

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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[Montenegro's president accuses Serbia and Russia of undermining independence](#)

By Aleksandar Vasovic / Reuters, February 29

Last December, protests erupted in Montenegro over a law that allows the state to take ownership of church property if the church cannot prove it owned it before 1918, the year in which the Kingdom of Montenegro joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, then renamed Yugoslavia. Protests were organised by opposition parties and the Serbian Orthodox Church, the main religious group in the country. The Church says that the law will endanger its status. In an interview with Reuters, the Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic accused Serbia and its ally Russia of using the Serbian Orthodox Church to undermine his country's pro-Western government. Montenegro joined NATO in 2017.

[Albania opposition rallies to stop “coup d'état” over reforms](#)

By Benet Koleka / Reuters, March 2

Justice reform is key to speed up the European accession process for Albania, that recently obtained the opening of EU accession talks. Tirana is implementing a deep reform of its judicial system to eradicate endemic corruption. Around 850 judges and prosecutors are being vetted. Most Supreme and Constitutional Court judges have been fired during this process, monitored by Brussels. Those appointed are close to the Socialist Party, led by the Prime Minister Edi Rama, the opposition says. The President of the Republic, Ilir Meta, too accuses the government to capture the judicial system. Protests erupted in Tirana at the beginning of March.

[A year after suspending Fidesz, EPP still turning a blind eye to Serbian Progressive Party](#)

By Aleksandar Ivković / European Western Balkans, March 23

One year ago, the European People's Party (EPP) suspended Fidesz, the party of the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban. Restrictions to media freedom and judicial independence forced EPP to freeze Fidesz membership. EPP should put under scrutiny also the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), that, like Fidesz, is affiliated to EPP, opposition and civil society organisations say. According to them, SNS followed Orban's path to non-liberal democracy by curtailing media freedom, NGOs rights and judges' independence.

[How Climate Change Triggered a Second Exodus in Bosnia-Herzegovina](#)

By Lillo Montalto Monella & Marco Carlone / Euronews, March 23

Since the end of the war in 1995, Bosnia-Herzegovina's population has shrunk by the year. Poverty, lack of opportunities and the post-war troubled ethnic situation have been the main roots of this population drain. Climate change is a new factor igniting emigration. Euronews reports on how severe floods in 2014, that completely submerged some areas of the country, forced more people to leave.

[China nutzt die Gunst der Stunde und überflügelt mit seiner Hilfe die Europäer auf dem Balkan](#)

By Andreas Ernst / Neue Zürcher Zeitung, March 23

Already very active in the region through big investments in infrastructures, China plans to boost its influence providing aid to contain the coronavirus pandemic. European integration, once the only viable future for the Western Balkans, is under threat. The Chinese soft power works. Yet, Beijing's competition is not necessarily bad news for Brussels. It should stimulate it to re-energise its commitment to the future of the Western Balkans.

[Coronavirus: Bruxelles débloque des fonds pour les Balkans occidentaux](#)

Le Figaro, March 30

The EU Commission allocated 412 million Euros for containing the Coronavirus pandemic in the Western Balkans and support economic reconstruction. The EU will immediately assist countries of the region with €38 million to cover the needs of public health systems. The remaining €374 million, will be granted to support the socio-economic recovery. Serbia will be the main beneficiary.

Kosovo announces removal of tariffs on Serbian and Bosnian goods

By Matthew Holroyd / Euronews, April 2

Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti, leading a caretaker government since his coalition recently collapsed, announced that the Kosovo lifted 100% import tariffs on goods from Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, at least temporarily. The measure will remain in force until the 15th of June. The 100% import tariff was introduced by the previous government, led by Ramush Haradinaj. It was one of the factors that froze dialogue with Serbia to normalise bilateral relations. Both the EU and US asked Kosovo for cancelling import tariffs. However, Kurti's decision does not change drastically the scenario, since under new trade regulations Serbian goods must comply with Kosovo's constitution and legislation. This would require Serbia to acknowledge documentation listed under the words "Republic of Kosovo". Since Serbia does not recognise Kosovo, it opposes this provision.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

NATO and the North Macedonia Accession

On March 27, North Macedonia officially became the 30th NATO member. Skopje could have joined the club much earlier, perhaps alongside Albania and Croatia in 2009, but the naming dispute with Greece froze the process. However, during the last decade the former Yugoslav republic has never given up, maintaining a strong focus on NATO. It has participated to several security initiatives in the region, and from 2002 to 2014 it contributed to the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan.

North Macedonia is a country characterised by multiple contrasts, including the difficult relations between the Slav majority and the Albanian minority, as well as a rough struggle between nationalists and pro-West parties. NATO is one of the few issues that creates bipartisan consensus. The ratification of NATO accession protocol voted in Parliament on the 11th of February is just the last evidence of that: out of 120 MPs, 114 approved it.

For the tiny post-Yugoslav country, NATO could represent a source to strengthen the sense of nationhood, still not fully defined, but also a boost for foreign investments (if the coronavirus pandemic will be successfully contained). *“I expect economic effects for the country due to NATO membership, based on other recent members accession pattern (especially Bulgaria and Romania) where the biggest GDP growth was seen in the years after NATO and prior to EU accession”*, said Aleksandar Kržalovski, Executive Director of the Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation (MCIC), quoted by the news website [European Western Balkans](#). Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic will slow down this process for an unspecified time and extent.

