

STRATEGIC BALKANS

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By Stephan Ozsvath / Deutsche Welle, November 3, 2020

The Austrian citizen with Albanian-Macedonia roots, responsible for the recent terrorist attack in downtown Vienna was sentenced to 22 months in prison early in 2019, after it emerged that he wanted to join ISIS. He then embarked in a de-radicalisation process, with the help of a local NGO. In an in-depth article on Islamic radicalism in Austria, Deutsche Welle told how **Austria has become a hub for jihadists, particularly from the Balkans and Chechnya**. Prisons are a primary source for radicalisation. The terrorist network in Austria mainly recruits jihadists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and the Sandjak, the Muslim-majority region in southern Serbia.

[Western Balkans commit to green agenda and regional common market at Sofia summit](#)

By Denitsa Koseva / BNE Intellinews, November 10

At the EU–Western Balkans annual summit held in Sofia on the 10th of November, the countries of the Western Balkans agreed to launch the Common Regional Market (CRM) to strengthen regional economic integration. **“They adopted an action plan for the period 2021–2024, which is based on the EU four freedoms”**, BNE Intellinews reported. Furthermore, the countries of the Western Balkans signed a declaration to commit themselves to climate neutrality, aligning with the EU green agenda. The summit held in Sofia, organized by the Bulgarian Government, is part of the Berlin Process, an initiative launched in 2014 by the German Government to foster the EU re-engagement in the Western Balkans and promote regional cooperation, which is key to the Europeanisation process.

[Is it end of an era in Kosovo?](#)

By Džibhat Aliju / Anadolu Agency, November 12, 2020

Facing an accusation of war crimes filed by the Kosovo Special Prosecutor’s Office, at the International Court based in The Hague, **the Kosovar President Hashim Thaci resigned on 5th November**. Thaci was the political leader of the pro-independence Kosovar Liberation Army during the war against Milosevic’s Serbia in 1998–1999. **His resignation opens a very uncertain scenario in Kosovo**, where presidential elections are due by early 2021. If Thaci is cleared, he can run for a second

term, otherwise his Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) will choose another candidate. In Kosovo, the President is elected by Parliament, that currently is very fragmented. If MPs fail to elect a new President, a distinct possibility, the Parliament will be dismissed and early elections will be called. ***“The dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, which was suspended for many reasons in previous years, runs the risk of being suspended again due to these possibilities”***, the author noted.

China goes granular: Beijing’s multi-level approach to the Western Balkans

By Vladimir Shopov / European Council on Foreign Relations, November 12, 2020

The uncertainty surrounding the region’s status, given the slowness of the EU’s enlargement process and the US’s reluctant re-engagement, has given China a chance to gain influence. Initially, Beijing focussed on big infrastructural projects, but now ***“is taking a multi-level approach designed to develop relationships and embed its influence across society, politics and the economy in the Western Balkans”***. A granular policy that provides China with *“the capacity to exploit differences between national policies, and ... harness local entrepreneurship to develop ties with it”*.

Hundreds gather for funeral of Serbia’s Patriarch Irinej

Al Jazeera, November 22, 2020

Al Jazeera reported on the state funeral of Irinej, patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church. He died of coronavirus, contracted days after attending the funeral of the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, Bishop Amfilohije, who also died from complications caused by the virus. When Irinej was appointed as Patriarch in 2010, after the death of his predecessor, Pavle, *“he was seen as relatively moderate and a compromise choice among factions within the church”*. Yet, throughout the years *“he maintained the hardline nationalist stance that the church developed during the wars that cleaved the Balkans in the 1990s”*, Al Jazeera wrote, remarking that ***Irinej strongly opposed Kosovo’s independence and kept insisting on “beliefs that the Serbs were historic victims of injustice”***. But Irinej was also a man of religious dialogue, dedicated to the reunification of Christian churches. ***“He was among the rare Serbian church dignitaries who openly called for improved ties with the Roman Catholic Church. He said the two churches should overcome historic differences”***, Al Jazeera underscored.

[‘Catastrophic’: Balkan healthcare overwhelmed by virus surge](#)

Associated Press/France 24, November 29, 2020

An Associated Press dispatch published by France 24 told how the second wave of **the coronavirus pandemic is pushing health structures in the Western Balkans to the brink of collapse**, “*in chaotic scenes reminding some medics of the region’s the 1990s wars*”. The current health crisis is closely tied to an acute problem affecting regional healthcare systems from many years: **the brain drain of doctors and nurses** heading to Western Europe to seek better opportunities and higher salaries. “*Even before the pandemic began, the Balkans had some of the lowest density rates of doctors in Europe, according to World Health Organization data*”, AP reported.

