

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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[Don't Blame Balkan Citizens For the Latest COVID Surge](#)

By Florian Bieber / Balkan Insight, August 12

Florian Bieber, Director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, looks at the growing number of Covid-19 cases in the Western Balkans, writing that “*the challenge in fighting the pandemic arises from a combination of top-down restrictive measures in a context of low trust between state and citizens and a high level of polarization*”. Therefore, “*it is short-sighted to blame the sharp increase in COVID-19 cases in the Western Balkans only on irresponsible citizens, or on some proverbial Balkan mentality, as many leading politicians have done*”.

[The Balkans are getting short of people](#)

The Economist / August 20

Demographic crisis is a serious problem in the Western Balkans, maybe the most serious one. The printed version of The Economist investigates it, explaining that the trend depends on emigration and low fertility. “*In the past, populations in the Balkans grew back after waves of emigration, since many women had six children. Now few have more than one*”, the British weekly tells. “*In the short run governments do not mind emigration because it lowers unemployment and increases remittances from abroad, but in the long run the demographic decline is catastrophic*”. The region “*will not catch up with the rest of Europe without young, talented people to generate prosperity*”.

[Restoring America's Role](#)

By Visar Xhambazi / Visegrad Insight, August 24

Visar Xhambazi, a policy researcher at Democracy for Development (D4D), tries to foresee how the US approach to the Western Balkans would change if Joe Biden won presidential elections in November. “*A Biden presidency could counterbalance Russia and China's influence by ensuring that EU integration for the remaining Balkan states is on track*”, writes the researcher. As for Serbia-Kosovo talks, “*Biden is aware*

that finalising a deal will pave the way for sustainable cooperation and development in the region. A solution to the so-called Gordian Knot of the Balkans will not be found in a matter of weeks. Quick foreign policy deals, such as the one that Trump and US envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue Richard Grenell have been pushing for, are not sustainable. Biden is committed to maintaining US involvement in the region and will choose a credible envoy; someone who is experienced in the Balkans or has the relevant negotiating skills.”

Why the EU’s Balkan Expansion Faces a Long and Winding Road

By Misha Savic / Bloomberg, August 26

In an eight-point analysis, Misha Savic, a Bloomberg journalist with an expertise on South-eastern Europe affairs, provides a good glimpse on the European integration process in the Western Balkans. Citizens still largely support EU integration, but it is hard to achieve any new enlargement before 2025, Savic writes. He also stresses that *“accepting the nations into the EU would help insulate the region from the influence of Russia, China and Turkey, which have interests in deepening their footholds on the bloc’s doorstep”*.

As Serbia strengthens ties with West, Russia seeks to destabilize

By Jelena Milic / New Eastern Europe, September 3

Jelena Milic, the director of Center of Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS), argues that Serbia’s citizens endorse the government’s attempt to intensify ties with the USA. It is supported by 65% of citizens, a CEAS public opinion poll highlights. *“These renewed efforts are not just Vučić’s attempt to manipulate the West, as some baselessly and tendentiously suggest, but rather are concrete, constructive steps that illustrate Serbia’s goal of moving towards the West and is genuine, despite huge obstacles”*, Milic writes. Russia is one of these obstacles. It exercises influence through energy (Moscow de facto controls Serbia’s energy sector), disinformation campaigns and other means, Milic underlines. Yet, *“over the last several years Serbia has managed to significantly reduce some of the damaging Russian influence”*, Milic observes, adding that strengthening Serbia-USA relations would be an opportunity also for the EU. *“Unfortunately, improving relations with the US is perceived as a zero-sum game by Brussels, rather than a win-win scenario for all parties”*.

**Focus / Serbia-Kosovo economic deal in Washington*

Wie Trump sich als Vermittler auf dem Balkan inszeniert

By Michael Martens / Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, September 6

The South-eastern Europe correspondent for the German daily criticizes the US envoy for Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, Richard Grenell. “*He has underlined that his goal was the economic rapprochement between the two countries, so that ordinary people can live a better life*”, but relations with Israel, efforts to decriminalize homosexuality, blacklisting Hezbollah and banning 5G technology, are points of the Serbia-Kosovo deal that “*are not directly related to Grenell’s goal of creating jobs in the region*”.

