

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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[Seizing the democratic opportunity in Montenegro](#)

By Florian Bieber and Jovana Marovic / European Politics and Policy Blog, September 8

Florian Bieber, Director of the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, and Jovana Marovic, Executive Director of the Politikon Network in Montenegro, analyse the consequences of Montenegro's elections on the 30th of August, that paved the way for a change in power, ending the near 30-year-rule of Milo Dukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). According to the authors, there are reasons for hope. Firstly, the new majority in the Parliament, formed by three former opposition parties, "*refrained from polarising the situation further and called for calm*" to avoid a chaotic transition of power. Secondly, they renewed the commitment for NATO membership, achieved in 2017, and for joining the EU. Thirdly, they are trying to involve national minorities in the process leading to the formation of the new government. However, there are also possible uncertainties. **MPs of the winning parties "might be tempted to be bought or co-opted by the DPS to switch sides" for example, the authors stress.** Furthermore, "*they might attempt to use clientelism and nepotism in the same way the DPS had done for decades to get their share and instead of dismantling state capture, may appropriate it instead*".

[Trump's Balkan Deal Prompts Cautious Optimism on the Ground](#)

By Bojan Pancevski and Laurence Norman / The Wall Street Journal, September 9

The article focusses on how the US can implement strategies to make the recent Serbia-Kosovo agreement to normalize economic relations effective. Everything rests "*on the promise of cheap U.S. loans and development aid aimed at unlocking private investment and spurring growth by financing strategic infrastructure projects and businesses*", the article indicates. As for the total amount that the US are supposed to invest through the International Development Finance Corporation, the Export-Import Bank of the United States and the Millennium Challenge Corporation, the agreement does not provide specific indications. Yet, "**Kosovo's government said it expected over \$2 billion in financing**", the Financial Times reports.

[As hospitals fill, Kosovo battles plague of virus deniers](#)

By Ismet Hajdar / AFP, September 11

Although Kosovo has one of the highest Covid-19 death rates in Europe, filling hospitals and pushing the health systems to the verge of collapse, many citizens do not recognize the risks posed by the pandemic. **A recent public opinion poll “found that a third of the Kosovo population did not believe the virus was real, while 61 per cent said COVID-19 was less risky than described by authorities and media”**, AFP reports. People’s scepticism is a huge problem for the government as it tries to enforce measures to face such critical situation; not even the initiative of filming patients in sealed hospitals seems to have dented widespread denial.

[Bregu: Western Balkans cannot lose another decade marked with new instabilities](#)

By Sofija Popovic / European Western Balkans, September 12

Interview by European Western Balkans, the Secretary-General of the Regional Cooperation Council, Majlinda Bregu, emphasizes **results achieved through Green Corridors, an initiative aimed at smoothing flow of goods during the first phase of the coronavirus pandemic in the Western Balkans**. Bregu points out that Green Corridors have secured flow of goods, especially food, medicines and medical equipment within the region and between the region and the EU, shortening time and procedures required to cross 14 border-crossing points amongst the Western Balkan economies and 18 with the EU member states. Asked if such a border-crossing regime can continue outside the context of coronavirus, she said she hopes that *“with the decrease of health risk posed by the coronavirus, borders will be opened slowly and permanently, as closed borders are of use to no one”*. That way, Bregu stresses, the Western Balkans *“can survive as a market and be more trustful and interesting for foreign investors, which means more economic growth and job creation”*.

Diplomacy is not “The Apprentice”. Serbia-Kosovo issue requires a long-term commitment

By Leon Hartwell / *New Eastern Europe*, September 15

Leon Hartwell, a researcher at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), compares Donald Trump’s foreign policy to the TV series “The Apprentice”, which found in the current US President its main host for years. **Hartwell criticizes Trump saying he wanted the agreement between Serbia and Kosovo only to obtain immediate benefits in the presidential election campaign**, presenting himself as a global peace-broker. Yet, the researcher emphasizes that diplomacy “is *part of an intricate process that requires diplomats to take a long-term perspective*”. Furthermore, Trump’s approach to Serbia-Kosovo frozen conflict contradicts the US long-term and bipartisan view that US-EU cooperation is key to solve the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo. Instead, Trump perceives the EU a competitor more than an ally, Hartwell argues.

