

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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[Regional Cooperation Council: Balkan Barometer 2020](#)

The Sarajevo-based Regional Cooperation Council, a structure enhancing dialogue between the Western Balkan countries, released the 2020 edition of the Balkan Barometer, an annual survey showing perceptions of civil societies on key trends like Europeanization, environment, business and corruption. Highlights of the new edition tell that 59% of Western Balkans citizens see EU integration as a positive thing, 78% view digital skills as crucial to improve business, 74% perceive pollution as a threat for their economies, and 71% are dissatisfied with how governments are tackling corruption. In the chapter related to emigration trends, it emerges that the percentage of people willing to move abroad has increased in all the six countries of the region compared to 2019. This just confirms that the demographic crisis is one of the biggest challenges for the future of the Western Balkans. To download the Balkan Barometer 2020, [click here](#).

[Trade barriers and wary eye on Serbia hold back Balkan economies](#)

By Valerie Hopkins / Financial Times, June 17

A long and very detailed article by the [Financial Times](#) focusses on trade barriers in the Western Balkans. The Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) tore down tariffs, but border checks still exist, frustrating business. *“In the Western Balkans, trucks spend an estimated 28m-30m hours waiting on the border every year. A recent IMF study found that the long wait times cost the region an estimated €800m annually, equivalent to 1 per cent of its GDP”*, the Financial Times wrote.

Recently, there have been attempts to establish a sort of Schengen zone in the Western Balkans, yet smaller countries fear they *“would lose out because of Serbia’s potential dominance”*. However, cooperation should prevail, according to Safet Gerxhalii, head of the Chamber Investment Forum, that represents all six CEFTA countries’ chambers of commerce. Contacted by the Financial Times, he said that Serbia’s economic strength in the region recalls Germany’s weight in the EU, thus smaller countries should work to promote their attractiveness instead of complaining. *“Imagine if you heard from people in Switzerland, Austria, or Italy . . . that they did not want to co-operate with Germany”*, Gerxhalii told the British financial daily.

Bosnia Parties Strike Landmark Deal on Governing Mostar

By Nedim Dervisbegovic / Balkan Insight, June 17

Bosnia and Herzegovina will hold municipal elections on the 15th of November, eventually in Mostar too. The ethnically divided city in the southern flank of the country has been paralyzed since 2008 due to political clashes between parties representing Croats and Bosniaks, the two communities of the town. On the 17th of June, a historic agreement was signed under the supervision of UK and EU diplomats. It regulates the new power-sharing structure, paving the way for the first local elections since 2008, [Balkan Insight](#) reported.

Will COVID-19 create a new surge in poverty in the Western Balkans?

By Jamele Rigolini, Marc Tobias Schiffbauer, and Edith Kikoni / Brookings Institution, June 19

The Covid-19 factor is affecting every aspect of politics in the Western Balkans, as we have seen in the above-mentioned issues and in our previous media reviews. There is a clear impact on economy, too. The [Brookings Institution](#) published an article telling that the coronavirus pandemic poses an unprecedented threat to jobs and income. “*In the absence of government responses, more than 400.000 people in the region could fall into poverty [...] and the share of the middle and upper classes [...] would shrink substantially across the region, between 2 and 10 percentage points depending on the country and the length of the crisis*”, the article reveals, quoting a World Bank study. Governments should shift the focus from strengthening health systems to the implementation of social measures, if they want to contain a new surge in poverty, the American think tank suggests. Not an easy task, given that the GDP is falling in all the Western Balkan countries.

Europe’s Betrayal of Bosnia and Herzegovina

By Torkel Brekke / Peace Research Institute Oslo, June 29

In the [blog of the Peace Research Institute Oslo \(PRIO\)](#), the researcher Torkel Brekke blamed the EU for not having offered Bosnia Herzegovina a clear integration path in the last twenty years. This made frustration grow in the country. People feel trapped in a never-ending limbo. At the same time, Brekke condemns Bosnia’s leadership for having failed to deliver reforms. “*The EU has betrayed BiH, but BiH has also betrayed the EU. The biggest betrayal has been committed against ordinary people, who need and want change*”, the researcher wrote.

