

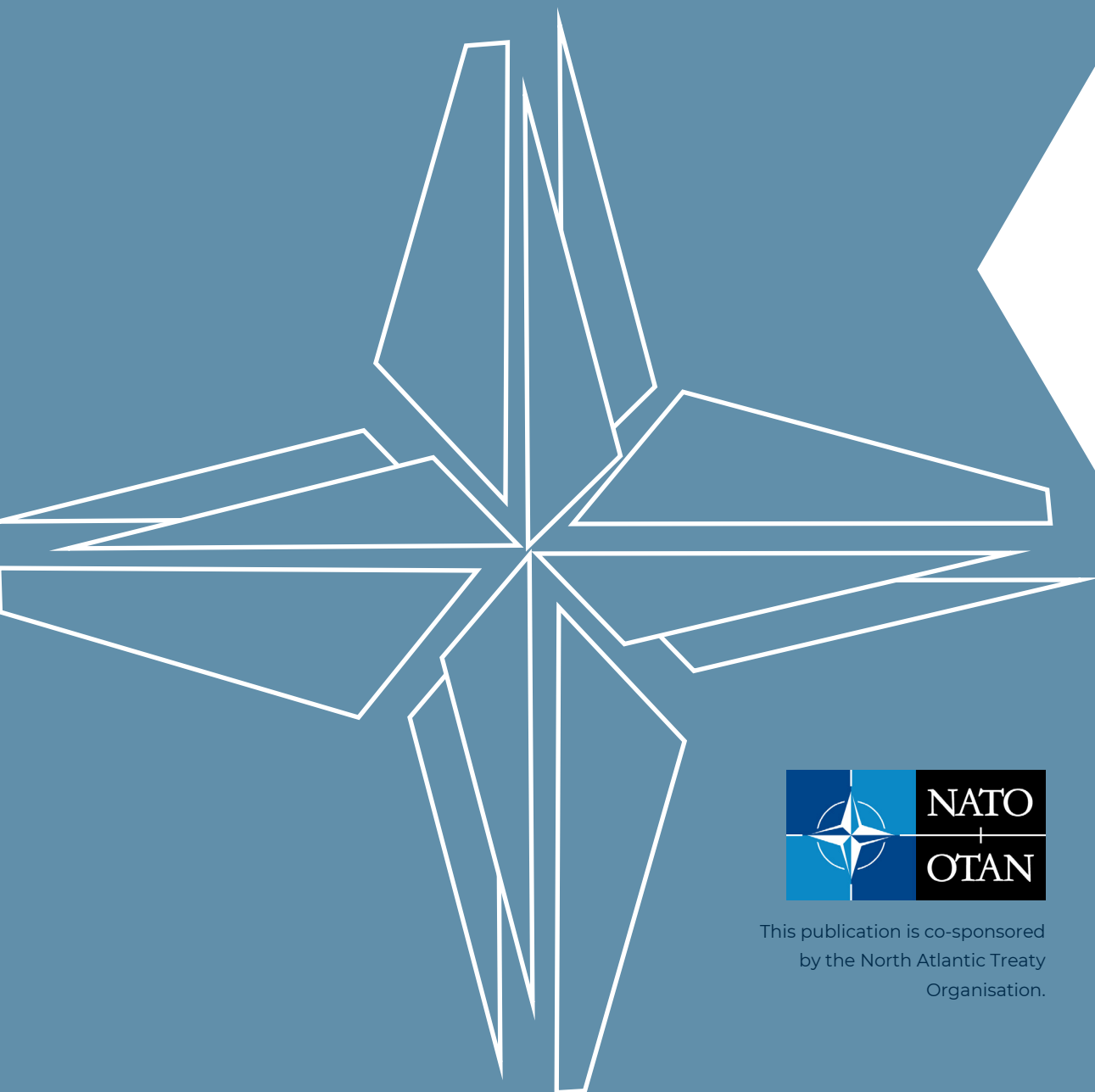


NATO Foundation
Defense College

DOSSIER

Special Issue

WESTERN BALKANS:
THE WAY AHEAD
TOWARDS A FULL
EURO-ATLANTIC
INTEGRATION



This publication is co-sponsored
by the North Atlantic Treaty
Organisation.

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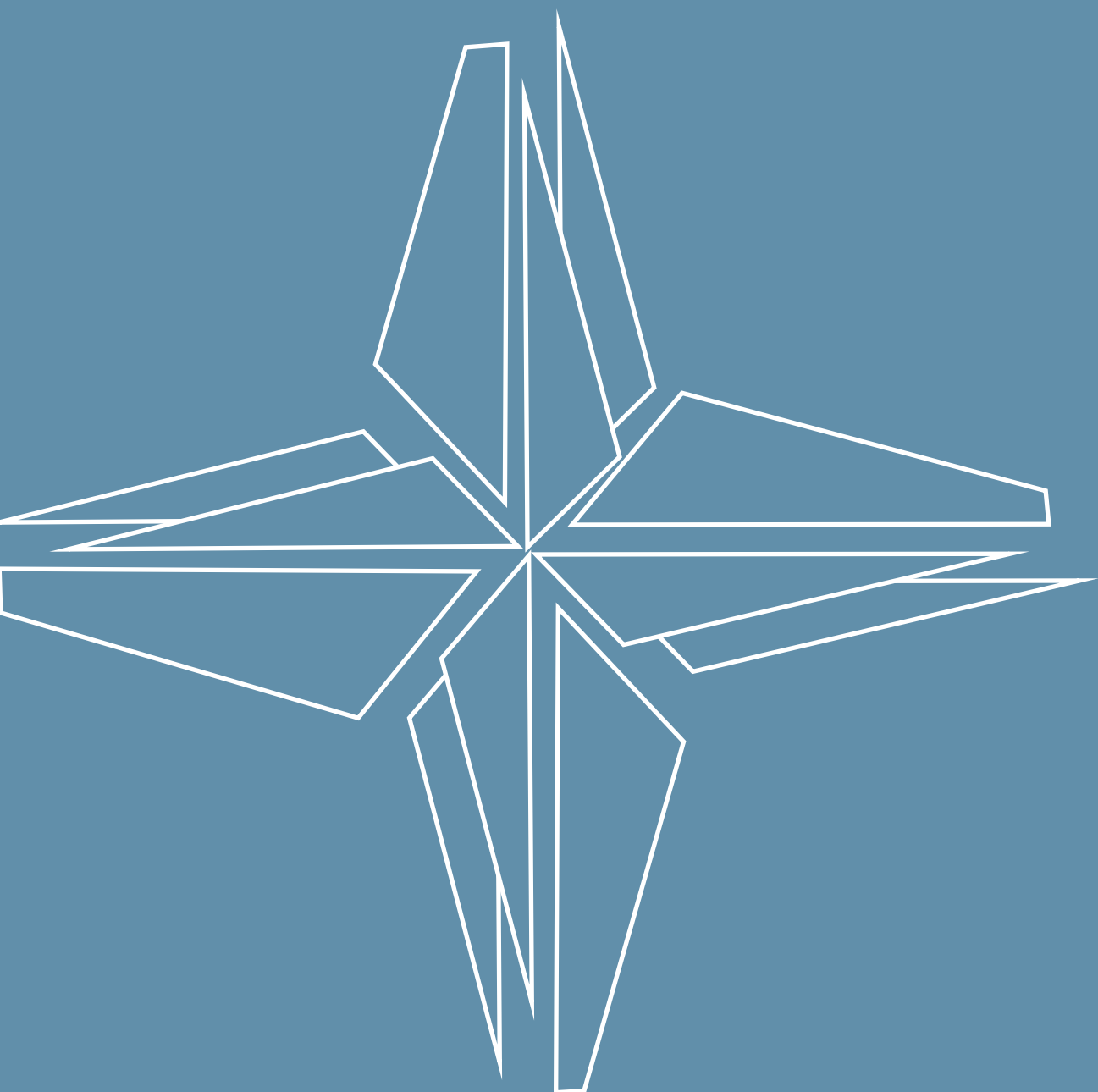
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Map of the Balkan Peninsula



This Special Issue is the crowning product of ten years of unrelenting activity by the Foundation, the only officially recognised by NATO, on this area that is critical for the future of the Alliance and of Europe as a whole. It stems from the Strategic Balkans project whose objectives are: follow the integration trajectory of the countries in the Euro-Atlantic community; analyse through the Strategic Trends its essential orientations; pinpoint with the Strategic Balkans press review the regional strategic highlights and its evolving Euro-Atlantic perceptions; stimulate the debate with papers and food for thought articles and connect practitioners and social leaders on the security issues tackling interstate (energy security, hybrid threats, etc.) and non-state risks (terrorism, trafficking, organised crime etc.) affecting the peninsula.



Foreword

ALESSANDRO MINUTO-RIZZO

President, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome

The NATO Defense College Foundation has prepared a Special Issue on the Balkan region. This decision has been taken because of the importance of this area. We are speaking about something that, contrarily to mainstream usage, is not really specified with precision and has not precise boundaries. A region going from the Adriatic to the Black Sea, from the Mediterranean to the Danube, changing features with the process of history.

It had been said that “the Balkans produce more history than they can consume”. It is also well known that Chancellor Metternich one day said that the Balkans begin at the borders of Vienna. Today we are in a different environment and, in a way or in another, it has to do mainly with former Yugoslavia,

Besides the narratives, let's remember that, with the exception of Yugoslavia, South-Eastern Europe was divided between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Things have radically changed since the cold war; 2004 was a special year due to the enlargement of both NATO and the European Union to south eastern Europe. The process continued afterwards. Today there are six countries remaining outside the European Union. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, belong to that group but are now members of the Atlantic Alliance.



Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo

is an Italian diplomat who served as Deputy Secretary General of NATO from 2001 to 2007 and as interim Secretary General of NATO from the 17th of December 2003 to the 1st of January 2004. Prior to be appointed Deputy Secretary General, he acted as Ambassador of Italy to the Western European Union and to the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC).

In conclusion, a slow process of inclusion into the Euro-Atlantic institutions has taken place. At a slow pace but in a positive direction. It has not satisfied everybody, with difficult moments and it is, in any case, incomplete.

There are two basic angles for looking into this affair that keeps us busy. On the one hand completing the process of inclusion is the only possible destination for the countries concerned.

On the other hand, to become members of the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance is not simple and requires deep reforms and the adoption of specific standards. It takes time and political will.

Looking at the big picture, why NATO and what kind of role is it playing? The Alliance started its involvement with a peace-keeping and peace-enforcing role in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the mid-90s after the collapse of Yugoslavia as a single state.

There is consensus that it was beneficial for stopping to war and, in the end, it produced the Dayton Agreement. It was a compromise and it is not perfect, but it is still in force.

The NATO operation gave way to a European Union operation under the so-called "Berlin-plus" arrangements between the two organizations. The most visible sign of the two institutions supporting each other.

In 1999 the Alliance has been engaged in an air campaign lasting about two months to stop an ethnic war in Kosovo by Slobodan Milosevic, the last Communist leader in the region. Kosovo has become an independent country and NATO still contributes to its stability with the presence of KFOR. Again, there is a very good ongoing cooperation with the European institutions.

In North Macedonia NATO had an active role in 2001 with the operation "Essential Harvest", avoiding a civil war and supporting democratic institutions.

Let's not forget that Italy, a NATO country, came to help Albania and its people at the fall of the Communist regime. It gave a substantial support also to rebuild its defence institutions.

In conclusion we witness a positive role of the Atlantic Alliance, promoting democracy and stability, projecting security in a strategic part of Europe. Developing a fruitful cooperation with the European institutions with examples that could be followed in different parts of the world.

Old and new challenges are now visible in the Balkans, in part due to fatigue in the process of changing traditions and legacies of the past. Bad memories with Serbia should be overcome and the moment has come to turn the page.

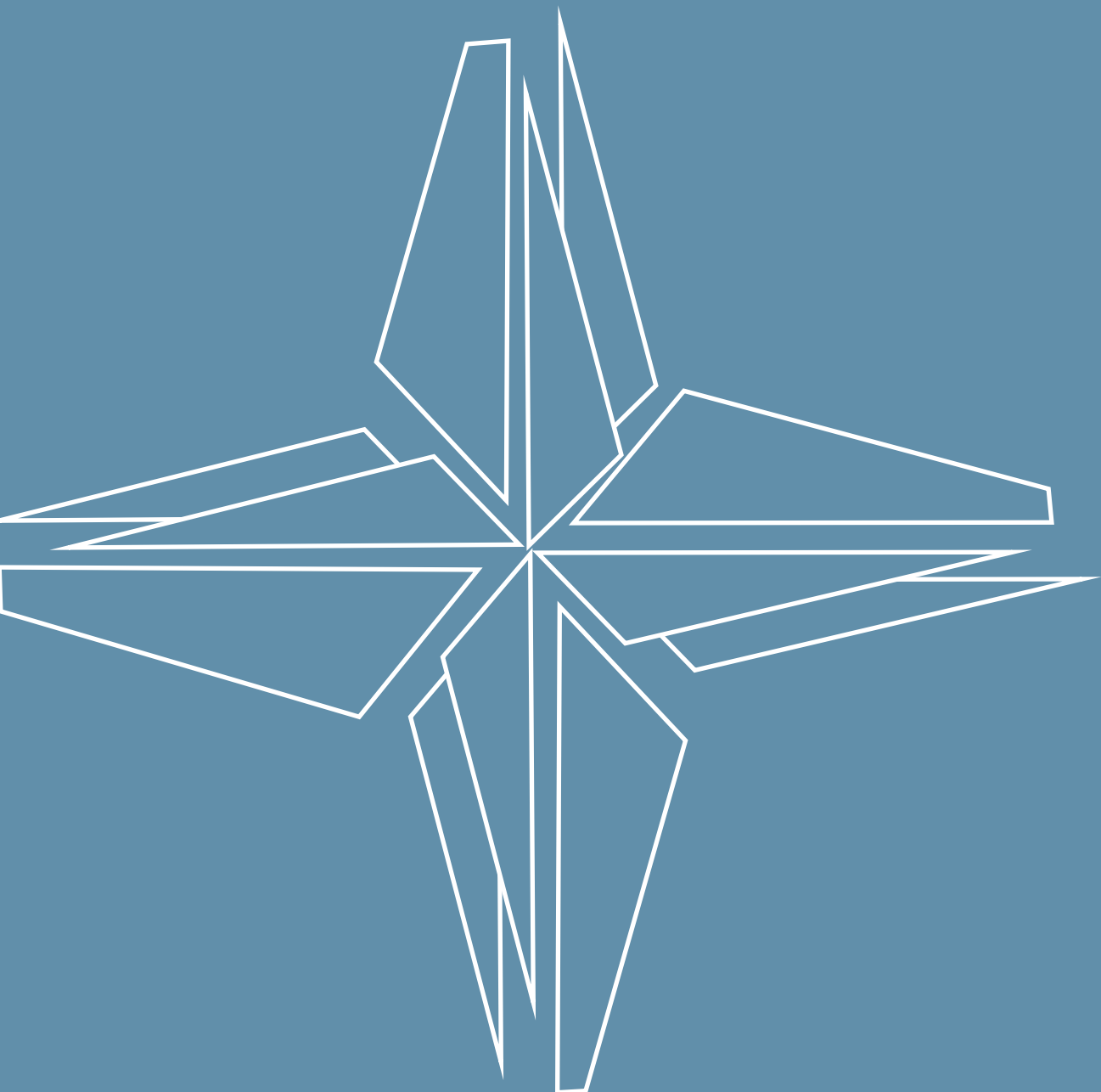
Bosnia-Herzegovina remains in a difficult situation because of its basic fragility, but cannot be left behind. Kosovo has to complete its process of becoming a state recognized at European and international level and to overcome the existing issues with Belgrade.

North Macedonia is finally a member of NATO, but there is still work to do in a complex regional environment.

This is a short summary in order to give to the reader a sense of the historical complexity in a region that has been for centuries at the intersection of empires and remains fragmented. The recent NATO Brussels Summit has confirmed the importance of the region and the Balkans are mentioned in the final Communiqué.

The Foundation is keeping its focus here since many years. We are convinced that the wider Balkans are an essential part of Europe, of strategic value; we should do our best to accompany them in a process of reforms and inclusion.

The Special Issue is composed by contributions of recognized experts of various nationalities. We have thought that quality is more important than quantity. We wish to give to the region the attention that is needed and that it deserves. The ultimate objective of the Foundation is to concretely contribute, in a positive spirit, to a historical process underway.



Political Summary

ALESSANDRO POLITI

Director, NATO Defense College Foundation, Rome

For two decades NATO has been successfully involved into stopping a terrible conflict in former Yugoslavia as an immediate task and then in stabilising the region directly or indirectly, pending the different accessions to NATO and/or EU membership by the six countries of the Western Balkans.

Despite all the concrete difficulties, the involvement of KFOR (Kosovo Force) has been, in collaboration with other international actors and institutions, a clear success. Only two countries are still not part of the Euro-Atlantic community and only two are not yet candidates to the EU membership.

A clear indicator of how the area has been stabilised is the drastic drop of KFOR's numbers from 55.000 soldiers during the first stages of pacification to just 3.672 and the constant manning of EUFOR (European Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina) around 600 units. The situation may be still fragile, but the tensions have shown to be more at a political level than violent ones.

In the meantime, the strategic environment of the Balkans has considerably changed because the region is now considered not just limited to the Balkan Six, but encompassing the traditional area from the Adriatic to the Aegean and the Black Sea. This was first due to the



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end of a compartmentalised political and strategic view that arbitrarily separated the former Yugoslav territories from what was considered either Central (Slovenia, Croatia), East (Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova) or South Europe (Greece and Turkey).

Geopolitics for centuries have seen this area disputed by Central and Eastern European powers (Austria-Hungary and Russia) or Southern European ones (Ottomans). The temporary prospect of reasonably sustained enlargement of Europe had effectively driven the perception locally and in the European capitals that this region was apart, precisely because it was going to be integrated in the rest of the Euro-Atlantic family. Two successive five-year delays, the ensuing delusion and the return of great power competition have again recreated a vast Balkan arena dangerously bordering a split Ukraine and a restless Caucasus.

If Europe and NATO want to close definitively this thorny dossier, they have to resolve the matter not at the margins but in its centre of gravity that is made by Serbia and Kosovo. Serbia has been the historical unifier of Yugoslavia and Kosovo, right or wrong, has been considered an essential ingredient of the Serbian political set up.

Despite considerable change, the Serbian elite is still in denial of its defeat, very much like Germany after the I WW. Kosovo on its side is still in denial of a brutal covert civil war that drastically reduced for a very long period any meaningful alternance in power. This has allowed both elites to be rentiers of the division and the political tensions, profiting from the substantial aid of the international community, European Union especially, and sustaining each other in their reciprocal vetoes.

The biggest potential for change, as I could personally witness in the country during my tenure as Chief Political Advisor of the KFOR, was not in Serbia, but in Pristina because there is a predominance of young people who at least since five years have realised that change is their biggest alternative to illegal emigration. And elections have twice shown this trend.

A new government, much less tainted by past political killings, corruption and organised crime networks, has much more interest and drive to break with past stalemates, despite some ideological rigidities. One of the key stakes is the treatment of minorities, especially Serbian ones. While all minorities enjoy a solid constitutional and parliamentary protection, Serbian-speaking Kosovars still feel that they are not really considered by Pristina on par as the Albanian-speaking majority.

They still remember the ugly scars of the destructive 2004 disorders and most pensions or salaries are paid directly by Belgrade. If Kosovo transforms its traditional stance towards Serbian-speaking Kosovars, it will achieve three main goals: increase its chances of international recognition (including the critical 5-4 EU/NATO non recognisers) because the ethnic issue will be put out of the debate; consolidate its national identity since a minority-friendly state reduces the scope for internal divisive debates or political ghettos and drastically stifle the temptation of Belgrade to manipulate Kosovo through ethnic channels.

