

STRATEGIC BALKANS

Strategic Balkans – a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

PRESS REVIEW DECEMBER 2020



NATO Foundation
Defense College

Index

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: Albright Tells Congress Corruption ‘Crippling’ Western Balkans. Says U.S. needs to step up regional presence

BiEPAG: The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans

Transparency International: Captured States in Western Balkans and Turkey

Balkan Green Energy News: Platform Initiative launched to help energy transition of coal regions in Western Balkans, Ukraine

Frankfurter Rundschau: Flucht nach Europa: Kaltes, grausiges Spiel an der Grenze - EU schaut zu

Emerging Europe: Western Balkans to get coronavirus vaccine, courtesy of EU

Euronews: Heart-warming harmony as Balkan tensions set aside in Croatia’s hour of need after deadly earthquake

[Albright Tells Congress Corruption ‘Crippling’ Western Balkans, Says U.S. Needs To Step Up Regional Presence](#)

By Todd Prince / *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 9 December

Asked by the Congress to brief about the Balkan scenario, the former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, who served during the Clinton era, remarked that corruption is crippling the Western Balkans. “*In every country, leaders seem to regard political office as a source of patronage to stay in power. Addressing the so-called state capture and rooting out these influences must be a top priority for the US*”, she said. To her, the two main threats to stability in the Western Balkans are Serbia’s refusal to recognize Kosovo and Republika Srpska’s persistent attempts to erode Bosnia and Herzegovina’s sovereignty. Albright urged Washington to devote more attention to the strategically important region, also to counter Russian and Chinese influence, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported.

[The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans](#)

By Florian Bieber, Tena Prelec, Dejan Jovic and Zoran Nechev / *BiEPAG*, 11 December

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, a think tank devoted to support the Western Balkans’ effort to boost ties with the EU, issued a report about how citizens in the region perceive the coronavirus pandemic. Here are the main findings, as rounded up by the authors of the study:

*“As elsewhere, the Western Balkans have been affected by conspiracy theories, with doubts about government policies and trust in institutions emerging in light of the pandemic. The scale and implications of these theories are particularly strong. While in most of Europe COVID conspiracies are supported by a quarter to a third of the population, more than 75% of WB citizens surveyed believe in one or several of six COVID theories. Education, age and gender do not significantly impact these numbers. Instead, there is a geopolitical pattern, **where support for conspiracies often aligns with larger feelings about the USA and China.** Minorities, more vulnerable and often less trusting in the state, might be more susceptible to conspiracies. There is a direct link between support for conspiracy theories and scepticism towards vaccination. **A majority across the region does not plan to take the vaccine, a ratio considerably higher than elsewhere in Europe, where a majority favours taking the vaccine.** Conspiracy theories constitute a risk for public health in the Western Balkans and weaken trust in institutions and states, promoting a populist worldview that undermines democratic development”.*

[Captured States in Western Balkans and Turkey](#)

Transparency International, 11 December

Undue influence on the judiciary and on the law-making process are the two main factors driving the state capture in the Western Balkans and in Turkey, states Transparency International in an in-depth research on the unjustified expansion of the executive power which occurred in Europe's south-eastern periphery over the last years. As a consequence, *“powerful individuals and groups use corruption to shape a nation's policies, laws and economy to benefit their own private interests. It allows the corrupt to maintain their power, get rich from the state and avoid punishment”*, the authors of the report remark.

[Platform Initiative launched to help energy transition of coal regions in Western Balkans, Ukraine](#)

Balkan Green Energy News, 12 December

The World Bank, the European Commission, the Energy Community Secretariat, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the College of Europe (Natolin campus) and the Government of Poland teamed up to launch the Platform Initiative, a tool for stakeholders across the Western Balkans to share knowledge on all aspects of energy transition. **The aim of the project, which involves Ukraine too, is to accelerate the coal phase-out in order to adhere to Europe's roadmap for cutting emissions.** The Western Balkans and Ukraine are still heavily dependent on coal, both to produce energy and to heat households. Poland, one of the promoters of the initiative, still massively relies on coal, too. *“Transitioning away from coal, according to Poland, requires cooperation between coal regions in the EU and those in the Western Balkans and Ukraine”*, stressed Linda Van Gelder, Country Director for the Western Balkans Region at the World Bank, quoted in the article.

[Flucht nach Europa: Kaltes, grausiges Spiel an der Grenze - EU schaut zu](#)

By Adelheid Wolfl / *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 17 December

In a report from Bihac, the Bosnian town that has become the bottleneck of the so-called Balkan route in the last two years, the journalist Adelheid Wolfl told of the desperate lives of migrants trying to cross the border into Croatia, and then that between Croatia and Slovenia, heading to Italy. Croatia's police

beat migrants, pushing them back illegally, human rights activists claim. The reporter also highlighted how the presence of thousands of migrants, living in tents, shelters, in the forests and in IOM camps, one of which was set on fire recently, has sparked a growing sense of insecurity among the locals. Authorities in Bihac and in Una-Sana canton, where Bihac lies, are trying to solve the problem in the fastest and brutal way: pushing for relocating the migrants. They even forbid NGOs and private initiatives to reach migrants to provide help and food.

