

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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Turkey in the Balkans: A march westward

By Andrei Isaev / International Affairs, July 6

The magazine of Russia's Foreign Ministry analysed Turkey's strategy for the Western Balkans. Inspired by the neo-ottoman doctrine launched by the former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu in 2009, the Turkish ambitious foreign policy in Europe's south-eastern corner aims at promoting a wide range of projects in fields like education, healthcare, culture, energy and infrastructure, in order to help the integration of the region in the Western-led structure, primarily NATO. The Turkish soft power has achieved good results, yet growing divergences between Ankara and Brussels have turned the EU-Turkey cooperation into competition, weakening Turkey's ambitions in the region. "*The West does not need Pax Ottomana in any form, while efforts to create it may in the long run can be a too heavy burden for the Turkish economy*", the author of the analysis, Andrei Isaev, wrote.

L'integrazione europea dei 'Balceni occidentali'. Il punto di vista degli attori

By Tatjana Sekulić / Cespi, July 20

The Italian think-tank CESPI posted a series of analysis focussing on EU's enlargement in the Western Balkans. In her contribution, Tatjana Sekulić, a researcher at Milano-Bicocca University, suggested that EU countries should sidestep a too geopolitical approach towards the Western Balkans. More bottom-up strategies are required, so that citizens of the Western Balkan countries, who still view Europeanisation as a positive factor, could improve their living standards.

A fork in the road for Serbia

By David I. Phillips / EU Observer, July 23

Talks between Serbia and Kosovo restarted after stalling for 20 months. While Kosovo's position is transparent (recognition by Serbia and EU visa-free regime for its citizens), Serbia's plan is less clear. The Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic plays a double game. On the one hand, he wants to benefit from EU economic assistance, but on the other hand, he flirts with Russia and China, and avoids recognising the neighbour as a sovereign state. Either he does it, "*or it will be excluded from Euro-Atlantic structures, left to fend for itself with anti-democratic rogue regimes*", argued David I. Phillips, the director of the program on peace-building and human rights at Columbia University, in a comment published by the EU Observer.

Bill Clinton pushed 'appeasement' of Serbs after Srebrenica massacre

By Julian Borger / The Guardian, July 26

The US president, with one eye on re-election, urged Bosnia's Muslim-led government to make territorial concessions in 1995, just after the Srebrenica massacre, declassified documents reveal. The Muslim-led government should have to accept less than half the country, and the US would consider "pressing the Bosnians to agree that the Serbs can conduct a referendum on secession after 2-3 years", an article published by The Guardian highlighted. The US proposal suggested a peaceful separation between Muslim-Croat territories and Serb-dominated regions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the basis of the so-called velvet divorce occurred in Czechoslovakia in 1993.

Kosovo Pushes Ahead with Law to Protect KLA's Reputation

By Xhorxhina Bami / Balkan Insight, July 30

Kosovo Parliament is supposed to pass soon a law on the Protection of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) War Values. "It forees the establishment of a War Museum, and the Day of Remembrance of the war that ended in 1999 with the withdrawal of Serbian forces following a prolonged NATO campaign", Balkan Insight reported. "So-called values of war include the KLA itself as an armed military formation, including its veterans, flag, soldier's oath, coat of arms, the General Staff, Political Directorate, Staffs of operational areas and archives".

The draft law, proposed by the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) in 2018, was pushed back in Parliament after that Hashim Thaci, the President of the Republic and founder of the PDK, was accused for war crimes by the Hague-based international court created to investigate alleged war crimes committed by KLA members. Thaci was the political leader of the guerrilla.

The bill, that appears as a tool to protect Thaci and former KLA members' reputation, was criticized by the US embassy. "It criminalizes free speech, intimidates citizens, and is costly", the US Ambassador to Kosovo, Philip Kosnett, told. He fears that under the law whoever will question KLA conduct might be prosecuted.

[Frustration und Staatsverdruss, Unwissen und Verschwörungstheorien – warum sich Covid-19 auf dem Balkan am Ende doch noch ausbreiten konnte](#)

By Jan Koneffke / Neue Zürcher Zeitung, August 1

When the pandemic broke out, governments in the Balkan region successfully imposed severe measures to contain the spread of the virus. Compared to Western Europe, the Balkans has had few positive cases and few victims in March-April 2020. Since then, the scenario has changed. Today, the Balkans are a hotspot. Weak trust in the state, ignorance and conspiracy theories made the region very vulnerable to the virus.