Is there a terrorism threat in the Balkans?

By Harun Karcic / *Daily Sabah*, September 18

Over the last years, Bosnian-Serb and Bosnian-Croat politicians have constantly described Bosnia and Herzegovina, their own state, as a dysfunctional state with weak and chaotic institutional balance. They have also pointed out that Bosnia and Herzegovina is a safe haven for radical Islamic groups, even for terrorists, the journalist Harun Karcic explains in a comment published by the Turkish daily newspaper. **“It is a paradoxical situation where some of the highest-ranking Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat politicians accuse their own country of being a failed state prone to terrorism and openly call for its dissolution”**, Karcic writes. It is true – he points out – that there are hundreds of Muslims adhering to Salafi or Wahhabi interpretations of Islam, as well as dozens of young Muslims who have joined Daesh in the Middle East battlegrounds. However, following Salafism “*does not translate to joining a terrorist group*”, and those radical fighters returned home “*faced hefty prison sentences*”. Thus, Bosnian-Serb and Bosnia-Croat politicians’ views, often backed from politicians in Belgrade and Zagreb, are over-exaggerated. “*They continue pushing the plot because they see it as an effective tool in pursuing their unfinished war against Bosnia-Herzegovina and its majority Muslim population by retroactively justifying crimes their forces committed*”, during war in BiH in the Nineties. “*It is also a useful smokescreen to camouflage Serbia’s and Croatia’s irredentist aspirations toward Bosnia-Herzegovina’s territory*”, Karcic thinks.

Russia's New Cold War in the Western Balkans

By Edina Bećirević / Institute for War & Peace Reporting, September 21

Edina Bećirevic, Professor of Security studies at the University of Sarajevo, has a different view of recent political developments in Montenegro. Since the coalition of three political blocs “*is overwhelmingly pro-Russian*”, she writes in a comment posted by the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, **“it takes a certain level of naivety or political hypocrisy to accept the win by these parties as a celebration of democracy”**. To her, the new government could “*end 30 years of reformist, Euro-Atlantic oriented leadership*”. This could have a relevant geopolitical impact in the whole region, giving Moscow the chance to blow on ethno-nationalism and “*invest in the destabilisation of the Western Balkans*”. The next test could be November local elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia works to prevent the country’s accession to NATO by supporting the Serbian member of the tripartite presidency, Milorad Dodik, who “*continues to use an anti-NATO narrative and repeat that the status of Kosovo should be tied to that of Republika Srpska*”, Edina Bećirevic highlights.

In Serbia, China's Digital Silk Road Might Be in Trouble Very Soon

By Vuk Vuksanović / The Diplomat, September 23

Vuk Vuksanovic, a Ph.D. researcher in international relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), looks at the consequences of the ban on 5G technologies included in the recent deal, brokered by the USA, for normalizing economic relations between Serbia and Kosovo. There is no doubt that the ban referred to the Chinese tech giant Huawei, “*and that it targets Serbia, which has a partnership with Huawei*”, Vuksanovic stresses. **“Huawei established a strong presence in Serbia, giving Belgrade a special place on what is called the Digital Silk Road”**, he notices, explaining that a public auction for the 5G spectrum in the country will be held during the first quarter of 2021. Thus, Serbia faces a dilemma. “*For Serbia and Vucic, Trump might be the best bet to get a less painful settlement to the Kosovo dispute*”, but a “*decision to remove Huawei from its telecommunications system will cost a much larger and wealthier 2 billion British pounds.*” For the moment, Serbia is buying time. Yet, “*if Washington decides to lash out against Huawei with economic sanctions, Belgrade’s technological partnership with Huawei is dead, and so is the Balkan route of the Chinese Digital Silk Road*”.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

Balkans: the new enlargement method

In October 2019, the French President Emmanuel Macron vetoed the opening of the EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. His decision disappointed Tirana and Skopje, as well as some EU governments. Both the candidate countries had met Europe's requests to push the European perspective forward. In January 2019, the Parliament in Skopje voted a constitutional reform to implement the name change agreed with Greece in accordance to the Prespa Agreement, thus ending a thirty-year long dispute. As for Albania, it has embarked on a comprehensive judicial reform in the last years, which finds its pillar on the vetting process for judges. Results are not excellent so far, yet such a change – not easy to digest – shows Tirana's commitment to stick to the EU path.

