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CENTRUM PRE ANALYZY
MONITORING
REPORTING

**December 2023-
January 2024**

Briefing on Western Balkans

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The image shows the flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which consists of a blue triangle with white stars on a yellow background, set against a dark blue background.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The UN Security Council extended the EU peace and security operation in Bosnia. On the 2nd of November, the decision received the unanimous support of the Council. EUFOR Althea will continue until at least the end of 2024. The extension of the mission is important given the current divisions between Sarajevo and Banja Luka, as the Republika Srpska entity is showing secessionist aspirations and its leaders are openly discussing independence, contrary to the Dayton Agreement. The trial of the current President of the Republica Srpska, Milorad Dodik, is still ongoing. However, there have been delays and repeated postponements. As a gesture of support for Sarajevo, Washington sent a pair of F-16 fighter jets to fly over the country on the 8th of January. This was the day before the parade in Banja Luka, where, in addition to the entity's security forces, the Russian Night Wolves group also appeared as a part of the parade.

In addition to the trial of President Milorad Dodik, there have been several arrests and high-level political convictions recently. In December, state court head Ranko Debevca and Osman Mehmedagic, former head of the intelligence-security agency (OSA-OBA BiH), were arrested on the prosecutor's orders. The arrests are related to allegations of wiretapping judiciary officials in 2020.

In November 2023, the European Commission recommended open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina on the condition that Sarajevo complies with the membership criteria. A progress report should be presented to the EU Council in March 2024 to take further steps.

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Montenegro

The European Commission publishes its annual report on Montenegro in November. The report assesses the country's progress in various categories rather positively. However, these shifts are often very small or almost non-existent. According to the Commission, Podgorica remains a constructive partner on the path to EU integration. Thus, the year 2024 will mean that Podgorica will have to take certain political steps to advance in the accession negotiations.

Montenegro planned to conduct a population census on the 30th of November. However, in the face of opposition protests, Parliament approved a postponement to the 3rd of December. Criticism was directed at the system itself and the possibility that the data would be misinterpreted by Serbian radical parties in their favour. The census ended on the December 29th, 2023. According to official statistics, 627,340 people registered for the census. Partial statistics were published by Monstat (the state statistics office) in January. The final results will be published in late January or early February.

The construction of the Chinese highway, which brought near-bankruptcy to Montenegro, brings other problems that are not being properly addressed. The China Road and Bridge Corporation, the Chinese company behind the construction of the highway, has been ordered to repair the damage caused by the construction of the highway on the UNESCO-protected Tara River. To date, however, the construction company has not taken steps to remedy the disaster, according to the Montenegrin Environment Agency.

Sources:

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<https://balkaninsight.com/2023/11/30/montenegro-postpones-census-over-opposition-boycott-threats/>

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Serbia

Early parliamentary elections were held in Serbia on the 17th of December 2023. However, the official election results were not released until January. The results and process were widely criticised by the Serbian opposition, the non-governmental sector and international organizations.

The ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won 46.75 % of the votes. The largest opposition coalition, “Serbia against Violence”, created after the series of protests, won 23.66 %. The Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) won 6,55 %. The fifth place belongs to the NADA (Hope) coalition led by the New Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) with 5 %, The sixth and last party with enough votes is “We – Voice of the People” won 4.69 %.

Opposition parties challenged the results of the elections and staged a series of protests aimed at creating pressure for repeated elections and an international independent investigation into the conduct of the elections, particularly in the capital Belgrade. The opposition has mainly directed its demands to Brussels, as the European Union is Serbia's main trading partner and financial donor. The opposition also accuses the current government of rigging the local elections in Belgrade, which were held at the same time as the parliamentary elections, by bringing citizens from Republika Srpska to Belgrade to help win a majority in the city council.

Serbian citizens of Kosovo also took part in the electoral process. However, Pristina refused to open polling stations on their territory, so citizens had to travel to southern Serbian towns.

Sources:

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Kosovo

BIRN Kosovo published a 106-page report on the state of disinformation in Kosovo. The overall assessment is negative and describes a lack of activity on the part of the authorities: *“The media, institutions, and society are facing substantial challenges in effectively addressing the issue of disinformation. There is no clear vision and strategic approach to combating this phenomenon in Kosovo. Consequently, disinformation exerts a considerable influence on public opinion within Kosovo”*. The document contains a large amount of different data and recommendations for various social and governmental authorities.

Several members of the extra-parliamentary opposition party Social Democratic Party (PSD) in Kosovo were detained during a protest on the 29th of November. The protest was called in support of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) officials on trial in The Hague. According to the demonstrators, these persons are being tried unjustly and the current government is facilitating this unjust act. The accused are former Kosovo President Hashim Thaci, former Parliament Speaker Kadri Veseli and former legislator Rexhep Selimi.

On the 20th of November, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg met with Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani to discuss the situation in Kosovo. At a press conference after their meeting, the Secretary-General said that a strengthened NATO presence also means a greater degree of stability in the region.

Kosovo has carried out a reform, after which only the Euro is the official currency in the country. The Serbian Dinar has lost this position, which has been met with a negative response among Serbs and in Belgrade.

Sources:

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https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_220281.html

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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. The text 'North Macedonia' is written in white, bold, sans-serif font in the lower-left corner of the flag.

North Macedonia

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) annual summit in Skopje started on the 30th of November. The most discussed topic was the presence of the Russian delegation, which was denied entry in 2022. Due to the invitation of the Russian delegation, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia did not attend the summit. Poland and Romania also joined the boycott. This may be a minor diplomatic defeat for Skopje, despite their direct military support for Ukraine and their participation in the adopted sanctions against Russia. and will have negative diplomatic consequences for 2024.

An unknown number of Ukrainian soldiers have completed their first round of training on the territory of North Macedonia. The country plans to continue providing its training capabilities for Ukrainian needs in 2024. This information was provided by Defence Minister Slavjanka Petrovska on national broadcaster Macedonian Television. According to her, Skopje kept this information secret so as not to jeopardise the whole initiative.

Northern Macedonia faces presidential and parliamentary elections in May. The election campaign guarantees that there will be no shift on the issue of changing the constitution to allow EU integration to proceed. Thus, negative developments stemming from the polarisation and influence of foreign actors can be expected in the coming months.

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Albania

In early November, Italy and Albania signed a memorandum on the establishment of migrant centres on Albanian territory. The agreement was announced at a joint press conference of the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama in Rome. However, the original information was partially modified during the month. First, it was reported that the approval of the Albanian Parliament would not be required for the plan to go ahead. By the end of November, however, it became clear that the agreement had to be approved by the parliament in Tirana. The centres are due to open in spring 2024 and accommodate up to 40,000 migrants, to whom Italy will contribute financially and from whom it will choose suitable asylum seekers. However, several experts consider this initiative to be doomed in advance and evaluate it as highly ineffective with a high burden on state budgets and low output. In the case of Italy, the vote on the establishment of the centres did not come before Parliament until the second half of January. At the same time, the Albanian Constitutional Court began to look into the agreement.

The dispute between Greece and Albania, the consequence of which is the Greek blockade of Albania's approach to European integration, continues. In addition to historical disputes, the reason is the current detention of the mayor of a small Greek village in Albania, an ethnic Greek, in custody. Tirana refuses to release him, but for Athens, it is a key condition for a shift in Albanian integration. According to the Deutsche Welle: *“In mid-November, Greece refused to back a letter asking the European Commission to open the first five chapters of negotiations for Albania's EU accession process. The letter was ultimately sent but with Greek reservations.”*

Sources:

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