Trump e i Balcani: il non-accordo tra Kosovo e Serbia

By Giorgio Fruscione / Ispi, 7 settembre 2020

Announced with great fanfare, agreements for normalizing economic relations signed by Serbia and Kosovo in Washington on the 4th of September do not mark any astonishing improvement on the ground, signals Giorgio Fruscione, a research fellow at ISPI, a Milan-based think tank.

Road and railway connections, a common crossing point on the border and the accession to the so-called “Schengen mini-zone” promoted by Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia are the only points in the document that “*can contribute, timidly, to the normalization of economic relations between the two countries*”, Fruscione observes.

To him, the real winner of the meeting is Donald Trump. The Serbia-Kosovo deal reinforces his doctrine for the Middle East, since the document foresees that Serbia will move to Jerusalem its embassy to Israel and that Kosovo and Israel will agree on mutual recognition. As for mutual recognition between the two Balkan countries, it was not discussed in Washington, despite rumours in the previous months indicated that the US diplomacy was working behind the scenes for this goal.

Trump's calculations behind Serbia-Kosovo deal

CGTN / September 7

“Improving economic cooperation and easing decades-long tensions are what these two Balkan rivals care about. But they are pressured to agree on Washington-proposed Israel plan, of which they may not have been aware of until signing the agreement”, the Chinese state-owned network stresses, saying that “the U.S.’ role as a mediator between Serbia and Kosovo is more driven by its domestic politics than its international obligations. The U.S. was seeking its private political gains in brokering Serbia-Kosovo deal – the country pushed Kosovo to recognize Israel and Serbia to move its embassy to Jerusalem”.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

Montenegro on the verge of change?

The elections in Montenegro, held on the 30th of August, marked a major political disruption. The Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), in power since 1991 and headed by Milo Djukanovic, the former Prime Minister, now President of the Republic, lost the majority in the unicameral Parliament. DPS obtained 30 seats out of 81 seats in Skupstina, as the chamber is named. Counting on parties representing ethnic minorities, its traditional allies, DPS can reach 40 seats, falling short of majority.

Three coalitions could join forces to form a government: For the Future of Montenegro (27 seats); Peace is Our Nation (10 seats); Black on White (5 seats). Together, they have 41 seats in the Parliament: a very thin margin. The leading coalition “For the Future of Montenegro” is led by the Democratic Front, a party considered pro-Serbia and pro-Russia, accused by DPS of having masterminded an alleged attempted coup in 2016 to hijack Montenegro’s accession to NATO, achieved in 2017. Peace is Our Nation is a liberal civic tent. Black on White, finally, is a progressive green alliance promoted by the URA (United Reform Action - Građanski Pokret Ujedinjena reformska akcija) party.

Different political orientations among winning parties can make coalition talks hard, yet the three blocs seem determined to capitalize on the momentum in order to end the DPS hegemony. According to media reports, they vowed to maintain NATO membership and confirm the commitment to European integration, putting a strong emphasis on restoring the rule of law in the country, which appears to be their primary goal. All of them argue that Montenegro, during the DPS long-time dominance, has been plagued by corruption, nepotism and opaque links between politics and business. Time for dismantling this “state within a state” and restoring citizens’ trust in public institutions has come, they say.

As for the composition of the cabinet, the posts of Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior should go to members of the winning parties, while other ministries could be distributed so that also the civil society could be involved in the process of change.

There are rumours that the new government, if formed, could activate a vetting process of DPS officials, including Djukanovic, for wrongdoings committed in the past. This could be a risky choice, exacerbating tensions in the country: DPS still has a strong popular support. Furthermore, Djukanovic has the constitutional power to appoint the Prime Minister: he could trade the appointment with a formal guarantee that the vetting process will not be implemented, some observers suggest.

Meanwhile, Djukanovic and his party are telling that the new government will revolutionize the course of Montenegro's foreign policy, aligning with Serbia and Russia, jeopardizing the Euro-Atlantic path followed since 2006, the year in which Montenegro held a referendum to leave the state union with Serbia.