This is not a problem of security, sovereignty, land-swaps or excruciating

ating technical talks while waiting the Godot of a political solution, it is the issue of a state that is perceived as reasonably impartial and helpful vis-à-vis all citizens. Concretely Pristina should assume all the costs and pensions of all Serbian-speaking Kosovars and grant the Association/Community of Serbian-speaking municipalities with appropriate rules. It is the Kosovar national Marshal Plan to protect its own citizens from lingering Pan-Serbism.

If the new government will overcome outdated distrusts stemming from previous Bosnian experiences on similar mayoral associations, it will unhinge the ethnical discourse that still is present in Belgrade and start to normalize where it is immediately possible, at home by one's own means.

Until Serbia can somehow claim that she is the only assistant and protector of Serbian-speaking Kosovars, the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue will continue to be less than convincing and Serbia will delay as much as possible internal change. And while international transitional justice may try to put to rest past offences and grievances, offering a different condition to Serbian-speaking Kosovars is about a vastly different future.



Brussels, 16 February 2020. EU leaders and the leaders of the Western Balkans nations preparing for a family picture after an informal summit at the EC headquarters.





The Mehmed Pasa Sokolovic Bridge in Visegrad across the Drina River

After 30 years, what is the result of war?

IVAN VEJVODA

Permanent Fellow, Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna

A war happened in Europe at the end of the 20th Century. A war that should never have happened on a continent that was bred in the post-World War II period under the slogan “Never Again”. And yet 30 years ago in 1991 a war began in Europe in one country.

Yugoslavia, more precisely the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) disintegrated and fragmented, through a bloody disastrous self-implosion. One state that became seven states.

Yugoslavia was one of the three communist federally organized states that broke apart after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. One of them Czechoslovakia disappeared through a peaceful “velvet divorce” in 1993 between its two parts Czechia and Slovakia. The Soviet Union (USSR) fell apart in 1991 more or less without conflict and became 15 States.

Why did they fall apart? There is one fundamental reason: they were Communist federations, not democracies. Many more historical, political, social, economic, cultural arguments can of course be invoked but the absence of the freedom of speech and association, the monopoly over politics by a totalitarian/authoritarian state prevented democratic outcomes.

Ivan Vejvoda

Before joining the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna as Permanent Fellow in 2017, Ivan Vejvoda was Senior Vice President for Programs at the German Marshall Fund (GMF) of the United States. From 2003 until 2010, he served as Executive Director of GMF's Balkan Trust for Democracy. Vejvoda came to GMF in 2003 after distinguished service in the Serbian Government as a Senior Advisor on foreign policy and European integration to Prime Ministers Zoran Djindjic and Zoran Zivkovic.



The first and immediate result of the war of the 1990s in Yugoslavia was devastation and despair, massive loss of human life, displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. International intervention was required because the parties to the breakdown/conflict were unable to settle their disputes themselves. The then Yugoslav Socialist Republic of Macedonia, today North Macedonia, and in between FYROM, was the only one to “exit” Yugoslavia peacefully and unscathed, although in 2001 it went through its own brief internal conflict that resulted in the Ohrid Framework [Peace] Agreement. It was the United Nations that was called to intervene followed by many others over the years and most prominently by the NATO bombing campaign of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999.

Some have used the expression of “this is the unfinished business of the Versailles Peace Conference of 1918-19” to state that Yugoslavia was an unviable state, while others disagreed saying that a democratic Yugoslavia never got a chance after a monarchic (under a Serbian dynasty) 1918-1941, and a Communist (1945-1991) Yugoslavia.

Peace to these lands then came gradually. First in Croatia progressively and partially from 1991-1992, and then with the full reintegration of Croatian territory after a Croatian military action in the summer of 1995, that resulted in the expulsion of more than 200.000 ethnic Serbs from their homes; final borders were settled only in 1998. Then in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 after the Dayton/Paris Peace Accords at the end of 1995. Politically the region came into its own with the defeat of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia in October 2000 and then with succession agreements among five states in 2001. The final separations happened with the referendum for independence in Montenegro in May 2006, through which Serbia by default also became independent, and finally Kosovo declared itself independent in February 2008 and has been recognized by about 100 states (but not by 5 EU member states, nor by Russia or China). Serbia did not recognize Kosovo's independence and still considers Kosovo its autonomous province under Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council.

Where does all this leave the region? The states that came out of the former Yugoslavia were late to the “return-to-Europe” compared to the other post-communist countries that had vigorously followed this path from 1989 onwards. There was so much catching up to be done in the Western Balkans in terms of democratic transition, of espousing a democratic political culture, developing the rule of law and instilling the separation of powers, pluralism, legality, a free and open public sphere. The road to full Euro-Atlantic integration was speedier for some than for others and circumstances for integration were better before the onset of the financial and economic crisis in 2008, the migration crisis in 2014, the assertiveness of Russia with the annexation of Crimea, and lastly before the pandemic.

Slovenia was able to join the post-Communist frontrunners and was the first to join the European Union and NATO in 2004. Croatia joined NATO in 2009 and the EU in 2013. Three more, half of the Western Bal-

kans countries joined NATO: Albania in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia as the 30th NATO member in 2020.

Montenegro and Serbia are on the path to EU membership, all too slowly. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a strong advocate of EU enlargement said in August 2014 that the Western Balkans were “advancing at a snail’s pace” towards the EU. Regretfully, this remains true even today.

Blockages by France in 2019 and by Bulgaria today to North Macedonia’s EU path have not been nor are helpful to say the least. Hopefully this will change after Bulgaria’s parliamentary elections.

Regional cooperation is on the rise and the countries realize that they have to initiate bottom-up processes toward a regional single market and facilitated movement of people, goods and ideas. The Regional Cooperation Council in Sarajevo inheritor of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (1999-2008) and other regional initiatives are playing an important role in the “Europeanization” of the region.

Lastly, geography matters. The European peace project, the European Union is the defining framework for all these countries whose strategic goal is to join the Euro-Atlantic family. Integration of this region is crucial for stability and peace. It is also about the credibility of democratic intentions of these countries and of the European Union and NATO to support the efforts of integration. More engagement from both sides is needed.



Chimneys at heating plant during winter.

An endless transition

GENTIOLA MADHI

Associate Researcher, European Movement Albania, Tirana

Three decades after the fall of communism, Western Balkans' democratization process is still going through a rollercoaster ride and the prospects remain weak. The establishment of formal democratic institutions and procedures is constantly challenged by abuses of power, conflicting narratives, growing scepticism and reform stagnation. The deeply-rooted problems cannot be overcome overnight and the preservation of the status quo no longer provides stability to the region.

While the European Union integration perspective has been a major push in undertaking the democratization reforms in early 2000s, today the 'prolongation of the agony' of membership seems to have a reverse effect in the region. All countries are stuck in their integration path and membership looks like waiting for Godot. The negotiation frontrunners, Montenegro and Serbia, are far from getting closer to EU, and since 2019 no new chapter/cluster has been opened. While Serbia is advancing in its illiberal turn, Montenegro's shaky coalition government is facing new troubles.



Gentiola Madhi

works as consultant researcher and since 2018 she regularly contributes to Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso - Transeuropa on Albania's political and societal developments. Previously, she worked as project manager at the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and as national programme officer at Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation in Tirana. Gentiola graduated from the College of Europe (Bruges) and University of Florence.

Albania and North Macedonia are long awaiting in EU's door to start the negotiations.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a potential candidate country, and it is the emerging deadlock and divisive rhetoric are a worrisome symptoms. Kosovo's statehood remains disputed 13 years after its declared independence, due to insufficient international recognitions at UN level and the incomplete Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. The normalization of its relations with Serbia is a major stumbling block and, despite its compliance with the visa liberalization conditions (as stated by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell), no decision has been taken by the EU.

Certainly, the EU has played a crucial role not only in the stabilization of the region, but also in the state-building process of the Western Balkans. The accession perspective has been the major attracting tool for the advancement of the democratic reforms in these countries. Moreover, the expansion of NATO towards Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia as of March 2020, has further complemented and contributed to a more stable and secure region.

But, with the European Union stumbling from one crisis to another, its relation with the Western Balkans is suffering of ambiguity today. In front of a disunited EU, with given member states contesting the adoption of a common vision towards the region, vacillating signals and incoherent approach have resulted in a slowing down of reforms and the regional leaders paying lip service to values and democratic norms.

The emblematic postponement of the start of the accession negotiation talks with Albania and North Macedonia has further undermined EU credibility in the region. The countries were awarded the candidate status, respectively in 2014 and in 2005, and the situation is in a deadlock. Despite EU's attempts to inject political momentum from time to time, the French veto of 2019 ended in symbolic actions like the adoption of a new accession methodology, still on paper. The Council's genuine effort of March 2020 to greenlight the accession talks turned into another *déjà vu*, as no step forward was effectively taken.

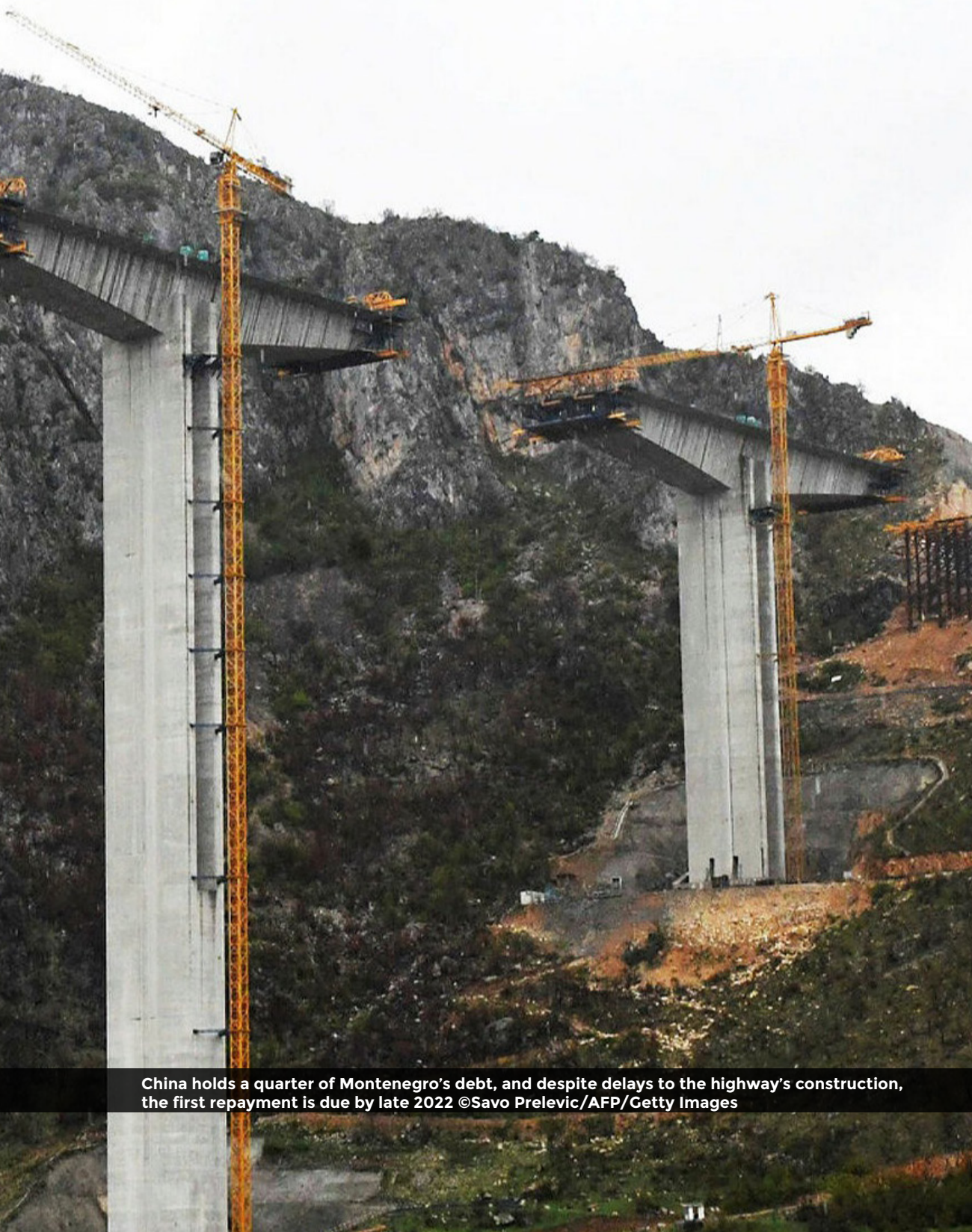
With the accession perspective in a stalemate, faith gave way to a growing frustration, since deeds have not followed the promises. Albania's undertaking of a deep and comprehensive justice reform has not been satisfactory enough to sceptical member states, who opted for introducing new pre-conditions to the process, raising the bar further. The burden to demonstrate and bilaterally convince the critical member states on the achieved progress has triggered domestic fatigue and simultaneously has put into question the role of the Commission.

The fragmented approach of the Union is even more visible in the case of North Macedonia, revealing a striking paradox of enlargement policy in the Balkans. Dragged down by reasons of history and identity, Bulgaria's vetoing of North Macedonia's start of the accession talks in 2020 is another case of crafting of extra (and unfounded) conditions.

Despite the landmark agreement to change the name in order to resolve the bilateral dispute with Greece in 2018, and the undertaken democratization reforms after the authoritarian turn of the past decade, unfortunately another EU member state uses enlargement for its own domestic issues.

The coupling of countries' domestic disappointment with the EU's disengagement from enlargement puts into the spotlight the fragility of the democratization process of these countries. Considering the ongoing pandemic conditions, the opportunities for illiberal behaviours of the regional leaders are on rise and the personalized style of politics is becoming a dominant feature. The vacuum created has permitted to other players to leave their footprint on the region, whose presence is cultivated also thanks to the willingness of regional actors. Besides the traditional role of Russia, the pandemic has served to China to pursue quite an active foreign policy, followed by Turkey and some Arab countries.

The deterioration of the state of democracy and particularly of media freedom is an alarm bell and enlargement can no longer be at the margins of EU political agenda. By year 2022 new political developments are foreseen, with France engaged in its presidential elections and chairing of the Council Presidency and Germany with a different government. Therefore, the EU needs to turn the tide vis-a-vis the Balkan issue in the next six months, before further political momentum is lost.



China holds a quarter of Montenegro's debt, and despite delays to the highway's construction, the first repayment is due by late 2022 ©Savo Prelevic/AFP/Getty Images

The unviable economies

VALBONA ZENELI

Chair, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies,
Garmisch-Partenkirchen

After more than three decades of transition and a triple dip economic recession, economic security remains the main challenge in the Western Balkans. Unemployment, poverty, corruption, and brain drain are the main challenges that threaten the everyday security of average citizens in the region¹. Suffering from a lack of competitiveness and dangerous public debts, the current Covid-19 crisis has further exacerbated existing structural problems, deteriorating people's social and economic conditions, and threatening hopes of future convergence with western advanced economies.

In addition to the burden imposed by the 2009 financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic took a far more damaging economic and social toll on the Western Balkans, with national estimates ranging from a low of -1% in Serbia to a high of -15% in Montenegro. This was the worst downturn on record, as a result of drops in

¹ See <https://www.rcc.int/pubs/95/balkan-barometer-2020-public-opinion-survey>.



Valbona Zeneli

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both domestic and foreign demand, disruptions in supply chains, and fall of tourism as one of the main sectors of the economy.

The economies of the Western Balkans lag behind the rest of Europe, with very low incomes and living standards. The average per capita income levels fluctuate at \$6,100 in current prices, as low as only 16% of the EU average of \$37,000. These income levels vary from the lowest in Kosovo with only \$4,300 per capita to the highest in Montenegro with \$7,700.

As countries are falling into the “middle income trap”, the regional convergence with Europe has stalled (regional economic expansion will be 3,7% in 2022-2023)², implying that it would take the at least 20 years for the Western Balkans on average to double its income, and more than 50 years to catch up with the European average.

The dire economic situation is a result of un-friendly business environment characterized by weak institution and rule of law, high levels of corruption, and the very limited role of innovation all factors contributing significantly to the low competitiveness of the region (lowest rankings in institutions and innovational capabilities), shown by the Global Competitiveness Report 2019³. Out of 141 countries researched from the World Economic Forum, the Western Balkan economies rank between the 72nd position held by Serbia to the 92nd held by Bosnia and Hercegovina. Unfortunately, small and fragmented markets, coupled with a harsh business environment, cannot repay costly innovation investments, stymying any significant modernisation will.

In terms of trade and investment partners The EU (84% of exports and 64% of imports) is the biggest trade partner, distantly followed by China (5,8% of overall regional trade), Russia (4,7%, in decline since a decade), Turkey (4,2%) and the USA (2%).

That said, China is working actively on a Balkan Silk Road of infrastructure networks and logistical corridors between the Port of Piraeus in Greece and markets in Western Europe, taking advantage of the lack of infrastructure in the region, combined with lack of capital, lax public procurement rules and poor labor regulations. Chinese investment (Greenfield investment and contracts) in four countries of the Western Balkans (excluding Albania and Kosovo) during 2005-2020 was \$15,4 billion, with Serbia leading with \$10,5 billion, according to the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).

This equals to almost 20% of total FDI in the region (\$80 billion in 2020). A misleading aspect of the reported data is that most of the money is not actual FDI, but loans. More than 80% of total Chinese investment in the region is financed by loans, with studies showing that construction costs would not be repaid in hundreds of years.⁴

Among the biggest infrastructure projects in the region is the Bel-

2 <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35509/Subdued-Recovery.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

3 Kosovo is not researched in the Global Competitiveness Report. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf.

4 <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/the-western-balkans-low-hanging-fruit-for-china/>.

grade-Budapest railway, 85% (\$2.5 billion) financed by China Export-Import Bank and constructed by China Railway and Construction Corp. Another important project is Bar-Boljare highway in Montenegro financed by Export-Import Bank of China, which loaned 85% of the estimated \$1 billion and is being built by the China Road and Bridge Corp. In North Macedonia, two highways — Miladinovici to Shtip and Kichevo to Ohrid — cost \$580 million and are being built by Sinohydro Corp. Ltd.

With an 18 million consumers' market, there is a good potential, but it is hampered by poorly functioning institutions, informal economies, rampant corruption, poor infrastructure, low productivity, low competitiveness and lack of regional integration.

In 2019, the six countries together attracted USD 7,5 billion FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), the largest amount going to Serbia, which is the largest economy in the region with USD 4,5 billion, followed by Albania with USD 1,3 billion, while Kosovo and Bosnia and Hercegovina have the lowest FDI with USD 300 million and USD 365 million respectively⁵. Western Balkans, bordering the EU, have received only 0,6% of the European investments in the global economy.

The Western Balkans are at a critical juncture: in a desperate need for modernization while struggling with the most difficult economic crisis in the last three decades. To escape this vicious cycle, they need to change gears and act on the following priorities:

- Regional economic integration, creating a truly integrated and innovation friendly market (Western Balkan Action Plan for the Common Regional Market 2021-2024 and Green Agenda);
- FDI and Regional “Near-shoring”, aiming at pooling competition for FDI and at achieving qualitative investments that would increase innovation and competitiveness. The pandemic has created an opportunity for the near shoring of European productions, entailing also a stronger EU's strategic autonomy;
- EU- Driven Economic Development, since it is essential for these countries to commit in deed and not only on paper to EU conditions of accession. This means that, while chapters are opened and negotiated, there should be more access to the EU budget, entry into the single market and the customs union. EU should in turn support seriously innovation and industrial development in the area. In fact, the EU will invest more than \$10,5 billion (EUR 9 billion) for the period 2021-2027;⁶
- Digital Economy, where governments need to build on existing success stories of IT hubs, promote and financially support them, focus government policies on IT-related infrastructure, and invest in the quality of education.

