

Western Balkans Briefing First Quarter 2025

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Bosnia Issues International Arrest Warrant for Milorad Dodik

A Bosnian court has issued an international arrest warrant for Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, the Serb-majority entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Dodik is accused of attacking the country's constitutional order and defying the post-war arrangements established by the 1995 Dayton Accords, which brought peace after the collapse of Yugoslavia. The charges stem from his recent move to ban police from Bosnia's central authority from operating in Republika Srpska, an order later overturned by the Constitutional Court. Dodik and two more senior Republika Srpska officials, Nenad Stevandic and Radovan Viskovic, are charged with undermining the country's constitutional framework. A domestic arrest warrant was issued in early March, but Dodik travelled abroad afterwards. The Investigation and Protection Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SIPA), which was tasked with Dodik's arrest, carried out a high-risk security assessment and shared it with the judicial police and relevant institutions as an argument for taking no action against him. The reluctance of this security force to act was seen as a serious disruption to the system of functioning institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. When he left the country, Dodik attended an anti-Semitism conference in Jerusalem, raising concerns about his willingness to comply with the legal process. Citing these travels, the Bosnian court referred the case to Interpol, claiming that the accused could be outside the country at any time. Known for his pro-Russian stance and repeated threats to push for the secession of Republika Srpska, Dodik continues to challenge the authority of Bosnia's central institutions. Meanwhile, a court in Sarajevo sentenced him to one year in prison and banned him from holding public office for six years for defying Bosnia's top international overseer. Despite the verdict, Dodik and his allies have refused to recognise the legitimacy of Bosnia's state prosecutor and have refused any summons to appear in Sarajevo. Their defiance poses a serious challenge to the fragile power-sharing structure outlined in the Dayton Accords.



Hazardous Air Pollution in Sarajevo

In January, the authorities in Sarajevo issued a public alert as thick smog and dangerous air pollution engulfed the city. The Sarajevo cantonal government issued the alert for the entire canton, urging residents to stay indoors and work remotely if possible. Sarajevo was, at that time, ranked as the most polluted city in the world, with the Air Quality Index (AQI) rising above 500 - the highest level recorded. AQI levels above 100 are considered unhealthy, while those above 300 are considered dangerous. All sections of the population were advised to limit their time outdoors and avoid physical activity. What kind of measures does the declaration of such a state of affairs entail? The alert activates measures to protect public health, including restrictions to reduce pollution. Older vehicles with EURO3 engines or lower are banned from entering the central zone of the city. Industrial activities that produce toxic emissions must be stopped or reduced if complete shutdowns are not feasible. Fines can be imposed on anyone who violates these temporary rules. Citizens are encouraged to use environmentally friendly public transport, and businesses are encouraged to support remote working arrangements.

The 2024 World Air Quality Report shows that Bosnia and Herzegovina in general, not just Sarajevo, has the worst air pollution in Europe, failing to meet the World Health Organization's air quality guidelines. However, the report reveals that only seven countries in the world meet the standards. Across the European continent, almost every country, including Bosnia, recorded levels of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) well above the recommended limit.

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Protests after the Mass Shooting at the Turn of the Year

In January, Montenegro declared three days of mourning from 2 January after a mass shooting in the town of Cetinje left 13 people dead. The attack took place on New Year's Day when Aco Martinovic opened fire at five different locations, killing 12 people, including two children. Four others were injured, one in critical condition and three in serious but stable condition at that time; however, one more victim died in hospital later. Authorities said Martinovic attempted suicide during a manhunt and died while being taken to hospital. The motive for the murders was revenge for a brawl that escalated into an indiscriminate killing spree. Officials confirmed that the victims included Martinovic's relatives, friends and godparents. Martinovic had a conditional conviction for violent behaviour in 2005 and served a one-year sentence. In 2022, he received a three-month sentence after being found in possession of weapons and explosives. In response to the attack, all planned events and public gatherings in Cetinje were cancelled, and New Year celebrations in Podgorica, Budva and Kotor were cancelled. Prime Minister Milojko Spajic visited the hospital treating the wounded and announced that the government would consider tightening gun laws, including a possible ban on carrying firearms. President Jakov Milatovic and leaders of neighbouring countries, including Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, issued statements of condolence. The US Embassy in Podgorica also expressed its condolences. The incident is the second mass shooting in Cetinje in the last three years, with the previous one happening in 2022 with 10 victims, including two children.

