

# STRATEGIC BALKANS

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### [Mein Europa: Trumps Deal auf dem Balkan](#)

*By Norbert Mappes-Niediek / Deutsche Welle, April 1*

The EU has failed to stabilize the Balkans, thus Trump stepped in. Bringing strongmen – Vucic and Thaci – around a table and make a fast land swap deal, without caring so much of diplomatic customs, is the US president’s plan. A strategy he has pursued in other world scenario, yet without getting any positive results. In the Balkans it could work. Vucic and Thaci are strong leaders in weak states, and being courted by the world superpower make feel them important. A column by Norbert Mappes-Niediek, an Austrian journalist with a recognized expertise on Balkan affairs.

### [North Macedonia joins the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region](#)

*Europa.eu, April 3*

The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), one of the four EU ‘macro-regions’ alongside the Baltic Sea Region, the Danube Region and the Alpine Region, has a new member. North Macedonia joined on April 2, becoming the ninth participating country of the EUSAIR, endorsed by Brussels in 2014. Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia are already members since that year. Although reported briefly and without fanfare by the EU Commission website, Skopje’s accession has plenty of significance. It is one of the many worthy consequences of the end of the naming dispute between Athens and Skopje. North Macedonia is not a maritime country, but it can play a role in the EUSAIR, being a logistical bridge between Greece and Serbia for example.

### [Serbia the focal point of Chinese “mask diplomacy” in the Western Balkans](#)

*By Stefan Vladislavljev / European Western Balkans, April 30*

China has been very skilled in activating a “mask diplomacy” in the Western Balkans. It distributed medical equipment across the region, except in Kosovo (Beijing and Pristina do not have diplomatic relations), but Serbia has been the main target. China has promoted massive investments in the country over the last years, recognizing a special role for Belgrade in the regional balance of power. The breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic is a chance to pursue this strategy further. Belgrade hugely welcomed China’s medical aid, while it blamed the EU for lacking solidarity towards Serbia and the

Balkans. “Putting Europe on the opposite side of any other actor (in this case China) could endanger the future of EU integration, if not in Brussels than in the eyes of the broader Serbian public”, the news site European Western Balkans wrote.

### [In Tito’s old hunting grounds, fans struggle to keep his spirit alive](#)

*Agence France Press, May 2 (via France24)*

On May 4, the 40th anniversary of Tito’s death was marked. The founder and leader of socialist Yugoslavia is still popular in the region. People have a good memory of Yugoslav times. No unemployment, limited ethnic tensions, no internal borders between Yugoslav republics. Compared to current times, marked by poverty and other postwar issues, Tito's era, although it was not perfect at all, was a sort of heaven. The AFP reported about these Yugonostalgic feelings from Bugojno, a small town in Bosnia where Tito had a villa.

### [Remembering Jasenovac: the lesser recognized concentration camp](#)

*By Aleksandra Petrovic / Jerusalem Post, May 2*

April 22 marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolt of the prisoners of Jasenovac, the most infamous death camp in the Balkans during the Second World War. Conditions in the camp, set up by the pro-fascist Croatian regime, were horrible for Roma and Serbian prisoners. “While the numbers are not as high as Auschwitz or Treblinka, Jasenovac was notorious for its cruelty and the high number of young children who were victims”, a Jerusalem Post article remarks. In the days before the revolt on April 22, 1945, which was bloodily repressed, Croatian guards killed hundreds on prisoners.

### [EU’s COVID-19 aid to reassure Western Balkan hopefuls as virus set to hijack summit](#)

*By Alexandra Brzozowski / Euractiv, May 6*

Vucic’s complaints against the EU have not passed unobserved in Brussels. During a video conference with their Western Balkans counterparts on Wednesday 6 May, the EU leaders launched a €3.3 billion aid package to fight the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. “An attempt to counter foreign influence in the region”, Euractiv highlighted, adding that “it could, however, come too late”. The EU had already provided financial funds for the countries of the Western Balkans right after the breakout of the

coronavirus pandemic. However, the first package reached just around €500 million. NATO is contributing to offer some relief in the region, too. [Here is a news](#) about the alliance activities.