⁵ <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/TableViewer/tableView.aspx>.

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1811



Protests in Belgrade, 8 July 2020.

Civil societies - enlarging freedoms

ARNE SANNES BJØRNSTAD

Special Representative for the Western Balkans, Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Oslo

If Western Balkans are to achieve stability and sustainable economic progress, we must support the development of a strong civil society. The transformation from the Socialist and authoritarian regimes of last century to mature liberal democracies is not yet completed in the region. To strengthen the positive developments and prevent backsliding, the checks and balances must be reinforced and supported. Civil society is having a vital role in moving the transformation forward.

Civil society is the foundation of democracy. As both a source of legitimacy and a counterbalance to public power, it protects the freedoms we take for granted. In the Western Balkans, its role will be decisive. Liberal democracy and the rule of law are still in their phase of consolidation in the region. More than 30 years have passed since the fall of the Berlin wall, but liberal democracy and the rule of law are as dependent on the political culture of civil society as of public institutions and legal texts. Polls taken on the Western Balkans indicate an engaged public, demanding more



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democracy and accountability, voicing frustrations with corruption and ruling elites that often seems more interested in obtaining and keeping levers of power than in changing society for the better.

While some go for the easy solution of joining “the system” through government party membership or bribes, some leave looking for a better life in Western Europe, many join forces to change “the system”, believe it is their power to improve.

If we look at the vitality of civil society in the WB6, we find comfort. Looking at the numbers published by the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), there were more than 90.000 organisations, foundations and endowments in the WB6 in 2019, a 5% increase since the year before.

Although some elections have shown the importance of civil society engagement for change, change cannot only be seen in the prism of support for opposition parties, their electoral success or change of government. Distrust of opposition parties, as experience shows that, when gaining power, former opposition parties have been quick in learning the ways of their predecessors, is most probably stronger in Western Balkans than generally in Europe.

That being said, all over Europe “single cause” activism is having a stronger pull on the young electorate than traditional political or professional organisations. Activism for environmental issues, anti-corruption, human rights and sometimes very specific local issues are however often a gateway for a broader engagement. Perhaps more important, it is also a school of political participation and democracy. Support of civil society is thus important.

The challenge is to ensure that every citizen feel sufficiently secure and well informed to take an active part in forming their societies, follow their conscience and convictions without fearing for their jobs, harassment or other forms social pressure.

Through fostering civil society in a regional programme, we must seek to support cooperation and mutual support between civil society in the different countries of the region to reduce the temptation – also in parts of civil society – of focusing on national victimhood and nationalism, easily manipulated passions that have wreaked havoc in the region far too often in the 20th century.

We must however be consistent in our support of freedom and democracy. If we only support organisations that agrees with us 100%, we undermine the very values we want to strengthen. We must support a diversity of opinions. Our condition for support must be adherence to the basic tenets of freedom, rule of law and democracy.

The engagement of committed citizens is the best guarantee for democracy and freedom. The transatlantic community must therefore invest not only funds, but also political and economic willpower into support of civil society.

Several NATO countries engage in programmes supporting civil society organisations in the WB6. One of the most successful is the Balkan Trust for Democracy, a Euro-Atlantic public-private initiative estab-

lished in 2003 by the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, we cannot let civil society in the Western Balkan countries adrift. If we do, the region risks backsliding to inward-looking nationalism and populist authoritarianism. The peoples of the Western Balkan cannot afford this, but neither can the rest of Europe.



Brussels, 25 June 2019. Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg gives a press conference ahead of the NATO Foreign ministers meeting at NATO headquarters.

Twenty years of NATO and the Western Balkans

SILVIA MARETTI

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Quote by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, during his speech given in front of the United States Congress on 3 April 2019, in the occasion of the 70th Anniversary of the signature of the North Atlantic Treaty:

“Time and again, Europe and North America have served together under the same flag. For the same cause of freedom and democracy. Deterring the Soviet Union. Bringing stability to the Western Balkans. Fighting terrorism in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Changing as the world around us changes. As we look together towards a more unpredictable world, we continue to stand shoulder to shoulder”.

At the NATO Summit hosted in Brussels on 14 June 2021, Allied Heads of State and Government agreed to a very ambitious agenda charting the Alliance's course and transformation over the next decade and beyond.

In particular, with the approval of the NATO 2030 agenda, Allies aimed at ensuring that NATO will be able to face the multiple, unpredictable challenges of today and tomorrow. Against the backdrop of a future Alliance, that, in the words of NATO's Secretary General Jens



Silvia Maretti

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Stoltenberg, should be prepared to be militarily stronger, more political and more global, the Allies agreed a very ambitious package.

This includes strengthening political consultations, reinforcing collective defence, enhancing resilience, sharpening NATO's technological edge, upholding the rules-based international order, step up training and capacity building for partners, and addressing the security impact of climate change. They further agreed to develop NATO's next Strategic Concept for the Summit in 2022.

As the world changes, it is an imperative requirement for NATO to continue to evolve. The present security environment is more complex than ever before, and even more complex is likely to be any future scenario ahead of us. With global competition, sophisticated cyber-attacks, disruptive technologies, brutal terrorism, proliferation of nuclear weapons and the security impacts of climate change. No country, no continent, can face these challenges alone. Yet, the transatlantic link, outlined first and foremost in the 72 years-old Washington Treaty, provides a unique bond between European Allies and North Americans, making NATO the organization of choice to best tackle these multi-faceted and interlinked security challenges, both today and tomorrow. NATO is not only a unique forum of continuous political consultations and practical cooperation between Europe and North America, it is the longest lasting political-military Alliance set up in times of peace in modern and contemporary history, having outlived the XIX century-established Holy Alliance.

Under the banner of NATO 2030, the Alliance is committed to a very ambitious agenda, encompassing eight main areas. It is worthwhile considering them, as they all bear a direct link with the current and future relationship between NATO and the Western Balkans, whereas addressing allies in the region, or partner nations. The future outlook of NATO therefore, as stated by the Secretary General for NATO 2030 is one that should combine the military dimension with an enhanced political role for the Alliance. The Western Balkans need NATO to continue to remain politically committed to the region.

How does this fit into NATO's continuous engagement in the Western Balkans, and most importantly, how does the future NATO agenda links to the achievements that have been reached so far in enhancing the security and stability of the Western Balkans, primarily – but not only – through the Open Door Policy? As we approach the revision of the Strategic Concept, did the current one facilitate an enhancement of regional integration into NATO?

No future vision of NATO can fail to include the Western Balkans. The region in fact consists of the oldest and longest-lasting political and operational investment of the Alliance, and certainly the most challenging and articulate one, given the regional complexity and its political, ethnic and religious fragmentation. The Western Balkans include in fact: NATO members, NATO partners, one neutral country –Serbia – and finally it is the region where NATO is still carrying out its sole military operation through KFOR in Kosovo.

NATO has been in the Western Balkans since the 1990s, and the Western Balkans have been in NATO for many years now, through operations, partnership, and membership in the Alliance, acquired by many countries of the region. Throughout the last 20 years, the Western Balkans countries, both Allies and partners, have been contributing to the three main pillars of the NATO Strategic Concept, namely: Deterrence and Defense, Crisis Management and Cooperative Security. The Western Balkans countries' contribution to these three pillars is worthwhile a deeper analysis, as it is closely linked to the Open Door Policy and the path to NATO membership.

The obvious start is crisis management. NATO has been present in the Western Balkans since the 1990s, and the region has marked the first interventions of the Alliance in the so called “out of area”, that is to say, operations other than those mandated by Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the Collective Defense clause. Allied military interventions in this region have marked a new path for the Alliance in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when NATO was confronted with the choice to go “out of area” or “out of business”. It was not though, the concern to go out of business to prompt the first peace enforcement operations in the Western Balkans. Rather, a growing understanding that NATO was the only international organization that, with its integrated military command structure and decades of joint Allied exercises, would have been the organizations of choice able to carry out crisis management and peacekeeping operations beyond its borders.

NATO has deployed stabilization forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IFOR and then SFOR), after the Dayton peace agreements, and is still present with a military force in Kosovo through KFOR, under the provisions of UNSCR1244 of 1999, that is, to date, around 3,500 personnel strong. NATO's presence in Kosovo remains essential to the security and stability of Kosovo and the region as a whole.

NATO today contributes, after 22 years of continuous presence, to the security and stability of Kosovo along three lines of effort. First, by maintaining a safe and secure environment and freedom of movement in accordance with UNSCR 1244 for all the communities in Kosovo. Secondly, by providing assistance in the area of capacity building through the mixed civil/military team composing the NATO Advisory and Liaison Team (NALT) in support of the development of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF). This commitment has been recently revised as a consequence of Kosovo's decision to transform the nature of the KSF into a full fledge army, therefore changing the forces' mandate. Last but not least, it is worth mentioning the Enhanced Interaction between NATO and Kosovo. This is a basket of tailored activities agreed between NATO and Kosovo that identifies specific areas where cooperation with Kosovo could be enhanced, such as public diplomacy activities, just to mention one. This cooperation has been revised as well in the wake of the above-mentioned decision taken by Kosovo.

In full respect of the decision of four Allies not to recognize the Uni-

lateral Declaration of Independence of Kosovo, the Alliance acknowledges the key role of the European Union in promoting a rapprochement between Serbia and Kosovo. NATO fully supports the EU-sponsored Intensified Dialogue on the Normalization of Relations between Belgrade and Pristina, as well as any other initiative aimed at improving the situation between these two. Important the recent development concerning the result obtained with the EU-brokered agreement between Belgrade and Pristina on the normalization of their economic relations reached in Washington in early September 2020 under the auspices of former US President Trump.

2019 marked the 20th Anniversary of the launching of the NATO-led Kosovo Force – KFOR – operation. Since then, NATO's operation, based on the provisions of UNSCR 1244 has evolved, and the situation on the ground has improved so significantly, that from a 50.000 strong force in 1999, we are now down to less than 4.000 personnel operating in KFOR. As the NATO Secretary General reiterated in a number of occasions, NATO's presence through KFOR will remain as long as it will be necessary. NATO's deployment is conditions-based, and not calendar driven.

Considering the region more broadly, it became clear very early on after the peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations of the 1990s that the post-intervention stabilization phase could not be carried out only by boots on the ground. The best and most efficient tool of stabilization has been - and still is - political dialogue and practical cooperation through partnership and partnership tools.

Partnership leads to the next pillar of the Strategic Concept: Cooperative Security. Since the early 2000, the countries of the Western Balkans have decided to join NATO's Partnership for Peace Program, some with a view to become members, some others with the aim to contribute to regional stability whilst preserving their constitutional neutrality.

The modalities and the ultimate aim driving the countries of the Western Balkans to become partners of NATO has varied and still varies, and this is absolutely undisputable: Montenegro four years ago in June, and North Macedonia joined as a full member just one year ago, in March 2020, setting its aspirations fully fulfilled.

Conversely, Serbia has willingly joined the Partnerships for Peace program, but made it clear from the outset that it is its decision to maintain its neutrality and therefore it does not have membership aspirations, and this is fully respected by NATO. Bosnia and Herzegovina instead, despite the internal divisions, is fully committed to continuing the reform process. It will then be a sovereign decision whether to aspire to membership, once the reform process will be complete. These examples of cooperation in the partnership framework are very different, as different may be individual country aspirations; nevertheless, there is a common feature to all of them, and that is the contribution that each country of the region is providing to "projecting stability" to their own respective country as well as for the Western Balkans region.

Ensuring the security of the Euro-Atlantic area in fact, is not only about deterrence and defence at home, it is also about fostering dialogue and cooperation beyond NATO borders, especially in area that, due to their proximity to the Alliance, may affect NATO security, like the Western Balkans. When NATO neighbours are more stable, the Alliance itself is more stable.

Stability is nourished and preserved through constant dialogue, cooperation, inter-operability, participation to joint exercises, civil preparedness, sharing of the key principles of human security. Partnership in all its aspects, being it political dialogue or practical cooperation, it is crucial, especially for the countries of the Western Balkans, to foster regional understanding, and to share common expertise.

Partnership is key also because it allows to develop tailored practical cooperation that helps improve institutional capacity not only, but also in the defence and security sectors. Ultimately, partnership and practical cooperation have proven, throughout the last two decades, to be the most effective and valuable tools and the essential conduit to the access to NATO's Open Door Policy.

For those countries that are willing and fulfil the criteria, the Open Door policy, a cornerstone of the Washington Treaty, allows democracies sharing Alliance's values to become a member of NATO. This implies of course the willingness and ability to assume the responsibilities and obligations of membership. NATO always respects the right of every country whether or not to join the Washington Treaty as any other international treaty.

Just a few words on North Macedonia, who is the last country that joined the Alliance in March 2020 and that, incidentally, is also a country of the Western Balkans. In 2019, North Macedonia got ready to prepare for full integration into the NATO structures. As an invitee, North Macedonia could sit at the Council table and participated in all meetings following the signing of the Accession Protocols by all NATO Allies. The full accession of North Macedonia demonstrate that reforms and commitment bring the expected results.

If we compare the NATO members and NATO partners' list of today with that of the early years 2000, we will see that we have now more countries of the Western Balkans sitting at the North Atlantic Council table as members, than partner countries. Slovenia, acceded in 2004, Albania in 2009, Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017 and North Macedonia in 2020. It is also worthwhile noting that - despite a more marked military dimension - real or perceived - of the Alliance at that time - the re-westernization of the countries born from the demise of the Federation of Yugoslavia was carried out by the Alliance earlier than the European Union. The EU is in fact to date, still striving with the accession process of most of the countries of the region.

All in all, NATO Open Door Policy has proven to be the best tool to make national membership aspirations fulfilled, as well as the most efficient instrument in the hands of the Alliance to promote reforms, thus ensuring long-lasting stability to the region. One may argue that

the outcomes of the NATO Open Door Policy run at a rather slow pace. It should be remembered though, that the countries of the Western Balkans now members of NATO, with the sole exception of Albania were created with the demise of the Former Yugoslav Federation. This required a high intensity phase of institution building, whose pace clearly differs from the pace of a peace-keeping or peace-enforcement operation.

What is the benefit? What does this bring to the NATO table? And what is the benefit for the countries of the Western Balkans?

The most important achievement I would argue is the fact that all of these countries, in twenty years or so, and to different degrees, have turned from security consumers into security providers, not only for the region, but also, as NATO members, contributing to the other pillar of the Strategic Concept, namely Deterrence and Defense.

With Slovenia, Croatia, and then Montenegro and North Macedonia becoming members of NATO, part of the Western Balkans has become NATO. Both partnership and membership contribute to provide substantial stability to the region. Political stability is the baseline for any other aspect related to a country's development to unfold. In addition, through participation in NATO-led military exercises as well as disaster response exercises, these countries have reached a level of inter-operability that allows them to participate in all NATO-led military operations and training missions.

Some may raise the objection that the contribution to NATO from the countries of the region is relatively modest, if compared to the overall NATO budgets. The size of most Western Balkans Allies is in fact relatively small, and their economies are relatively young. This may suggest that their contribution in terms of cash, capabilities and military commitments may have a relatively marginal impact on the Alliance.

This assumption is easily proven incorrect. According to NATO's extant procedures all members of the Alliance contribute to agreed current and possible future operations and missions on a voluntary basis; NATO does not impose on any of its members contributions to operations. Nevertheless, Western Balkans members of the Alliance have proven to be very keen to provide their contribution by actively participating in operations and Missions. Just for the sake of providing some indicative example, Slovenia and North Macedonia contributed to the NATO Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, Montenegro and Albania to KFOR. By the same token, partners provide their contribution as well: Serbia contributing to the ongoing Training Mission in Iraq; Bosnia and Herzegovina, contributing to Resolute Support.

As far as military capabilities are concerned, again, the Alliance is a net gain for the Allied countries of the region, since the principle of non-duplication has prevented these countries to incur in heavy expenditures for capabilities already existing, being provided by other Allies. As far as "cash" is concerned, the past years, especially the four years of the US Administration led by President Donald Trump have been characterized by a stronger plea to all Allies – old and new – to

comply to a fairer burden sharing, and to increase their respective defence spending to at least 2% of the national GDP by 2024.

According to the NATO Secretary General's latest Annual Report, the countries of the Western Balkans may not be there yet, but have recorded a significant and tangible improvement in their financial investments in the domain of defence. The latest official data published in the Annual Report 2020 account for the following official recording: Croatia: 1,83%; Montenegro: 1,72%; Albania: 1,29%; North Macedonia 1,24% Slovenia 1,10%.

For a gamble of history, the Soviet Bloc had a much softer landing from the Cold War than the Western Balkans did, and that this is something that needs to be factored in when discussing the Western Balkans, its various countries, and their mutual relationships. A huge amount of progress has been achieved in the stabilization of the Western Balkans, and surely, the NATO Open Door Policy has been a critical instrument to reach the level of security and stability that Allies from the region can enjoy today. Yet, the overall regional stability gained through so much effort and commitment is not yet irreversible. Sometimes, backsliding indicators in some areas: nationalist rhetoric, and some concerning security trends, such as radicalism, challenges to the rule of law should keep those countries as well as the Alliance as a whole, united and vigilant.

By the same token, time and difficulties faced together, like the one posed by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemics could and should provide an even stronger drive and determination to enhance our unity for NATO and for the region itself, and most importantly for the future generations.

The NATO 2030 Agenda provides all the instruments that are and will be key in the years ahead to strengthen and reinforce the achievements gained so far in the Western Balkans. Strengthening political dialogue, between NATO and its long-lasting partners in the region will be fundamental to promote and enhance regional cooperation and cohesion.

Deterrence and defence will remain the cornerstone of NATO, and thanks to the practical implementation of the NATO Open Door Policy, most of the countries of the Western Balkans – now Allies – actively contribute to it. The COVID-19 still ongoing pandemics has put Allies –old and new – in front of an unprecedented challenge, having a profound impact not only on daily lives, but also on economies, resources and populations.

In that situation, we have all learned how important it is to support the resilience of the civilian population having to be confronted with unprecedented challenges. The worldwide emergency that the world has been facing since February last year, provides a very good example of what it means to be part of an Alliance, and also to be partner of NATO, also for the countries of the Western Balkans. The robust strategic airlift capabilities that NATO Allies invested in have proven to

be absolutely essential during this pandemic, as it allowed to transport and transfer medical equipment and personnel across Allied and partner countries, on the basis of their specific needs and requirements. Resilient civilian services and infrastructures are and will be in the future essential for Allied military forces to operate effectively, in times of peace, crisis and conflict.

Sharpen the technological edge, to make sure that the Alliance remains ahead of the curve will be essential in the years to come. The contribution that the countries of the Western Balkans could potentially provide is already showcased by their continuous interest in the NATO Science for Peace Program. Working with start-ups, industry and universities has the potential for providing additional ways for the economies of the Western Balkans to become more solid, and to avoid the brain drain from these countries.

At the 2021 Brussels June Summit, Allied Heads of State and government took a unified stance against anyone who would attempt to endanger the international order, our democratic way of life or demonstrate an aggressive approach towards Allied nations. NATO committed to play a greater role in preserving and shaping the rules-based international order in areas that are important to Allied security. This includes by speaking with one voice in defence of shared values and interests. As part of NATO 2030, Allies decided to deepen NATO's relationships with like-minded countries and international organisations near and far, including in the Asia-Pacific, Latin America and Africa. This is also valid for the Western Balkans that, despite the integration into NATO, is still one of the targets of third parties' influences coming from the East, the South, and more recently from China, that should not interfere with the legitimate sovereign choices of the countries of the region. When NATO's neighbours are more stable, NATO is more secure. Years of experience have taught the Alliance that prevention is better than intervention.

