

# STRATEGIC BALKANS

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### Démographie: les Balkans à l'heure du grand exode

*By Jean-Arnault Dérens e Laurent Gestin / Vie Publique, Février 2020*

People have always migrated from the Balkan to the Western world. They did it after the Second World War, as well as during the wars in the Nineties that led to Yugoslavia's dissolution. People left the peninsula not only due to wars. Economic difficulties were as a constant motivation to move abroad. In the last decade, the end of wars and a slow economic stabilization drove returns. Yet, the global crisis in 2006-2008 caused a new migration wave. The Western Balkans are emptying; migration worsens the demographic trend, already severe, making the spectre of a future economic collapse come out.

### French change of tone boosts Balkan states' hopes of joining EU

*By Robin Emmott, Michel Rose / Reuters, February 5*

The EU's enlargement commissioner Oliver Varhelyi unveiled the plan to change negotiations criteria for countries willing to join the EU. Enlargement remains the main goal, but rules for accession talks will be stricter. EU members will have more powers "to pause or reverse the process of admitting new nations, or even force countries to restart entry talks in some policy areas", Reuters reports. Varhelyi's proposal seems an attempt to find a new European agreement on enlargement criteria after France vetoed the opening of accession talks for Albania and North Macedonia last October.

### North Macedonia ratifies NATO accession protocol, but still waiting for Spain

*By Alexandra Brzozowski / Euractiv, February 12*

North Macedonia's Parliament ratified NATO accession protocol on February 11. 114 MPs voted in favour, out of 120. In a very polarized country, with majority and opposition campaigning ahead of parliamentary elections on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April, the vote was a rare moment of unity. Few days after, the Parliament was dissolved. To become formally a NATO member, the Balkan country has to wait for Spain's ratification of the accession treaty. All the other NATO members already did it. Spain delayed ratification due to political turbulences and the failure to form a government in the last months. Now there is a coalition, thus the parliament is expected to gather soon to vote on this issue. Likely, the session will take place before elections in North Macedonia.

### **'Another milestone': Kosovo and Serbia sign rail, road deals**

*Al Jazeera, February 15*

After having reopened a flight connection between Belgrade and Pristina in January, Serbia and Kosovo agreed to build rail and road links between their capitals. Brokered by the US, the deal was signed by the presidents of the two countries, Hashim Thaci and Aleksandar Vucic, during the Munich Security Conference. It apparently paves the way to unlock talks to normalize bilateral relations, stalled months ago. Yet, the new Kosovar Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, questioned the agreement. He complained that the signatory officials were from the old Kosovar cabinet and that the deal was not authorized by the new one.

### **Balkan: Gier und Gleichgültigkeit zerstören UNESCO-Erbe**

*By Borjan Jovanovski / Euronews, February 19*

UNESCO warned North Macedonia to remove Ohrid from the list of protected world heritage sites due to real estate speculation and pollution. The lakeside town is home to one of the most important Orthodox monasteries in the Western Balkans. Euronews German service reported from Ohrid, collecting the locals' worried voices.

### **Top Serb and Croat parties propose law removing foreign Constitutional Court judges**

*N1, February 25*

Bosnian Serb politicians threatened in mid-February to start the process to secede from Bosnia Herzegovina if the federal parliament will not reform the Constitutional Court within 60 days. Tensions escalated after that Republika Srpska (RS, the Bosnian Serb entity of the country) voted a law stating that the RS automatically gets property of the unclaimed agricultural land in its territory. The Constitutional Court rejected it, ruling that the central state is the only owner of that land. Bosnian Serb long-time leader Milorad Dodik, currently a member of the tripartite presidency, proposed to remove the three foreign judges serving in the court, which in accordance of Dayton peace agreement is made of nine members (three foreigners, two Bosniaks, two Serbs and two Croats). To Dodik, foreign judges frequently side with the Bosniaks and outvote the Croats and the Serbs. Bosnian Croat politicians back the removal of foreign judges.