Montenegrin students from the informal group Where Tomorrow?, inspired by protests in Serbia, began road blockades demanding the dismissal of two ministers over the mass shooting in February. They threatened to block one road a day, claiming that Prime Minister Milojko Spajic had not responded to their demand for the dismissal of Interior Minister Danilo Saranovic and Deputy Prime Minister Aleksa Becic.



Despite four protests in Podgorica, both officials refused to resign, claiming no responsibility for the tragedy. Following this refusal, the students changed their demand from resignation to dismissal and refused Spajic's invitation to a meeting. As time went on, however, the protests died down. The demonstrators gradually disappeared from the streets, and stronger political actions were not taken.

Support for the EU Membership and the Montenegrin Army

On 28 February, the European Council approved six million euros in assistance to the Montenegrin army through the European Peace Facility. This funding aims to strengthen the Montenegrin Armed Forces, improve national security and resilience, and support participation in EU and international defence missions. It includes equipment for extreme weather, CBRN defence, and helicopter search and rescue units. The European Peace Facility supports the EU's foreign and security policy, particularly in military and defence cooperation. The Council noted that the assistance reflects Montenegro's alignment with EU foreign policy and the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans. Marjan Šarec, the European Parliament's rapporteur on Montenegro, presented a draft report citing political blockages, local-level dysfunction, and possible EU fund delays that could affect infrastructure. He warned that despite Montenegro's EU aspirations by decade's end, key issues remain, including visa policy alignment and the blockage of Chapter 31 by Croatia. Concerns were raised about the ruling coalition's past opposition to NATO and EU integration and Serbia's influence. The report recognised reform progress, especially in Chapters 23 and 24, but stressed the need for full implementation and media freedom. It also urged avoiding bilateral disputes in EU accession and harmonising Montenegro's visa regime while resisting foreign interference.

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The Biggest Protest Movement in the Modern History of Serbia

In November 2024, the collapse of the newly renovated railway station canopy in Novi Sad killed 16 people and sparked nationwide protests led mainly by university students. The demonstrators blamed the disaster on government corruption and substandard construction practices, in particular, the involvement of Chinese state-owned companies. In January 2025, the protests intensified, with students organising daily traffic blockades and silent vigils in honour of the victims. On 27 January, there was a significant escalation when students began a 24-hour blockade of Belgrade's Autokomanda intersection, a major motorway junction. This action disrupted the daily commute, underlining the determination of the protesters and the widespread public support for their cause. In response to mounting pressure, Prime Minister Miloš Vučević resigned on 28 January 2025. This marked a significant concession on the part of the government, but the student-led movement remained adamant and considered the resignation insufficient to address their broader demands for systemic reform.

The momentum continued into February, with a particularly symbolic event on 9 February 2025, marking 100 days since the Novi Sad tragedy. Students led blockades of key infrastructure, including a seven-hour blockade of Belgrade's Gazela Bridge over the Sava River. Similar demonstrations took place in Novi Sad and Niš, as well as other smaller towns, reflecting the national scope of the movement. By the end of February, the protests had gained support from a wide range of social groups, including farmers, teachers, artists and lawyers. This coalition highlighted widespread dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the Novi Sad incident and broader issues of corruption and governance. The culmination of these efforts came on 15 March 2025, when over 300,000 people gathered in Belgrade for the largest anti-government protest in Serbia's history.



During the protests, students were targeted with personal attacks as well as vehicle attacks. Additionally, at the protest on 15 March, Serbian security forces reportedly used sound cannons. As a result, students issued another demand, calling for a thorough investigation into the alleged use of this sonic weapon. They want to know the technology used, its origin, the legal basis and the people responsible for its use. The result of these efforts was also the submission of a petition to the UN with nearly 600,000 signatures. Throughout this period, the student-led movement maintained a decentralised and leaderless structure, using direct democracy through a plenary. Despite government concessions, including the release of some detained protesters, the movement continued to demand broader reforms. Protesters called for justice in the Novi Sad tragedy and action on corruption, media freedom, and democratic governance.

Uncertainty about Renewal of Military Service and Oil Company NIS

The public and political landscape in Serbia was heavily influenced by the ongoing nationwide protests. As a result, the Serbian parliament did not discuss a key proposal to reintroduce conscription. At the same time, Serbia continued to seek a sanctions waiver from the United States for its oil company, Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS), which is majority-owned by Russia's Gazprom Neft and Gazprom. In January 2025, the US imposed sanctions and gave Gazprom Neft a 45-day window to reduce its ownership of NIS because of its links to the Russian government. At the end of March, it remained uncertain whether the measures taken by Gazprom Neft would be sufficient for the US authorities to lift the sanctions. Serbia has come under increasing pressure to align itself with its Western partners following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and has formally approved sanctions against Moscow in response to the conflict.

