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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

1. On 27th June 2023, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska adopted the Law on the Non-application of Decisions of the BiH Constitutional Court in the territory of Republika Srpska. This means that Banja Luka will not respect the decisions of Bosnia's Constitutional Court. It provoked a wave of negative reactions in Bosnia, but also beyond the borders. This measure, which, according to Republika Srpska, is only temporary, threatens the future of Bosnia as set out in the Dayton Agreement.
2. In response to the action taken against the Constitutional Court, a number of Republika Srpska officials ended up on the US sanctions list: Speaker and President of the RSNA Nenad Stevandić, RS Prime Minister Radovan Visković, Serb member of the BiH Presidency Zeljka Cvijanović and RS Minister of Justice, Milos Bukejlović.
3. The Sarajevo Municipal Court has handed down a three-month sentence to Nefail Cehić, who threatened physical harm to journalists from the investigative organisation BIRN. The incident took place in 2020, but the decision has been made only now.
4. Bosnia commemorated the 28th anniversary of Srebrenica in July. The event was without significant problems or provocations.
5. On 20th July 2023, The Republika Srpska entity adopted a controversial law on defamation, which faced months of criticism and protests from the media, the non-profit sector, the opposition, but also the international community. A vague definition of defamation threatens freedom of expression.

Sources:

1. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/bosnian-serb-lawmakers-vote-suspend-rulings-bosnias-top-court-2023-06-27/>
2. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1660>
3. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/17/bosnian-sentenced-for-threatening-birn-journalists-on-facebook/>
4. <https://srebrenica.org.uk/news/remembering-srebrenicas-2023-theme-together-we-are-one>
5. <https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-srpska-defamation-law-criminalization-criticism/32512853.html>



Montenegro

1. In June 2023 Montenegro decided to pull out of the deal with the four Western banks with which it had entered into the agreement in order to financially survive the Chinese infrastructure project and loans connected to it. The move was defended by the government on the grounds that it was expedient at the time to abandon the deal. Whether this was a good and safe move remains to be seen in the near future, when problems could become apparent.
2. Podgorica has signed a memorandum of understanding with US firms Enerflex Energy Systems and Wethington Energy Innovation for the construction of an LNG terminal and thermal plant in the port city of Bar in May. Serbia has expressed interest in connecting to this terminal and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has already provided proposals for an infrastructure link. Representatives of Montenegro have also invited other regional countries to join the project and benefit from this infrastructure project.
3. Parliamentary elections were held in Montenegro on the 11th of June. The Europe Now Movement won these elections by receiving 25,53% votes. The party also won the presidency in the recent presidential elections. Although elections were held in early June, there was no political agreement on the formation of a governing coalition even in early August. *“The new government could be formed by the end of August or in September. The political interests in and pressures on negotiations are great, and it will certainly not be easy to reach an agreement,”* Calovic Markovic told BIRN.

Sources:

1. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-kineski-kredit-valuta/32466082.html>
2. <https://www.ekapija.com/en/news/4311093/serbia-also-wants-gas-via-bar-montenegro-how-much-would-a-new>
3. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/18/montenegrin-parties-haggle-for-advantage-in-coalition-forming-talks/>



Serbia

1. The United States has placed Alexandar Vulin, the director of Serbia's Security Intelligence Agency or BIA, on the sanctions list. They justified this on the grounds that he was allegedly involved in arms smuggling and international drug trafficking through his position. However, the fact that Vulin has close contacts with Russian intelligence services and publicly presents himself to them and meets with their representatives probably also played a role.
2. The state prosecutor in Serbia has proposed banning the far-right group Levijatan. The organisation is known for its creation through the protection of animal rights, mainly stray dogs. Later, when they managed to gain popularity, they gradually moved into the ideological spectrum and public promotion of radical ideologies.
3. The protests across Serbia sparked by a pair of bloody shootings slowly died down at the end of June and the beginning of July. The last major protest took place on the 30th of June. Since then, the turnout of demonstrators has gradually decreased significantly. Protests continue to take place in smaller towns, but the turnout is significantly lower than in Belgrade.
4. A small group of pro-democracy and anti-war Russian refugees in Serbia protested with white and blue flags in Belgrade on the 30th of July. The protest was to make a clear statement but also to express concern about the difficulties of entry into Serbia for Russian citizens who have publicly opposed Moscow. Serbia's official statements were vague without specifying the reasons for refusing entry to these persons. Approximately 200,000 Russian citizens have arrived in Serbia since February 2022.