[Serbia rescinds Montenegro ambassador expulsion](#)

BBC, November 30, 2020

A diplomatic row broke out between Serbia and Montenegro in the last days of November. Montenegro accused the Serbian ambassador, Vladimir Bozovic, of “interfering in Montenegro’s internal affairs”, giving him 72 hours to leave. **The diplomatic spat was stirred by a historical controversy**. Serbia’s envoy described a decision by Montenegrin authorities in 1918 to unify with Serbia, as a liberation. The Montenegrin outgoing pro-West Government does not share this view. As a countermove, Serbia expelled the Montenegrin ambassador, Tarzan Milosevic, on Saturday, 28th of November. Yet, the Serbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabic, revoked the decision the day after, saying her country wanted to extend “the hand of cooperation and friendship” to Montenegro. **The expulsion of the Serbian ambassador was criticised by Montenegro’s incoming Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic**, who leads a coalition widely seen as warm towards Serbia. It defeated the current government in parliamentary elections in August. The transition of power is expected to be formalised in December.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

The aftermath of Dayton

On the 21st of November 1995, the Presidents of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia, Alija Izetbegovic, Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman, signed a peace deal at the US Air Force base in Dayton, Ohio, to end bloodshed and ethnic cleansing in war-torn Bosnia and Herzegovina and to recognize its territorial integrity. In addition, the Dayton Agreement gave the former Yugoslav republic a constitution, still in force.

The institutional architecture tailored for Bosnia and Herzegovina foresaw the establishment of two ethnic entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, made of Bosniak (Muslim) and Croat cantons, and the Republika Srpska, predominantly Serbian. The two entities, whose administrative borders and demographic balance reproduced frontlines and ethnic cleansing results, were granted large prerogatives at the expense of central institutions.

The Dayton Agreement was a necessary compromise to secure peace, but it also contained the roots of today's political dysfunctionality. The government and the national parliament are hostages to the lack of trust among main Bosniak, Serb and Croat parties, unwilling to affirm the principles of cohabitation and cooperation that would make central institutions effective and generate vital reforms to foster European integration. Their main goal is keeping power in their spheres of influence. One country, three Bosnias.

The Party of Democratic Action (SDA, Bosniak), the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD, Serb) and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ, Croat), the ethnic-nationalist parties that have dominated the political scene since the end of the war, adopt the same method to exercise hegemony in their constituencies. First, they keep war memories alive to perpetuate social divisions and, claiming to be the only guarantors of the communities' rights and interests. Secondly, through a predatory use of public resources, they have crafted political systems where privileges, benefits and even jobs depend on party loyalty.

Bosnia and Herzegovina lags behind its Balkan peers in the Europeanization process and it is affected by increasing social inequalities, high unemployment and a severe shortage of foreign direct investments. According to the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business, an index measuring business-friendly environment throughout the globe, Bosnia and Herzegovina ranks last among Eastern European countries. The growing number of talented Bosnians heading for Western Europe to seek better opportunities is a direct consequence of such poor socio-economic standards.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's stagnation can still be reversed. During this long post-war era, civil society has repeatedly staged protests against the inaction of the political élites, blaming them for depriving people of opportunities, decent salaries and acceptable living standards. Sometimes, these protests have prompted political upheavals, making civic-oriented or alternative parties score good results at both national and local level. A latest example was given by the recent municipal elections, held on 15th November. Opposition parties flipped some SDA and SNSD strongholds, Sarajevo and Banja Luka included. People's demand for change shows that there are still sparks of hope in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet this is not enough to dismantle the sources of power of the nationalist parties. The international community must step in.

The US and the EU, the main guarantors of Bosnia and Herzegovina's stability, have not been fully engaged in the last years to improve the situation. Biden's arrival might be a good chance to reassert a joint, coordinated US–EU effort for Bosnia and Herzegovina. In a recent [policy brief](#), the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) suggests that Washington and Brussels must exhort Bosnian politicians to amend the constitution to widen the powers of central government, the unavoidable condition to make the country work and produce reforms in fields like the judiciary, property and the fight against corruption — key to boosting the European integration process. However, a stronger government should not jeopardize the existence of the entities, the ECFR remarks, noting that the Bosnian Serbs, backed by Russia, would never accept this. Yet Russia, which has and must have a say in shaping Bosnia and Herzegovina's future, being part of the Peace Implementation Council (the body charged with implementing the Dayton Agreement), can be convinced to promote effective institutional reforms. It is not a mission impossible.

