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Briefing on Western Balkans

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Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Bosnia's entity of Republika Srpska declared cut-off ties with UK and US embassies in Sarajevo following the US decision to add a director of the Administration for Geodetic and Property Affairs of Republika Srpska, RUGIPP, Dragan Stankovic to its list of sanctioned individuals. Both the US and the UK do not welcome this step. OSCE and the Peace Implementations Council's Steering Board member countries condemned this move. (1)
2. Bosnia's entity of Republika Srpska adopted a criticized law, which criminalizes defamation. Journalists and the international community see this step as a crackdown on free speech. Fines are between 3,000 to 60,000 euros. (2)
3. Bosnia requests extradition of convicted wartime commander Sakib Mahmuljin from Turkey after he did not appear for the serving of his 8-year sentence for war crimes in 1995. (3)
4. The US government imposed sanctions Wednesday on the former head of Bosnia's state security agency, accusing him of misusing state resources for the benefit of his political party and collaborating with criminal networks to enrich himself. Edin Gacanin "Tito", leader of the Tito and Dino cartel and one of the world's most prolific drug traffickers, was also added to the list of sanctioned individuals from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The third person is Dragan Stankovic, director of the Administration for Geodetic and Property Affairs of Republika Srpska. He was added to the list because of the Law on Immovable Property - which was declared unconstitutional. (4,5)
5. Ramadan is starting in Bosnia, bringing some changes to the daily life and functioning of the country.

Sources:

1. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/21/concerns-raised-over-eu-funded-migrant-detention-centre-in-bosnia/>
2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bosnias-serb-region-moves-criminalise-defamation-despite-protests-2023-03-23/>
3. <https://n1info.ba/english/news/bosnia-requests-extradition-of-convicted-wartime-commander-from-turkey/>
4. <https://apnews.com/article/bosnia-former-intelligence-chief-sanctions-b10714388d7693016f9442c84093e408>
5. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/15/us-sanctions-bosnias-former-intelligence-chief-for-corruption/>



Montenegro

1. The first round of presidential elections is held in Montenegro. It was won by the incumbent President, Milo Djukanovic. The second round takes place on 2 April. His challenger is Jakov Milatovic, former Minister of Economy. (1)
2. The country will also hold parliamentary elections on 11 June. (2)
3. Montenegro's police director Zoran Brdjanin was removed from his post. It is a result of a large-scale investigation into police links with the notorious Kavac drug gang. His removal is on the grounds that as police chief, he bears responsibility for who is in the lower ranks of the force. (3)
4. On the 29th of March 2023, Montenegro's government signed a construction contract with the Chinese Shandong International Economic & Technical Cooperation Group to build a new, 16 km long, coastal highway. The move follows despite the fact that Montenegro has already had bad experiences with Chinese highway projects. (4)

Sources:

1. <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-djukanovic-runoff-presidential-election/32325820.html>
2. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/montenegro-to-hold-snap-parliamentary-elections-on-june-11/2848551>
3. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/30/montenegro-sacks-police-director-over-officers-crime-ties/>
4. <https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/ekonomija/649918/potpisan-ugovor-o-gradnji-bulevara-od-jaza-do-aerodroma-tivat>



Serbia

1. The Humanitarian Law Center, a Serbian non-profit organization, has published its 15th dossier on the unpunished crimes of the Serbian Volunteer Guard. They are publicly advocating for the prosecution of former members of paramilitary units serving under the leadership of the ICTY prosecuted war criminal Željko Ražnatović Arkan. (1)
2. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell announced on March 18 that a deal had been struck between Serbia and Kosovo. However, the reality is different. There was no agreement signed. What the two parties in fact had agreed on was an annex following the previously discussed proposal in February. But neither of them was officially signed. Therefore, relations between Pristina and Belgrade remain unchanged. (2,3)
3. Miroslav Lajcak (Slovakia), the European Union's special representative for the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade believes these not yet signed agreements could lead to a breakthrough between both entities. (4)
4. Supporters of four right-wing Serbian parties and movements demonstrated in Belgrade on March 24. Protests were connected to the NATO bombing anniversary and also already mentioned agreements with Kosovo. Protesters were holding banners with anti-Vucic, pro-Russian and anti-Kosovo narratives. (5)
5. Damjan Knezevic, the head of Narodna Patrola, or People's Patrol, was detained by police on February 16 together with the editor of the nationalistic portal Srbin.info Dejan Zlatanović. Both are still being held in custody and are accused of inciting violence and weapons violations against the state of Serbia. (6)

Sources:

1. <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?p=38723&lang=de>
2. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-eu-proposal-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en
3. <https://www.rferl.org/a/wider-europe-jozwiak-serbia-kosovo-moldova-georgia/32335670.html>
4. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-srbija-dijalog-normalizacija-miroslav-lajcak/32327864.html>
5. <https://www.rtklive.com/rtk2/?id=12&r=85517>
6. <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/damjan-knezevic-i-petar-zlatanovic-optuzeni-za-pokusaj-nasilnog-svrgavanja-predsednika-srbije/>



Kosovo

1. Testimony in the war crimes trial of former Kosovo President Hashim Thaci and his three co-defendants could take over six years according to the judges in The Hague. There are 312 prosecution witnesses, and judges are able to hear around 46 of them per year. (1)
2. Previously mentioned unsigned agreements between Kosovo and Serbia are seen as a positive step by various diplomats in Kosovo if they will be applied and followed. (2,3)
3. Greece officially declared that its position of not recognising Kosovo's independence has not changed. It was stated by Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou during her visit to Serbia. Signals of possible recognition are not yet present in the rest of the Western countries that have not yet recognised Kosovo. (4)
4. Similar to Serbia, there were also protests against unsigned agreements in Kosovo. (5)

Sources:

1. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/20/prosecution-case-in-kosovo-ex-guerrillas-trial-could-take-six-years/>
2. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbia-normalization-rohde-talks/32320587.html>
3. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbia-normalization-eu-hovenier-significant/32319793.html>
4. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/greek-position-on-kosovos-independence-unchanged/>
5. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/albanians-in-kosovo-protest-eu-proposal-to-establish-union-of-serb-municipalities/2855774>

The image shows the flag of North Macedonia, which features a red field with a golden sun in the center. The sun has eight rays extending to the edges of the flag.

North Macedonia

1. Northern Macedonia continues to supply arms to Ukraine. Most recently, the country has decided to supply probably 12 military helicopters that are no longer needed by the army. (1)
2. According to the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), North Macedonia made steps towards a better legislative framework regarding human trafficking. However, there are still some areas where Skopje needs to progress in legislation. (2)
3. Germany and Austria urged North Macedonia to amend the constitution regarding the parts of the Bulgarian minority. Bulgaria blocks Northern Macedonia's accession to the EU until the constitution includes the status of the Bulgarian minority in the country. This step should lift the ban and open the doors for Skopje to enter the EU. (3,4)

Sources:

1. <https://fokus.mk/vladata-odluchi-da-donira-helikopteri-na-ukraina/>
2. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/greta-north-macedonia-s-legislative-framework-improved-but-human-trafficking-victims-need-better-access-to-justice>
3. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/germany-urges-eu-hopeful-north-macedonia-to-amend-constitution/>
4. <https://apnews.com/article/macedonia-bulgaria-eu-constitution-73c71a5e19cdfec949c3709d7a81adcd>