

# STRATEGIC BALKANS

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### **Serbian Activists Deliver Petition for Whistle-blower's Release**

*Maja Zivanovic / Balkan Insight, December 16, 2020*

A political scandal related to alleged abuses in the arm industry is mounting in Serbia. Aleksandar Obradovic, an employee of a state-owned arm factory in Valjevo, a town in western Serbia, is accused of having leaked secreted files proving that a private company owned by Branko Stefanovic, Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic's father, bought cut-price arms from the factory. Opposition parties and NGOs ask for the release of Obradovic, who was put under house arrest. They praise him as a whistle-blower who bravely denounced the big corruption of the Progressive Party, which rules the country since ten years.

### **Lessons from Vučjak migrant camp in Bosnia & Herzegovina**

*By Denis Haveaux / EU Observer, December 18, 2019*

The Vucjak migrant camp in Bihac, a town in Western Bosnia that has become the bottleneck of the so-called Balkan route in the last two years, was dismantled in December. Conditions were too squalid. There were neither electricity or hot water. Migrants were transferred to centres ran by IOM or NGOs. The story of Vucjak camp, writes the director of the Red Cross EU office in Brussels, Denis Haveaux, should tell the EU that more funds are needed to adequately address humanitarian consequences of current EU migration management priorities, which mainly focus on strengthening borders.

### **The Balkans in 2020**

*By Tim Judah / ISPI, December 26, 2020*

The population shrinkage is the most serious challenge that the Balkans are facing. Since the end of communism, countries of the region have lost population due to low birth rates and emigration. This is devastating for their economies, the British journalist Tim Judah writes, suggesting analysts to focus more on this dramatic problem and less on what the Americans, Russians, Chinese, Turks and Arabs might do in Europe's backyard.

### **Depleted uranium debate in Serbia: Public has stronger opinion than the experts**

*By Jovana Georgievski / European Western Balkans, December 26, 2020*

The national commission charged to investigate on consequences of NATO bombing on citizens' health issued the results of a report made by its medical experts. They argue that there is a connection between depleted uranium and the growth of malign cancers rate in the country, but there is no solid scientific evidence about this, European Western Balkans reports. The news website also explains that despite the ongoing work of the commission, established in 2018, the public still trusts media that spread the false news that consequences of NATO bombing in 1999 are more dramatic than anybody can think.

### **Bargain Buy: the Kosovo Traders Defying a Town's Ethnic Divide**

*By Tanja Vujisic / Balkan Insight, January 7, 2020*

In Bosnjacka Mahala, a neighbourhood in Mitrovica, there are no traces of the ethnic division that characterized the city since the 1998-1999 war (Serbs live in northern districts, Albanian in southern ones). Trade brings together Serbs and Albanians, as well as members of Roma and Turkish minorities. The scenario is not always smooth, and there are still some tensions, but when it comes to trade, ethnicity does not represent a barrier. An in-depth report by Balkan Insight.

### **Albanian Air Base Gets NATO Upgrade as Alliance Plays to Its Strengths in Balkan**

*By James Marson / The Wall Street Journal, January 8, 2020*

The Albanian town of Kucova, once known as Stalin Qiteti (Stalin City) and home to the air forces of Communist Albania, will host the first NATO air base in the Western Balkans. The military alliance is modernizing the Kuvoca air base through a €50 million investment in order to cement its foothold "in a part of Europe racked by wars two decades ago".

## Der Balkan am langen Seitenarm

*By Michael Martens / FAZ, January 8, 2020*

Turkstream, the pipeline through which Russia will export its gas to Turkey bypassing Ukraine, and from Turkey to Europe crossing the Western Balkans, will make Moscow and Ankara get access to energy market in the peninsula. This is not a good news for the EU, warns the author of the commentary, Michael Martens, because is another fact showing how Europe, without a re-engagement for the enlargement, is losing influence in the Balkans.

## REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

### Quo vaditis Balkans?

Approximately a decade ago, the narration of the Western Balkans was characterized by shades of optimism, justified by the arrests of war criminals made by Serbia, some progress in the field of regional cooperation and a growing sense of “Yugosphere”, as the British journalist Tim Judah described the daily commercial and cultural relations between peoples in the region.

Sure, the Western Balkans did not shine in terms of democratic standards, but policy makers in Brussels, as well as analysts and researchers, though that the situation would have improved within a relatively short period of time.

Since then, many things have changed. The global financial collapse depressed the Western Balkans' economies and the quality of democracy in the region has slowly worsened. In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vucic and his Progressive Party (SNS) have built an authoritarian democracy, according to several analysts, through an increasingly suffocating control on justice, security agencies and media. In North Macedonia, the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski ruled the country through a combination of nationalism and nepotism for ten years (2006-2016). After he was forced by popular demonstrations and vote to leave the post, he was charged for corruption and fled the country to avoid a trial. He was granted political asylum in Viktor Orban's Hungary. Where more, where less, democratic backsliding, populism comeback, widespread corruption and limitations of media freedom have been noticed also in Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro.