[Western Balkans to get coronavirus vaccine, courtesy of EU](#)

By Nikola Djordjevic / *Emerging Europe*, 28 December

Emerging Europe reports the EU Commission decision to provide a package worth 70 million euro to get early access to Covid-19 vaccines in the countries of the Western Balkans. In addition to the grants, the EU authorities will assist the region in finalising vaccination strategies in line with the Commission recommendations. “*With the countries of the Western Balkans already scrambling to procure enough doses of the various vaccines from as many different sources as possible, the EU’s move to share its first batch is welcome*”, the author states, assuming that Covid-19 vaccines, and the race to distribute them as fast as possible, are part of the geopolitical game in the region.

[Heartwarming harmony as Balkan tensions set aside in Croatia’s hour of need after deadly earthquake](#)

By Milivoje Pantovic / *Euronews*, 4 January

The legacy of deadly conflicts fought in the Nineties still divides politicians and citizens in the Western Balkans. Several towns in the region experienced heavy shelling and ethnic cleansing. Petrinja, the Croatian town recently hit by a devastating earthquake, is among these places. Once a Serb-majority town, it was captured by Croat-Serb separatists during the early stages of the war between Serbia and Croatia. The Croat population was kicked out. Then, the ethnic Serb majority was forced to leave in 1995 when the Croatian army launched a violent offensive to retake territories held by the separatists. War memories still divide the locals. Yet tensions have been put aside in the aftermath of Croatia’s earthquake. Solidarity prevailed, *Euronews* reported.

REGIONAL MONTHLY ANALYSIS

Wrapping up the Balkans

Finally, 2020 is over. It has been a tough and volatile year, whose trends have been mainly driven by the coronavirus pandemic, in the Western Balkans as well as elsewhere in Europe and in the world. The pandemic will also affect 2021, but indicating trends that will shape and shake the Western Balkans in the upcoming months would be extremely hazardous: the coronavirus is a too volatile a factor. Nevertheless, some trends emerged in 2020 and will continue influencing the Balkan chessboard in 2021, as the Strategic Balkans wrap up will show.

Some governments have exploited the pandemic to strengthen their grip on power by adopting controversial measures limiting people's rights and media freedom. Serbia, more than other countries, has been closely watched by analysts. Most of them stress that the President Aleksandar Vucic, the central character in Serbia's system of power, has used the pandemic to consolidate the enduring state capture process ongoing in the country for the last ten years. In our [April issue](#) we had a look at this topic.

However, despite the authoritarian posture of Vucic and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), we do think that Belgrade is not lost. On the backdrop of the June SNS overwhelming majority in parliament after general elections, the evaluation was:

“Serbia, the crucial Balkan country, negotiates its accession to the EU and takes part in 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 quote some examples. Furthermore, the EU is the main trade partner and investor in 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, which may come late but are key to Serbia's EU integration ([see more here](#))”.

The coronavirus also sparked harsh political disputes. In Kosovo, President Hashim Thaci manoeuvred to cause the collapse of the Albin Kurti government. Since the Strategic Balkans March analysis, the scenario has changed. Thaci resigned after the international court investigating war crimes in Kosovo accused him of having committed crimes against humanity during the 1998–1999 conflict between Serbian forces and Kosovo's guerrilla, which Thaci led. Furthermore, the Constitutional Court invalidated the procedure that allowed the formation of the current government, led by Avdullah Hoti, paving the way for snap elections. Albin Kurti, a nationalist with leftist views on economy, has a big chance to take back power.

In 2020 the big event was the US-mediated agreement for normalizing economic relations ([here you can find our analysis](#)), that triggered a diplomatic spat with the EU. With a new government in Kosovo and a new administration in Washington, some opportunities on this front might emerge. The cooperation between the US and EU could be revived, benefitting Bosnia and Herzegovina too, a difficult country as detailed in the [November ST edition](#).

“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 driving 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”.

In 2020 important developments impacted the Euro-Atlantic integration process. In March, North Macedonia achieved the prized accession to NATO, becoming its 30th member. As analysed in April ([see here](#)), *“for the tiny post-Yugoslav country, NATO could represent a source to strengthen the sense of nationhood, still not fully defined, but also a boost for foreign investments”*. North Macedonia expected to open EU accession talks too, but faced Bulgaria’s veto: a blow to the credibility of the enlargement process, [we stressed](#), considering how Skopje has fully committed to the European cause over the last years.

However, observers think that Bulgaria will lift the veto in 2021, enabling North Macedonia to open accession talks. It will be an important test for the new enlargement strategy, ardently envisaged by the French President, Emmanuel Macron. It has a much more solid political dimension, [as we explained here](#) (Strategic Trends, September issue), and it could re-energize Europe’s commitment to the stability and prosperity of the Western Balkans.

