

# STRATEGIC BALKANS

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### Flüchtlinge in Bosnien: Allein auf sich gestellt

*By Dragan Maksimovic and Rudiger Rossig / Deutsche Welle, November 6*

Deutsche Welle reported from Bihac about the refugee crisis. The 60.000 people town currently hosts around 7.000 people in transit, mainly Afghans, Pakistani and Syrians. They try to reach Italy, and from there Germany or other Western European countries, but the Croatian and Slovenian police push them back. Croatia's police, in particular, is accused of beating migrants and violating human rights. Deutsche Welle wrote that conditions for migrants in Bihac are really hard, not only in the squalid Vucjak camp (due to be closed soon), but also in IOM-run structures. Furthermore, a lack of coordination between local and state authorities is making the delivery of financial and medical assistance very problematic.

### First NATO counter-hybrid warfare team to deploy to Montenegro

*By Slobodan Lekic | Stars and Stripes, November 8*

Montenegro's Defense Ministry issued a statement saying that NATO is deploying a specialised team in the country to try to thwart hybrid attacks by pro-Russian factions. Montenegro was targeted by a hybrid attack during its elections in 2016, when Russian and Serbian agents ran a disinformation campaign to influence the vote and block the accession to NATO, that happened in 2017.

### Vetting process in Albania – the marching failure

*By Filip Lukic / European Western Balkans, November 13*

The Albanian Parliament approved a deep reform of the judicial system in 2016. The EU asked the government to carry it out in order to speed up the integration process. Vetting judges is the main pillar of the reform. All judges and prosecutors have been evaluated on three main aspects: the re-evaluation of assets, a background and integrity check to discover the links to organized crime and a qualification assessment. The EU Commission is quite satisfied of results achieved so far, but France and the Netherlands cast doubts on the effectiveness of the process. That is the reason behind the French veto to the opening of EU accession talks for Albania. European Western Balkans fact-checked the process, highlighting that the pace is still too slow. “There are 185 evaluate judges and prosecutors so far. Out of them 76 have been confirmed in the duty and 80 of them have been dismissed. Furthermore, 29 judges and prosecutors resigned from this process. There are still 615 judges and prosecutors that should pass the evaluation proces”, explains Rovena Sulstarova, Governance Program Manager from the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM), quoted by the news portal.

### **Serbs Protest Pollution from Chinese-Owned Mining Complex**

*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 18*

China is investing massively in the Western Balkans. It supports infrastructures and it takes over factories and coal sites on the brink of collapse. Local authorities welcome the Chinese financial aid, which means fresh money to save economic activities and jobs. However, there are people who question China's moves. In the Serbian city of Bor, for example, the locals are protesting over dangerous levels of pollution linked to a nearby mining and smelting complex. It seems that the problem has worsened dramatically since a Chinese company took over the mining operation last year. A video report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

### **Serbia accuses Russia of spy plot after video leak**

*Al Jazeera, November 22*

A Youtube video showed a meeting between a Russian intelligence official and a retired Serbian military officer, during which money changed hands. The Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic confirmed that the meeting happened, adding that the Serbian authorities found evidence of 10 other contacts between Russian agents and Serbian officers, the BBC reported. Vucic said that the Russian spy plot in Serbia upset him, but it does not affect the special relation between Belgrade and Moscow.

### **La politique du président Macron suscite un «sentiment anti-français»**

*By Jean-Dominique Merchet / L'Opinion, Novembre 27*

The French daily L'Opinion published a comment stressing that after Macron's veto to EU accession talks for Albania and North Macedonia an anti-French sentiment is spreading in the region. The French President is trying to maintain good relations with both Tirana and Skopje. In mid-November he met the North Macedonian President, Stevo Pendarovski, in Paris. Yet, for the two countries forgetting Macron's veto is tantamount to an open wound.

### **Fact-check: Is Montenegro really frontrunner for EU membership?**

*By Samir Kajosevic / Balkan Insight, December 3*

The EU Commission issued a document on Montenegro's progress on accession talks. It focusses on chapters 23 and 24 ("judiciary and fundamental rights" and "justice, freedom and security"). The Montenegrin government welcomed the paper, stressing it suggests that the country has made remarkable achievements. Balkan Insight had a look at the paper, finding a different reality. The progress report underscores "*the lack of progress on a number of key areas, from media freedom to the fight against corruption and human trafficking, casting doubt on the notion of Montenegro as frontrunner for EU accession*", the website noticed.

### **Albania, Kosovo agree to set up common energy market**

*Emerging Europe, December 5*

KOSTT and OST, the Kosovar and Albanian power transmission system operators respectively, signed an agreement to create a common energy market between the two countries, Emerging Europe reported. The agreement is expected to enter into force in April 2020. Albania produces its electricity through hydro-power plants, while Kosovo generates it through coal sites. Both countries often suffer power shortages because their very old energy systems need an upgrade.

## REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

### Protests, elections and Kosovo: a risky scenario for the Serbian leader Aleksandar Vucic

One year ago, the leftist politician Borko Stefanovic, a member of the opposition, was assaulted and punched after a speech he gave in Krusevac, a city in southern Serbia. He blamed the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, accused of creating an autocratic government as well as a hostile atmosphere for opposition politicians.

Vucic, a former hard-line nationalist who now promotes the European path for his country, is the Serbian strongman. His party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), controls the Parliament and all but three Serbian municipalities. It also has a strong grip on the media system.