### [Freedom House: Serbia, Montenegro, Hungary 'No Longer Democracies'](#)

*By Milica Stojanovic / Balkan Insight, May 6*

Standards in governance, justice, elections and media freedom are declining in Serbia and Montenegro, according to “Nations in Transit”, the annual report on the state of democracy issued by the US-based NGO Freedom House. Serbia and Montenegro have been classified for the first time as ‘hybrid regimes’. “Years of increasing state capture, abuse of power, and strongman tactics employed by [President] Aleksandar Vucic in Serbia and [President] Milo Djukanovic in Montenegro have tipped those countries over the edge”, Balkan Insight reports, quoting the Freedom House research.

## REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

### Kosovo's Constitutional Crisis

The breakout of the coronavirus pandemic stirred a harsh dispute between Hashim Thaci and Albin Kurti, Kosovo's president and prime minister respectively. It is one of the most severe political crisis in the tiny Balkan country since the declaration of independence in 2008.

As told in our last month's analysis, measures to restrict movement of people to contain the Covid-19 crisis were put in place by the government without declaring the state of emergency, which is not in line with the constitution according to Thaci. He remarked that any decision involving citizens' basic rights must be taken only after the adoption of the state of emergency. As consequence, he declared it on March 18. A week later, Kurti faced a no-confidence motion in the parliament. His coalition, made of his party, Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination), and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) collapsed. It lasted only 51 days. LDK deputies aligned with Thaci's view and voted to sink the cabinet.

After the vote, Thaci invited Kurti to hold talks to form a new government, but Kurti asked for snap elections once the pandemic will be over. On April 30, Thaci made a choice. He signed a decree to appoint Avdulah Hoti, a member of the LDK, as the prime minister-designate. Kurti argued that the head of state overstepped his powers by appointing Hoti, which means looking for a new majority in the parliament leaving out Self-Determination, which won the largest share of votes at general elections in November 2019. Kurti then asked the Constitutional Court for a judgment. Kosovo's top judges ruled in favour of Kurti's request, suspending Thaci's decree until a final sentence. At the time of this analysis, it has not yet been issued. Meanwhile, Kurti acts as caretaker prime minister.

The management of the coronavirus pandemic (around 900 persons tested positive, 28 deaths while we write) is just the surface of a much deeper and complex political crisis, with both domestic and foreign implications. During the electoral campaign, Kurti accused the outgoing coalition led by Ramush Haradinaj, with Thaci's Democratic Party (PDK) as the main force, to have failed the country through mass corruption and nepotism. To Kurti, Haradinaj and Thaci, both members of the anti-Serb guerrilla in the Nineties, built a "state in state" while in power. He promised to dismantle it. Vetëvendosje took ministries of economy, finance, health and justice in the government, all of them crucial to address people's expectations to curb corruption. Thaci's move to declare the state of emergency and what follows – the collapse of the coalition – could appear an attempt to avoid a too radical spoil system. Key positions in ministries and state agencies are held by members of PDK and other "war parties".

However, main factors behind the current political crisis are Serbia-Kosovo talks and Thaci's role in the process. So far, negotiations have been conducted under the EU aegis by the Kosovar president and his Serbian homologue, Aleksander Vucic. But Kurti says that the only person entitled to lead talks – stalled since months – is he himself as the prime minister.

According to several media reports, Thaci and Vucic agreed on a land swap through which Serbia would annex Serbian majority municipalities in northern Kosovo, while Kosovo would gain Albanian majority lands in southern Serbia. Kurti opposes this option (rather unpopular among Kosovo's public opinion), which is said to be backed by Washington. Anyway, US diplomats rebuffed Kurti's claim about a Thaci-Vucic secret deal.

