

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Outlook 2020 Montenegro

Bne IntelliNews, January 8

Compared to Serbia, Kosovo or Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro is poorly covered by international media. The brief 2020 outlook published by Bne IntelliNews helps to get familiar with issues that the country is facing and will face throughout the year. The outlook initially focussed on the dispute with Serbia, ignited by a controversial law about the ownership of religious buildings passed by the Montenegrin Parliament recently. According to the Serbian Orthodox Church, the main religion in the country, the law could strip it of some properties. The Serbian government, that has strong ties with the church, protested. The outlook also focusses on other challenges and trends in 2020, like the general elections (the Democratic Party of Socialists will win again) and growth (it will slow down).

Football unites Albania and Kosovo: the “Mother Teresa” cup is born

Albanianews, January 14

Albania and Kosovo football federations created a new competition, the Mother Teresa cup, to which teams from both countries will participate. Although football unification is not a prelude to political unification, the cup – 100 teams will participate – undoubtedly strengthens ties between the two Albanian-speaking nations. Football federations of the two countries are now waiting for UEFA green light to the Mother Teresa Cup.

Pollution. Les Balkans étouffent dans une purée de pois toxique

Ouest-France, January 17

The Western Balkans are one of the most polluted regions in Europe, and the situation is worsening. Coal and wood used for heating homes are the main causes of this toxic scenario. People ask for cleaner air, but politicians are unable to deliver effective results, lacking the necessary sense of urgency.

Serbia-Kosovo Flights to Resume Under US-Brokered Deal

by Melissa Eddy / New York Times, January 20

Serbia and Kosovo agreed on the 17th of January to resume direct passenger and cargo flights between Belgrade to Pristina, interrupted 21 years ago, during the Kosovo war. Flights will be operated by the German carrier Eurowings. The move follows months of shuttle diplomacy by Richard Grenell, the US ambassador to Germany and Trump's special envoy for Serbia-Kosovo relations. The re-establishment of direct flights between the two capitals is at least a good opportunity for business.

For Serbia's Hungarians, More Forints and a Tamed Media

by Akos Keller-Alant / Balkan Insight, January 30

Over the last years, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, VMSZ, the largest party representing the 150.000 Hungarians living in Serbia's northern province has cemented ties with Fidesz, the party of Viktor Orban. The Hungarian prime minister is pursuing a policy oriented at gaining influence in the Western Balkans through granting citizenship and funds for ethnic Hungarians. In this in-depth article, the author describes how Fidesz has "captured" the VMSZ and how VMSZ has absorbed some of the Fidesz non-liberal values.

Popov: We expect Spain to ratify NATO accession protocol in early March

European Western Balkans, February 3

Zoran Popov, State Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, said that he expects that Spain will ratify the NATO accession treaty early in March. Spain is the only NATO country that still has to ratify it. Once it will do it, North Macedonia will formally join the alliance, becoming its 30th member. The delay in Spain depended on the lack of a fully effective government, due to the fragile political situation in Madrid. Snap elections were called twice in the last months. The new government, led by Pedro Sanchez and installed few weeks ago, asked the parliament for scheduling the vote on North Macedonia's accession treaty.

Is Bosnia-Herzegovina becoming a Country of Retirees?

Sarajevo Times, February 4

Data about pensions show unequivocally how the demographic crisis is affecting the social-economic system, pushing it to the verge of unsustainability. For every 100 people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 25 are retired. Pensions are provided by workers, who are now 30 for every 100 residents. To make the pension system sustainable, the ratio must be two workers to one pensioner, but that number is just 1,2. Demographic crisis affects not only Bosnia-Herzegovina, but the entire Balkan region. Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia and Bulgaria are among the fastest-shrinking countries in the world.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

Brexit on the Balkans: the guessing game

Will the UK leave the Western Balkans, after having left the EU? The answer is no, but London's commitment to the region will change. Likely, not for the better.

Alongside Germany and Italy, the UK has been the major EU supporter of a gradual integration of the region in the Euro-Atlantic sphere in the last twenty years. London had – still has – hard and soft power to be a security provider and to promote the rule of law in the Western Balkans. Both aspects are crucial to keep the region on the right track. While security is a guarantee against new conflicts (a remote but still existing possibility), the rule of law is key to advance democratization in countries where authoritarian trends periodically re-emerge.