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Parliamentary Elections Brought a Win for Kurti Again

Kosovo's Central Election Commission (CEC) has officially certified the results of the 9 February parliamentary elections by the end of March, after several weeks of legal wrangling and procedural delays. Nine votes approved the certification in favour and two against, both from members of the ruling Vetëvendosje (LVV) party. LVV strongly objected to including certain absentee ballots, claiming that they disproportionately benefited the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). The party argued that the ballots in question were suspicious and possibly fraudulent. The LVV complained to the Election Complaints and Appeals Panel and later appealed to the Supreme Court. However, both bodies rejected their claims, stating that there was insufficient evidence to overturn or delay the certification. Nevertheless, the LVV has vowed to continue challenging the process and is now preparing to take the case to the Constitutional Court. The party claims that the vote certification is incomplete and undermines the legitimacy of the process. Despite the controversy, the final certified results show that LVV, led by Albin Kurti, remains the leading political force, winning 48 of the 120 seats in parliament, based on 42.3% of the total vote. The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) came second with 24 seats, followed by the LDK with 20 seats. The coalition of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) and Nisma won 8 seats. The Serb List, which represents the ethnic Serb minority, won 9 seats, while another seat went to a smaller Serb minority party led by Nenad Rašić. Other Serb parties did not pass the electoral threshold and were, therefore, not represented. Although the LVV has the largest number of seats, it falls short of the 61 needed for a parliamentary majority. This puts the party in a difficult position, as it must now seek coalition partners to form a stable government. So far, there have been no formal coalition negotiations initiated by the LVV. The party has expressed reluctance to compromise on its platform, which may limit its options.



Potential alliances could include non-Serb minority parties and possibly members of the Nisma movement, but no agreements have been reached. Meanwhile, the opposition parties are reported to be holding informal talks among themselves. Both LDK and PDK have said they are not interested in joining a coalition led by LVV. LDK has explicitly ruled out participating in a government in which it does not play a leading role. AAK and Nisma have also distanced themselves from LVV, casting doubt on any short-term alliance. Political analysts are now warning of a possible deadlock that could stall the formation of the next government. The assembly is expected to hold its first session soon, and the next few days will be crucial in determining whether a functioning government can be formed - or whether Kosovo is headed for another round of elections.

The Reform of KSF

Kosovo's Defence Minister Ejup Maqedonci claims that the transformation of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into a full-fledged army is progressing faster than originally planned. The KSF currently has more than 4,300 personnel and is expected to exceed 5,000 by next year, with a target of more than 7,500 members by 2028, including active and reserve forces. Maqedonci emphasised that the force is being developed according to NATO standards, with members trained at NATO military academies and equipment procured exclusively from NATO member states to ensure compatibility. He also highlighted significant progress in Kosovo's defence capabilities, mentioning the procurement of various military systems, including a fleet of Bayraktar drones and anti-armour systems similar to the American Javelin. For the next four years, a budget of more than EUR 1 billion is foreseen for the defence of Kosovo.

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Deadly Fire in Kocani

In March, North Macedonia mourned the victims of a devastating nightclub fire that killed 59 people and injured more than 150. Funerals were held in the city of Kocani, where the club was located, and surrounding towns. Most of the victims, many of them young, were directly from Kocani, where dozens of funerals were held at the local cemetery, while others were held in places such as Stip, Probistip, Strumica and Skopje. Mourners gathered early on the days of the funerals and formed solemn processions to honour the dead. To ensure a dignified farewell, the authorities had banned the use of drones over the funeral sites and urged the media not to publish intrusive or sensational material. The fire broke out after fireworks were set off during a concert at the packed Pulse nightclub, making it one of the worst tragedies in the country's recent history. A government investigation has already led to several arrests, including seven police officers accused of allowing the nightclub to operate without proper safety permits. Eighteen other people, including organisers and officials, have also been detained as the authorities widen their investigation into alleged corruption and the illegal purchase of the fireworks. The North Macedonian government later banned the use of fireworks inside the buildings to prevent another similar tragedy. Protests related to this tragedy are still ongoing, and the case is not closed.