Strengthening partners and training local forces is a more sustainable and cost-effective way to address insecurity, build stability and fight terrorism. Allies decided to strengthen NATO's ability to provide security and defence assistance, and build partner capacity in areas like counter-terrorism, stabilisation, counter-hybrid activities, crisis management, peacekeeping and defence reform wherever partners ask for Alliance's assistance. NATO's commitment to its Western Balkans partners remains unchanged, or even strengthened, as it was reaffirmed in the letter of the Summit Final Communiqué'. NATO has also recognised that climate change could turn into a security challenge, possibly leading to new geopolitical tensions.

In conclusion, the achievements of the countries of the Western Balkans recorded in the last twenty years are enormous. The job is not done yet, and work should continue to secure that a peaceful, stable

Western Balkans will be the home to the next generations of citizens of the region. Membership in NATO is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end, a tool to better manage the challenges of the future. It is also the venue where political matters and concerns can be discussed freely, on the basis of equality, regardless of the size of each Ally, its population, or the defence percentage contribution calculated on the basis of each national GDP. The rule of consensus makes all Allies equal. As equal, free democratic countries sharing the same values they should pursue the path ahead.

THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN THE ARTICLE DO NOT REFLECT ANY OPINIONS OR VIEWS OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION.



A young european with the EU flag.

The Brussels Perspective

MICHELA MATUELLA

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The Western Balkans region is an integral part of our continent; we share the same history and the same culture. It is our firm conviction that the reunification of Europe, which started with the great enlargement in 2004, will only be completed once the entire Western Balkans region is inside the European Union.

The political and economic logic that underpins the European Union applies equally to the Western Balkans. Economically the region is already very closely linked to the European Union. 68% of its trade is with the EU and 65% of its Foreign Direct Investment stock has come from EU companies.

It is the tragedy of the Western Balkans that the region was falling apart, torn by civil war and bloody conflicts at the time when the majority of Central and Eastern European states were preparing for EU membership. By the end of the 1990s, the Western Balkans faced a triple transition – not only from a centrally planned economic model to a market economy, and from authoritarianism to democracy, but also

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from war to peace. In this context, the EU made a promise at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003: the promise that the whole region could join our European Union. This promise is still alive, but it is taking longer to fulfil it than anyone expected.

In the past decades, we have often faced challenges on both sides that undermined the credibility of our promise. While the European perspective of the region has helped our partners to achieve political and economic reforms with improved democratic processes, stronger rule of law and better governance, those reforms often remained slow and old elites clung on to power. This led some to question the transformative power of the enlargement process. On the other hand, also the EU sometimes failed to respond when partners delivered on reform commitments.

To address those challenges and to speed up the accession process, the Commission has recently upgraded its toolset. We revised our enlargement methodology, setting up a more dynamic, credible and balanced approach to accession, while putting an even stronger focus on fundamentals such as the rule of law and democracy.

And we underpinned this with substantial support for the region's economic convergence with the EU. In the coming years, we will be bringing close to €30 billion of investment to the region: to build and upgrade sustainable transport and energy infrastructure; to support the region's convergence to the EU and addressing the great economic challenges of our time (the green and digital transition) and to invest in innovation and in the region's youth.

Our goal is to treat our partners like Member States in as many areas as possible and to give them access to some benefits of EU membership, such as access to the EU single market, ahead of accession, as soon as they fulfil the criteria. This will help the accession process, boost growth potential for local businesses and improve the lives of citizens.

We are also stepping up our engagement on security. Our focus is on better law enforcement and cooperation with EU agencies such as EUROPOL, FRONTEX and EUROJUST in tackling security threats such as organised crime, arms and drug trafficking, or money laundering.

The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated security challenges and exposed the vulnerabilities of our societies to cyber-attacks, cybercrime and hybrid threats. Disinformation and misinformation have been booming and the Western Balkans have not been spared by these phenomena. State and non-state actors play a strong part in disseminating disinformation and pushing their narratives. The risk is that political processes could be hampered, letting destabilisation kick in.

Responding to these threats demands robust, comprehensive and joint responses. Over the past years, the EU and NATO have stepped up their cooperation to support the stability and the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the region. We have coordinated our capacity-building activities and our messages towards the region.

The EU's commitment is key as our partners in the Western Balkans

engage in the difficult reforms that are needed to transform their societies, to find compromises to end long-lasting disputes and to turn away from an often painful legacy of the past and towards their future within our European Union.

Strategic Trends 2019-2021

Balkans & Black Sea

Back in 2012, the NATO Foundation launched a long-term programme called Strategic Trends in order to provide busy readers with focussed and short monthly analyses on ten NATO-relevant great geographic or functional sectors.

The Western Balkans and Eastern Europe have been at the core of such research activity since the beginning.

The Dossier Appendix compiles the most recent years (2019, 2020, 2021) of NDCF Strategic Trends covering the area, drafted by a number of highly qualified analysts to enable one's orientation in the regional complexity through brief, easily-digestible surveys.

JANUARY 2019

BALKANS BETWEEN GREAT POLITICS, BUTTER AND GUNS

The Balkans produce more history than they can consume: one of Churchill's many famous quotes seems to never get old. The very same could be said about other nearby areas: think about the hotbeds of latent instability in the Donbass, Transnistria, Georgia.

Balkan's geopolitics, with their ancient cleavages, inter-ethnic divisions, constantly whipped up identity consciousness and its century-long foreign influences, might further undermine an already unsteady, undefined and transitional European security framework.

Putin's recent visit to Belgrade – and Serbia's shaky geopolitical balance itself – is paradigmatic of the ongoing geopolitical competition in the region. It's not only Serbia though that currently finds itself in such a tug-of-war over different potential foreign states' influences.

A similar trend touches in fact other areas that are vulnerable of destabilization throughout Western Balkans, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ethnically rich country is indeed facing a gradual erosion of the Dayton agreement's contents due to the Serb-majority Republika Srpska's ever-increasing ties with Moscow in the security domain and some Croat parties' insistence on an autonomous entity. Alongside the issue of the creation of Kosovo's new army, Bosnia and Herzegovina might considerably make more fragile the region.

However, besides all the above, besides Russia's opposition, besides Trump's foreign policy uncertainties, NATO is not only holding on in the Balkans; is gaining momentum.

After establishing itself as a major international community component in the region during the post-Soviet era through its enlargement policy, it scored new successes. After managing to maintain an albeit fragile balance between Kosovo and Serbia for years through its KFOR

mission – while contributing to the efforts in normalising relations between Pristina and Belgrade – Montenegro became NATO's newest member in 2017.

In January 2019 instead, a new page in the history of the region was written when the (former) FYROM ended its 28-years long feud with Athens over the term Macedonia, now renamed Republic of North Macedonia. This event clears the way for Skopje's future integration into NATO and, possibly, into the EU too.

If this scenario occurs, Serbia – which is now in close cooperation with the Alliance in various fields – would be the only state left out of NATO and therefore the very last “true” Russian ally in the region. In reality, Belgrade's position is as ambiguous now as during its Yugoslav period: good relations with Moscow but at arm's length, proximity to the West but insisting on neutrality. The Serbian President Vucic knows that President Vladimir Putin can provide his country with overpriced guns, but that only EU has the butter necessary for a real economic development.

The positive resolution of Macedonia's dispute, which has been strongly opposed by Moscow, further strengthened NATO's presence regionally and showed the necessary path for other states hopeful of joining the Euro-Atlantic space: territorial disputes must be mended through political dialogue. A clear and evident reference for Serbia and Kosovo.

Controlling the Balkans – alongside the central and eastern European area – is paramount for the security of Europe. For history scholars it comes as no surprise: that has been key for centuries. Does the ancient label *Antemurale Christianitatis* ring a bell? Mutatis mutandis, **current Europe's** security imperatives seem to retain its past geopolitical directives.

In order to do so, a solid and coordinated Euro-Atlantic policy is needed to address such a complex spectrum of challenges. It's conceivable that such a European policy for the Balkans would also boost a positive spill over for the weakened transatlantic bond.

Giorgio Cella

FEBRUARY 2019

PROTESTS IN SERBIA: VUCIC'S OPPORTUNITY FOR WHAT?

Anti Vucic protests are entering their third month, but is it clear what function they objectively have and may have for the Serbian President? Indications are that the potential is huge and the reality might be a bit more drab.

Every Saturday, since December 8, civil society and political parties from the opposition organize protests in central Belgrade against Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's President since 2017 and leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), in power 2012. The SNS has a comfortable majority in Parliament and controls all but three municipalities in the country.

Demonstrators say that Vucic has built a system of power that recalls Russia, Turkey or Hungary's authoritarian democracies. They argue that the SNS has taken over the courts, law enforcement agencies and media, using them against opponents. Media freedom, in particular, is a very sensitive topic for protesters. They accuse Vucic to use the State radio-TV as a party branch. In addition to that, they cast doubts on the independence of media owned by oligarchs close to the power.

So far, street protests have not concerned Vucic. After all, these are not mass protests. It is hard to think that they can bring radical changes in the political sphere. Polls conducted in recent weeks show that the SNS has a strong lead over opposition. Knowing it, Vucic could call early elections to confirm his party in power and cool down protesters' enthusiasm. Some institutional support to protesters has worried his government slightly more, but not to the point of any significant change.

Protests are not only about Vucic's style of power. They signal a huge discontent in Serbian society. The country's economy is growing, but it is still very precarious. Young talented people are leaving Serbia more and more, due to the lack

of opportunities. The Kosovo question remains unresolved, slowing down accession to the EU. However, while trying to anchor his country to the EU, the Serbian president looks for a strong relationship with Russia. On 17 February, the Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Belgrade. He was welcomed like a hero. Thousands of people marched in Belgrade to homage to him. The opposition believes that the SNS paid people to gather in the capital, forgetting that a sizeable part of Serbs really believes in the narrative of true friendship with Russia.

In principle for Vucic, protests could be not only a nuisance, but also an opportunity to push away Serbia from the limbo in which it is stuck. The only way is seizing membership of the EU, the historic goal that Vucic wants to achieve and the reason why in 2008 he and his predecessor as President, Tomislav Nikolic, chose to leave the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the party symbolizing Serbia's ultra-nationalism.

Unfortunately, the last public appearances of Vucic and his Pristina counterparts show that North Macedonia's success has very little influence on the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and that, thinking about his enduring legacy, protests are relegated to the level of day by day politics.

Matteo Tacconi

MARCH 2019

PROTESTS IN THE REGION: WHY THE EU MUST CARE ABOUT THEM

In recent weeks, street protests have broken out in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania. First demonstrations started in Serbia at the beginning of December, and they still go on. Every Saturday, citizens parade in central Belgrade, as in other cities of the country. Initially, they demanded more media freedom and more protection for opposition politicians (the protests began after the beating of Borko Stefanovic, a leftist politician). However, the mood has gradually changed. Now protesters question the whole

political action of Aleksandar Vucic, Serbia's President and founder of the Progressive Party (SNS), in power since 2012.

Demonstrators, who say they are not supported by any political parties in terms of logistics and money, accuse the President and his party, which has the absolute majority in the Parliament and rules almost all the municipalities of the country, of having built an authoritarian State through tightening its control over justice, media and law enforcement agencies. The slogan of the movement is One out of five million (Jedan od pet miliona). It recalls what Vucic said when protests broke out. "I will not accept demonstrators' demands, even if they will be five millions".

In Montenegro, protests erupted in early February after a controversial banker, Dusko Knezevic, accused the President Milo Djukanovic and his ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), in power since the Nineties, of corruption, cronyism, abuse of office and murky financial deals. Investigative journalists and opposition politicians have told many times that those opaque relations between politics, business and organised crime jeopardize Montenegro's democracy. Like in Serbia, protests are peaceful, held on Saturdays and mainly coordinate by civil society. Demonstrators ask for Djukanovic's resignation, saying he is the patron of Montenegro's ill system. They also claim that high-ranking judges cover up politicians' dirty games. Djukanovic has ruled out to leave, denying accusations against him and his party. He said that protests are legitimate, unless they become violent.

In Albania, protests began on the 16th of February, after a scandal-plagued plan to build a ring-road around the capital emerged. Prior to that, the country had been shaken by huge demonstrations launched by students. They asked for cutting high fees at universities and improve the public education, badly administered according to them.

Unlike those in Serbia and Montenegro, demonstrations in Tirana have been very tense. The first protest turned violent. People attacked the

building hosting the office of the Prime Minister, Edi Rama, a Socialist, demanding his resignation. Fifteen people were injured, including five police officers. The opposition approach marks another difference between the protest in Albania and those in Serbia and Montenegro. In Serbia and Montenegro, opposition does not have a direct role in anti-government marches. In Albania, protests are called and coordinated by the Democratic Party (DP) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), the two opposition parties.

Several media have written that a "Balkan Spring" is blooming. It sounds as a forced attempt to drag protests marked more by differences than similarities into the same framework. Those in Albania, for example, seem more a fight for power than a surge for democracy.

It is not a Balkan Spring, but the European Union should care about these protests. Beyond political disputes, a common trend emerges. There is a growing popular discontent for how these countries are ruled. Albanians, Serbs and Montenegrins are tired of corruption, insufficient democratic standards and lack of economic opportunities. In short: they feel trapped in a limbo. Central European countries joined the EU in 2004, fifteen years after the collapse of communism. Almost thirty years after the collapse of Yugoslavia, and twenty since the last regional conflict (Kosovo), the Western Balkans are still in the waiting process. It begins to be an excessive time politically and socially.

So far, the European enlargement has been primarily perceived in the post-Yugoslav space as an economic opportunity more than a chance to build a real, working democracy. Supporting the hunger for democracy – showed by recent protests – is an opportunity for Europe to reassert its mission in the Balkans and let pass its model before those promoted by other players, like Russia or China, interested in gaining influence in the region.

Matteo Tacconi

APRIL 2019

NATO TURNED 70, BUT NO SOLUTIONS ON THE HORIZON FOR THE EASTERN FLANK'S CRISIS

On the 4th of April, NATO turned 70. It was a birthday that not only meant an evident and historical landmark for the Euro-Atlantic politico-military alliance, but also continued a strategic debate over the current strengths, weaknesses and purpose of the Alliance's geopolitical role in the international system.

Of the several events and celebrations held on the 70th anniversary, the most significant was the speech given by NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Washington. Stoltenberg's intervention - the first time a NATO SG addressed the U.S. Congress - was marked by a realist approach and geared towards strengthening the bond with Washington, in the attempt of pushing aside the clouds of criticism and doubt coming from across the Atlantic over the current role of the organization.

After tracing the historical landmarks of the Alliance, Stoltenberg touched upon the '*unprecedented challenges*' that the Alliance is currently facing. Besides international terror, the cyber threat and the shift in the global balance of power, the Secretary General dwelt at length on Russia's assertive policies, namely in Georgia and especially in Ukraine.

Indeed, seventy years after its foundation and thirty years after the end of the Cold War, one of the main security and geopolitical conundrums lies in the Alliance's troubled Eastern region, where a coherent and shared policy orientation vis-à-vis Russia is yet to be found. The Alliance's expansion eastwards, on the one hand constituted one of its most remarkable achievements in the post-Cold War era - sealed with the recent inclusion into the club of the North Republic of Macedonia - on the other it created a security dilemma. This implies that the more one geopolitical actor expands its sphere of influence to

bolster its status and provide security to new aspiring allies, the more it produces, as a reaction, growing strains with another opposing geopolitical force who feels its own security jeopardized. So far, the situation with Moscow over certain contested Eastern European borders has turned into a long-time stalemate, often nourished by the propagation of so-called frozen conflicts and their relative de facto states. This state of affairs saw no real evolution, little improvements if any, besides the traditional two-track policy of eastwards expansion flanked by a constant dialogue with the Kremlin.

More than that, no established mechanism for a long-standing de-escalation and geopolitical arrangement have been sketched out. At this stage, what is safe to say is that a plausible *modus vivendi* will not be reached only through external game-changers and macro-geopolitics, but also through the internal political-institutional evolution (or involution) that Russia, and other former Soviet states, will possibly undertake in the years to come.

The recent elections in Ukraine, which had the outsider Volodymyr Zelenskyy victorious over the incumbent president Petro Poroshenko, are in this respect significant. "While I am not formally president yet, as a citizen of Ukraine I can tell all post-Soviet countries: Look at us! Everything is possible!". That was the subtle message the actor-turned-president sent to post-Soviet countries in his victory speech, Russia of course included. Regardless of the future outcome of Zelenskyy's presidency - most importantly in the fight against corruption, oligarchs, and the war in the Donbass - his election showed a great deal about how established Ukraine's affection with democracy is, and, despite the country's structural issues, how democratic roots have grown steadily in such a troubled post-Soviet state.

Giorgio Cella

CHINA REAFFIRMS COMMITMENT TO MAKE THE WESTERN BALKANS A GATEWAY TO EUROPE

The eighth annual EEC-China summit was host-

ed by Croatia, in Dubrovnik, on the 11-12th of April. For the last time, it was called 16+1, because a new member – Greece – joined the club, now rebranded as 17+1.

Athens is already a member of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the ambitious Chinese project to create new trade routes to export its goods to the West. Beijing plans to make the Balkans a gateway to the EU. Athens has close relations with the region. Joining the CEE-China Forum seemed a logical choice for Greece, but it also shows that China – or at least China's money – is attractive, especially for the Western Balkans countries, that desperately need cash to improve their poor infrastructure. Ahead of the Dubrovnik gathering, Agence France Presse (AFP) quoted a study by the European Investment Bank to highlight that “between 2007 and 2017 Beijing announced 12 billion Euros in loans for construction projects in the 16 countries, one third of which were earmarked for Serbia, followed by Bosnia (21%) and Montenegro (7%)”.

In Dubrovnik, China confirmed its commitment to invest in infrastructures in the whole region. An announcement about contracts to build the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway is due to come soon. The same railway could be extended via North Macedonia to the Piraeus Port, managed by the Chinese shipping giant COSCO, a crucial spot for Beijing's grand strategy. China is eyeing Croatian ports, too, in particular the Rijeka port. Alongside that of Trieste, in Italy (so far, the only Western European country joining BRI), it could become a northern Mediterranean hub for the BRI.

Other major projects are already undergoing, like the 103 km highway connecting Bar, Montenegro's main port, to northern Serbia. Build by the Chinese Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), Beijing's constructions giant, it is mainly financed by its Exim Bank, a state loan provider. The project – valued 1,3 billion Euros – is becoming too big for a tiny State like Montenegro. The Financial Times reported that the borrowing from China “has sent the country's debt from 63% in 2012 to almost 80%”. In case of default,

China can be paid back through access to Montenegro's land.