Warum die Pandemie den Balkan so hart trifft

By Alexander Sarovic and Maria Stöhr / Der Spiegel, July 3

The German weekly Der Spiegel published an article over the increased number of Covid-19 cases in the Balkans, that suggested to EU countries to close borders to people coming from South Eastern Europe. The authors pointed to the contradiction between the very severe lockdown imposed by governments once the pandemic broke out and the very permissive end of restrictions, in some cases just aimed at dragging voters to polling stations. Serbia held parliamentary elections on the 21st of June. In North Macedonia elections will take place the 15th of July.

Serbia Protests Meet Violent Response in Europe's 1st Major Virus Unrest

By Patrick Kingsley / New York Times, July 8

On the 7th and 8th of July, thousands of people took streets in central Belgrade to protest against new restrictive measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic announced by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. Demonstrations initially started out peacefully, but then turned violent; there were serious clashes between some protesters and the police. Some groups stormed the Parliament.

“Demonstrations quickly morphed into a wider expression of frustration at Mr. Vucic’s increasing control over policymaking and perceived mismanagement of Serbia’s pandemic response”, wrote Patrick Kingsley, a New York Times correspondent for Europe. When the coronavirus pandemic erupted, Vucic said that the virus was “ridiculous”. Then he introduced a very severe lockdown, on the strictest in Europe, postponing elections from the 26th of April 26 to the 21st of June. In early May, Serbia’s authorities declared that the virus was defeated and allowed gatherings again, nudging back to normal life. People protested in Belgrade because they got angry at the *“governmental missteps that had created the need for renewed restrictions. These included decisions to proceed with a general election last week and to restart large public sports events”,* Kingsley stressed. Due to the tense scenario, the Serbian government chose to revoke the curfew, implementing just minor measures.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

A safety/opportunity net for Vucic's Serbia

The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), founded by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, was the great winner of the parliamentary elections held on the 21st of June. He won took 60,7% of the votes, securing 191 seats in the 250-member Parliament. The Socialist Party (SPS) came second with 10,35%, getting 32 seats. Likely, the SNS will renew the coalition with the Socialist Party (SPS), with which it has been ruling the country since 2012.

Beside the SNS and the SPS, the only party that passed the 3% threshold was the Serbian Patriotic Alliance, a nationalist group (3,85%, 11 MPs). Ethnic parties will be present in the new Parliament too (16 seats altogether). Pro-EU opposition parties did not pass the threshold instead, while the largest among them, the Alliance for Serbia, basically a pro-democracy and pro-Europe cartel despite the presence of Dveri, a nationalist party, boycotted the vote as previously announced. Serbia has become a hybrid regime under Vucic's tenure, thus basic principles to guarantee a healthy electoral competition lack, the Alliance for Serbia argued.

The large victory of the SNS appears as a voters' choice for stability, although this same stability should not be interpreted as a full confidence in the president and his party. *"The system is stable — as stable as the communist system that came before it. But it can only function when there is something to hand out and distribute"*, the German reporter Norbert Mappes-Niediek wrote in a comment for Deutsche Welle, stressing that despite the number of Covid-19 infections is increasing, the very hard lockdown helped Vucic to keep *"the topic of the coronavirus very much in the background. The election date, it seems, was perfectly chosen"*.

There is a very negative mood, among Western media and watchdogs advocating democracy, towards Vucic's Serbia and to a certain extent it appears understandable. The very centralized structure of power, limited media freedom and the absence of the opposition in the new Parliament (the Serbian Patriotic Alliance cannot be seen as a real opposition party) put a larger greater between Serbia and democracy. Belgrade's path to Europe could become longer and more troubled and, besides that, Vucic seems oriented to pursue a growing pro-China and pro-Russia foreign policy.