Months of Various Protests

In early 2025, mass protests erupted in Northern Macedonia following the death of 22-year-old student Frosina Kulakova, who was fatally struck by a car while crossing a pedestrian walkway in Skopje. The driver, identified as Vasyl Yovanov, was reportedly under the influence of alcohol, lacked a valid driving licence and ran a red light at the time of the incident.



Public outrage intensified following revelations that Yovanov had previously received a lenient sentence for drug-related offences, raising concerns about judicial leniency and systemic corruption. Protesters, including Kulakova's family, organised marches under slogans such as "Justice for Frosina" and "Who's next?", calling for judicial accountability and stricter enforcement of traffic laws. The protests, which spread to towns such as Negotino and Kavadarci, also highlighted wider issues of impunity and the need for comprehensive legal reforms. Activist groups such as "Who is Next?" called for the establishment of a justice system that serves citizens, the creation of safer urban environments and a cultural shift towards responsible behaviour on the roads. These events underlined the public demand for a transparent and accountable legal system that prioritises the safety and rights of all citizens.

Military Budget Not Definitive

North Macedonia is among the countries under pressure to increase military funding and improve equipment, as its current capabilities are considered inadequate. Reaching 2% of GDP is possible for Skopje, but the 5% threshold that has emerged in the context of the White House statements would be devastating for the state budget. Current military spending is already a heavy burden on the budget, and additional spending on new equipment would be problematic. The budget for modernisation and new equipment for the Armed forces for the period 2023-2032 is planned at 955 million euros, which is 28 percent of the total defence budget for equipment and modernisation.

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Election Campaign and TikTok Ban

The Albanian government ordered a one-year ban on TikTok, citing concerns about violent content affecting children. The ban officially came into effect on 13 March, but the app was still partially functional on some mobile devices more than a week later. While the web version of TikTok became inaccessible, the mobile version remained usable for some users, raising questions about the effectiveness of the ban. The National Cyber Security Agency said it had instructed ISPs to block TikTok's IPs, DNS and SNIs across Albania. Providers were also asked to confirm in writing that they had complied with the technical restrictions. Experts such as Orkidea Xhaferaj pointed to the lack of public transparency, noting that full SNI filtering could take time and require advanced technical solutions. Critics argue that the ban violates digital rights and freedom of expression, especially as there is no clear evidence linking TikTok directly to the incidents that prompted the ban. Media freedom groups condemned the decision as disproportionate and warned that it sets a dangerous precedent for online censorship. Prime Minister Edi Rama defended the move, saying it followed a survey of parents, most of whom supported shutting down the platform. However, opposition parties and analysts suggested the ban was politically motivated ahead of upcoming elections. Although there is a political division and fear of manipulation due to the TikTok ban, ahead of the 11 May 2025 parliamentary elections, Albanian political parties have signed a voluntary code of conduct for digital campaigning, inspired by similar efforts in the 2024 European elections and national initiatives in the Netherlands and North Macedonia. The code, developed by the International IDEA, the University of Helsinki's Rule of Law Centre and the National Democratic Institute in cooperation with Albania's Central Election Commission, aims to promote ethical digital campaigning, combat disinformation and ensure fairness online.



The signing was preceded by a series of consultations and discussions on key issues such as hate speech, online advertising and data protection, setting the stage for responsible digital engagement. Political leaders and international partners praised the initiative and emphasised its role in strengthening trust and democratic values. While voluntary, the Code serves as a self-regulatory tool to fill legal gaps and promote civil, transparent and respectful campaigning practices in the digital space. Monitoring of the Code's implementation will continue, with opportunities for more parties to sign up and lessons learned to inform future electoral reforms.

Military Alliance between Albania, Kosovo and Croatia

On 18 March 2025, Kosovo, Albania and Croatia signed a trilateral declaration on a military alliance in Albania aimed at strengthening defence cooperation and regional stability. The Ministers of Defence, Pirro Vengu (Albania), Ejup Maqedonci (Kosovo) and Ivan Anušić (Croatia) stressed that this alliance was not intended as a threat, but as a message to deter potential destabilising forces in the region. The Memorandum focuses on building defence capabilities, enhancing interoperability through education and training, countering hybrid threats and supporting Euro-Atlantic integration. Minister Maqedonci underlined the significance of this first trilateral agreement in the region and expressed openness to other countries joining the initiative. This cooperation underlines a shared commitment to peace and security in South Eastern Europe. The move did not meet with understanding in Serbia, which, in response, decided to strengthen its military relations with NATO member Hungary.

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