The Montenegrin case reveals that China's cash money could jeopardise the Western Balkans financial stability, EU officials warn. Brussels is concerned “over the socioeconomic and financial effects some of China's investments can have”, the EU commissioner to Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, told AFP. Also Chinese investments in coal plants have been put under scrutiny by the EU. They are not strategic. They just help to forge good relations with local governments and get the green light for major infrastructural projects. Politicians in the region welcome such investments, that keep old plants alive and save jobs, but also consensus. Such scheme is much more preferable than that proposed by the EU, which asks to do more to phase out coal in order to comply with European environmental criteria. Do the Western Balkans think that China is better than the EU? Are they becoming more and more fascinated by the Chinese way, that combine fresh money and authoritarian rule at home? It is hard to answer yes. The Asian super-power's contribute in terms of FDI in the Western Balkans is still rather thin compared to that of the EU, which still keeps a 70% quota. And despite democracy standards have decreased in the region over the last years, the Western Balkans have absorbed some *acquis communautaire* and feel very comfortable under NATO umbrella. Nevertheless, China's dynamic posture in the Western Balkans and in Central Europe as well, testify that the Asian giant plays a role in the old continent. This cannot be underestimated; neither European politicians should complain loudly because of China's assertive behavior, as it happened recently, showing they think that the Western Balkans are Europe's own courtyard. Europe is a big democracy, and democracies accept challenges and global competition, if possible by taking action.

Matteo Tacconi

MAY 2019

A CONFRONTATION IN NORTHERN KOSOVO

On the 28th of May, Kosovo special operations police units entered the territories in the northern strip of the country, mainly inhabited by Serbs, to arrest several people – both Serbs and Albanians, but also Bosnians – heavily involved in criminal activities.

The operation lasted few hours, but reignited tensions between the two countries. Serbian authorities accused Pristina of harassing the Serbian population living in northern Kosovo, where Belgrade still exercises political influence despite the deal between Serbia and Kosovo, brokered in 2013 by the EU, partly dismantled the Serbian “parallel institutions”. Under the so-called Brussels Agreement, the Serbian police and justice in Northern Kosovo, once depending on Serbian government, have been integrated in Kosovo’s governmental structures. However, the process still has to be properly implemented. Apparently, Belgrade could do more to make it work.

Kosovo authorities’ decision to dispatch the special police in the North to tackle organized crime – very powerful also in that part of the country – might appear as a move to show that Kosovo does have full control on the whole national territory. The Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, put the army on full alert after Kosovo’s police operation. A muscular gesture against a muscular circumscribed action.

The day before the operation, Vučić delivered an important speech in Belgrade’s Parliament. “We need to recognize that we have been defeated. We lost the territory”, he said. “We have two options – to normalize relations by reaching an agreement or to maintain a frozen conflict”, he added. Such words suggest that Vučić is trying to make the Serbs accept the reality that Kosovo will not be part of Serbia anymore, as the Serbian Constitution and the UN 1244 resolution still

state. However, Vučić will not recognize Kosovo’s independence without having secured that the Serbs who live there will be granted large administrative autonomy, as agreed in 2013.

The Brussels agreement foresees the establishment of a Community of Serb Municipalities (not very different from the autonomy that South Tyrol/Alto Adige has in Italy), but Pristina has not fulfilled its obligations. The Kosovar President, Hashim Thaçi, recently said that if the Community of Serb Municipalities was created, a second Republika Srpska will emerge. It will be a camouflaged partition, in other words. The declaration seems not to perceive the difference in institutional and political robustness between the two situations: largely in favour of Kosovo.

Both Serbia and Kosovo block the implementation of the 2013 agreement and keep the tension high. Such behaviour does not imply the intention of starting a new conflict that would be detrimental and unsustainable. Instead, the two leaders want to assure their public opinions that they will do whatever they can to protect national interests, while behind the scenes they look for the right time to make a historic deal to definitely settle the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. Serbia will establish full diplomatic relations with Kosovo; Kosovo will give Kosovo-Serbs rights and implement administrative autonomy.

The recent police operation carried out while Vučić was briefing the Serbian Parliament, and Vučić’s consequent decision to put the army on full alert, are chapters of this screenplay, as well as the recent plan – now a bit eclipsed – for a land swap or Thaçi’s idea to call a referendum on the union between Kosovo and Albania.

Serbia and Kosovo’s specular tactics are also oriented to involve the US in the game. Vučić and Thaçi think that the EU alone cannot be an effective mediator, since the current Commission will not embark in any risky move before the expiration of its mandate (in autumn) and the Franco-German axis is extremely weak, due to Macron’s internal problems and Merkel’s declining star. Hence, they want to involve the US as a second patron for their historic deal.

In the last months, the American President, Donald Trump, expressed the will of facilitating the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. However, the US mood is still a bit unclear. On the one hand, it makes sense that the world biggest superpower goes back to the Balkan arena to end a story – the Serbia-Kosovo dispute – in which it had been deeply involved in the Nineties. On the other hand, Trump's approach, in theory open to the land swap, could create a contrast between the US and the EU (both Macron and Merkel reject a land swap). In that case, it will be difficult to unlock the “Balkan cold war”.

Matteo Tacconi

JUNE 2019

MACRON: ANOTHER LOST OCCASION FOR THE BALKANS

At the recent EU-Balkans summit, hosted by Poland, the Franco-German divergence about enlargement emerged again. In Poznan, the dynamic town in Central Poland where European leaders met Balkan heads of state and government on the 3-5th of July, the French President Emmanuel Macron told once more that any further enlargement should be pursued only after a comprehensive reform of the European governance. He thinks that EU territorial expansion would leave decision-making even more unwieldy. For him, a larger Europe means more vetoes and much slower changes. Likely, this is the reason why he forced the EU Council to postpone the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, already recommended by the Commission. Holland backed France.

The German chancellor Angela Merkel agrees with Macron about the need to give the EU better and faster decisional mechanisms but has another view on Western Balkans. “As we know, the accession process lasts very long, and we have enough time to re-evaluate our own cooperation”, she emphasized.

The Polish President Andrzej Duda, the host of the summit, echoed Merkel. The Balkan countries should not be asked to participate in a race «where they cannot see the finish line», he said. Poland and other members of the so-called Visegrad Group (Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia) support the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, but they also are the main problem in the EU, at least for Macron, because they oppose any federative development in the EU, advocate non-liberal values and block the decision-making process, if not aligned with their interests. V4 countries are an obstacle for strengthening Europe's role in immigration sphere, but also for curbing emissions, for example. Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary recently vetoed an ambitious package that if approved would have cut CO2 emission to zero by 2050 in Europe. Poland and Czech Republic, still very dependent on coal, told that for them respecting the EU roadmap is impossible, unless being hugely funded to convert their economies. Hungary is not coal-hungry anymore, but supports the neighbours claim.

Negotiations to appoint the new President of the European Commission strengthened Macron's view about the V4, which took the most hawkish posture among countries that shelved the candidature of Frans Timmermans, a progressive Dutch politician who has served as vicepresident of the Commission in the last five years. For Paris and Berlin, he, and not Ursula von der Leyen, was the best choice for the EU top job. However, the V4 opposed Timmermans, arguing that he has used his rule of law portfolio in the Commission as a stick to hit Central Europe. Any recommendations he has made to avoid reforms not in line with the EU principles – for example, justice reforms in Poland and Hungary – have been perceived by the V4 as an attempt to interfere in domestic affairs.

As The Economist remarked in one of its latest editions, “as the leaders of Hungary and Poland attack the independence of their judiciaries it seems quaint to argue that negotiating membership would instil democratic habits in

countries with long memories of dictatorship". Macron shares this concern. He thinks that the Balkan Six are still very vulnerable democracies, very exposed to authoritarian trends. Hence, enlargement can wait.

Macron eyes also the French public opinion, and this should not be underestimated. Enlargement is not very popular in France. "It brings back memories of the 2005 campaign for the referendum on the European Constitution, which was massively rejected, during which enlargement to Turkey and the 'Polish plumber' as a personification of the 2004 wave of enlargement were among the main topics", the French political analyst Loic Tregoures recalled in an op-ed he wrote for Balkan Insight, explaining Macron's "bad cop" role.

Such attitude is unjust, wrote Wolfgang Ischinger, a German diplomat, in a comment posted by The Politico: "If the EU can't offer a credible path to accession, it will lose any leverage it has in the region. Conditions, to be sure, have to be strict. But they also have to be fair: when countries fulfil the criteria set by the EU, they should not be held back by domestic considerations in national capitals», thinks Ischinger, who served as the European negotiator in Bosnia and Kosovo crisis.

This is also Merkel's view. Anyway, considering that Angela Merkel's star is fading, it is difficult for her to convince Macron that reforming Europe and enlarging Europe are compatible challenges.

Meanwhile, the French President is due to visit Serbia in mid-July. In the last 18 years, no French head of State has made a trip to Belgrade. At least, it means that Paris does understand that it has to commit in the Western Balkans, to play a role on the ground. Over the last years, it has not been so active in the region, as confirmed by its glaring absence in NATO's KFOR (Kosovo Force) since 2014.

Matteo Tacconi

JULY 2019

HARADINAJ OUT: KOSOVO RESHUFFLED OR UNRUFFLED?

The Prime Minister of Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj, stepped down the 19th of July. The decision came after he was summoned by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office (KSC), an EU-funded court established in 2015 to investigate alleged crimes committed by members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA/UCK), the Albanian guerrilla that fought against the Serbian forces during Kosovo war in 1998-1999 and at the same time was involved into a bloody internecine conflict until 2000. Haradinaj, one of the most powerful KLA military commanders, is suspected for war crimes, although the KSC, which functions under Kosovo law but employ international staff, has not indicted him so far.

Years ago, Haradinaj was accused by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for war crimes against Serbs and Albanians regarded as collaborators or rivals. Originally, he was convicted, but then judges acquitted him. Trials he faced at the ICTY, whose mandate expired in 2017, were controversial due to reported intimidation or elimination of witnesses.

The Kosovar Prime Minister, who leads the Alliance for the future of Kosovo (AAK), a junior party in the ruling coalition, went to The Hague on July 25. Invoking the right to remain silent, he did not answer any questions made by prosecutors. To explain his resignation, he said that he did want to go in The Hague as a private citizen, to preserve Kosovo's institutions honour.

Haradinaj's resignation paves the way to snap elections. His decision to step down could be a calculated move, some commentators in Pristina argue. Divisions and rivalries have weakened the coalition. Since months, there are rumours about its collapse. It is important to keep into account that the government majority was

weak since the beginning of the legislature (September 2017), just one seat. In the meantime, Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) the strongest party in the Assembly (Kuvend) lost 12 members to the new Group of the Independent Deputies (GDP), plus one who went back to the AAK, her original party led by Haradinaj; giving the majority another seat in a 120-seat strong parliament.

Nevertheless, the results delivered by the government are poor. Talks with Serbia are frozen, the big promise made by Haradinaj when he was appointed in 2017 (free visa for Kosovars to travel to Europe in 90 days) is unfulfilled, corruption is still very high, and wages are not going up. Haradinaj chose to act as a responsible patriot to cover up the bad performance made by his government and re-energize himself, some analysts say. He will be once again the AAK candidate for the premiership.

Haradinaj is still praised for what he did as a KLA commander, but it is hard to think that people will take street to support him in case he will face a trial, as it happened in the past. Most of Kosovo's citizens are very young, and many of them have not experienced war times. They appreciate those who fought to give Kosovo independence, but their main concerns are jobs, opportunities and visas. Among the youth, there is a huge disappointment towards political parties, perceived as corporations selling benefits to customers (voters) and getting their own pockets well lined up. More than a national hero, Ramush Haradinaj is viewed by young Kosovars as a member of an élite who seized their homeland.

It is difficult to predict who will win snap elections. It is reasonable to expect a low turnout, as it was in 2017 (41%). Telling how Haradinaj's resignation will affect talks with Serbia is a unpredictable as well. Haradinaj strongly opposes a land swap proposed by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and supported by Hashim Thaci, Kosovo's president and founder of the Democratic Party (PDK), the strongest force in the coalition. In accordance to Vucic's idea, Ser-

bia will recognize Kosovo and annex its north strip of land, mainly populated by Serbs, compensating Kosovo with some territories in southern Serbia where the Albanians are the ethnic majority.

If the KSC will charge Haradinaj for war crimes, or if snap elections will turn into a disaster for him and his party, Thaci could play this card one again, should PDK will win a large amount of votes. To the contrary, if Haradinaj will be a king maker in the new Parliament, the land swap, rejected by France, Germany and Russia, could definitely fade away.

To add some more uncertainty in this scenario, it should not be forgotten that snap elections are expected also in Serbia (probably by late 2019 or Spring 2020, according to Vucic's statements). Likely, nobody will seat at the negotiating table or do something significant in the coming months.

Matteo Tacconi

AUGUST 2019

ELECTIONS IN KOSOVO: HARADINAJ-THAÇI DUEL

The Kosovar President, Hashim Thaçi, set the 6th of October as the date for snap elections, after the government collapsed in July due to the resignation of the Prime Minister, Ramush Haradinaj. He left after he was summoned as war crime suspect by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office (KSC) – the EU-funded court investigating alleged crimes committed by members of the Albanian guerrilla during the war and post-war period from 1998 to 2000.

Haradinaj, a former UCK commander, said he resigned because he wanted to appear in The Hague, where the KSC is located, as a private citizen in order to preserve Kosovo's institutions honour. He tried to enhance his profile as responsible patriot ahead of elections, where he will run again as a candidate for the premier-

ship. The chances he will keep his post are not necessarily high. According to polls, the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), the party he leads, will get only 12-14%. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), Thaçi's party and the main partner of the outgoing coalition, should win more or less the same amount of votes.

People are frustrated with the government. Failure to tackle corruption, a plague for the tiny and extremely poor Balkan country, impacted directly on the big promise made by the PDK-AAK electoral coalition in 2017 campaign to liberalise visa with the EU. Fighting corruption is the second condition on visa by the EU after the accomplished border demarcation agreement with Montenegro.

Moreover, the stalemate in talks with Serbia for normalising diplomatic relations eroded the credibility of the government, which had promised to make it a priority. One more reason that undermined the coalition strength resides in the personal rivalry between Thaçi and Haradinaj, rooted in war time) and brutally re-emerging during talks with Serbia. Thaçi favours the land swap proposed by the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, while Haradinaj rejects it, re-proposing the cleavage between a political leader and a heroic fighter. Diplomatic sources reveal that Thaçi and Vučić had actually produced a draft that was ready to be signed once the exact lines delineating precisely the new border near several villages had been defined.

The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and Vetëvendosje! (Self-Determination) are topping the polls. They both are supposed to get 20-22%. Over the last two years, they have intensively cooperated in Parliament against the government. There are rumours about their intention to form a coalition after the vote. However, their ideological platforms are deeply different on several issues, like economy and Serbia. The LDK, that formed a government with PDK in 2014-2017, took part in dialogue with Belgrade. Self-Determination, a nationalist movement, opposes it and still pushes for unification with Albania.

Another aspect that creates tensions between

the two parties is the legacy of Ibrahim Rugova, the founder of the LDK and the champion of the nonviolent fight against Serbia in the Nineties. Albin Kurti – the Self-Determination front-runner – strongly criticized Rugova's passive resistance at that time. As a student leader, he organized violent protests against Serbian authorities in Kosovo. The LDK asks Kurti to pay homage to Rugova's tomb on the Velanja Hill in Pristina, a thing that Kurti has not yet done.

The glue between LDK and Self-Determination could be a common coordinated effort to dismantle the "state within a state" created by PDK over the years. Thaçi's party has ruled the country since its independence in 2008, filling institutions and state agencies with its members, who have accumulated power and privileges, say both Albin Kurti and Vjosa Osmani, the LDK candidate for the post of prime minister, the first woman who runs for such a position in Kosovo.

As for the PDK candidate, the party unanimously picked Kadri Veseli, the speaker of the parliament. A powerful politician, he was close to be the AAK-PDK choice for the post of prime minister in 2017, but in the end Haradinaj prevailed. During the recent campaign, Veseli stressed the need to fight against nepotism and presented an anti-corruption plan. It sounded absurdly ironic to LDK and Vetëvendosje.

However, anger against PDK is not enough to form a stable coalition, and for sure PDK and AAK does not want to be sidelined. They have resources to mobilize voters (Veseli himself got 129,000 votes at previous elections) and influence talks to form the government. One thing is certain: whoever will rule the country will face the burden of talks with Serbia. Fixing Kosovo depends on it.

Matteo Tacconi

RECOVERING UKRAINE, DIS-ALIGNING RUSSIA: A BET FROM PARIS

In the current highly volatile and liquid international system, the shaping of an apparently ever-strengthening Sino-Russian relationship

from a tactical alignment into a strategic partnership is a concrete issue. France appears to be considering in a EU framework Beijing a systemic rival and hence to support a careful rapprochement towards Moscow, in line with the current US administration's leanings.

Soviet/Russian-Chinese relations are long-standing. Historically, one of the most significant phases to look at is the Cold War period, in which an initially solid partnership had been established between the two leading countries of the Communist camp. In this period the balance of power between the two was tilted strongly in favour of Soviet Union; Beijing was the junior partner. The relationship back then was nevertheless uneasy culminating in the conflict that erupted in 1969 on the Ussuri River, leaving dozens dead on both sides. Eventually the relationship broke the senior-junior mould, thanks to the Pingpāng wàijiāo (ping-pong diplomacy) that opened direct relations with the USA in 1972.

Today, compared to the balance existing at the time of the Cold War, the situation is hugely different, not only due to the different global context, but to the reciprocal balance of power. Moscow, willy-nilly, is the more junior power, although Beijing is very careful in minimising its overall importance. The balance is against Russia in the sectors of demography, economy, international image and power projection.

Moscow sees clear challenges with the One Belt One Road initiative and its consequent effects over the former imperial areas of Russia's influence like the Far East (Dalniy Vostok), Middle East (Blizhniy Vostok), Eastern Europe (Beijing's led 16+1 Initiative), or Central Asia, with Beijing's expanding its strategic and economic role within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This time the centuries-long encirclement obsession of the *Russkij Mir* (Russian World) could actually be looming.

That said, there are Russian interests that find a commonality with China's: avoid isolation by the Euro-Atlantic constellation, regime survival, superpower status, authoritarian internal politics, and tactical convergences in several regional

theatres (see the first-ever Sino-Russian joint air patrol in the Yellow Sea in July) and, paradoxically, a relative confidence in multilateral arrangements vis-à-vis a more exceptionalist US policy. Macron's Realpolitik, with the bilateral meeting with Vladimir Putin in Brégançon (19 August 2019), is once again trying to reassert its European leadership, thus overshadowing Germany, and assisting the US Administration in re-including Russia in a wider political conversation hoping to distance Moscow from Beijing and hence to start closing (or freezing again) different crises in Eastern Europe, starting with Ukraine. Like what Washington is trying to implement and could be strengthened with the departure of the National Security Adviser, John Bolton, it is ping-pong diplomacy in reverse.

That said, three main hurdles stand in the way of such policy approach:

- A divided US Administration and Congress on Russia;
- The Russian ambiguity between Euro-Asian hegemony and better relationships on par with the West;
- The position of NATO's neighbours to Russia, some of them still fearing further encroachments and promoting the Piłsudski's Inter-marium vision (a sort of grouping of countries connecting the Baltic, the Black and sometimes the Adriatic Sea, stillborn in the Twenties of last century).

Giorgio Cella

OCTOBER 2019

KOSOVO: A CHANGE WITH A VIEW

Snap parliamentary elections were held in Kosovo on the 6th of October. Results could mark a historic change, since parties born from the ashes of the KLA, the guerrilla who rose up against the Serbian rule in 1998-1999 war, seem to be ousted from power after a long time. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), the most

influential among “war parties”, has ruled the country in the last 12 years. Its leader Hashim Thaci, the guerrilla political leader, is now the President.

The great winner of the vote, Self-Determination (Vetevendosje, VV), a faction that supports unification with Albania and promotes Social-Democratic recipes in economy, wishes to form a coalition with the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), that has its roots in the non-violent resistance against Serbia in the Nineties.