After Brexit, the UK impact on the region is due to decline. The Balkan affairs expert Florian Bibier predicted in an analysis he wrote for the Freedom House that the UK *“will be able to encourage reform and EU accession from outside”*, like Washington, but *“the credibility of such policy after Brexit would be undermined as an extreme case of do as I say, not as I do.”*

The battle for defining new bilateral rules between EU and UK – a battle that will be harsh and will last quite a long time – is another factor that can erode the British projection in the Western Balkans. At the same time, the search for a deal with the UK can have a negative consequence also on the EU current attempt to revive the enlargement process. The more the deal with the UK will absorb time and energy, the more the enlargement will be deprioritized: this is the risk.

Meanwhile, some consequences of Brexit are already visible for the Western Balkans. Emmanuel Macron's skeptical position about the enlargement is one of them. With London in the EU, Paris did not have enough strength to question the enlargement policy or to sink key passages like EU accession talks for North Macedonia and Albania. Now France is bolder in assuming such posture, made possible also by the loss of international influence of Italy and the political eclipse of Angela Merkel, in her fourth and final term.

To sum up, Brexit is a bad news for the Western Balkans. However, the British withdrawal from the region will not be neither quick nor absolute. For example, another Balkans expert, Dimitar Bechev, argued in an article published by the website of the German NGO Atlantische Initiative that the UK is worried by growing Russia's geopolitical appetite and since it perceives the Balkans as regions

threatened by Moscow's assertive foreign policy, it will somehow "*continue to pursue a tough line on Russia and therefore focus on Eastern Europe*". Anyhow, on 3.500 soldiers in the KFOR, the UK contribution is since years of 23 soldiers: what one calls a selected and selective commitment.

Kosovo: new start, old hurdles

After four months of hard talks, Self-Determination (LVV) and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), the two parties that scored the best result at parliamentary elections in October, finally found an agreement to form a government headed by Albin Kurti, the LVV leader. His party got 29 seats at elections, while the LDK gained 28 seats.

Negotiations between LVV and LDK have repeatedly been on the verge of collapse during the last four months due to disagreements over the distribution of top positions and the name of the next President of the Republic (the actual expires in 2021), who is appointed by the Parliament. For the moment the discussion was postponed

Albin Kurti delivered an opening speech in the Assembly on the 3rd of February and got a 66 majority on 120 seats with the support of all ethnic minorities (10 seats) except the Serbians. Kurti stressed that his government will fight corruption and will try to save state resources. "*We will have 15 ministries, not 21 like there were before. We will have 33 deputy ministers and not more than 80 like before. So, fewer expenses on posts and privileges in order to spend more in development projects*" he underlined.

During the electoral campaign, both LVV and LDK accused the outgoing coalition, led by parties born on the ashes of the guerrilla that fought against Serbia in the Nineties, to have failed the country through mass corruption and nepotism.

In the new government, LVV members will run the crucial ministries of Economy, Finance, Health. The new minister of Foreign Affairs, Glauk Konjufca, is also an LVV member. Ministries of Culture, Interior, Defence and Agriculture will be led by LDK members, while the LDK front-runner, Vjosa Osmani, will be the Speaker of the Assembly. A reasonable division of power, although a risky one for the less experienced partner of the coalition

As for dialogue with Serbia, the new prime minister, known for advocating unification with Albania, said that the government is ready to resume talks with Serbia, but the focus will be on the sole aim of securing recognition of Kosovo by Belgrade.

Among the main points of the programme are: “full commercial, economic and political reciprocity”, from which depends the abolition of the 100% tariffs on Serbian products, imposed by the previous government; a three-month military conscription (a militarily symbolic measure, with high impact on the Serbian speaking citizens); filing a suit against Serbia at the International Court of Justice for war crimes committed in 1998-1999.

In any case talks with Belgrade will no longer led by the President Hashim Thaci, but by Kurti himself. This could imply: a harder political line, more transparency on the negotiations and a push to reduce the powers of the Association/Community of Serbian Municipalities (the ZSO, stalled since 2013). Kurti believes that the ZSO could be still a political influence tool for Belgrade.

It is likely that Serbia will harden its own stance and in fact the Srpska Lista, the Belgrade-controlled political party representing Serbian speaking Kosovars, is in the opposition.

The forecast is that both capitals will try to gain time by playing hardball and keeping the status quo in order to understand if the US push in the Balkans is enduring or just an episode featuring a direct air link between Belgrade and Pristina and if the EU restarts an effective enlargement process or is still mired by the French veto..

Matteo Tacconi

With the support of the Balkan Trust for Democracy.



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