Sources:

1. <https://ofac.treasury.gov/recent-actions/20230711>
2. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/27/serbia-prosecution-seeks-ban-on-far-right-leviathan-movement/>
3. <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-protests-government-guns/32485885.html>
4. <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-russia-ukraine-antiwar-activists-ban-ceae2d6107914002a3542ab51665e8b8>



Kosovo

- 1.** In mid-July, the Kosovo government said it would reduce the presence of security forces in the predominantly ethnic Serb North. They also said they would proceed with new regional elections for local government in some municipalities, as requested by local Serbs. However, it is not known in early August when this step will take place. This concession was also the result of negotiations between a group of several EU and Kosovo representatives in Slovakia.
- 2.** On 13th July, there was a rift in the Kosovo Parliament. This was a result of the publication of recordings of a representative of the ruling party in Kosovo with a representative of a Serbian political party. The reason for the resentment was that the ruling party had previously criticised other entities for similar contacts, but as it turned out, they themselves also have them.
- 3.** In mid-July, Kosovo's prime minister publicly announced the purchase of Turkish Bayraktar drones. However, the number and price of the purchase were not made public in order to protect national security. Pristina's reason for the purchase is said to be to increase tensions with Serbians in the northern regions.
- 4.** At the end of July, the government in Kosovo suspended the broadcasting rights of Klan Kosova TV. This has aroused a wave of resentment in the non-profit sector and among journalists in general in the country. State institutions defend themselves by saying that they gave the company a month to administratively adjust its registration, which they say violated the constitution by listing Serbia instead of Kosovo as the country of registration. Western partners have also expressed concern.

Sources:

1. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbian-municipalities-new-elections/32500638.html>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6qcAK-a1T0>
3. <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/kosovo-buys-turkish-bayraktar-drones-2023-07-16/>
4. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/31/kosovo-journalists-protest-govts-suspension-of-tv-stations-permit/>

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

- 1.** The United States has placed one of Northern Macedonia's wealthiest citizens on a sanctions list. US claims, that Orce Kamcev has engaged extensively in corruption, including abuse of office, money laundering, and other offences for more than a decade starting in the early 2000s. Kamcev has a history of scandals with links also to top politics in Northern Macedonia.
- 2.** The necessary constitutional change in Northern Macedonia for Bulgaria to lift its blockade of accession negotiations with Skopje is still far away: *"North Macedonia's opposition nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party has welcomed an ethnic Albanian party's offer to resign from government ministries in a move designed to help push forward the path toward EU talks, but it said the resignations must be irrevocable and that elections be quickly called. The Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) said the resignations would become effective only if VMRO-DPMNE votes for constitutional changes"*.
- 3.** At the end of June, a protest was held in Skopje in response to efforts to pass laws on gender equality and identity. The protest was organised by the local Orthodox Church, which sees these laws as a threat to the "Traditional Family", or family values. The protest was also supported by representatives of other religions - Islam or the Catholic Church and other smaller religious groups.

Sources:

1. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/19/us-targets-north-macedonia-businessman-for-corruption/>
2. <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-albanian-offer-vmro-dpmne/32526563.html>
3. <https://apnews.com/article/north-macedonia-protest-gender-equality-identity-bills-2535d49c55ee1a107964acb521ab71ca>



Albania

1. A summit of the Western Balkan countries together with representatives of the European Union and its Member States was held in Tirana on the 17th of July. The summit focused on the accession negotiations and the efforts of the Western Balkan countries to gain a better perspective on their road to the EU. Summit was attended by Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Albania. Kosovo was not present. *"Dimitar Kovacevski, the prime minister of North Macedonia, said the key topics discussed on July 17 at the informal meeting were the EU plan for the accelerated integration of the Western Balkan countries, which is based on several basic pillars."*
2. The European Commission suspended agricultural subsidies to Albania in mid-July on suspicion of corruption. *"At this stage, the European Commission has taken precautionary measures based on the preliminary information provided by OLAF. In particular, as a preventive measure to protect the financial interests of the European Union, the European Commission has provisionally interrupted the reimbursements to the Albanian authorities for expenditure incurred under the IPARD II program,"* the European Commission spokesperson told Euronews Albania.
3. Albania detains a former member of the Kosovo Liberation Army who was wanted by a Hague-based Kosovo Specialist Chambers. Dritan Goxhaj is accused of crimes committed during the fighting in 1998 and 1999. He is also suspected of the criminal offences of intimidation during criminal proceedings and obstructing officials in the performance of official duties. This is the first case of an Albanian citizen arrested on the warrant by this Chamber.

Sources:

1. <https://www.rferl.org/a/western-balkans-eu-membership-summit-tirana/32507518.html>
2. <https://euronews.al/en/european-commission-suspends-agriculture-funds-ministry-calls-it-procedure/>
3. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/31/albania-arrests-kosovo-ex-guerrilla-for-extradition-to-the-hague/>