Relations between US diplomats and Kurti are not easy. Washington is trying to reactivate the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, although without looking at a strong coordination with the EU. To clear the path, the US proposed to remove 100% tariffs imposed by Haradinaj's government on Serbian goods, but Kurti did it only partially. This sparked frustration among US diplomats, who prefer Thaci as mediator in talks with Serbia. For his part, Thaci wants to take centre stage. Should the constitutional court reject Kurti's request and pave the way for a new government, he will be confirmed as the broker-in-charge.

As media in Pristina report, it is almost certain that the Srpska Lista, a Belgrade-controlled party representing the Serbian minority in Kosovo will support a government led by Hoti (while it did not support Kurti's cabinet). A signal that Vucic is ready to resume talks. The large mandate that his Progressive Party is supposed to secure in Serbia's parliamentary elections in June can give him a boost for negotiating the land swap.

In such scenario, the EU is temporarily a loser. However, it still can play a decisive role in building a constructive and stable dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. While the US approach is driven by the need of producing a quick result (ahead of presidential elections in November?), the EU, being the first investor and lender in the Western Balkans, has the responsibility to provide a long-term perspective for Serbia and Kosovo, which includes establishing diplomatic relations between them. The appointment of the former Slovak foreign minister Miroslav Lajcak as the EU special envoy in the Balkans is a positive step. It reveals that Brussels wants to be more proactive in the region. To give Belgrade and Pristina a clear sign of hope, the EU could speed up accession talks with Serbia and liberalize visa for Kosovo's citizens. It would also be a way to reconnect to the two countries' people, who have lost some confidence in Europe's capacity to deliver results.

As for the land swap, which the EU top diplomat Josep Borrell would not rule out if the two sides agree on it, Brussels must work to *“produce a solution that the populations of both countries accept and is not reached behind closed doors”*, the European Council on Foreign Relations suggested in a recent analysis. To

broaden the spectrum, the territorial exchange needs to be acceptable also for the other Balkan countries and some EU members like Cyprus and Spain, which face long-time territorial disputes.

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### **Serbian Regressive Party**

In order to contain the coronavirus pandemic the Serbian government has introduced very severe restrictions to people's movement, especially for seniors over 65. Curfews in Serbia have been the toughest in the Western Balkans, if not in Europe as a whole. Police committed a considerable number of abuses of power while enforcing these measures, according to media sources. Several observers agree that, the country's strongman Aleksandar Vucic, elected as President of the Republic in 2017, is exploiting the state of emergency to tighten his grip on power, piling pressure on the population, as well as on journalists trying to report on critical times faced by the health system. The [Italian Institute for International Political Studies](#) and the [Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group](#) reported abundantly about these current trends in Serbia.

Apparently, for Vucic and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) there are no reasons to further extend their already immense power. The party won an absolute majority in the 2016 parliamentary elections and together with the Socialist Party (SPS), the junior member in the coalition, has full control on state institutions and municipalities, as well as on judiciary, security agencies and media. Through some opaque takeovers, several media have been dragged under the SNS influence in recent years. To liberal-minded observers, there are similarities between SNS style of ruling Serbia and the state capture project in Viktor Orban's Hungary.

The worrying economic scenario can be a factor explaining Vucic's approach in time of pandemic. Serbia's GDP is expected to decline from 3,5% to even 10% in 2020 as a result of lockdown measures and international economic turmoil (meanwhile Standard and Poor's has just cut the outlook from positive to stable). The brutal slowdown will certainly affect employment, prompting a wave of social dissatisfaction that could eventually revive a trend of protests (put on standby during the pandemic) against Ana Brnabic's government. Until it broke out, people had gathered on weekly basis in Belgrade and other Serbian cities demanding higher democratic standards, media freedom and fair parliamentary elections. Scheduled in April, the vote has been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. By strengthening the grip on power, Vucic might plan to prevent a new round of protests. Or maybe it is

just another symptom of the SNS and its leader's hunger for power, described as insatiable by their critics?