After Stefanovic was beaten, people took the streets in Belgrade. It was the first of several protests – more than 50 – organised since then on a weekly basis, on Saturday. More media freedom, protection for opposition politicians and transparency are the core demands of the movement, mainly coordinated by the civil society and called “One out of five million” (Jedan od pet miliona), to recall what Vucic said when protests broke out: *“I will not accept demonstrators’ demands, even if they will be five millions”*. After one year, Vucic’s mind predictably has not changed and the requests formulated by the movement have been consistently rejected.

Protestors have achieved some goals anyway. Their perseverance to march every week in central Belgrade (protests have been held also in other Serbian cities) has made people more sensible towards political scandals. Thus, the appetite for a better political system is growing.

Meanwhile, the Alliance for Serbia (SZS), a cartel gathering several opposition parties, is calling for a boycott of the forthcoming general elections, due to be held in March or April 2020. The SZS stresses that the campaign lacks fair conditions, mainly because the public radio-television system does not guarantee equal access for all political parties. The alliance also distrusts the Central Electoral Commission, perceived as a tool of the government.

In order to overcome the impasse, the EU got involved as a broker between the majority and the opposition. The government is trying to make some concessions, like training for members of the election committees and regulating the misuse of public resources in a political campaign. Of course the opposition brands these measures as cosmetic measures.

Opinion polls show that the SNS still has a large rate of approval and it could get an absolute majority in the new Parliament. However, Vucic should not underestimate the people frustration regarding corruption, lack of democratic standards and of economic opportunities. His foreign policy, oriented to

join the EU while preserving a special relationship with Moscow, is another topic criticized by the demonstrators and the opposition.

Meanwhile, the dialogue with Kosovo is frozen. Vucic's intentions are not yet very clear since two years. On the one side, he looks to normalise relations with the unrecognised neighbour, since keeping the diplomatic conflict unsolved is a high political cost. On the other side, he does not want to recognise Pristina, fearing that supporters of the SNS could react angrily to such a move. Yet, the EU and the US are pressuring Belgrade, as well as Pristina, to find a final comprehensive settlement. The evolution of the Serbian political crisis will depend on the Serbian-Kosovo issue, as already happened in the past.

## **A French veto entails dangerous consequences for North Macedonia**

In early 2020, North Macedonia will be formally accepted as a NATO member. The accession should have been happened by the end of the year, but it was delayed due to the postponement of the ratification process in Spain, where the political situation is very uncertain due to the lack of a viable majority.

Despite the fact that it will soon join NATO, the post-Yugoslav country has not yet opened accession talks to join the EU. Emmanuel Macron, the French president, blocked it in October. He argued that before accepting new members, the EU should rethink its governance, adding that stricter rules for enlargement are required. Macron vetoed also the opening of accession talks for Albania, already a NATO member.

Macron's choice was widely criticised by several EU leaders, to no avail. Recently, the French government outlined a proposal aimed at redefining the enlargement rules. Rather than being based on negotiating the chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, Paris suggests that accession talks should follow several stages, which would “*form coherent policy blocks*”, [the website of the Atlantic Council reports](#). Furthermore, if candidate members fail to make reforms, the process can be reversed.

Macron's plan – supported by The Netherlands and Denmark – is inspired by internal political reasons (the French far right opposes any EU enlargement), as well as by the idea that previous enlargements were made too quickly, as Poland and Hungary threats to democratic values apparently show.

To some observers, Macron's vision to rethink the enlargement process makes sense, but the timing is utterly wrong. Albania and North Macedonia had to make big reforms to get closer to the EU. Tirana approved measures that revolutionise the judicial system and foresee the vetting of judges, a very sensitive issue in a country that still faces the burden of Communism. As for North Macedonia, efforts towards NATO-EU integration were even tougher. The country had to solve the long-time naming dispute with Greece, the historic hurdle on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration. The Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, has survived several challenges, like nationalism and foreign meddling, to achieve this goal.

The veto posed by Macron frustrates Zaev, who called for snap elections in April 202. He is aware that Macron will not change the tune and that the EU will take months to discuss his plan to redraw enlargement rules. Should it be approved, the path to the EU will become longer and harder. Thus, Zaev and his Social Democratic Party (SDSM) want at least to play in a timely way the NATO membership card (the first concrete promise to join the West), hoping it will enough to secure a new mandate.



It is a risky move anyway. Many North Macedonians saw the naming change as a humiliation, and the VMRO-DPMNE, the nationalist opposition party, is trying to exploit this feeling. It accuses Zaev of having betrayed the national interest by agreeing with Greece and the West to turn the name of the country from Macedonia to North Macedonia.

Before Zaev was appointed Prime Minister in 2017, the VMRO DPMNE had ruled the country for ten years building an authoritarian and corrupted regime, featuring massive phone eavesdropping against tens of thousands of opponents. His leader and former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, accused for corruption, fled to Hungary to avoid a trial where he has received political asylum. Should the VMRO DPMNE win elections, his member will take the power back. It is rather likely that they will promote a nationalist and anti-globalization agenda inspired by Orbán's Hungary and discreetly supported by the Kremlin. EU integration hopes could fade away and Russian influence would grow again, putting into jeopardy Skopje's NATO membership. A bad message for the entire Balkan region.

**Matteo Tacconi**

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



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