VV got 25,5% of the votes, obtaining 31 seats. LDK took 24,82%, securing 30 seats in the new Parliament. Together, they can have a slight majority in the 120-seat assembly. In order to make it more stable, they will try to include in the coalition the parties representing Bosnian, Egyptian and Roma minorities. They have 10 reserved seats in the Parliament, as many as those awarded to Serbian parties. The Srprka List, a Belgrade-controlled faction, won all of them.

After parliamentary elections in June 2017, the PDK, the real loser of last week's elections, agreed a coalition deal with the Alliance for the future of Kosovo (AAK), headed by Ramush Haradinaj, a prominent KLA commander, who was then picked as prime minister.

A parliamentary majority was secured only through the support of the New Kosovo Alliance (AKR), led by Behgjet Pacolli, a controversial tycoon who then became the minister of foreign affairs, and by some independents. In last week's elections, it engineered an electoral list with the Social Democratic Initiative, whose leader Fatmir Limaj was another well-known commander of the KLA. However, the Pacolli-Limaj faction failed to reach the 5% threshold.

The Haradinaj government collapsed in July, when the prime minister resigned after he was summoned by international justice as a suspected of war crimes. In snap elections, the AAK got 11,5% and 4 seats, while the PDK took 21,2% and 25 seats. Both Haradinaj and Kadri Veseli, the PDK front-runner, he himself a top KLA commander, admitted defeat.

The Haradinaj government has not delivered

any of the great promises made when it took office, among them free-visa regime for Schengen area. Little has been done also to tackle corruption, a plague for this country, the poorest and the youngest in the Balkans. Half of the population is under the age of 25. Most of the young people voted VV or LDK, that campaigned to push war parties out of power. Both Albin Kurti and Vjosa Osmani, the VV and the LDK front-runners respectively, accused the former KLA commanders for having failed Kosovo, spreading corruption at any level of the administration.

Albin Kurti, whose political journey began in the Nineties when he headed Kosovar students' protests against the discriminations imposed by the Serbian rule, is seeking to make a coalition deal with Vjosa Osmani, the first woman to run for the top government post.

It will not be an easy task. VV and the LDK diverge on many issues, especially in the economic field. VV has a leftist approach, while the LDK has a pro-market approach. Another potential rift concerns policy towards Serbia. VV is rather ideological and opposes the creation of an autonomous association of Serb-majority municipalities, a provision included in the Brussels Agreement, signed by Pristina and Belgrade in 2013 under the aegis of the EU. The LDK backs the package, aimed at normalising relations, and as junior partner in the PDK-led government (2014-2017), worked to implement it.

Dialogue with Serbia collapsed last year due to several reasons, among them the 100% tariffs imposed by the Haradinaj government on Serbian exports to Kosovo. The US and the EU are pushing Belgrade and Pristina to restart negotiations. This topic will give to the new Kosovar government a headache, whatever it may be, and some problems to the international community, if the government formation is not quick enough.

Matteo Tacconi

NOVEMBER 2019

MACRON'S TOUGH LOVE FOR THE BALKANS

At a recent EU Council, the French President, Emmanuel Macron vetoed the opening of EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, as suggested to the Council by the EU Commission.

Macron's *non*, somehow expected, depends on French internal political situation (immigration and EU enlargement are an issue of concern for citizens), as well as on governance in Europe. He believes that before expanding further its borders, the EU needs a profound rethinking of its decisional mechanisms.

The French veto is clearly connected to Macron's European ambitions, too. He wants to emerge as the leader of the bloc, succeeding the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is serving her fourth and last term. In spring, he launched a manifesto for Europe's future. Yet, it has not sparked big enthusiasm. Observers speculate that sinking Albania and North Macedonia's European hopes, supported by all the EU members, exception made for France, could be interpreted as a tit for tat for the lukewarm reception of the manifesto.

To move closer to the EU, Tirana approved a deep reform of the judiciary. Implementation was slow, but it should not be forgotten that the vetting of judges (the main pillar of the reform) is a very sensitive issue in a country that still faces the burden of the most brutal and paranoid dictatorship among all others in the former Eastern Communist bloc.

North Macedonia's effort to close the gap with Europe was even more forceful. The Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, has survived several challenges, like nationalism and foreign meddling, to solve the naming dispute with Greece, the historic hurdle on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration. Macron's veto ignites frustration in the two countries and in the rest of the region. Zaev felt

the necessity to call early elections the 12th of April 2020 due to the French veto. Disappointed by Europe's enlargement fatigue, stemmed only by Angela Merkel during the last years, the Western Balkans might forge closer ties with Turkey, China and Russia, whose appetites in the region are growing, despite their questionable democratic standards. Since Macron showed that accession talks can be sunk at any moment, even if EU requirements are on the path of fulfillment, increasing cooperation with Beijing, Moscow and Turkey might not seem anymore a big issue for the Balkan Six at least until some concrete opening from the EU is visible.

Matteo Tacconi

DECEMBER 2019

A FRENCH VETO ENTAILS DANGEROUS CONSEQUENCES FOR NORTH MACEDONIA

In early 2020, North Macedonia will be formally accepted as a NATO member. The accession should have been happened by the end of the year, but it was delayed due to the postponement of the ratification process in Spain, where the political situation is very uncertain due to the lack of a viable majority.

Despite the fact that it will soon join NATO, the post-Yugoslav country has not yet opened accession talks to join the EU. Emmanuel Macron, the French president, blocked it in October. He argued that before accepting new members, the EU should rethink its governance, adding that stricter rules for enlargement are required. Macron vetoed also the opening of accession talks for Albania, already a NATO member.

Macron's choice was widely criticised by several EU leaders, to no avail. Recently, the French government outlined a proposal aimed at redefining the enlargement rules. Rather than being based on negotiating the chapters of the *acquis communautaire*, Paris suggests that accession talks should follow several stages, which would

"form coherent policy blocks", the website of the Atlantic Council reports. Furthermore, if candidate members fail to make reforms, the process can be reversed.

Macron's plan – supported by The Netherlands and Denmark – is inspired by internal political reasons (the French far right opposes any EU enlargement), as well as by the idea that previous enlargements were made too quickly, as Poland and Hungary threats to democratic values apparently show.

To some observers, Macron's vision to rethink the enlargement process makes sense, but the timing is utterly wrong. Albania and North Macedonia had to make big reforms to get closer to the EU. Tirana approved measures that revolutionise the judicial system and foresee the vetting of judges, a very sensitive issue in a country that still faces the burden of Communism. As for North Macedonia, efforts towards NATO-EU integration were even tougher. The country had to solve the long-time naming dispute with Greece, the historic hurdle on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration. The Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, has survived several challenges, like nationalism and foreign meddling, to achieve this goal.

The veto posed by Macron frustrates Zaev, who called for snap elections in April 202. He is aware that Macron will not change the tune and that the EU will take months to discuss his plan to redraw enlargement rules. Should it be approved, the path to the EU will become longer and harder. Thus, Zaev and his Social Democratic Party (SDSM) want at least to play in a timely way the NATO membership card (the first concrete promise to join the West), hoping it will enough to secure a new mandate.

It is a risky move anyway. Many North Macedonians saw the naming change as a humiliation, and the VMRO-DPMNE, the nationalist opposition party, is trying to exploit this feeling. It accuses Zaev of having betrayed the national interest by agreeing with Greece and the West to turn the name of the country from Macedonia to North Macedonia.

Before Zaev was appointed Prime Minister in 2017, the VMRO DPMNE had ruled the country for ten years building an authoritarian and corrupted regime, featuring massive phone eavesdropping against tens of thousands of opponents. His leader and former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, accused for corruption, fled to Hungary to avoid a trial where he has received political asylum. Should the VMRO DPMNE win elections, his member will take the power back. It is rather likely that they will promote a nationalist and anti-globalization agenda inspired by Orbán's Hungary and discreetly supported by the Kremlin. EU integration hopes could fade away and Russian influence would grow again, putting into jeopardy Skopje's NATO membership. A bad message for the entire Balkan region.

Matteo Tacconi

JANUARY 2020

QUO VADITIS BALKANS?

Approximately a decade ago, the narration of the Western Balkans was characterized by shades of optimism, justified by the arrests of war criminals made by Serbia, some progress in the field of regional cooperation and a growing sense of “Yugosphere”, as the British journalist Tim Judah described the daily commercial and cultural relations between peoples in the region. Sure, the Western Balkans did not shine in terms of democratic standards, but policy makers in Brussels, as well as analysts and researchers, though that the situation would have improved within a relatively short period of time.

Since then, many things have changed. The global financial collapse depressed the Western Balkans’ economies and the quality of democracy in the region has slowly worsened. In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vucic and his Progressive Party (SNS) have built an authoritarian democracy, according to several analysts, through an increasingly suffocating control on justice, security agencies and media. In North Macedonia, the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski ruled the country through a combination of nationalism and nepotism for ten years (2006-2016). After he was forced by popular demonstrations and vote to leave the post, he was charged for corruption and fled the country to avoid a trial. He was granted political asylum in Viktor Orban’s Hungary. Where more, where less, democratic backsliding, populism comeback, widespread corruption and limitations of media freedom have been noticed also in Albania. Bosnia Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro.

In the past these trends brought effectively the region to a large-scale crisis. Luckily, today such scenario is rather unlikely because the Western Balkans are tied to the Euro-Atlantic area. Albania and Montenegro are NATO members, while North Macedonia should join the club in the coming months. In Kosovo, NATO is still the

main security provider. Montenegro and Serbia opened EU accession talks in 2012 and 2013 respectively. Albania and North Macedonia could follow them soon, if Emmanuel Macron will drop its veto. As for Bosnia Herzegovina, the country applied for EU membership in 2016.

However, the Euro-Atlantic “safety net” could be no longer effective to keep the Western Balkans on the right track. The governance crisis in the EU, the enlargement fatigue (fatigue or carelessness?), a slow recovery from the global financial crisis and the emerging confrontation between liberal democracies and non-liberal democracies, weakened it. And the more this safety net is weak, the more the Western Balkans leaderships feel authorized to ignore Euro-Atlantic values.

Today the “big game” between democracy and populism is played in the Western Balkans too. Governments are failing in delivering democratic progress, but civil society is committed to denounce abuses of power, corruption and nationalism. This shows that in the Western Balkans there is still a demand for democracy, transparency and values, issues that both the EU and NATO consider as crucial in their agenda for the region. Yet, to make values a real change driver, as well as the marker between full democracy and limited democracy, the Euro-Atlantic club must find again its unity that can also help it to preserve the status of the main stability provider in the region, challenged by Russia, China and some allied countries.

NDC

KOSOVO: NEW START, OLD HURDLES

After four months of hard talks, Self-Determination (LVV) and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), the two parties that scored the best result at parliamentary elections in October, finally found an agreement to form a government headed by Albin Kurti, the LVV leader. His party got 29 seats at elections, while the LDK gained 28 seats.

Negotiations between LVV and LDK have re-

peatedly been on the verge of collapse during the last four months due to disagreements over the distribution of top positions and the name of the next President of the Republic (the actual expires in 2021), who is appointed by the Parliament. For the moment the discussion was postponed

Albin Kurti delivered an opening speech in the Assembly on the 3rd of February and got a 66 majority on 120 seats with the support of all ethnic minorities (10 seats) except the Serbians. Kurti stressed that his government will fight corruption and will try to save state resources. *"We will have 15 ministries, not 21 like there were before. We will have 33 deputy ministers and not more than 80 like before. So, fewer expenses on posts and privileges in order to spend more in development projects"* he underlined.

During the electoral campaign, both LVV and LDK accused the outgoing coalition, led by parties born on the ashes of the guerrilla that fought against Serbia in the Nineties, to have failed the country through mass corruption and nepotism.

In the new government, LVV members will run the crucial ministries of Economy, Finance, Health. The new minister of Foreign Affairs, Glauk Konjufca, is also an LVV member. Ministries of Culture, Interior, Defence and Agriculture will be led by LDK members, while the LDK front-runner, Vjosa Osmani, will be the Speaker of the Assembly. A reasonable division of power, although a risky one for the less experienced partner of the coalition

As for dialogue with Serbia, the new prime minister, known for advocating unification with Albania, said that the government is ready to resume talks with Serbia, but the focus will be on the sole aim of securing recognition of Kosovo by Belgrade.

Among the main points of the programme are: "full commercial, economic and political reciprocity", from which depends the abolition of the 100% tariffs on Serbian products, imposed by the previous government; a three-month military conscription (a militarily symbolic measure,

with high impact on the Serbian speaking citizens); filing a suit against Serbia at the International Court of Justice for war crimes committed in 1998-1999.

In any case talks with Belgrade will no longer led by the President Hashim Thaci, but by Kurti himself. This could imply: a harder political line, more transparency on the negotiations and a push to reduce the powers of the Association/Community of Serbian Municipalities (the ZSO, stalled since 2013). Kurti believes that the ZSO could be still a political influence tool for Belgrade.

It is likely that Serbia will harden its own stance and in fact the Srpska Lista, the Belgrade-controlled political party representing Serbian speaking Kosovars, is in the opposition.

The forecast is that both capitals will try to gain time by playing hardball and keeping the status quo in order to understand if the US push in the Balkans is enduring or just an episode featuring a direct air link between Belgrade and Pristina and if the EU restarts an effective enlargement process or is still mired by the French veto.

Matteo Tacconi

FEBRUARY 2020

ORBAN: THE HUNGAROSPHERE IN THE BALKANS

Over the last years, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has deployed an ambitious strategy to gain influence in the Balkans. Connected to the Balkans through history and culture, Hungary was already a regional player, although lacking a high profile status. Now it is trying to earn it.

To many observers, Orban wants to drag the Balkans under the influence of the faction promoting "illiberal democracy" in Europe and elsewhere. Fidesz, the party he leads is a prominent member of this club. Funds for the Hungarian ethnic minorities, a law for granting Hungarian citizenship and investments in banking and media sector are the incentives offered to make

Orban's plan attractive. To Srdan Cvijic, a senior policy analyst at the Open Society European Policy Institute (a very partisan NGO for Hungary's government), Orban's strategy can be successful. *"It requires coherent ideology; only the simple rejection of another one"*, Cvijic, a Serb, wrote in a comment published by Politico in 2018.

He and other liberal-minded commentators argue that some authoritarian twists in the region, like those in Serbia or in Northern Macedonia under Nikola Gruevski's tenure, recall the Hungarian recipe for state capture, based on an increasingly suffocating control over judiciary, law enforcement agencies, education and media.

In a recent article, Balkan Insight told how the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ), the main party of the Hungarian minority in Serbia, has fully aligned with Fidesz during the last years. Today the VMSZ distributes funds channelled by the Hungarian government to the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, Serbia's northern multi-ethnic autonomous province, and controls Magyar Szó, the main daily newspaper of the Hungarian community.

The VMSZ is allied at both local and national level with the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. *"Critics of the Progressives say Vucic is also following Orban's lead in marginalising dissenters and controlling the media"*, noted the author of the article, the Hungarian reporter Akos Keller Alant. As for North Macedonia, the Hungarian government granted political asylum to Nikola Gruevski, the Prime Minister of the Balkan country from 2006 to 2016. There are strong ties between Fidesz and Gruevski's party, the VMRO DPMNE. Pro-EU parties and NGOs stress that it followed Orban's path to illiberal democracy.

After he lost elections in 2017, Gruevski was accused of corruption but fled to Hungary in November 2018 to avoid a trial. *"One treats allies fairly. If he turns to us, he can expect due process. We can't place him above the law, but we can give him due process"*, Orban said.

In the last months, there have been Hungarian

investments in media sector in Northern Macedonia. The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and partners have showed that two senior executives of Hungarian public television, a government mouthpiece, established companies in Northern Macedonia that bought stakes in several local outlets. The reason of the investment is not clear. It could be only business, but also a move to support the electoral campaign of the VMRO DPMNE, which would want to take the power back at parliamentary elections on the 12th of April.

Today, the Western Balkans appear as one of the many arenas where the challenge between liberal democracy and illiberal democracy, full democracy and limited democracy takes place. Hungary works to expand the boundaries of the illiberal camp, as critics of Mr. Orban say, and this could ignite tensions in the region. Yet, Hungary is also a NATO member, committed to guarantee peace. Furthermore, in the new EU Commission the enlargement portfolio is run by Olivér Várhelyi, a Hungarian diplomat. He supports European integration for the Western Balkans.

In other words, Hungary is part of the problem but also part of the solution. In the current chaotic, fluid and naïve geopolitical scenario, such double-headed approach to the Balkans and to foreign policy in general can last.

Matteo Tacconi

MARCH 2020

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE BALKAN REGION

The Western Balkans have adopted draconian measures to tackle the coronavirus pandemic. Schools, universities, theatres, and cinemas have been closed. Borders are strictly controlled. The people's freedom of movement has been severely limited. North Macedonia and Serbia have postponed parliamentary elections, scheduled for the 12th and 26th of April, respectively.

Although the impact of the pandemic in the

Western Balkans has been less devastating than in EU countries so far, and will likely remain so, countries in the region have several reasons for concern. The Covid-19 pandemic is a hard stress test for their weak health systems, as well as for their very fragile economies, that risk, as much more solid ones in the EU, a severe recession.

The pandemic can affect the EU integration process, too. In March, the EU Council approved the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia – blocked by France last October 2019. The EU Council decision “reaffirms EU’s commitment to the European perspective of the region”, said EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, adding that this is an important message not only for Tirana and Skopje, but for the whole region.

Turning a good signal into concrete results depends on many factors. Concrete facts are needed to show that the EU recommitment for the Western Balkans will be genuine and constant, for example, as the echo of Macron’s niet to Albania and North Macedonia is still strong. At the same time, the effectiveness of the new enlargement strategy (here explained by New Eastern Europe), that France strongly wanted, must be verified. On the other hand, greater pushes for reforms are required from Albania and North Macedonia, as well as from Serbia and Montenegro, that are already negotiating accession to the EU.

However, the key factor to observe in the coming months is, again, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. An economic earthquake and prolonged limitations to civil and political activities, could either freeze reforms in the Western Balkans or push the EU to put the renewed focus on the Western Balkans on standby (both in the worst case).

Meanwhile, a Coronavirus dispute in Kosovo caused the collapse of the coalition between Self-Determination (Vetevendosje), a leftist nationalist party, and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), agreed only two months ago.

The Prime Minister and Self-Determination leader Albin Kurti introduced restrictive mea-

sures to people’s movement, without declaring the state of emergency. The President of the Republic, Hashim Thaci, questioned Kurti’s approach saying that any measure concerning basic rights of the people can be implemented only by adopting a state of emergency. The Minister of Internal Affairs and LDK deputy leader, Agim Veliu, aligned with Thaci’s view and was dismissed by Kurti. As a consequence, LDK promoted a no-confidence motion, which was voted by the majority of MPs.

However, the Coronavirus controversy was just a pretext. The real reasons behind the collapse of the Government were the bad relations between Kurti and LDK’s leadership, Thaci’s ambition to be indispensable and US diplomacy’s games in Kosovo, as reported by the New York Times and other media.

Since the beginning of the year, the US administration involvement in the Serbia-Kosovo issue has increased. Washington wants to restart talks between the two countries and get a final agreement to normalise relations. The US supports Thaci as the Kosovar mediator. He and his Serbian counterpart, the President Aleksandar Vucic, put the issue of land swap with Serbia on the table. Kurti opposes it and, once appointed Prime Minister, said that the only body authorised to negotiate is the Government. The no-confidence vote reflects “a much deeper disagreement about how to resolve a decades-old impasse between Kosovo and Serbia. The debate pitted Mr. Kurti, a longtime activist, against both Mr. Thaci and the Trump administration”, the New York Times wrote, adding that US view angered Europe’s diplomacy.

