kurti, whose political journey began in the Nineties when he headed Kosovar students' protests against the discriminations imposed by the Serbian rule, is seeking to make a coalition deal with Vjosa Osmani, the first woman to run for the top government post.

It will not be an easy task. VV and the LDK diverge on many issues, especially in the economic field. VV has a leftist approach, while the LDK has a pro-market approach. Another potential rift concerns policy towards Serbia. VV is rather ideological and opposes the creation of an autonomous association of Serb-majority municipalities, a provision included in the Brussels Agreement, signed by Pristina and Belgrade in 2013 under the aegis of the EU. The LDK backs the package, aimed at normalising relations, and as junior partner in the PDK-led government (2014-2017), worked to implement it.

Dialogue with Serbia collapsed last year due to several reasons, among them the 100% tariffs imposed by the Haradinaj government on Serbian exports to Kosovo. The US and the EU are pushing Belgrade and Pristina to restart negotiations. This topic will give to the new Kosovar government a headache, whatever it may be, and some problems to the international community, if the government formation is not quick enough.

## **Bosnia and Herzegovina: a government is still missing**

A year has passed since October 2018 parliamentary elections, but Bosnia and Herzegovina still does not have a coalition. Any attempts to form a new government made by Muslim, Serbian and Croatian parties, representing the three “constituent peoples” of the country, have failed so far.

One of the many disagreements concerns future NATO membership. Muslims and Croats support it, while Serbs oppose it. Bitter memories related to NATO strikes on Bosnian Serb positions during the Bosnian war and to air campaign against Milosevic’s Yugoslavia in 1999 are still a psychological burden.

Conflicts to form a coalition are a routine in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While succeeding to end the bloody 1992-1995 war, Dayton agreements gave the country a dysfunctional political system. It forces political leaders to look for compromises for any issue, at any level, both local and national. Sometimes such deals are deeply unwanted. Political-administrative paralysis follow.

The current stalemate seems more worrying than any other crisis in the past. Topics inflaming relations between parties are the same ever, but now are narrated with a much more catastrophic tone. A clear example is a recent declaration by the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), the largest Muslim party, about the need to build a more centralized state through transferring to the government some of the large powers of the two Bosnian ethnic entities, the Bosnian-Croat Federation (FBiH) and the Republika Srpska (RS). A new balance between the central state and the entities could give Muslims – the largest ethnic group – more political power.

The SDA stance is not brand new, and has never been turned into real political action. In the past, it did not prompt furious reactions from the Bosnian Serb side. This time it did. The Bosnian Serb member of BiH tripartite presidency, Milorad Dodik, stated that SDA plan will lead towards the independence of Republika Srpska and its unification with Serbia. Actually, Dodik’s words are not surprising as well. He has often advocated a referendum on independence for RS, yet without going beyond these rhetorical threats. Despite this, Bakir Izetbegovic, the SDA leader and Muslim member of the presidency accused Dodik of plotting against BiH stability through the support of Serbia and Russia. It seems a disproportional reaction, as it was Dodik’s one to the SDA declaration. It was criticized also by Croat parties. They fear that the Croats, the smallest ethnic group in BiH, could become even less influent in national politics. But this is also nothing new.

The current harsh but empty war of words tells the spirit of compromise, already weak, is completely vanishing. Ethnic parties do not want to make any further reforms aimed at making the country moving forward. They just provoke each other, almost on daily bases, to preserve strength in their own electoral perimeter and sank any attempts to win interethnic consensus.

War legacy is key to this strategy. The SDA claims that Bosnian Serbs – labelled as the heirs of Mladic and Karadzic – want secession, while Dodik says that Muslims’ goal is to seize the whole country and turn it into an Islamic state, as Bosnian Serb leaders used to say during the war. As for the Croats, they try to defend their electoral basin in Herzegovina, where a Croat para-state was created during the war, blaming Muslims and Serbs’ hunger for power. Meanwhile, nothing changes.

Reshaping this complex landscape is a hard mission. The more viable option is a huge mobilization of the international community. The United States, the European Union, Russia and Turkey, the countries that have influence in BiH and in the whole Balkan region, should work to overcome the Dayton balance of power, yet without prompting too radical rearrangements. A stronger central government is strongly needed, but it can’t dramatically jeopardize rights and powers of the ethnic entities, notably the Serbian one. Drafting a compromise acceptable for all parties requires a high degree of sensibility. Yet, this is not enough. A top-down approach must be followed by a bottom-up trend in order to involve civil society in the process and make parties feel responsible for the whole country, not only for their electoral strongholds. One thing is certain: fixing BiH is not a walk in the park.

**Matteo Tacconi**

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



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