[Balkans : échec du projet européen, néolibéralisme et dérive autoritaire](#)

An interview with Fatos Lubonja / Le Monde diplomatique, via Courier des Balkans, August 1

Le Monde Diplomatique interviewed the Albanian leftist intellectual Fatos Lubonja, a former political prisoner in Communist Albania. Lubonja said that the Western Balkans have moved from Communist dictatorship to post-democracy, skipping a deep democratic transition based on liberal values and the rule of law. As a consequence, autocratic oligarchies have continued ruling the region in the last thirty years, and will likely solidify their grip on power, since liberal values are more and more questioned by neo-populist parties, that are gaining strength in Poland, Hungary and elsewhere in the EU. Hence, Brussels has growing difficulties in developing its democratic agenda in the Western Balkans. The interview was republished by Le Courier des Balkans.

[Fact-check: Has Montenegro's Government Kept its Promises?](#)

By Samir Kajosevic / Balkan Insight, August 3

There will be parliamentary elections in Montenegro on the 30th of August. The DPS-led government, in power since 1991, made many promises during the 2016 campaign. It said it would have improved economy, promoted good neighbourly relations with the other Balkan nations, developed infrastructures and fostered political dialogue with the opposition. Balkan Insight fact-checked that list of promises, discovering quite a lot of shortcomings.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

The pandemic: a further shock on the Balkans

The coronavirus pandemic represents a serious economic challenge for the Western Balkans, whose economies are already very fragile. The International Monetary Fund estimates that economies in the region will likely decrease by between 3% and 5% as a result of the crisis ignited by the virus.

The recessive economic trend can have a very serious social impact. According to a recent World Bank study, failing effective government measures, more than 400.000 people in the region could fall into poverty. Furthermore, the share of the middle and upper classes would shrink substantially, between 2% and 10% depending on the country and the length of the crisis.

Young talented people leave

The demographic crisis in the Western Balkans can just worsen, in such scenario. Slowly but steadily, many people have left the Western Balkans in the last years, or plan to leave it in the future. Emigration is particularly strong among young talented people. They look for better opportunities in Western Europe or, to a lesser extent, in North America. Germany is the most desirable country of destination, as the proliferation of German language classes throughout the region indicates.

The demographic crisis weakens at the same time the regional social-economic sustainability and worsens the democratic prospects. If young educated people – the future ruling class, in other words – leave, it will be harder to find a counterbalance to growing authoritarian trends in the last years. Hybrid regimes can live longer and this is one of the most worrying consequences of the pandemic..

A too long transition

The economic crisis caused by the coronavirus is a new stage of the long, unaccomplished transition in the Western Balkans. Almost thirty years have passed since the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, but most of its former republics are not members of the European Union yet. Just Croatia and Slovenia joined the club. Lack of jobs, innovation and infrastructures plague the region. The financial shock in 2006-2009 already exasperated the sense of being in a limbo, increasing existing frustrations.

The reasons for the 30-year crisis in the Western Balkans are both endogenous and exogenous. On the one hand, the ruling classes have failed in promoting radical reforms aimed at eradicating corruption, introducing effective free-market rules and strengthening the rule of law. On the other hand, the European Union has not delivered enough results in terms of political integration. Since the financial turmoil in 2006-2009, the EU has faced unprecedented threats in terms of economic cohesion and

political governance. Thus the enlargement process was low on EU's list. The pandemic puts further pressures on the EU, but it cannot be a new excuse to keep the enlargement out of the core focus. The EU still is by far the first commercial partner and investor in the Western Balkans, yet this is not a reassuring and stabilising factor anymore.

The message that Brussels has sent to the Western Balkans in recent years has been too ambivalent. Time has come to act with renewed determination to integrate the Western Balkans. The new enlargement methodology launched by Brussels seems to go in this direction, although the effectiveness of the process will ultimately depend on the political will of both the EU and Western Balkans countries more than on technical provisions, of course.