### **What happened to the “mini-Schengen”?**

*by Sandra Maksimovic / European Western Balkans, March 6*

Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia leaders, Edi Rama, Aleksandar Vucic and Zoran Zaev, announced with fanfare the intention of establishing a Balkan “mini-Schengen” in October. Fostering free trade and free circulation between their countries is the aim of the initiative. The three founding members invited Kosovo, Bosnia Herzegovina and Montenegro to join the initiative.

Massively covered by media when it was launched, the mini-Schengen has left largely unreported in the following months. On the one hand, new priorities appeared in political and media agenda. On the other hand, no technical paper on what the mini-Schengen can look like has been produced or distributed yet, the news-site European Western Balkans reports. The article also gives a worth overview about regional patterns of trade cooperation like the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and the Regional Economic Area (REA).

### **Facebook Extends Political Ads Rules to Balkans Before Elections**

*By Ivana Nikolic / Balkan Insight, March 6*

2020 will be an electoral year in the Western Balkans. There will be parliamentary elections in North Macedonia on the 12<sup>th</sup>, in Serbia on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April and in Montenegro, likely in October. Facebook has added the three countries to its updated list of countries that must adhere to its strict political advertising transparency regulations. Stricter criteria for sponsored contents will be introduced, so that advertisers will be “*accountable for the ads they run on Facebook and Instagram*” the company stated.

## REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

### Orban: the Hungarosphere in the Balkans

Over the last years, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has deployed an ambitious strategy to gain influence in the Balkans. Connected to the Balkans through history and culture, Hungary was already a regional player, although lacking a high profile status. Now it is trying to earn it.

To many observers, Orban wants to drag the Balkans under the influence of the faction promoting “illiberal democracy” in Europe and elsewhere. Fidesz, the party he leads is a prominent member of this club. Funds for the Hungarian ethnic minorities, a law for granting Hungarian citizenship and investments in banking and media sector are the incentives offered to make Orban’s plan attractive.

To Srdan Cvijic, a senior policy analyst at the Open Society European Policy Institute (a very partisan NGO for Hungary’s government), Orban’s strategy can be successful. “*It requires coherent ideology; only the simple rejection of another one*”, Cvijic, a Serb, wrote in a comment published by [Politico](#) in 2018.

He and other liberal-minded commentators argue that some authoritarian twists in the region, like those in Serbia or in Northern Macedonia under Nikola Gruevski’s tenure, recall the Hungarian recipe for state capture, based on an increasingly suffocating control over judiciary, law enforcement agencies, education and media.

In a recent article, [Balkan Insight](#) told how the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ), the main party of the Hungarian minority in Serbia, has fully aligned with Fidesz during the last years. Today the VMSZ distributes funds channelled by the Hungarian government to the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, Serbia’s northern multi-ethnic autonomous province, and controls Magyar Szó, the main daily newspaper of the Hungarian community.

The VMSZ is allied at both local and national level with the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. “*Critics of the Progressives say Vucic is also following Orban’s lead in marginalising dissenters and controlling the media*”, noted the author of the article, the Hungarian reporter Akos Keller Alant.

As for North Macedonia, the Hungarian government granted political asylum to Nikola Gruevski, the Prime Minister of the Balkan country from 2006 to 2016. There are strong ties between Fidesz and Gruevski’s party, the VMRO DPMNE. Pro-EU parties and NGOs stress that it followed Orban’s path to illiberal democracy.

After he lost elections in 2017, Gruevski was accused of corruption but fled to Hungary in November 2018 to avoid a trial. “*One treats allies fairly. If he turns to us, he can expect due process. We can’t place him above the law, but we can give him due process*”, Orban said.

In the last months, there have been Hungarian investments in media sector in Northern Macedonia. The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and partners have showed that two senior executives of Hungarian public television, a government mouthpiece, established companies in Northern Macedonia that bought stakes in several local outlets. The reason of the investment is not clear. It could be only business, but also a move to support the electoral campaign of the VMRO DPMNE, which would want to take the power back at parliamentary elections on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April.