North Macedonia's NATO membership is very important for regional stability. The Western Balkans are still a fragile corner of Europe. Weak economies, complex ethnic relations and foreign interferences from non-NATO countries are factors that keep the region exposed to shocks. After having created a contiguous NATO border along the Adriatic coastline, NATO puts more glue in the region through Skopje's accession. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo are now the only countries that are not members of NATO, although Bosnia-Herzegovina has some guarantees by the international institutions and Kosovo finds in KFOR, the NATO-led peacekeeping mission, its main security-provider.

NATO's enlargement to North Macedonia and the EU Council decision to open accession talks with Skopje and Tirana, the latter made on March 25th, are very positive developments for the region. However, the scenario in the Western Balkans is still volatile. Anchorage to the West is still a long way to go.

While NATO has succeeded in pushing forward its enlargement strategy in the region, the EU has achieved insufficient results so far. NATO broadens its borders faster than the EU, as Central Europe's recent history shows, but the EU has never been so slow in integrating candidate countries. Turkey, Russia and China exploited its hesitation to gain influence in the region. Meanwhile, some points of divergence emerged in US and EU policies towards the Western Balkans. The covid-19 pandemic can bring new uncertainties in Europe, in transatlantic relations and in the Balkans. The West must act with responsibility to preserve itself and the future of the Western Balkans.

The impact of Covid-19 on the Balkan region

The Western Balkans have adopted draconian measures to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. Schools, universities, theatres, and cinemas have been closed. Borders are strictly controlled. The people's freedom of movement has been severely limited. North Macedonia and Serbia have postponed parliamentary elections, scheduled for the 12th and 26th of April, respectively.

Although the impact of the pandemic in the Western Balkans has been less devastating than in EU countries so far, and will likely remain so, countries in the region have several reasons for concern. The Covid-19 pandemic is a hard stress test for their weak health systems, as well as for their very fragile economies, that risk, as much more solid ones in the EU, a severe recession.

The pandemic can affect the EU integration process, too. In March, the EU Council approved the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia – blocked by France last October 2019. The EU Council decision “*reaffirms EU's commitment to the European perspective of the region*”, said EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, adding that this is an important message not only for Tirana and Skopje, but for the whole region.

Turning a good signal into concrete results depends on many factors. Concrete facts are needed to show that the EU recommitment for the Western Balkans will be genuine and constant, for example, as the echo of Macron's visit to Albania and North Macedonia is still strong. At the same time, the effectiveness of the new enlargement strategy ([here](#) explained by New Eastern Europe), that France strongly wanted, must be verified. On the other hand, greater pushes for reforms are required from Albania and North Macedonia, as well as from Serbia and Montenegro, that are already negotiating accession to the EU.

However, the key factor to observe in the coming months is, again, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. An economic earthquake and prolonged limitations to civil and political activities, could either freeze reforms in the Western Balkans or push the EU to put the renewed focus on the Western Balkans on standby (both in the worst case).

Meanwhile, a Coronavirus dispute in Kosovo caused the collapse of the coalition between Self-Determination (Vetevendosje), a leftist nationalist party, and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), agreed only two months ago.

The Prime Minister and Self-Determination leader Albin Kurti introduced restrictive measures to people's movement, without declaring the state of emergency. The President of the Republic, Hashim Thaci, questioned Kurti's approach saying that any measure concerning basic rights of the people can be implemented only by adopting a state of emergency. The Minister of Internal Affairs and LDK deputy leader, Agim Veliu, aligned with Thaci's view and was dismissed by Kurti. As a consequence, LDK promoted a no-confidence motion, which was voted by the majority of MPs.

However, the Coronavirus controversy was just a pretext. The real reasons behind the collapse of the Government were the bad relations between Kurti and LDK's leadership, Thaci's ambition to be indispensable and US diplomacy's games in Kosovo, as reported by the [New York Times](#) and other media.

Since the beginning of the year, the US administration involvement in the Serbia-Kosovo issue has increased. Washington wants to restart talks between the two countries and get a final agreement to normalise relations. The US supports Thaci as the Kosovar mediator. He and his Serbian counterpart, the President Aleksandar Vucic, put the issue of land swap with Serbia on the table. Kurti opposes it and, once appointed Prime Minister, said that the only body authorised to negotiate is the Government. The no-confidence vote reflects "a *much deeper disagreement about how to resolve a decades-old impasse between*

Kosovo and Serbia. The debate pitted Mr. Kurti, a longtime activist, against both Mr. Thaci and the Trump administration”, the New York Times wrote, adding that US view angered Europe’s diplomacy.

Geopolitics and coronavirus are intertwined also in neighbouring Serbia, object of a medical-diplomatic competition. The President of the Republic, Aleksandar Vucic, blamed the EU for its limited solidarity and said that this forced Serbia to turn to China to get help in the battle against the pandemic. Beijing sent equipment and experts to Belgrade. The Serbian leadership warmly greeted the effort. Belgrade’s bridges and monuments were floodlighted in red to thank the Asian giant. Immediately after, the EU announced a €400 million Euro plan to support the Western Balkans (Serbia is the main beneficiary) to tackle the emergency caused by Coronavirus, and somehow counter China’s soft power. The coronavirus pandemic is a new tool for political competition in the region.

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