Macron's veto depended on multiple factors. First, it reflects France' traditional posture towards enlargement, driven by scepticism. Second, the democratic backsliding observed in the Western Balkans in the last years made Macron think that candidate countries, once in the bloc, could challenge Europe's core values while being hugely funded by EU money, as Poland and Hungary are doing. Third, Macron did want to re-launch France's initiative in the Western Balkans after years of vacuum.

Paris proposed to change the enlargement methodology to revoke the veto over EU accession talks for Skopje and Tirana. In February, the European Commission drafted a new strategy to rearrange the enlargement strategy, subsequently backed by the EU Council, which in March gave the green light to the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. As the Council remarked, "*reinvigorate the accession process by making it more predictable, more credible, more dynamic*" is the main goal of the renewed methodology. Previously based on a chapter-by-chapter approach, it now regroups the 35 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* in six clusters¹ and lies on four principles.

The first principle is *credibility*. The European perspective has slowed down over the last years. Candidate countries have not implemented crucial reforms, while the EU has postponed the enlargement, sending mixed messages to the Western Balkans. The new methodology seeks to reignite mutual trust. "*Candidate countries need to deliver on the reforms they promised, and EU needs to deliver when they do*", the EU Commission summarizes.

¹ 1) Fundamentals, including rule of law; (2) Internal market; (3) Competitiveness and inclusive growth; (4) Green agenda and sustainable connectivity; (5) Resources, agriculture, and cohesion; (6) External relations.

The second principle is a *stronger political steer*. It foresees the organization of high-level meetings and a greater involvement of EU member countries in the process. They can block negotiations in case candidate countries do not comply with the enlargement criteria. This passage has been criticized since it could give national governments, more than EU as a whole, the right to freeze talks.

The third principle is the above-mentioned process of *regrouping chapters in six clusters*. If reforms are fulfilled a whole pillar can be opened, and remain so during the whole negotiation process. The strongest focus is on the first cluster, centred on the rule of law, fundamentals and good administration. If there will not be enough progresses on these fields, no other clusters could be discussed.

The emphasis on fundamentals of democracy and good governance unambiguously reflects the EU growing concern for the state of democracy in the WB6, which are still experiencing serious delays and contradictory results in these areas, as confirmed by the 2020 edition of “Nations in Transit”, a Freedom House report on democracy in Eastern Europe issued on yearly basis. It downgraded Serbia and Montenegro from semi-consolidated democracies to hybrid regimes.

Finally, the fourth pillar: *predictability*. It means granting incentives in case of reforms achieved, but also imposing sanctions in case of non-compliance. Inducements and pressure.

The adoption of the new strategy was followed in March, as said, by the green light for opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Instead, Serbia and Montenegro, which had already begun talks, have to adapt the old model to the new one. Whether the new enlargement strategy will work or not, depends both on WB6 and their ability to deliver reforms and on the EU member states, that have to show a credible commitment, without further hesitations, to keep the door open for the its southeaster neighbours.

Another historic Balkan agreement?

The USA-mediated agreement to normalise economic relations between Serbia and Kosovo, signed in Washington on the 4th of September, produced mixed reactions. The US President, Donald Trump, declared it a “*historic agreement*” that will put an end to decades of troubled relations, stirred by the war fought by the two Balkan nations in 1998-1999. However, several analysts think that Trump’s vision is too optimistic. Main points included in the document – commitment to build shared infrastructures or to join the still non-existent “mini-Schengen” – are just declarations of intent, without specific implementation details.