However, neither Belgrade is lost nor Europe has lost Belgrade. Serbia, the crucial Balkan country, negotiates its accession to the EU and takes part to important forums promoting European integration, like the Central European Initiative and the EU Strategies for the Danube Region and the Adriatic-Ionian Region, just to make some examples. Furthermore, the EU is the main trade partner and investor for Serbia. All of this consolidates a large safety/opportunity net protecting EU-Serbia relations, at least in the mid-term, in a period marked by democratic backsliding and a difficult resumption of talks with Kosovo, that may come late but are key to Serbia's EU integration.

Hashim Thaci indicted on war crimes charges

On the 24th of June, the Specialist Prosecutor's Office for Kosovo (SPO), the Hague-based international body investigating on crimes that were commenced or committed in Kosovo between 1 January 1998 and 31 December 2000 by or against citizens of Kosovo or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, made public an indictment charging the Kosovar President, Hashim Thaci, with a range of crimes against humanity and war crimes. Alongside Thaci, the political leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA-UCK) during the conflict, other nine persons once belonging to the guerrilla were indicted, Kadri Veseli included. He is the former President of Kosovo's Parliament and former deputy leader of the Kosovo Democratic Party (PDK), Thaci's party; during the war he was the chief of the UCK intelligence.

The SPO and the Kosovo Specialist Chambers (KSC), a pool of international judges who integrate the international court investigating on war crimes in Kosovo, are recognized by Kosovo's Constitution that was amended to provide a proper legal basis for the court. *"The crimes alleged in the Indictment involve hundreds of known victims of Kosovo Albanian, Serb, Roma, and other ethnicities and include political opponents"*, the SPO's press office told. A judge must still review the indictment to confirm charges that Thaci and Veseli firmly rejected. If confirmed, Thaci will resign, he stated.

The indictment, originally filed in April, was made public because of Thaci and Veseli's "repeated efforts to obstruct and undermine" the work of the SPO and the KSC, according to the SPO press statement.

The publication of the indictment came just ahead of scheduled talks between Thaci and Vucic in Washington, under the patronage of Donald Trump. He is looking for a fast deal between Serbia and Kosovo to boost chances of re-election in November by presenting himself as a world peace broker, several media think. According to rumours spread in the last months, Trump would support a land swap between Serbia and Kosovo, through which Serbia would annex Serb-majority areas in northern Kosovo, while Kosovo would get Albanian-majority lands in southern Serbia.

The timing of the indictment seems strictly related to the land swap option. To Lisen Bashkurti, a university professor in Tirana, the Kosovar leader agreed to exchange the dissolution of the court with territorial concessions in favour of Serbia, with the US backing this option. Realizing this, the court decided to shield itself by making the indictment public, Bashkurti wrote in a comment for Eurasia Review.

Once he got the news of the indictment, Thaci cancelled his trip to Washington. No talks anymore and a blow to Donald Trump and Richard Grenell, the US envoy to the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue. The failure of their approach (just momentary or definitive?) gives the UE the chance to retake the initiative. Yet Brussels should look for instruments and incentives other than accession to the EU for Serbia and

a faster lane to get admission to international organizations for Kosovo because both are not enough anymore. A new scheme and a new method are required.

Meanwhile, former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army have vowed to protest against Thaci's indictment made by the international court, that is considered biased in Kosovo, as well as oriented to "rewrite history", to quote Thaci's words. The majority of Kosovo's citizens share veterans' view: a just war was fought in 1998-1999. Yet, many of them were children during the conflict or were even born after it. Around 40% of the population is under 25, making Kosovo the youngest nation in Europe. Young people in Kosovo are mainly interested in visas, jobs and good education. While respecting those who resisted to Milosevic's Serbia, they do not want to feel trapped in the past and in corruption. It is hard to think that they will answer a call to take streets to support Thaci and Veseli. However, if there will be large-scale demonstrations throughout the country, security issues could emerge and KFOR (approx. 4.000 troops) is taking into account also this possibility.

Matteo Tacconi

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