Geopolitics and coronavirus are intertwined also in neighbouring Serbia, object of a medical-diplomatic competition. The President of the Republic, Aleksandar Vucic, blamed the EU for its limited solidarity and said that this forced Serbia to turn to China to get help in the battle against the pandemic. Beijing sent equipment and experts to Belgrade. The Serbian leadership warmly greeted the effort. Belgrade’s bridges and monuments were floodlighted in red to

thank the Asian giant. Immediately after, the EU announced a €400 million Euro plan to support the Western Balkans (Serbia is the main beneficiary) to tackle the emergency caused by Coronavirus, and somehow counter China's soft power. The coronavirus pandemic is a new tool for political competition in the region.

Matteo Tacconi

APRIL 2020

SERBIAN REGRESSIVE PARTY

In order to contain the coronavirus pandemic, the Serbian government has introduced very severe restrictions to people's movement, especially for seniors over 65. Curfews in Serbia have been the toughest in the Western Balkans, if not in Europe as a whole. Police committed a considerable number of abuses of power while enforcing these measures, according to media sources. Several observers agree that the country's strongman Aleksandar Vucic, elected as President of the Republic in 2017, is exploiting the state of emergency to tighten his grip on power, piling pressure on the population, as well as on journalists trying to report on critical times faced by the health system. The Italian Institute for International Political Studies and the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group reported abundantly about these current trends in Serbia.

Apparently, for Vucic and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) there are no reasons to further extend their already immense power. The party won an absolute majority in the 2016 parliamentary elections and together with the Socialist Party (SPS), the junior member in the coalition, has full control on state institutions and municipalities, as well as on judiciary, security agencies and media. Through some opaque takeovers, several media have been dragged under the SNS influence in recent years.

The worrying economic scenario can be a factor explaining Vucic's approach in time of pan-

demic. Serbia's GDP is expected to decline from 3,5% to even 10% in 2020 as a result of lockdown measures and international economic turmoil (meanwhile Standard and Poor's has just cut the outlook from positive to stable). The brutal slowdown will certainly affect employment, prompting a wave of social dissatisfaction that could eventually revive a trend of protests (put on standby during the pandemic) against Ana Brnabic's government. In the meantime, parliamentary elections have been postponed since April.

Vucic's recipe for power is based on typical schemes adopted by populist parties in Hungary and Poland. On the one hand, they advocate the need of being part of the European family, trying to maximize Europe's flow of money towards its peripheries. On the other hand, they literally occupy every power structures.

Nevertheless, the EU, since it is beefing up its commitment in the region through new diplomatic initiatives and solid financial support to fight Covid-19, should not be afraid of tersely warning the Serbian government against going too far in this trend. Beijing is increasing its weight in the Western Balkans turning the region into a key terminal of the Belt and Road Initiative, but the EU is and will remain the main investor, lender and market for Serbia and its neighbours.

Matteo Tacconi

MAY 2020

TENSION AND APPEASEMENT: DJUKANOVIC'S FLUCTUATING APPROACH TO SERBIA

From the 1st of June, Montenegro, declaring to the WHO its coronavirus-free status, reopened its borders. As other European countries, the post-Yugoslav state plans to lift gradually lockdown restrictions in order to support tourism, a crucial sector for growth. Its contribution to Montenegro's GDP floats around 9-10%.

So far, the government has opened the border only to citizens of countries where the Covid-19 rate of infection is under control (no more than 25 Covid-19 patients per 100.000 inhabitants). People coming from France, Italy and Spain cannot still travel to Montenegro, for instance, and Serbs are not on the list, too.

Belgrade blamed Podgorica saying the neighbour discriminates Serbs, for whom Montenegro is the closest and most popular seaside destination. It is not just cheap weekend tourism: thousands of Serbian citizens own properties on the Adriatic coast. As a countermove, the Serbian government banned Montenegro Airlines from landing at Belgrade airport.

The border controversy (just a temporary health issue for Podgorica) increases bilateral tensions, already at their highest since Montenegro's referendum on independence in May 2006 due to a law on church property passed by the Montenegrin Parliament last December 2019. According to the law, religious communities have to prove ownership on their buildings from before 1918, the year in which Montenegro joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, subsequently named Yugoslavia.

If solid evidence lacks, a building may be listed as state property. The law angered the Serbian Orthodox Church, the largest church in Montenegro, on two accounts. First, there is the fear that the Church can be stripped off its holdings. Secondly, that this measure would pose an emerging threat to Serbs in Montenegro, who represent one third of the whole population. The Serbian Patriarch Irenej, enthroned in 2010, declared that the church property law recalls the violent methods used during the II World War by the ultra-nationalist Ustasha movement to expel Serbs from Croatia.

It is important to remember that Montenegrins believers belong also to the Serbian Orthodox Church, because it extends its jurisdiction also in this country since Podgorica is not the seat of an autocephalous (autonomous) orthodox church. Something that is far from a purely theological dispute, as the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Or-

thodox Church shows. The Serbian government, which has a strong relation with the Serbian Orthodox Church, shares these concerns, although without using Irenej's blunt words. From their side Montenegro's authorities argue that the law is just a step to make national legislation comply with that in place in most of EU countries.

The Democratic Front, the main opposition party in Montenegro, embracing pro-Serbia and pro-Russia views, supports the Serbian Orthodox Church. Until the coronavirus pandemic broke out, orthodox priests and DF members had organized protests against the law. In Niksic, the second largest city of Montenegro, priests marched the 13th of May, challenging lockdown limitations. A bishop and eight priests were arrested. Despite the fact that they were released soon, tensions surged. A leader of the DF, Andrija Mandic, called all orthodox believers in Montenegro to take the streets, but then he backtracked.

Alongside Russian and Serbian officials, Mandic and Milan Knezevic, another DF leader, were convicted in 2019 for having organized a coup in 2016 to derail Montenegro's accession to NATO, fulfilled in 2017. Mandic and Knezevic appealed. According to prosecutors, there could be also a plan to assassinate the President, Milo Djukanovic.

Djukanovic, who rose to power in 1991 and has served both as Prime Minister and President over these thirty years, is trying to exploit tensions with Serbia to secure his Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) another mandate at parliamentary elections in autumn. In a recent interview with Reuters, he said that protests related to church law recall "mechanisms of the implementation of the Greater Serbian state project" (28/02/2020). For the actual leadership in Podgorica Montenegro's, the Democratic Front and the Serbian Orthodox Church, act under the influence of Belgrade.

Diplomatic tensions will be exploited for electoral reasons also by Vucic. There will be general elections in Serbia on June 21. The Serbian leader and Djukanovic "both need causes to champion

and enemies to vanquish ahead of upcoming elections”, journalists Sasa Dragojlo and Samir Kajosevic argued in an article recently published by Balkan Insight.

Yet, Djukanovic could play the card also for a broader strategy. Insisting on the narration of the “big brother” trying to swallow the “little neighbour”, thus evoking Serbia’s past dreams of regional hegemony, Djukanovic tries to distance his country from Belgrade in a moment in which Vucic’s reign is increasingly under scrutiny.

Over the last years, he and his Progressive Party have curtailed rule of law, media freedom and opposition rights, turning Serbia into a hybrid regime, as many observers underline. Montenegro cannot be dragged under the influence of Vucic’s Serbia: this is Djukanovic’s message. If it happened, it would jeopardize Podgorica’s commitment to the Euro-Atlantic community, as Serbia is departing from democratic values and pursuing a pro-Russia and pro-China foreign policy.

Interestingly a recent Freedom House report underlined a democratic backsliding also in Podgorica, 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.

Accusing Serbia of being aggressive can divert international watchdogs’ attention, force the EU to speed up its integration process, suggest NATO to strengthen Montenegro’s security and – last but not least – keep Djukanovic and his party in power. In any case having trouble with Serbia is uncomfortable but unavoidable, because trade is brisk and language, history, religion and mixed families cement ties between the two countries.

All along his career, Djukanovic has had a changeable relation with the Serbian leadership. He rose to power in 1991, backed by Slobodan Milosevic. Then he turned against his Serbian boss and began to play the independence card, breaking with the policy of unity between Serbia

and Montenegro. During the referendum period, tensions were very high. Serbia did oppose the neighbour’s independence and the Montenegrin society was extremely polarized. The same happened with the accession to NATO; yet Djukanovic achieved his goals and then successfully looked for an appeasement with Belgrade. He is ready of another run with Belgrade.

Matteo Tacconi

JUNE 2020

HASHIM THACI INDICTED ON WAR CRIMES CHARGES

On the 24th of June, the Specialist Prosecutor’s Office for Kosovo (SPO), the Hague-based international body investigating on crimes that were commenced or committed in Kosovo between 1 January 1998 and 31 December 2000 by or against citizens of Kosovo or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, made public an indictment charging the Kosovar President, Hashim Thaci, with a range of crimes against humanity and war crimes. Alongside Thaci, the political leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA-UCK) during the conflict, other nine persons once belonging to the guerrilla were indicted, Kadri Veseli included. He is the former President of Kosovo’s Parliament and former deputy leader of the Kosovo Democratic Party (PDK), Thaci’s party; during the war he was the chief of the UCK intelligence.

The SPO and the Kosovo Specialist Chambers (KSC), a pool of international judges who integrate the international court investigating on war crimes in Kosovo, are recognized by Kosovo’s Constitution that was amended to provide a proper legal basis for the court. “The crimes alleged in the Indictment involve hundreds of known victims of Kosovo Albanian, Serb, Roma, and other ethnicities and include political opponents”, the SPO’s press office told. A judge must still review the indictment to confirm charges that Thaci and Veseli firmly rejected. If con-

firmed, Thaci will resign, he stated. The indictment, originally filed in April, was made public because of Thaci and Veseli's "repeated efforts to obstruct and undermine" the work of the SPO and the KSC, according to the SPO press statement.

The publication of the indictment came just ahead of scheduled talks between Thaci and Vucic in Washington, under the patronage of Donald Trump. He is looking for a fast deal between Serbia and Kosovo to boost chances of re-election in November by presenting himself as a world peace broker, several media think. According to rumours spread in the last months, Trump would support a land swap between Serbia and Kosovo, through which Serbia would annex Serb-majority areas in northern Kosovo, while Kosovo would get Albanian-majority lands in southern Serbia.

The timing of the indictment seems strictly related to the land swap option. To Lisen Bashkurti, a university professor in Tirana, the Kosovar leader agreed to exchange the dissolution of the court with territorial concessions in favour of Serbia, with the US backing this option. Realizing this, the court decided to shield itself by making the indictment public, Bashkurti wrote in a comment for Eurasia Review.

Once he got the news of the indictment, Thaci cancelled his trip to Washington. No talks anymore and a blow to Donald Trump and Richard Grenell, the US envoy to the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue. The failure of their approach (just momentary or definitive?) gives the UE the chance to retake the initiative. Yet Brussels should look for instruments and incentives other than accession to the EU for Serbia and a faster lane to get admission to international organizations for Kosovo because both are not enough anymore. A new scheme and a new method are required. Meanwhile, former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army have vowed to protest against Thaci's indictment made by the international court, that is considered biased in Kosovo, as well as oriented to "rewrite history", to quote Thaci's words. The majority of Kosovo's citizens share

veterans' view: a just war was fought in 1998-1999. Yet, many of them were children during the conflict or were even born after it. Around 40% of the population is under 25, making Kosovo the youngest nation in Europe. Young people in Kosovo are mainly interested in visas, jobs and good education. While respecting those who resisted to Milosevic's Serbia, they do not want to feel trapped in the past and in corruption. It is hard to think that they will answer a call to take streets to support Thaci and Veseli. However, if there will be large-scale demonstrations throughout the country, security issues could emerge and KFOR (approx. 4.000 troops) is taking into account also this possibility.

Matteo Tacconi

JULY 2020

THE PANDEMIC: A FURTHER SHOCK ON THE BALKANS

The coronavirus pandemic represents a serious economic challenge for the Western Balkan, 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.

Matteo Tacconi

AUGUST 2020

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.

Matteo Tacconi

SEPTEMBER 2020

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

OCTOBER 2020

IN SERBIA, THE NEW GOVERNMENT IS ALREADY OLD

On the 24th of October, the new Serbian government was announced. Led by Ana Brnabic, confirmed as Prime Minister, it is a national alliance between the only three parties that won seats in Parliament at elections on June 21: the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), dominating the political scene for years; the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS), its traditional ally; the Serbian Patriotic Alliance (SPAS), a right-wing, populist party that had never been in Parliament before.

The government is made of 21 ministers plus 2 ministers without portfolio. With 11 women as ministers, it is the most gender-balanced cabinet ever in the region. But it will have a short life span. Just a few days before it was formed, the

Serbian President and SNS leader Aleksandar Vucic announced that there will be snap parliamentary elections in April 2022. Vucic said it makes sense to couple regular presidential elections, scheduled on April 22, with the parliamentary vote. He also added that municipal elections in Belgrade, also planned for 2022, could be arranged for the same date.

Grouping the three electoral processes is an astute political game. Vucic needs to restore the legitimacy of Parliament after the main opposition parties boycotted general elections in June. They argued that the SNS, viewed as a corrupted and hegemonic party that has emptied Serbia's democracy, did not offer equal conditions to take part in the electoral process. Vucic will try to persuade the opposition to take part in the 2022 vote, assuring them that the process will be transparent and will involve European observers to supervise it.

Having a challenged parliamentary vote and then a multiparty assembly is key to the Serbian President, who is reorienting the country's foreign policy towards the West, as several analysts have recently noticed, among them Jelena Milic. A Parliament with a majority, an opposition and a dialectic between them, thus a normal Parliament, can help Vucic to boost his credibility among the EU countries and with the prospective US President, Joe Biden, reigniting the Europeanization process and talks with Kosovo to normalise economic and political relations.

The Serbian President needs an opposition in the Parliament, but this means that the overwhelming consensus of the SNS, which took 60,65% of the vote in June, will decrease. Merging presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections in Belgrade, is the way through which the ruling party, by making its electoral machine work at all levels, will try to maximize its consensus.

But there is still a long way to 2022 e-day. In the meantime, Vucic will put himself centre stage, even more, as the exclusion from the government of the SPS leader Ivica Dacic could suggest. Having been Prime Minister and Minister of

Foreign Affairs in the SNS governments, he has been a crucial figure in the current architecture of power, thus gaining some status, although not comparable with Vucic's popularity. Anyway, for the President it might be convenient to stand alone on the stage ahead of the 2022 elections. Dacic has been appointed the Speaker of Parliament, somehow a downgrading.

It is too early to make predictions, but it is reasonable to think that the most challenging scenario for Vucic and the SNS will be the city of Belgrade in 2022. In Serbia's political map, the capital city matters a lot. Having the majority in the city council raises chances of controlling the country. Since 2013, one year after it rose to power at national level, the SNS holds the town (the current mayor is Zoran Radojicic). It is still strong, but a sign of concern for Vucic and the SNS is that the boycott campaign for parliamentary elections reached its peak precisely in Belgrade. Only 35% of Belgradians voted, compared to a nationwide turnout of 50% less. What's more, the creation of a new local party advocating a stronger commitment to environment and social rights (see the other Strategic Balkans analysis) could make the SNS goal to keep Belgrade, harder than expected.

Matteo Tacconi

NOVEMBER 2020

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

DECEMBER 2020

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, stick-

ing to the policy inaugurated by Brussels due to Moscow's role in the war in Ukraine.

Matteo Tacconi

JANUARY 2021

THE VACCINE DIVIDE

Due to a chronic lack of resources, accessing to Covid-19 vaccines is not an easy game for the Western Balkans. To immunize people, the countries of the region mostly opted for relying on COVAX, a global initiative set up by the EU, the WHO and France to distribute in developing countries vaccines made by European manufacturers.

Under COVAX scheme, doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines have been shipped to Serbia and Albania, however just in a symbolic amount, while other countries in the region have not yet received the first batch. It is already clear that Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia — home to some 20 million people — will lag far behind the EU's 27 nations and Britain in efforts to reach herd immunity by quickly vaccinating a large number of their people.

The scarcity of doses has sparked frustration across the region. Politicians point their finger at the EU. The Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, blamed Brussels for lacking solidarity, saying that its approach to health crisis in the Western Balkans is “morally and politically unacceptable”, implying that the EU has forgotten the region.

However, a note by the EU Commission remarked that 3,3 billion Euro have been mobilized so far to address the health emergency and mitigate the socio-economic impact of the pandemic in the Western Balkans. Moreover, the EU Commission launched in December a loan package, worth 70 million Euro, tailored to speed up vaccinations in the Western Balkans. Yet, the pace is still inadequate.

The vaccine issue is a mirror reflecting the complicated relationship between the UE and its South-eastern neighbours. Brussels is by far the first donor, the first lender and the first trading partner for the region, but the enlargement fatigue, still present across the union, prevents it

to upgrade the Europeanization process in the Western Balkans, which also mean relieving the region's undeveloped economies. For their part, the post-Yugoslav and Albanian political elites criticise in turn the EU's lack of solidarity (sometimes a legitimate argument), to divert attention from their failures to increase up democratic standards, that are clearly worsening. The Western Balkans's efforts to contain the pandemic, for example, is very questionable. During the second-wave pandemic, restrictive measures have been too soft, prompting a surge of infections and deaths. In November, Kosovo was the country with the highest death rate in the world, according to the Johns Hopkins University.

The Western Balkans have realized that the vaccines shortage will not be filled up soon, thus they look for bilateral agreements with manufacturers, not only European ones. Serbia bought doses of Sinopharm and Sputnik V, the Chinese and the Russian vaccines, less effective but cheaper compared to those produced by Western companies. Bosnia Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia are also due to start negotiations with the two non-EU producers. Belgrade's authorities also plan to set up centres to produce the Russian vaccine. Generium, the producer of the vaccine, has confirmed its readiness to transfer technology to Serbia.

With the European enlargement stagnating, China and Russia see vaccines as an opportunity to expand influence in the region and achieve strategic goals. For the Asian superpower, the Western Balkans are a fundamental section of the Belt and Road Initiative, one of the most ambitious geopolitical projects in recent years. As for the Kremlin, the basic objective is watering down the Euro-Atlantic integration in the region. Both China and Russia count on vaccines to strengthen their mix of resources to penetrate the region's porosity. A response from the EU is expected.

Sources: Reuters, Euronews, EU Commission, Seenews, Balkan Insight

Matteo Tacconi

FEBRUARY 2021

VOTING MATTERS

In August 2020, parliamentary elections in Montenegro marked a major political upheaval in the tiny former Yugoslav republic. For the first time since 1991, The Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro, led by the President Milo Djukanovic, lost the majority in the assembly. A coalition made of the pro-Serbian Democratic Front and civic-oriented parties formed the new government, led by Zdravko Krivokapic. He appointed as ministers technocrats and personalities from the civil society.

On February 14, the region experienced a new stunning disruption, with the triumph of Albin Kurti's party, Self-Determination, at snap elections in Kosovo, the poorest country in the region, lagging far behind in terms of Euro-Atlantic integration, which sees Montenegro as the frontrunner. Kurti's victory ended the long-time political domination of parties formed during the war years against Serbia or even before, during the peaceful resistance to Milosevic's authoritarian rule.

In spite of the two countries very different scenarios, elections in Montenegro and Kosovo present a strong analogy. The big change (Kurti and Krivokapic), stemmed from promises to eradicate widespread corruption, restore the rule of law and address social-economic disparities, and was consequences of the selfish and predatory posture of old elites.

From a Western perspective, political processes in the Western Balkans are driven by the choice between Euro-Atlantic integration and international isolation. Unsurprisingly, Western media gave some attention to the pro-Serbian (and pro-Russian) attitude of the Democratic Front, considered as a threat to the West-oriented foreign policy promoted by the DPS since the end of the Balkan wars. However, the new Montenegrin government renewed its commitment to NATO and EU integration.