Yet there must be a strong political will to make the new enlargement methodology effective, as well as to win people’s trust in the European perspective. It is still robust, but the EU should not underestimate that among young people, who more and more leave the region due to a chronic lack of opportunities, worsened by the coronavirus crisis ([see our July analysis](#)), disappointment for how Brussels is managing the enlargement file is growing. In October we published a [piece](#) on grassroots movements in the region, an expression of this mounting frustration towards the EU approach in the Western Balkans. Below, our conclusion:

“Regardless of the path they will follow, it is wise for the EU to listen to these movements’ demands. They are an important radar to assess problems in the Western Balkans as well as to understand youth’s ambitions and hopes for a better future in a region where, unfortunately, more and more talented people are leaving due to a dramatic lack of opportunities. What’s more, paying growing attention to the grassroots movements could help the EU to change the narrative, shared by many activists, that sees Brussels legitimizing authoritarian regimes in exchange for regional stability, an approach trade that political scientists call ‘stabilocracy”.

Having taken into account also the role of Italy or Hungary in the region and also the consequences of the Brexit, the end of Milo Djukovanovic's DPS long tenure in Montenegro is another important, albeit fragile, sign of change, as analysed in the current Strategic Trend on the country.

A different Montenegro

The new Montenegrin Government, led by Zdravko Krivokapic, won a confidence vote in Parliament on Friday, 4th of December, opening a new political era in the tiny Balkan country. For the first time since 1991, it will not be ruled by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) led by Milo Djukanovic who emerged as a faithful ally of Slobodan Milosevic in 1991 and has been the master of Montenegro's politics for the last thirty years. He has served as both Prime Minister and President, the post he holds currently, and has shifted gradually to a pro-West stance that culminated with Montenegro's accession to NATO in 2017.

At parliamentary elections on 30 August, the DPS secured only 30 of the 81 seats of Montenegro's parliament. The winner was a coalition formed by three electoral alliances: For the Future of Montenegro, Peace is Our Nation and Black on White. The first one is led by the pro-Serbia Democratic Front (DF), the others are pro-EU and civic-oriented groups. Together, they have 41 seats in the Parliament – a very slight majority.

Krivokapic, 62, is a mechanical engineering university professor without any political experience, as are his ministers. Milojko Spajic, the Minister of Finance, has made an international career as an investment banker while Tamara Srzentic, the Minister of Public Administration, has worked as an expert in reforms to modernize the public administration in California, where she studied and graduated.

Appointing technocrats in the cabinet is a move to appease voters. The country is extremely polarized, with the DPS accusing the DF of being openly pro-Serbia, planning to detach Montenegro from the West. Appointing the DF leaders Andrija Mandic or Milan Knezevic as ministers would only have exacerbated tensions.

Despite being composed of technocrats, the new cabinet has a clear political mission: to change a country that has been ruled for thirty years by one party, led by one person, widely viewed as corrupt and uninterested in creating the bases of a stable economy. The first main goals of the new cabinet will

be fixing the economic scenario, burdened with the new challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic and rewriting a controversial law on the ownership of religious buildings passed in December 2019, which could strip the Serbian Orthodox Church of some of its holdings. The previous government said that the law was necessary to align with the EU standards, but the current rulers described it as an attempt to punish the Serbian Orthodox Church, the main church in the country, yet with many Montenegrin worshippers, and to create an artificial confrontation between a pro-Serbia camp and a pro-West camp, just for electoral reasons.

History, religion and mixed families cement ties between Serbia and Montenegro, where one third of the citizens define themselves as Serbs, despite the two countries having been at odds quite frequently in recent years.

The new government's intention of rewriting the law on religious buildings has already sparked protests. On the 28th of December 2020, thousands of people rallied in front of the Parliament while lawmakers were opening a debate on the law. The crowd accused the coalition of betraying the country and serving Serbia's interests. Tension could increase in the coming weeks. Another sensitive test in terms of identity will emerge with the census to be carried out in the coming months. Citizens will be asked to declare their religious affiliation, national identity and language.

Problems related to identity are just one factor making the path to change very narrow for the government. Its room for manoeuvre is threatened also by a difficult economic environment and by the grip that the DPS still holds on the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, lots of municipalities and media. The party and its leader, Milo Djukanovic, will try to mobilize all of their resources to shorten the life of the new government, that for several observers is an opportunity for a country needing acutely some reforms aimed at tackling corruption and winning back people's trust in public institutions.

As for foreign policy, the Prime Minister, Zdravko Krivokapic, and the Foreign Minister, Dorde Radulovic, a young career diplomat, have confirmed the country's commitments to NATO and EU integration, as well as sanctions on Russia, sticking to the policy inaugurated by Brussels due to Moscow's role in the war in Ukraine.

Matteo Tacconi

With the support of the Balkan Trust for Democracy.



STRATEGIC BALKANS