Today, the Western Balkans appear as one of the many arenas where the challenge between liberal democracy and illiberal democracy, full democracy and limited democracy takes place. Hungary works to expand the boundaries of the illiberal camp, as critics of Mr. Orban say, and this could ignite tensions in the region. Yet, Hungary is also a NATO member, committed to guarantee peace. Furthermore, in the new EU Commission the enlargement portfolio is run by Olivér Várhelyi, a Hungarian diplomat. He supports European integration for the Western Balkans.

In other words, Hungary is part of the problem but also part of the solution. In the current chaotic, fluid and naïve geopolitical scenario, such double-headed approach to the Balkans and to foreign policy in general can last.

## The uncertain energy transition

In a study, the United Nations Environment Programme (Air Pollution and Human Health: The Case of the Western Balkans, May 2019) monitored the air quality in some Western Balkans cities. It emerged that the PM<sub>10</sub> (10 micron Particulate Matter) concentration exceeds the EU limit values up to 4-5 times per year. PM<sub>2.5</sub> (2,5 micron Particulate Matter, called also fine particles) levels are also very high across the region. Among the cities observed for the study, Tuzla (Bosnia Herzegovina) is the most severely affected.

Diesel and petrol vehicles, old generation coal power plants and household coal or wood fuelled heating systems are the factors that dramatically worsen air quality in the Western Balkans. The impact on health is heavy. *“Air pollution contributes between 4 and 19% of total premature mortality in the selected cities”*, the report warns.

The Western Balkans countries have adopted EU legislation to curb the concentrations of air pollutants, but authorities are too slow to introduce effective measures to reduce pollution. Implementation of systems to monitor air quality is another problem. Data collection is inadequate *“due to shortage of financial resources for maintenance of the stations, the lack of certified calibration laboratories and the absence of air quality modelling”*, the UN report highlights.

A time has come for the Western Balkans to face seriously the threats posed by air pollution. Since thick and toxic air in the region depends mainly depends on coal, decarbonising is the highest priority in the transition to sustainable and clean energy. The process is highly expensive but it could turn profitable in the long term. Interviewed by the Anadolu press agency, Srdjan Kukolj, a health and energy expert for the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL), a European NGO, told that *“decarbonizing our societies and way of life - be it in transport, buildings, energy or food systems - will make the Western Balkans a healthier, increasingly prosperous and more sustainable place”*.

North Macedonia and Montenegro seem committed to take this path. Podgorica has recently stopped the construction of a new big coal plant in Pljevlja, a town bordering Serbia, while Skopje has unveiled a strategy aimed at phasing coal out by 2030, Bankwatch reports. It foresees a best scenario (coal exit by 2025) and a worst one, in case the lignite plant in Bitola, providing a huge portion of electricity produced in the country, will be shut down only in 2040. A major project in the context of transition to clean energy will be a large-scale solar power plant installed at the defunct Oslomej coal site, in the western part of the country. The plant will be co-financed by the European Bank for Reconstruction

and Development (EBDR). As for household coal heating systems, the government plans to increasingly replace them with natural gas.

Other Balkan countries do not pay the same attention to de-carbonisation. The Serbian government ordered the construction of a new unit at the already existing Kostolac coal power plant, while in Bosnia Herzegovina people are raising their voices against a new coal power plant in Tuzla financed by the Export-Import Bank of China. Protestors say that authorities altered the feasibility study to move the plan forward.

Closing coal plants in the Western Balkans is hard for politicians. It implies huge social and economic losses in the short term, and this can have an electoral impact of course. That is why China's instant money is well accepted (not only in the energy field). The European green alternative is much healthier but also much harder to implement. Brussels must grant larger financial resources to foster a faster energy transition in the region.

**Matteo Tacconi**

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



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