DPS plans to polarize the public opinion – a potentially counterproductive move – and try to split the majority, shortening its life. For this reason, the three coalitions are supposed to convince parties representing ethnic minorities to join the new parliamentary majority. Not an easy task: DPS has a strong influence on them.

While the political future of Montenegro is still uncertain, reasons of Djukanovic's historic defeat are rather clear. Firstly, a border controversy with Serbia, whose citizens were banned from travelling to Montenegro due to the Covid-19; secondly, a bill threatening to strip the Serbian Orthodox Church – the main church in the country – of its holdings, disappointed many citizens and believers. The two moves were perceived as too hostile towards Serbia and the Serbs. Language, history, religion and mixed families cement ties between the two countries. Serbia is a complicate neighbour, but for many Montenegrins is not an enemy. [For a wider glimpse on Serbia-Montenegro confrontation, please go to our May 2020 Strategic Trends.](#)

Thirdly, a recent Freedom House report underlined a democratic backsliding in the country, while the EU Commission signalled very little progresses in key areas, like justice, media freedom and the fight against organized crime that are crucial in the context of accession negotiations, ongoing since eight years. Frustration for political stagnation has grown among people, who had already expressed their deep dissatisfaction for DPS's ruling last year, organizing mass protests. Perhaps, DPS has underestimated this aspect.

Italy in the Balkans: the presence and the essence

International media and think tanks, including the NDCF, have published numerous analyses over the last years explaining how global and regional powers are exerting influence in the Western Balkans. With higher or lower ambitions, through economy, specific policies and prestige, the USA, Germany, France, Russia, China, Turkey and even Hungary are playing a game in the region. What about Italy?

Italy is comparatively less relevant in the last years in the Western Balkans, despite having an important role, due to a mix of important factors:

- Since 2013, Italy holds the command of KFOR, the international NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Kosovo.
- It is a member of the Quint for Kosovo, alongside the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany.
- It is one of the main investors and trade partners for the region (the first trade partner for Albania and the second one for Serbia).
- It hosts and co-steers two important cross-regional initiatives: the Central European Initiative (CEI) and the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII), based in Trieste and Ancona respectively. It should be noted that the AII, created in 2000, had advocated the Europeanization of the Balkan countries before the EU Council, gathered in Thessaloniki in 2003, solemnly endorsed the European integration for the post-Yugoslav countries and Albania.
- It has a great moral prestige stemming from the remarkable humanitarian efforts made during wars in the Nineties by the government and NGOs alike.

The Western Balkans are experiencing one of the toughest phases since the end of the war in the Nineties. A democratic backsliding has emerged throughout the region. The central power is becoming more and more authoritarian, curbing media freedom and citizens' rights, highlighting how this process could affect regional political rivalries. And then there is the demographic collapse: a growing number of young talented people leave because due to a severe lack of opportunities. The coronavirus pandemic could worsen both trends.

In such scenario, Italy's role would be crucial. On the one hand, the country's historic role as dialogue-broker could contribute in cooling down regional tensions (as well as disputes between Washington and Brussels over the management of Serbia-Kosovo talks). On the other hand, Italy's economic potential,

despite a long period of stagnation, could still help the Western Balkans to stabilize their economic environment and avoid mass emigration, a big threat for future socio-economic sustainability.

Among EU countries, attempts to give a new impetus to the European strategy for the region have been made, primarily, by Germany and France. Germany promoted the so-called Berlin Process, an initiative aimed at improving regional cooperation, fostering economic growth and strengthening civil society's involvement in the decision-making process. The French President, Emmanuel Macron, strongly pushed for a recent rethinking of the EU enlargement mechanisms, now much more focussed on political criteria, especially a stricter respect for the rule of law: a consequence of the democratic regression in the Western Balkans.

Reasons behind Italy's lesser clout are different: a listless political élite, a media landscape that has lost the focus on the Western Balkans, a geopolitical and economic stagnation. Italy has diplomatic resources and political capital to be back in the game and contribute with a renewed proactive approach to fix the Western Balkans, provided it finds an appropriate focus.

Matteo Tacconi

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