When the SNS was created in 2012, the purpose of its founder, Tomislav Nikolic, was to create a modern, conservative and pro-EU party to revolutionize the political market in Serbia and promote an alternative to the democratic bloc, made of liberal and mildly nationalist parties. Since the fall of the Milosevic regime in 2000, these forces had always prevented the ultranationalist and anti-EU Serbian Radical Party (SRS), headed by the former paramilitary leader Vojislav Seselj, with Nikolic acting as his loyal deputy, to take the power. The SRS won the largest percentage of votes in several parliamentary elections, but pro-Europe parties always found a way to keep Seselj and Nikolic in opposition.

In 2012, Nikolic broke ties with the SRS and founded the SNS, shifting to conservative and pro-EU values. Vucic supported the split and became the party's number two. The move was extremely successful. In the same year, Nikolic won the presidential elections and the SNS secured a resounding victory at parliamentary elections. After that, it forged a coalition with the Socialist Party, previously allied with democratic forces. Vucic was appointed as deputy prime minister, but this did not match his enormous ambitions.

Two years later, Vucic forced early elections to become prime minister, challenge Nikolic's leadership in the party and launch a hegemonic project for Serbia, presenting himself as the only leader bringing Belgrade in the EU, cutting ties with its dark past and solving once and for all Kosovo's issue. He won elections and became prime minister, then ran for the presidency in 2017. Another easy victory.

Today, Vucic does not put a big emphasis on the accession to the EU anymore, while negotiations on Kosovo are essentially frozen. It depends on Europe's difficulties to offer Serbia and the Western Balkans a clear perspective, but Vucic himself contributed to scale down these processes. More than finding a way to free the country from its burden and look for a stable future, in the last years he has focused on strengthening power, both in Serbia and in Kosovo, where he established the Srpska Lista, the most trusted party in the Serbian majority municipalities and a tool to influence Kosovo's politics.

Vucic's recipe for power is based on typical schemes adopted by populist parties in Hungary and Poland. On the one hand, they advocate the need of being part of the European family, trying to maximize Europe's flow of money towards its peripheries. On the other hand, they literally occupy every power structures, endangering the rule of law, curtailing media freedom and reducing the



opposition to irrelevance, or trying to do it (Poland's opposition is much more active than that of Hungary or Serbia).

Since it is beefing up its commitment in the region through new diplomatic initiatives and solid financial support to fight Covid-19, the EU should not be afraid of warning the Serbian government against going too far, Nathalie Tocci, a special adviser to European High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell, pointed out in a comment published by [The Politico](#). At the same time, she argued that *“the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans must not be propelled by the fear that the region will otherwise fall into China's lap”*.

Beijing is increasing its weight in the Western Balkans turning the region into a key terminal of the Belt and Road Initiative, but the EU is the main investor, lender and market for Serbia and its neighbours. However, neither this aspect nor the EU attempt to give back the Serbian and the whole region strategic importance could be enough to reverse Belgrade's path to illiberal democracy.

The EU is trying to put Hungary and Poland back on the right track, yet without success. Despite Budapest and Warsaw get a large amount of EU and have been hit by the EU Commission infringement proceedings due to threats posed to the rule of law, they are still pushing forward their illiberal agenda. Since it is not a member of the EU, Serbia is not subject to Europe's check and balances system. Thus, there the room for manoeuvre to make Belgrade feel under pressure is narrower.

In the meantime, in the “Freedom in the World”, the annual index of freedom elaborated by the Freedom House, just published, the state of Serbia's democratic institutions and freedoms scored the lowest value since 2001. Over the years, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has steadily eroded political rights, civil liberties and media freedom, the report underlines. In Serbia, a land of many paradoxes, it can happen that a Progressive Party pursues regressive policies, not only during a pandemic era. Serbia, the crucial country to stabilize the Western Balkans, is not yet lost, but the EU must work very hard to rebuild confidence with Belgrade, and also with the Serbian civil society, that still perceives the EU as a change-driver, yet not as much as it used to do years ago.

**Matteo Tacconi**

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



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