In the past these trends brought effectively the region to a large-scale crisis. Luckily, today such scenario is rather unlikely because the Western Balkans are tied to the Euro-Atlantic area. Albania and Montenegro are NATO members, while North Macedonia should join the club in the coming months. In Kosovo, NATO is still the main security provider. Montenegro and Serbia opened EU accession talks in 2012 and 2013 respectively. Albania and North Macedonia could follow them soon, if Emmanuel Macron will drop its veto. As for Bosnia Herzegovina, the country applied for EU membership in 2016.

However, the Euro-Atlantic “safety net” could be no longer effective to keep the Western Balkans on the right track. The governance crisis in the EU, the enlargement fatigue (fatigue or carelessness?), a slow recovery from the global financial crisis and the emerging confrontation between liberal democracies and non-liberal democracies, weakened it. And the more this safety net is weak, the more the Western Balkans leaderships feel authorized to ignore Euro-Atlantic values.

Today the “big game” between democracy and populism is played in the Western Balkans too. Governments are failing in delivering democratic progress, but civil society is committed to denounce abuses of power, corruption and nationalism. This shows that in the Western Balkans there is still a demand for democracy, transparency and values, issues that both the EU and NATO consider as crucial in their agenda for the region. Yet, to make values a real change driver, as well as the marker between full democracy and limited democracy, the Euro-Atlantic club must find again its unity that can also help it to preserve the status of the main stability provider in the region, challenged by Russia, China and some allied countries.

## Montenegro: playing with religion

A controversial law about religious buildings ownership in Montenegro came into effect on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January. It foresees that a state body, the Property Directorate, will compile a register of all religious sites in the country and that each religious community must prove ownership on its buildings before 1918, the year in which Montenegro joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, then named Yugoslavia. If solid evidences will lack, that building could be listed as state property.

The Serbian Orthodox Church, the main religious community in the country in terms of parishes and believers, fears that the law is a tool to strip it of its holdings, owned by the Montenegrin autocephalous church until 1918. In that same year, it was absorbed by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

In December and January, priests and believers (who are not only Serbs, but also Montenegrins) organized rallies all over the country to demonstrate against the law and ask to withdraw it. The Democratic Front, the main opposition party, mainly pro-Serbia, supported the protests. Many of its members stood against Montenegro's independence from Belgrade, achieved through a referendum in May 2006.

Those who oppose the law think that by declaring some assets as state property, the Montenegrin government plans to limit the church independence in the country. However, Podgorica states that the law does not want to harm any religious group and it is just a measure to align national laws with those of EU members.

The law stirred diplomatic tensions between Montenegro and Serbia. The Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic, planned to visit some churches in Montenegro for the Orthodox Christmas on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January, in a sign of support to the Orthodox community of Montenegro. However, he cancelled the trip saying he did not want to escalate tensions.

The dispute tells how religion manipulation is a sensitive factor in the Western Balkans. During Tito's Yugoslavia era, the "unity and brotherhood" motto and the myth of partisans who freed the country from the Nazi occupation during the Second World War became the main identity factors. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, religion has become central in the process to redefine national identities, especially in Serbia, where the relation between state and church is very strong, somehow like in Russia, and it is much rooted in the pre-Yugoslav history of the country.

For this reason, the Serbian Orthodox Church, which counts thousands of believers outside Serbia proper, notably in Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo, is often viewed as a tool used by Belgrade to keep influence in the region. The controversial law about religious buildings and reactions to it are part of this broad scenario, but also a potential electoral factor. Montenegro will hold parliamentary election in October 2020 and the pro-West majority could use the polarization created by

the religion law to strengthen the idea that Serbia, in one way or another, works to undermine the country's sovereignty. In accordance to the government, Belgrade already meddled in Montenegro's domestic affairs during the referendum on independence in 2006 and before the accession to NATO in 2017.

Protests against the law were held not only in Montenegro, but also in Belgrade and Gracanica, a Serbian enclave in Kosovo home to a very old and famous orthodox monastery. Serbs in Kosovo voice that Pristina could follow Montenegro's move in order to weaken the local branch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which authorities in Pristina see as a Belgrade's shadow. Yet, people's attachment to the Orthodox Church - whether in Montenegro or in Kosovo, or elsewhere - should not be considered only as a political phenomenon. In post-war Balkans, religion is a source to forge personal identity too.

**Matteo Tacconi**

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



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