

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Index

ECFR: Borrell will face centrifugal forces in the Balkans

Deutsche Welle: Handke und der Balkan - Nobelpreis in den falschen Händen

Euractiv: Three countries agree mini-Schengen in the Balkans

Social Europe: Can Europe help the Balkans keep its young emigrants?

European Western Balkans: China is deeply in the Balkans and plans to stay there

Balkan Insight: Unsafe Haven: Balkans Sees Rise in Turkish Asylum Requests

Libération: Serbie-Kosovo: le lac de Gazivode, pôle de discorde

Al Jazeera: How the EU balkanised the Balkans

[Borrell will face centrifugal forces in the Balkans](#)

By Vessela Tcherneva / European Council on Foreign Relations, October 10

The European Council on Foreign Relations analyses the challenges that the new EU top diplomat, Josep Borrell, will face in the Western Balkans. His main goal is reviving the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, which is key to enhance stability in the region and push forward EU integration process. Yet, there are several hurdles on this path, among them the US stance, that shows some ambiguity, as well as Turkey's and Russia's assertive postures. But Borrell must find a way to avoid a failure in the Balkans, otherwise the EU "*can be hardly taken seriously in the international arena*", Vessela Tcherneva, the author of the piece, argues.

[Handke und der Balkan - Nobelpreis in den falschen Händen](#)

By Alida Bremer / Deutsche Welle, October 11

In an article published by the website of the German public radio Deutsche Welle, Alida Bremer, a Croat writer living in Germany since 1986, recalls some of the wrong interpretations given to the Balkans wars by the Austrian novelist Peter Handke, who recently won the Nobel prize in literature. Handke denied some ethnic cleansing made by Serbs, she wrote. In the last part of the article, the Croatian writer stressed that there are good Balkan novelists who would deserve the Nobel prize in literature much more than Handke, "*But the Nobel Prize committee takes the people of the Balkans just as seriously as the youngest laureate*".

[Three countries agree mini Schengen in the Balkans](#)

By Jilija Simic / Euractiv, October 11

Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania plan to establish a free movement of people, goods and services common area. Edi Rama, Zoran Zaev and Aleksandar Vucic, the Albanian and North Macedonian prime ministers, and the Serbian President, met in Novi Sad on October 10 to discuss the issue.

The "mini-Schengen" area could become effective in 2021. The initiative is open to other members of the "Western Balkans Six", Kosovo included, the three leaders stressed. Serbia does not recognize Kosovo, but Vucic argued that political contrasts in the region, as well as diverging views about Serbia-Kosovo issue, should not affect the principle of the free circulation of people and goods, that is key to foster development in the region.

[Can Europe help the Balkans keep its young emigrants?](#)

By Alida Vracic / socialeurope.eu, October 16

A demographic earthquake is shaking the Balkans. More and more persons – especially young talented citizens – are leaving the peninsula. The latest Eurostat figures say that around 230.000 people left it in 2018. The largest number emigrated from Albania—62.000. Bosnia and Herzegovina follows (53.500). Kosovo is still constrained by its problems to obtain a visa-free regime, but this will not last for long. People mainly move to the EU, to look for opportunities matching their education and skills. The demographic crisis is already affecting local economies and should be contained. A stronger European policy in the region is the best recipe to do it, but the EU must find back its focus on enlargement.

[China is deeply in the Balkans and plans to stay there](#)

By European Western Balkans / October 19

China should stay or go home? European Western Balkans reports thoughts and views of panellists who took part to a debate about China's role in the region held during the Belgrade Security Forum, in October. Experts share the idea that China has come to Western Balkans to make money, thus there are no reasons to think about a strategic withdrawn soon.

[Unsafe Haven: Balkans Sees Rise in Turkish Asylum Requests](#)

By Dimitar Ganev, Eraldin Fazliu and Sofia-elpida Kartali / Balkan Insight, October 21

After the failed coup in July 2016, hundreds of Turkish citizens, fearing the crackdown of the Turkish government, asked for political asylum in the Balkans. More than 250 applications were submitted in Kosovo, Bosnia, North Macedonia and Bulgaria, according to a Balkan Insight inquiry. Yet, the scenario for the asylum seekers is not so safe. The Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is making pressures on local governments to extradite individuals allegedly connected with the network of Fetullah Gülen, a powerful preacher accused by Erdogan of having masterminded the coup.

Serbie-Kosovo: le lac de Gazivode, pôle de discorde

By Louis Seiller / Libération, October 21

The French left-oriented daily Liberation published a reportage about the Gazivoda Lake (Liqeni i Ujmanit in Albanian language), a shared basin between Serbia and Kosovo. Most of lake waters lie in Kosovo, but the northern part is a region where the Serbs represent the majority of the population and Serbia still exercises a strong power. The lake will be a hot topic in Serbia-Kosovo negotiations, due to resume in spring 2020 after Serbian snap elections.