North Macedonia's fragmented post-electoral scenario

Parliamentary elections in North Macedonia, held the 15th of July, produced a highly fragmented result. The Social Democratic Party (SDSM), the built the 'We Can' coalition together with BESA, a small Albanian party, won the largest share of vote (35,89%), securing 46 seats in the 120-seat parliament. Zoran Zaev, the SDSM leader and incumbent Prime Minister, is supposed to get a mandate to hold talks to form a coalition. President Stevo Pendarovski's decision is expected in few days.

'Renewal', a coalition made of VMRO DPMNE, the main right wing opposition party, and some ethnic parties representing Turkish, Serbian and Roma minorities, came second with 34,57% (44 seats).

Among the Albanian minority, accounting for 25% of the country's population, the race for dominance was won by the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), led by Ali Ahmeti. It took 11,48% (15 seats), followed by ASh-Alternativa (8,95%, 12 seats) and the Democratic Party of Albanians (1,53%, two seats).

In the new Parliament there will be also two MPs of the left-wing party Levica, which got 4,1%. The party platform insists on social rights and opposition to NATO, seen as a symbol of the West-led imperialism.

What coalition?

Likely, Zaev will try to renew cooperation with DUI, that has been the junior party in the previous government. Some media speculate on a secret deal between SDSM and DUI, under which DUI will appoint the prime minister in the fourth and last year of the government mandate. It would be an unprecedented move, with unclear consequences, considering how the echo of the Albanian insurgency in 2001 still incites divisions in the society. Furthermore, this option could be strongly opposed by BESA, that accuses DUI members of being corrupted. For its part, DUI criticizes Bilal Kasami, BESA chairman, for having joined forces with SDSM. No other Albanian party had ever signed a coalition deal with a Macedonian political group since independence (1991). Kasami's move weakened Albanian interests in North Macedonia, Ali Ahmeti remarked during the campaign.

A SDSM-DUI coalition would have only 61 seats. Perhaps, Zaev and Ahmeti would need a third partner in the Parliament to make the government more stable and foster a pro-West agenda. For the moment other Albanian parties seem unwilling to cooperate with DUI so far, while Levica, due to its anti-NATO stance, does not appear as a reliable ally.

If Zaev will fail to form the new government, VMRO DPMNE will take the initiative. Yet, it would face even more difficulties to build a coalition. To reach a 61-MPs majority it would need a deal with two parties, at least.

VMRO DPMNE credibility was badly damaged by the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, fled to Hungary to avoid a trial for corruption. Nepotism, authoritarianism and nationalism emerged during his decade in office (2006-2016). Despite this, Hristijan Mickoski, the current leader of the party, successfully managed to avoid an electoral collapse, losing only 3% compared to previous elections.

The former Yugoslav republic held its first parliamentary elections after it solved the longtime dispute with Greece and turned its name into North Macedonia. This turning point paved the way to NATO membership, achieved in March, as well as to the opening of EU accession talks, once France's resistance was overcome.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has become the main topic of the campaign.

If VMRO DPMNE will take the power back, it could exploit the health emergency to promote authoritarian policies, as Viktor Orban and Aleksandar Vucic did in Hungary and Serbia, some observers think.

To keep the focus on Covid-19, it should be underlined that the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has been reproached for having held the vote in July despite the growing number of infections in the country. He put electoral needs – capitalizing NATO membership and the forthcoming opening of EU accession talks – before people's health, Zaev's opponents argued.

Urban-rural and other rifts

The July 15 vote confirmed the urban-rural divide, as well as regional, ideological and ethnic electoral polarising lines. SDSM dominated the urban vote, scored better results in the southwestern electoral districts and received the endorsement of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats. VMRO DPMNE performed well in rural areas and northeastern regions and was supported by Viktor Orban. Both parties did not succeed to attract Albanian voters, who once again massively placed their trust in Albanian parties.

Another difference between SDSM and VMRO DPMNE concerns the approach to NATO membership and the European perspective. Zaev promotes a policy of full integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures, driven by liberal-democratic values, while Mickoski, even if he supports both NATO membership and the opening of EU accession talks, blames Zaev for sacrificing national sovereignty.

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