Also, Kurti's pan-Albanian views were scrutinized, despite – as said before – the incoming Kosovar Prime Minister has shifted towards other objectives in the last years.

Not that these postures should not be underestimated. Yet, the main reason of political upheavals in Montenegro and Kosovo originates from domestic issues. Poverty, hunger for jobs, youth frustration and anger for state capture: this is the stake. People in the Western Balkans still believe in European integration, but while in the past they thought that problems at home would have solved by Europe, now – since the enlargement is stalled – they are more proactive. They understand that voting matters. They do not wait for Brussels. This is the new trend emerging in the region.

Matteo Tacconi

MARCH 2021

THE ALBANIAN COMMON STATE: MYTHS AND PERCEPTIONS

In a recent interview with Euronews, Albin Kurti, the winner of parliamentary elections in Kosovo on the 14th of February, said that he would back the unification of Albania and Kosovo, should a referendum be held in the future on this matter. His words re-ignited an issue that has always been present in the agendas of Pristina and Tirana. Kurti has been campaigning for reunification for a long time. The former Prime Minister of Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj, stressed in the past that he is open to such an idea. The same goes for the former President Hashim Thaci and the current Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, who once said that the question of the unification is unavoidable in the future. Public opinion in both the countries supports the unification, too.

A new Albanian state would count almost 5 million citizens and would become the second political power in the region, challenging the Serbian dominance. This is a strategic gain for

both Albania and Kosovo. Yet it is Pristina that could reap more advantages. A joint state would mean, in principle and notwithstanding real diplomatic issues with non-recognising allies, getting NATO protection (Albania joined the Alliance in 2009) and overcoming Serbia's attempt to block the recognition process through Russia and China's support at the UN Security Council. What's more, Kosovo has a growing demographic trend, while Albania's population is shrinking due to emigration. Kosovo can challenge Tirana's role as the main engine of the union in the long term.

Next, the cost of unification BNE Intellinews estimates, could be \$16 billion. Collecting resources to afford such a price is almost a mission impossible: Tirana and Pristina have very fragile economies with many Achilles' heels. Not to mention the fact that citizens in both countries are not very keen to accept a would-be unification tax, as public opinion polls show.

The birth of a joint Albanian state could also spark territorial changes in the region. Serbia, which opposes unification between Pristina and Tirana, would try to seize Northern Kosovo, mainly inhabited by Serbs and still largely controlled by Belgrade, as well as to strengthen relations with Serbs in Montenegro and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to counter the increased Albanian weight on Europe's south-eastern periphery. It would mean opening a Pandora's box, with unpredictable consequences that NATO and the EU would not appreciate.

Ultimately, Kurti's recent interview with Euronews should not be taken as an alarming message. It mainly sounds like a card to force Serbia to integrate Northern Kosovo into Pristina's structures and Europe to support more Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic ambitions. The unification between Albania and Kosovo seems unlikely in the near future.

Sources: Euronews, Open Democracy, BNE Intellinews, Harvard Political Review

Matteo Tacconi

APRIL 2021

BELARUS ROLE IN NATO'S EASTERN REGION

Immediately after the outbreak of the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Minsk presented itself mainly as a neutral party willing to substantially further peace negotiations over the war's resolution, thus playing the role of an indispensable regional peace broker.

But just as importantly, Belarus also warranted so-called security guaranties toward all states in its neighbourhood. Accordingly, the Belarusian government took upon itself the commitment that it would not allow third countries (including Russia) to use Belarusian territory as a springboard to carry out military aggression against any of its neighbours.

Lukashenka's resolve aimed at preserving this *de facto* neutrality and therefore at avoiding a Russian military encroachment, has morphed into Belarus's considerable level of strategic autonomy within its complex political and military alliance with Russia that can be assessed as a trade-off between economic help against geopolitical loyalty to Moscow.

In the Russia-Belarus Union State, for instance, Minsk and Moscow, from the purely legal point of view, despite a substantial power gap between the two entities, held formally equal weight, and decisions are, accordingly, taken on the basis of consensus. This helped Minsk in the past to exercise its veto power effectively and substantially to block any unilateral Russian decisions that may have been inconsistent with core Belarusian national interests, as, for instance, substantial, but non formal, military neutrality, or, better said, the difficulty or impossibility of Russian forces of carrying out military operations from Belarusian territory.

What is changing? Belarus is being courted by neighbouring states like Lithuania, Poland and Latvia with the offer of grants, financial help to the burgeoning civil society to further the de-

velopment of democracy in an atomized society that has been used to authoritarian rule for so many years.

Presently we are witnessing “democracy promotion” by Western European states or the EU, that condemn Lukashenka’s use of violence (“deeply concerned”) against protesters in the streets. This automatically entails the threat or the implementation of sanctions against Lukashenka and his immediate entourage who are not affected by them. It is clear that these sanctions have a very limited effectiveness.

If Russia and Belarus were united as a single entity in the near future, the strategic implications for NATO would be very serious, because the Baltics would be almost surrounded by Russian forces with, presumably, the provision of logistic support by the armed forces of Belarus.

This would weaken the strategic and political posture of the Baltics and of Poland by highlighting further the importance of the indefensible Suwalki corridor, as the only land connection open between the Baltics and other NATO allies, while luckily sea access is more diversified although contested in a conflict scenario. Therefore, more forces would be deployed in the area by NATO.

The scenario of a Russian military intervention or even a “creeping annexation” can be deemed as relatively unattractive for Moscow due to the heavy political resistance from Belarus’ citizens for whom unification with Russia is not popular and rather divisive, as it was in other Russian speaking countries. Concrete international opposition would be strengthened by internal resistance.

Instead, long as Russia continues to remain steadily and actively involved or embedded in the steering of the political process towards the gradual democratization of the Belarusian society, while safeguarding a neutral or “balanced” political and military status, one can reasonably expect that a Ukrainian-type escalation may be prevented.

Gregorio Baggiani

MONTENEGRO'S DEBT SAGA: THE LESSON TO LEARN FOR THE EU

Montenegro has been struggling to contain the public debt throughout the years, but recently its level has become unsustainable, reaching 103% of GDP. The surge originates from a loan agreement between the previous Montenegrin government and Exim Bank, the major Chinese lender, to build the 41 km section of a highway connecting the strategic Adriatic port of Bar to the border with Serbia.

Despite being branded as largely unfavourable by experts, the contract, worth around 950 million dollars with a 2% annual interest, was approved by the Montenegrin government, dominated by Milo Djukanovic’s Democratic Party of Socialists. As expected, it has become a big burden for the tiny post-Yugoslav nation, that gained independence from Serbia in May 2006. The first payment of the loan is due to expire in July. If paid, the public debt will go up, jeopardizing the already fragile macroeconomic scenario. If unpaid, China will assume control over some of Montenegro’s lands, as stated by the contract.

The new Montenegrin civic-oriented coalition, that came to power after the August 2020 parliamentary elections, keeping the DPS in opposition for the first time since 1991, asked the EU for a loan to reduce Podgorica’s financial and geopolitical dependence on China. Brussels rejected the plea, saying that while it is committed to enhance democracy and economic growth in Montenegro, it cannot repay loans taken from third countries.

Brussels’ stance is legally logical. The EU has repeatedly discouraged countries of the Western Balkans to enter financial agreements with China, whose conditions are opaque. Hence, the refusal to assist Montenegro is a warning to the whole region. The message is clear: relying on European lenders such the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is the only right choice.

However, dealing with Montenegro's rising debt would make sense for the EU. On the one hand, it would be helping the 27-nation bloc to counter the Chinese influence in the region. On the other hand, the current Montenegrin government promised to improve democracy and restore the rule of law, damaged under the DPS tenure, as several independent observers have noted over the years. Since the recently revised EU enlargement strategy is centred on the rule of law proper, helping Montenegro's new Government – that has to face an unpleasant debt legacy – would have been coherent with this new approach.

Beside this, the EU has a lesson to learn from Montenegro's debt saga, not the only story of China's increasing influence in the region: other countries, for other objectives, have asked Beijing for financial support. The fact is that the pace of the enlargement process is too slow. Thirty years have passed since the breakup of Yugoslavia and the end of communism in Albania. So far, just Slovenia and Croatia have joined the EU. Other nations are stuck in a limbo, both for local leaders' reluctance to promote democratic reforms and the EU "enlargement fatigue". If the EU does not find a new momentum to timely integrate the region, Russian and Chinese room for manoeuvre will become much wider.

The EU has contributed a lot to foster stability in the Western Balkans over the last thirty years. Nevertheless a geopolitical Union should understand when support to local allies should override mere accountancy rules: Greece, left alone, was induced to lend two terminals in the port of Piraeus to Chinese companies, allowing a strong commercial foothold to the detriment of ports owned by Mediterranean EU members.

Matteo Tacconi

MAY 2021

NORTH CAUCASIC GEOPOLITICS

The Russian Northern Caucasus is a strategic

region for Russia, although less visible in general for international geopolitics due to intertwined geopolitical, political, cultural, energy and security factors. The Russian Northern Caucasus consists of seven multi-ethnic regions: Chechen Republic; Dagestan; Ingushetia; Kabardino-Balkaria; North Ossetia; Stavropol Krai and Karachay-Cherkessia.

The region is important for the Russian state for several reasons and one is that it defends the Russian underbelly from a potential aggressor, that is it defends one of the most densely populated areas of central Russia. The second strategic reason is that the Russian Caucasus is quintessential for Russia's maritime projection through the Azov Sea, the Black Sea. and, above all, the Caspian Sea along which Dagestan shares a border that stretches almost 450 kilometres.

Dagestan is quintessential for Russia's energy security as the oil pipeline Baku -Novorossiysk goes through the territory of Dagestan. Hence its great importance, also in the light of the enduring competition between the EU sponsored BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Limani in Turkey) oil pipeline and its aforementioned Russian counterpart. A very strong competition between rival EU or US energy projects is also to be seen in the case of Kazakhstan's Kashagan gas pipeline that goes through Russian or other countries' territory. The whole area is one of the most vied for energy projects in the strongly contested oil-rich Caspian region because the EU is striving to reduce its dependence on Russian energy exports. Unfortunately, Dagestan is very prone to external influence, especially from the Arab world, although not exclusively. Russia is therefore interested in the economic development of the Northern Caucasus by Arab states but not in the import of fundamentalist doctrines that might ravage the North Caucasus.

In the past, it was the springboard for many terrorist groups from Dagestan and Chechnya to fight in the Syrian war. This was one of the factors, although probably not the most important, that induced Russia to get involved in Syria, pre-

venting the spread of similar caliphates at home. Chechnya, especially through its governor Ramzan Kadyrov, appears to be also very important for Moscow as it offers a concrete chance of dialogue with the Umma, the Muslim world and especially the Sunnite world. Since Russia has taken sides with Iran, Hezbollah and Assad, it is intensely trying to mend the ties with the Sunnite world and especially Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates through Ramzan Kadyrov's shuttle diplomacy which in turn allows him to reach a higher consideration in the whole Northern Caucasus and in the whole Arab world in general.

Gregorio Baggiani

18 YEARS AFTER THESSALONIKI, "DEEP DISAPPOINTMENT" IN ENLARGEMENT

The delays in the integration process and the EU accession strategy and the perception of sluggish delivery of vaccines from the European Union have exacerbated an already robust sense of disillusionment towards enlargement in the Western Balkans. And the EU is aware that losing momentum in the enlargement process could lead to more instability in the region and beyond.

The scenario, connected with potential risks of an increased geopolitical influence of external power in the region, was confirmed by an internal document distributed at the European Union Council this month. A non-paper on "EU reinforced engagement in the Western Balkans", sent to the foreign ministers of the 27 EU member countries, warned that "the people in the region are experiencing a sense of deep disappointment in the enlargement process".

There are several reasons behind the disillusionment that permeates the region, the paper noted. Among them, the delays in the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, countries that underwent painful reforms to achieve the goal, but are blocked by the scepticism of some EU member countries and by a Bulgarian veto.

Furthermore, people in the region are disillusioned due to the slow pace in the integration process of Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the latter two still potential candidates, and by the uncertainties around the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo.

The "perception of tardy EU delivery of the COVID-19 vaccines has further fed a narrative of disillusionment" this year, the non-paper noted, recalling that the EU "treated the partners in a privileged manner, giving them access to several initiatives normally reserved for member states" during the pandemic. However, the lack of vaccines in the region has led several countries, firstly Serbia, to turn to Russia and China to get millions of doses, additionally fuelling the external actors' grip on the Balkans.

There is a concerning and widespread "perception in the Western Balkans that the prospect of accession is receding and that European aspirations are lost under a complex set of conditions and procedures that keeps the Western Balkans locked into a Sisyphean destiny", the non-paper reads.

On the other hand, the region is not lost, with public opinion across the region still favouring EU accession. A study by the think tank BiEPAC–European Fund for the Balkans earlier this year confirmed this perception, with a survey revealing that a vast majority of citizens of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are in favour of their country joining the EU. However, 58% of people in Albania, 75% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 40% in Kosovo, 49% in Montenegro, 47% in North Macedonia and 45% in Serbia stated that they are dissatisfied with the progress in the EU integration process.

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The study noted that people in the region are aware that their leaderships also have some part of responsibility in the slow integration process, citing "poor situation in institutions and state, inadequate laws and corruption" and "inadequate policies" as the gaps to work on.

Stefano Giantin

JUNE 2021

THE NEW NATO CYBER INCIDENT RESPONSE CENTER IN MOLDOVA

The recent opening of a NATO Cyber Response Capability Center on the 21st January 2021 in Chisinau, the capital of Moldova has intensified the already existing cooperation framework agreement between NATO and Moldova.

This state of the art technological capability was established with support from the NATO Science for Peace and Security (SPS) Programme and in cooperation with the NATO Information and Communication Agency (NCIA) through a multi-year project. It will substantially reduce any threat resulting from cyber incidents, provide quick and efficient recovery and prevent similar incidents in the future that might jeopardize Moldova's security and make it thoroughly resilient to cyber-attacks aiming at destabilizing the country.

This is particularly true with regard to the security sector, the effectiveness of which on the field can be severely affected by corruption, lack of coordination with foreign partners or an absence of the rule of law. The main enhancer of security for Moldova is the NATO Program Security and Partnership for Peace, in the framework of an IPAP (Individual Partnership Action Plan). The country appears to be one of the main battlefields of NATO-Russia information confrontation, which reveals a deep mutual mistrust and therefore an ensuing confrontational attitude over the so called "grey area", the "belt" of Eastern European countries stretching from Belarus to the north to Moldova to the south sandwiched or dangerously oscillating between NATO and Russia.

Russian governmental officials and the press limit themselves to soberly reporting the news, adding that the further deepening of military integration of Moldova with NATO will even further exacerbate the already tense relations between Russia and NATO. The incumbent Moldovan government, presided by the Western leaning Prime Minister Maia Sandu, generally expresses itself

strongly in favour of the collaboration with NATO and in general with Euro-Atlantic institutions, but the media near to the Moldovan Socialist Party, and, more generally, the left-leaning parties, stressed the possible problems that a deepening of collaboration or military integration with NATO would cause to the country's neutrality status. The Russian-speaking press of the Pridnestrovi-an Republic, or Transnistria, under direct Russian tutelage, also seems generally concerned about the tighter connections that are presently being established between NATO and Moldova.

Some of the goals of the NATO technical and advisory mission in Moldova include strengthening and updating the defence capabilities of the Moldovan Army in the unforeseeable event of a cyber-attack, coordinating them with NATO standards also by means of improving technical cyber capabilities and a strengthening of the institutions and their viability and resilience. The training of young scientists and other specialized experts appears also to be a core element of paramount importance as these projects have boosted the capacity, knowledge and skills of researchers in Moldova by fostering scientific networks with their NATO counterparts. The Transnistrian conflict is another very important issue that needs to be addressed, albeit indirectly, by the newly-opened NATO office in Chisinau against cyber-attacks, because of the potential unrest that could be unleashed by the severe clash of diametrically conflicting interests and their ensuing rows among Russia, Ukraine and Romania (the latter has obviously a special interest in the country), thus spearheading in the mid-term Moldova's convergence with the EU and NATO.

Gregorio Baggiani

JULY 2021

SERBIA AND KOSOVO RESTART TALKS, FAIL TO MAKE PROGRESS

For the first time in almost a year, Belgrade and Pristina relaunched long-awaited European

Union-led bilateral talks to normalise their relations. Still, they failed to make any real progress. The dialogue is led by the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, and Albin Kurti, a left-wing nationalist and reformist who became Kosovo's Prime Minister after a landslide victory in February's elections. Kurti and Vucic met for the first time in Brussels. The positions of Belgrade and Pristina remain very distant and the chance of a solution in one of the most intractable territorial disputes seems remote.

After the meeting, hosted by the European Union Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, Miroslav Lajcak, and the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, Vucic hit out at Kurti. The Serbian leader claimed that Kosovo Prime Minister "demanded" that Belgrade recognises the independence of Kosovo and refused to discuss the implementation of a 2013 agreement that foresees the creation of a Community of Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo, a key step for Belgrade to advance the talks with Pristina. Kurti "asked me when are you going to recognise independent Kosovo. I told him never, and he exploded," Vucic said.

Kosovo and Serbia separated de facto after the 1999 war. Pristina declared its independence from Belgrade in 2008 and has been recognised by more than 100 countries. Serbia still considers the territory as its southern province, a position supported by Russia and China and by five EU member countries (Slovakia, Greece, Romania, Spain and Cyprus), which do not recognise Kosovo as an independent state.

On the other side, PM Kurti noted that Pristina "brought four new proposals which were refused by the Serbian side," and claimed that Vucic refused to even consider them. However, Kurti defined the summit as "constructive," without elaborating further.

The EU admitted that no concrete results were achieved in the first meeting between Vucic and Kurti, expressing hope that steps forward will be observed at their next meeting, at the end of July. Even if Borrell spoke of a "new momentum"

in solving the open issues between Belgrade and Pristina, Lajcak was more outspoken. "Both leaders had a very open and frank exchange on what they each want from the dialogue," but "it was not an easy meeting," the EU envoy Miroslav Lajcak admitted.

There are many disputes to be resolved between Kosovo and Serbia. The main one is the refusal of Belgrade to recognise Kosovo's independence, while Pristina claims that nothing else can be discussed until that reality is accepted by the Serbian side. The latter is fighting to keep Kosovo out of main international organisations and reacted with anger when Pristina managed to get admitted in the World Bank, IMF and FIFA and UEFA. The Serbian Constitution says explicitly that Kosovo is part of Serbia. Pristina also hinted at the possibility of asking Belgrade to pay war reparations and to sue Serbia for genocide.

For Belgrade, one of the most crucial points in the dialogue is the protections of its cultural and religious heritage, the churches and orthodox monasteries in Kosovo, considered by Serbs as the cradle of their nation. Moreover, Belgrade is keeping a strong link with the 120.000 Serbs who still live in the former Serbian province and remain loyal to Belgrade, because their salaries and pensions are paid by Serbia. A 2013 deal brokered by Brussels paved the way for the creation of an association of 10 Serb-majority municipalities in Kosovo, but the agreements has never been implemented as the two sides cannot agree on how it would work, with Pristina fearing the creation of a "Republika Srpska" in Kosovo.

Stefano Giantin

The Strategic Trends (2012-2019) online



The Strategic Balkans Press Review (since 2012) online



The Strategic Balkans project stems from the desire to analyse in depth the trajectory of the region since the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia to the current status of the Euro-Atlantic integration process.

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