How the EU balkanised the Balkans

By Katerina Kolozova / Al Jazeera, November 2

In a comment published by Al Jazeera online, the philosopher and political scientist Katerina Kolozova harshly criticized Emmanuel Macron's recent veto to the EU accession talks with Albania and Northern Macedonia. The author remembers that after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, "*After its dissolution, we all naively thought we would enter the EU immediately because, after all, we were European, we were from Europe and we thought we always had belonged to it. This expectation was spontaneous, and it felt, indeed, 'natural'. So it felt like a slap in the face when in the 1990s the EU asked us to undergo 'Europeanisation' before we could become 'European' on paper. We felt humiliated but had to accept this 'slap' from our more 'sophisticated', developed and wealthier European brothers and sisters.*" Kolozova concludes bitterly that "*The measure for being truly European appears to be being from a rich, capitalist neoliberal state, especially a former colonial power which still enjoys some post-colonial perks*".

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

The long-simmering Bihac crisis

The refugee crisis in Bihac, a city in Bosnia Herzegovina bordering Croatia, is deteriorating. The 40.000 people town, located in Una-Sana canton, is now home to 5.000 refugees. Among them, the Afghans and Pakistani represent the largest national groups.

UN agencies and NGOs warn that conditions for refugees in camps are very precarious and that in winter times could worsen. Meanwhile, new alleged cases of brutal pushbacks by Croatia's police are witnessed. Due to the forthcoming accession to Schengen area, Zagreb is enforcing patrols and checks along the border to BiH.

Beside humanitarian issues, the scenario in Bihac is a multifaceted challenging political test for Bosnia Herzegovina. It sours relations between central government and authorities from Bihac and the Una-Sana canton, for example. Local politicians complain that they are left alone coping with the problem, due to the government inaction. State authorities – they stress – do not care of the issue and they do not provide funds. Keeping refugees far from the capital town, Sarajevo, is their basic interest.

The Bihac crisis is straining the already troubled relations between the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and the Serbs. Milorad Dodik, the Serbian member of the Bosnian tripartite presidency, has said several times that the influx of refugees from Muslim countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan is due to change the ethnic balance in the country. Dodik's propaganda is primitive, but it works among the Bosnian Serbs, who feel themselves as a threatened minority, since after the end of the 1992-1995 war their demographic weight has diminished.

Dodik also says that he will try to stop any plan to redistribute refugees from the so-called Bosnian-Croat federation (Bihac is located in its territory) to the Republika Srpska (Dodik's stronghold), the two entities of the country. A lacking sense of national solidarity, Bosniak politicians say, but also a way to keep the Bosnian-Croat federation and authorities in bordering areas under pressure of people's anger. They would want a normalising situation, but they realize that the slow response by authorities and political infights are letting stagnate the issue. This frustration could cost votes to some politicians at the October 2020 municipal elections, if the refugee crisis will not be over.

Macron's tough love for the Balkans

At a recent EU Council, the French President, Emmanuel Macron vetoed the opening of EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, as suggested to the Council by the EU Commission.

Macron's *non*, somehow expected, depends on French internal political situation (immigration and EU enlargement are an issue of concern for citizens), as well as on governance in Europe. He believes that before expanding further its borders, the EU needs a profound rethinking of its decisional mechanisms.

The French veto is clearly connected to Macron's European ambitions, too. He wants to emerge as the leader of the bloc, succeeding the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is serving her fourth and last term. In spring, he launched a manifesto for Europe's future. Yet, it has not sparked big enthusiasm. Observers speculate that sinking Albania and North Macedonia's European hopes, supported by all the EU members, exception made for France, could be interpreted as a tit for tat for the lukewarm reception of the manifesto.

To move closer to the EU, Tirana approved a deep reform of the judiciary. Implementation was slow, but it should not be forgotten that the vetting of judges (the main pillar of the reform) is a very sensitive issue in a country that still faces the burden of the most brutal and paranoid dictatorship among all others in the former Eastern Communist bloc.

North Macedonia's effort to close the gap with Europe was even more forceful. The Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, has survived several challenges, like nationalism and foreign meddling, to solve the naming dispute with Greece, the historic hurdle on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration.

Macron's veto ignites frustration in the two countries and in the rest of the region. Zaev felt the necessity to call early elections the 12th of April 2020 due to the French veto. Disappointed by Europe's enlargement fatigue, stemmed only by Angela Merkel during the last years, the Western Balkans might forge closer ties with Turkey, China and Russia, whose appetites in the region are growing, despite their questionable democratic standards. Since Macron showed that accession talks can be sunk at any moment, even if EU requirements are on the path of fulfillment, increasing cooperation with Beijing, Moscow and Turkey might not seem anymore a big issue for the Balkan Six at least until some concrete opening from the EU is visible.

Matteo Tacconi

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