The Wilson Center, a Washington-based think tank, hopes for renewed US–EU action too, recommending a mechanism linking the disbursement of European funds to Bosnia and Herzegovina (and to the whole Western Balkan region) to the respect of the rule of law and transparency, limiting endemic corruption and cronyism.

As long as the weight of war memories still lasts, Bosnia and Herzegovina will not become a genuine multicultural country, but at least it can improve in terms of governance and political cooperation. A determined but non-aggressive external pressure is a crucial tool to drive the domestic change and encourage, indirectly, people who wish for a change. The 25th anniversary of the Dayton Agreement could represent an opportunity to begin to put Bosnia and Herzegovina back on the right track.

North Macedonia: the Bulgarian hitch

On November 17, Bulgaria vetoed the formal launch of EU accession talks with North Macedonia, the last of a series of blockades experienced over the years by the Balkan country, a NATO member since March.

The long-lasting name dispute with Greece ended since Skopje's 2018 accession to NATO and its bid to join the EU. Eventually, the Prespa Agreement, signed two years ago, paved the way for closing the controversy. The former Yugoslav nation changed its name to North Macedonia, Greece withdrew its veto and accession talks, which the EU Commission had recommended since 2009, could start.

However, French President Emmanuel Macron argued in October 2019 that any further EU enlargement must be based on a more effective mechanism for assessing the respect of the rule of law. Such posture stemmed both from the traditional French cautious approach to the enlargement (driven by voters' scepticism for newcomers) and the concern for how Hungary and Poland, once considered the champions of Europeanization, are departing from the EU's democratic principles. To Macron, any country wishing to join the EU must develop robust democratic practices before accession, in order to avoid authoritarian twists once in the bloc. The EU Commission revisited the enlargement strategy taking into account Macron's request; thus, the EU Council gave the green light to the opening of accession talks for North Macedonia.

Now Bulgaria hinders Skopje's path to the EU. Its veto comes as no a surprise. The Bulgarian Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov, had already warned he could trigger it because of unsolved cultural heritage and historical controversies between the two countries. Sofia demands that Skopje eliminates negative views on Bulgaria in textbooks (mainly stemming from Sofia's occupation of the current territory of North Macedonia during the Second World War), as well as references to the "Macedonian language" in official documents. "Official language of North Macedonia" is the form suggested by the Bulgarian Government, that claims that the Macedonian language derives from Bulgarian. Most of North Macedonians reject the neighbour's claims.

Although the Macedonian issue is sensitive for Bulgaria, Borisov's move is mainly driven by domestic political calculations. Recently, mass protests have been staged in Sofia against the Government, blamed for corruption and cronyism. Escalating the cultural clash with North Macedonia gives Borisov a leverage to regain voters' trust ahead of parliamentary elections in spring 2021. Recent public opinion polls indicate that most citizens approve the decision to veto EU accession talks for North Macedonia.

In Skopje, the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has adopted a conciliatory tone. He recently gave an interview to the Bulgarian news agency BGNES, suggesting that today it is unfair to insist so much on

Bulgarian Fascism during the Second World War, a view largely inherited from Yugoslav times. “*The new generations don’t know the entirety of this reality that must unite us,*” Zaev pointed out, adding that his government had removed some plaques on historical wartime monuments that contained the words “Bulgarian Fascist occupation,” [Balkan Insight reported](#). For his remarks, Zaev was strongly criticized by the nationalist opposition, as well as from members of his Social-Democratic Party and some historians.

Observers think that the diplomatic and cultural spat between Sofia and Skopje could be fixed during the current German Presidency of the European Union, lasting until December 2020. Berlin’s leadership on the EU is a very good opportunity, considering how German diplomacy has contributed to the positive end of the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia, as well as to giving a refreshed impetus to Europe’s commitment to the stability of the Western Balkans in the last years.

For sure, the bitter and paradoxical truth of this story is that the North Macedonian government, despite its proven commitment to keep the European perspective alive at all costs, finds a new undesired hurdle on the path to the EU: a blow to the credibility of the enlargement process.

Matteo Tacconi

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