Beside this, the agreement pushes Serbia and Kosovo to align with some Trump’s foreign policy goals. Serbia has to move its Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, while Kosovo and Israel will establish diplomatic relations, siding with the White House doctrine on the Middle East. Furthermore, Belgrade and Pristina agreed to join the US global campaign to decriminalize homosexuality (perceived as move to weigh political pressure on Iran), forbid 5G technologies (a China’s penetration tool in Europe) and diversify sources for energy supply, a shield to counter Russia’s dominance in the Serbian gas sector and in the whole Europe. At the same time, the US administration tries to increase exports of US shale gas to the Old Continent.

The EU reaction to the US re-engagement in Serbia-Kosovo dialogue has not been enthusiastic in a first stage. Brussels, which has been mediating between the two countries in the last ten years in order to normalise political relations (and paving the way for mutual recognition), has felt side-lined by the US renewed attention for the Serbia-Kosovo puzzle. For many pundits it also coincides with Trump’s attempt to boost his chance at US presidential elections on the 4th of November by portraying himself as a global peace-broker.

Jelena Milic, the director of the Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies (CEAS), a Belgrade-based think tank, tells that the EU should not be disappointed. In her view, the agreement signed in Washington signals a strategic reorientation pursued by Aleksandar Vucic, the Serbian President, who has realized that Serbia should reduce its political dependence on Russia and lean towards the West, a process that can provide benefits to the entire Balkan region. They EU should understand that Serbia’s “*improving relations with the US is a win-win scenario for all parties*”, Milic wrote in a recent article published by New Eastern Europe.

After some hesitation, Brussels now is trying seize the opportunity to exert a double pressure on Belgrade to diminish its ties with Moscow. In the aftermath of the resumption of the EU-facilitated dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, on the 7th of September in Brussels, Belgrade announced that it quitted the annual war games with Russia and Belarus, codenamed Slavic Brotherhood, taking place since 2015. The minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin publicly said that Belgrade received “*terrible and undeserved*” pressure from the EU.

Before a meeting with Vucic and Kosovo's Prime Minister, Avdullah Hoti, held on the 7th of September, the EU top diplomat and the envoy for Serbia-Kosovo talks, Josep Borrell and Miroslav Lajcak, issued a note recognizing that steps agreed in Washington "*could make a useful contribution to reaching a comprehensive and legally binding agreement on the normalisation of relations*". Yet, while discussing with the two Balkan politicians, they stressed that Kosovo and Serbia must align with Europe's foreign policy. Thus, Serbia should not move its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, neither Kosovo should open it there, because this clearly contradicts the EU vision of the two-state solutions for the Israeli-Palestine dispute. To sum up: a harmonized EU-US effort for relaxing Serbia-Kosovo relations is welcomed, yet it should not harm Europe's foreign policy. A message to Vucic and Hoti, as well as to Trump and Richard Grenell, the American diplomat behind the September 4 deal.

The EU-mediated dialogue restarted from the Brussels Agreement signed in 2013. It partly dismantled the so-called "Serbian parallel structures" in Serb-majority northern strip of Kosovo (police and justice were vaguely absorbed in Kosovo's state structures) and foresaw the creation of an Association of Serb-majority municipalities in order to give the Serbian minority a large administrative autonomy. However, a serious divergence has emerged between the Prime Minister, Hoti, and the President Hashim Thaci. While Hoti agrees to restart the dialogue on the basis of what arranged in 2013, Thaci made a U-turn, saying that establishing the Association of Serb-majority municipalities (that he supported in 2013) would be "*a serious and very dangerous mistake*", paving the way for creating a Serbian entity like the "*Republika Srpska in the territory of Kosovo*", similar to the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Thaci's changed view could be related to forthcoming presidential elections, scheduled in April 2021. The political atmosphere is warming up. The majority of Kosovo's population is against the creation of the Association of Serb-majority municipalities. Maybe Thaci plans to ride this sentiment to secure a second mandate. However, his bid could be stopped if the Specialist Prosecutor's Office for Kosovo (SPO), the Hague-based international body investigating on alleged war crimes during the war between Serbia and Kosovo, would confirm an indictment charging the Kosovar President with a range of war crimes connected to his role as political leader of the anti-Serb guerrilla in 1998-1999. Thaci has announced that he would resign should the indictment be confirmed.

Matteo Tacconi

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