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CENTRUM PRE ANALÝZY
MONITORING
REPORTING

February 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

Last year, Bosnia was shaken by an execution that was broadcast live on social media. The families of the victims are calling for the case to be reopened because they disagree with the results of the investigation into the lack of response by the security forces. During February, there was another similar murder, where an off-duty police officer shot and killed a woman with his official gun in a shopping centre in Tuzla. In this case, there is also talk of neglect of precautions, where the shooter should not have been carrying his weapon because it was supposed to be deposited.

Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, faced a reopened trial at the beginning of February, with him being charged with failing to execute the decisions of the High Representative to Bosnia-Herzegovina Christian Schmidt. The trial will resume in March. Milorad Dodik held several important meetings during February 2024. The President went on a working visit to Minsk, where he met with Alyaksandr Lukashenko. He has also met with Belarusian Foreign Minister Syarhey Aleynyk. Subsequently, Dodik travelled to Tatarstan, a subject within the Russian Federation, where he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin: *“We confirmed the good relations that the RS has and cultivates towards the Russian state and towards you. What we are doing under the current circumstances is rejecting any possibility of joining Western sanctions against Russia. In particular, we unhesitatingly refuse to join NATO membership. When the West came, it immediately privatized commercial banks and now they choose whether they want to work with us and they do it for purely political reasons,”* Dodik said.

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Montenegro

At the end of February, there was a major crisis in the ruling Europe Now party, which led to the resignation of the country's current president from the party. Jakov Milatovic cited a lack of transparency and internal debate as the reason. Along with the president's resignation from the party, there was a dismissal of Justice Minister Andrej Milovic. He was sacked for public comments and decisions that hurt government support, according to the local media referring to the Europe Now party. In addition, there have been several administrative and personnel changes within the party. The loss of the president can be a significant problem for the ruling coalition because in this situation they become an opposition to each other. Montenegro has gone through several political crises in recent years and it seems that 2024 will be no different in this respect. A few days earlier, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien praised Montenegro's leadership for its first 100 days in office. He presented hope towards deeper European and transatlantic integration. However, he did not forget to mention the existence of pro-Russian forces that form part of the government and maintain its decision-making capacity. However, as it has already turned out, this was probably an overly positive assessment, given the developments just a few days after the joint meeting.

Milorad Dodik also visited Montenegro, where he met with the Speaker of the Parliament, Andrija Mandić. Dodik proposed that Montenegro should conclude a special relations agreement along the lines of the one that Banja Luka has with Belgrade.

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Serbia

The final report on the elections by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights was met with divergent interpretations on the part of the current government and the opposition. The government presented the results of the report as a positive confirmation that the elections were conducted in accordance with the norms. On the other hand, the opposition presented the results as their victory, which was meant to confirm rigging. The opposition boycotted the opening assembly of the local government in Belgrade. The opposition wanted to express its position on the results of the December 2023 elections, which it considers, together with the European Union, to have been rigged and calls for a rerun. Representatives of the opposition have also filed an application with the Constitutional Court, from which they are demanding a rerun of the elections in the capital.

The death of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny led to a small protest in Belgrade by Russian opposition exiles and the creation of a memorial in front of the Russian embassy.

A group of several hundred protesters have been blocking the mining activities of the Chinese company Zijin Mining Group in the village of Krivelj. The reason is said to be the high level of pollution, which the Chinese company has long ignored and failed to take measures to limit the damage.

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Kosovo

The main issue in Kosovo in February was the national currency. Kosovo applied a ban on the use of the Serbian dinar, to which the Serbian minority living on Kosovo territory was dependent. The euro became the main and only currency, despite the fact that Kosovo is not a member of the European Union, its economic area, the euro area and is not even recognised by several EU countries. This move did not meet with the understanding of local Serbs, Serbia itself, or even the foreign community and Kosovo's partners, who have repeatedly criticised Pristina for this move and demanded that it reverse the ban. The European Union has expressed concern that this decision is seriously complicating the lives of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo. According to Brussels, they are being forced to move away from the dinar and adjust to a new currency regime. Peter Stano, lead spokesperson for foreign affairs and security policy of the EU, said on February 1 that the bloc *“is concerned about the consequences that this decision might have on the daily lives of Kosovo Serbs and other communities throughout Kosovo due to absence of prior consultation, in particular on its impact on schools and hospitals, given the apparent absence of alternatives at this moment. The short transition period for the regulation’s implementation, combined with a lack of information and practical solutions for all affected communities, risk seriously complicating their lives. The EU urges Kosovo to ensure a sufficiently long transition period and to find a negotiated solution to this issue in the framework of the EU-facilitated Dialogue”*. Pristina, however, defends the move despite widespread criticism and has no plans to change it. This attitude may lead to a deterioration of the situation between Belgrade and Pristina, but also between Pristina and its partners.

Sources:

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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

Northern Macedonia appoints the country's first ethnic Albanian as interim Prime Minister. Talat Xhaferi is supposed to lead the government until the parliamentary elections on May 8. He was elected on January 28 with 65 votes in favour out of the 120 seats in parliament. Despite the fact that this is a temporary position, it is a big step for a country that has long been troubled politically by ethnic issues, not only in the context of Bulgarian requests to change the constitution but also in the relations between ethnic Albanians and the rest of the country. In this, Skopje follows the example of Slovakia, which in 2023 was also led for the first time by a temporarily appointed prime minister of Hungarian nationality.

RFERL published an interesting article describing their investigation into a fraud scheme originating in North Macedonia from the town of Veles. The scheme deceived a large number of American citizens who came across the possibility of buying "Trump cards", which were supposed to bring great wealth to their owners after his return to the position of US president. At first glance, the possibilities of these cards appear to be a clear scam, yet dozens of Americans have fallen victim to it: *According to data from North Macedonia's Public Revenue Office, over the past two years, 98 individuals under the age of 35 from Veles and the surrounding area have reported a combined 634,198,939 denars (around \$11 million) in income from the United States. Most of it was said to have been generated from marketing and Internet services, the office said.*

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Albania

The long-term reason for the dispute between Greece and Albania received less media attention in February as well. The mayor of Greek origin, Fredi Beleri, in the village of Himara, inhabited by the Greek minority, is accused of corruption and vote-buying during the elections last year. Albania's special prosecutor's office against corruption and organized crime asked for a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence. Due to this dispute, Athens is threatening to block Albania's accession negotiations with the EU. Even the European Commission itself appealed to Albania. At the end of February, the court found the mayor guilty and he was sentenced to two years in prison. Since this trial was not met with understanding in Athens, this decision will probably mean a significant deterioration of mutual relations. According to his lawyer, the mayor will request an appeal and continue to fight against the accusations.

There was also a dispute between the Constitutional Court and the current government in Albania. The constitutional court accused the ruling socialists of refusal to implement its ruling in the case of the mandate of Socialist MP and former minister Olta Xhacka, calling it unprecedented. The court asked parliament to have Xhacka's mandate declared void, due to the suspicion of Xhacka's family enrichment through the state's decision on a 30-year lease for a beach on the lucrative southern coast in March 2022.

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