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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

The public broadcaster of Bosnia and Herzegovina, BHRT, has cancelled 15 television programs due to severe financial difficulties. These difficulties stem from a substantial debt of 95 million KM (€48 million), which has created an untenable financial situation for the organization. Consequently, over 700 journalists and staff members face potential unemployment, and BHRT has not fulfilled its financial obligations to tax authorities and other entities. The broadcaster's potential closure poses a significant threat to the country's democratic framework and progress towards EU accession, leading international organizations to urgently call for government intervention to secure sustainable funding for BHRT.

The Parliament of Republika Srpska has withdrawn a controversial bill on 'foreign agents'. The official reason for this withdrawal is to align the bill with the EU legislation, demonstrating a commitment to the European path. Introduced by current president Milorad Dodik in 2022, the bill was initially removed from the agenda on May 28 without explanation. Deputy Prime Minister Milos Bukejlovic announced the withdrawal, and Dodik later clarified on X (formerly Twitter) that the bill required harmonization with European norms. Bosnia, an EU membership candidate since 2022, must satisfy specific criteria before commencing accession talks. The law, targeting foreign-funded NGOs and mandating their registration and monitoring, has faced criticism from various local and international NGOs and the OSCE for violating human rights and constitutional obligations. It also posed a threat to the initiation of accession chapters.

Sources:

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2. <https://n1info.ba/vijesti/radnici-bhrt-a-danas-protestuju-nikad-nam-nije-bilo-teze-ne-mozemo-vise-cekati/>
3. <https://www.koha.net/en/rajon/421101/asambleja-e-republikes-serpska-e-terheq-nga-debati-ligjin-per-agjentet-e-huaj>
4. <https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-serbs-dodik-foireign-agent-law/32970490.html>



Montenegro

On May 22, citizens gathered in front of the Montenegrin government building in Podgorica to protest the government's endorsement of the UN resolution on the Srebrenica genocide. Hundreds of demonstrators chanted "betrayal, betrayal" and waved Serbian, Russian, and historic Montenegrin flags. Zdravko Nišavić, president of the Mihalović congregation, warned of larger protests if the resolution were adopted, although no significant demonstrations ensued. Nišavić asserted that Montenegrins are not a nation capable of committing genocide and cautioned that the resolution might ignite conflicts in the Balkans. The protest included participation from pro-Serb organizations and politicians such as Vladimir Dobricanin and Marko Milačić. The rally was heavily policed, with protective barriers set around the government building. Other organizers included the Serb Cultural Centre "Patriarch Varnava," Serb Cultural Club "Sveti Sava," Serb Society Sveti Sava from Bijelo Polje, the Association of Admirers of the Participants of the Liberation Wars 1912-1918, NGO "Herceg" – Pljevlja, NGO "Srpska Nit," NGO "Bozuri," NGO "Stupovi," NGO "Miholjski Zbor," NGO "Serdar," and the Night Wolves.

Montenegro's vote in favour of the resolution precipitated a political crisis still remaining unresolved by the end of May. A minority faction within the ruling coalition condemned the resolution's adoption, and Montenegro now faces the prospect of new parliamentary elections as the coalition loses its majority in parliament.

Sources:

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2. <https://sarajevotimes.com/a-protest-in-podgorica-against-the-resolution-on-the-genocide-in-srebrenica/>
3. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-srebrenica-rezolucija-genocid-spc/32962198.html>
- <https://www.intellinews.com/un-srebrenica-resolution-tears-montenegro-s-ruling-coalition-apart-326915/>



Serbia

May was a significant month for Serbia in terms of geopolitical issues and its position in the international arena.

Firstly, the visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping, accompanied by his wife and delegation, marked a pivotal moment. Xi's visit, during which nearly 30 new agreements were signed, underscored the strengthening ties between Belgrade and Beijing. Given Xi's infrequent foreign travels, this visit highlighted China's strategic interest in enhancing its influence in Europe, amidst ongoing competition with Russia, the EU, and the US. The successful outcome of the visit was a notable achievement for the Serbian government, although it also indicated Serbia's increasing alignment with China, potentially distancing itself from Western integration.

Secondly, Serbia faced a diplomatic challenge with the UN resolution on the Srebrenica genocide. Despite efforts to garner enough political support to defeat the resolution, Serbia was ultimately unsuccessful. The resolution was adopted with 84 out of 193 UN member states voting in favour, while 19 voted against, 68 abstained, and 22 did not participate. This outcome reflected the complexities of Serbia's diplomatic position and the international community's stance on the Srebrenica genocide.

Sources:

1. <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-xi-jinping-visit-serbia-anniversary-1999-nato-bombing-2024-05-07/>
2. <https://apnews.com/article/serbia-china-xi-jinping-visit-nato-e37b7ad0e89ac73b83e754142ce8e399>
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Kosovo

In the context of the Serbian currency ban, Pristina has also decided to close Serbian banks in northern Kosovo. The closure of six Serbian bank branches has drawn sharp criticism from the United States, the European Union, and Serbia. On May 19, the Central Bank of Kosovo banned cash transactions in currencies other than the euro. Washington and Brussels argue that this step undermines Kosovo's commitment to resolving relations with Serbia through dialogue. Serbian officials, including Petar Petković, described the closures as provocative and a threat to peace. The EU stressed that Kosovo's unilateral and uncoordinated actions were detrimental to the normalization process. Kosovo's Interior Minister defended the closures as necessary to uphold the rule of law, but the international community continues to express concern about the impact on Kosovo's Serb population.

Following last month's partial success at the Council of Europe, Kosovo's progress within the organization has stalled. Further progress was not on the agenda for the vote, leading to diplomatic criticism from Kosovo. However, Kosovo has achieved partial success in another arena. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly has voted to advance Kosovo's status to that of an associate member. This decision marks a significant step in Kosovo's efforts to enhance its international standing and integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Kosovo's president, Vjosa Osmani, welcomed the decision, highlighting it as a crucial development in Kosovo's path toward full NATO membership.

Sources:

1. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/21/us-eu-and-serbia-condemn-kosovos-closure-of-serb-banks/>
2. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/kosovo-shuts-serbian-bank-branches-in-troubled-north/>
3. <https://www.voanews.com/a/eu-condemns-kosovo-s-closure-of-serbian-banks/7620988.html>
4. <https://apnews.com/article/kosovo-council-of-europe-membership-serb-association-7b4b5c5bcfe264e9097a6c591c8ca4f4>
5. <https://www.intellinews.com/nato-parliamentary-assembly-votes-to-advance-kosovo-s-status-to-associate-member-327036/>
6. <https://n1info.rs/vesti/vjosa-osmani-nato-je-sudbina-kosova/>

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

North Macedonia held two significant elections in May—a parliamentary election and the second round of the presidential election. Both elections occurred on May 8. Voter turnout was notable, with over 54% participating in the parliamentary elections and just over 47% in the presidential elections, reflecting a relatively high engagement given the country's history of voter apathy.

The nationalist opposition party VMRO-DPMNE achieved substantial victories in both elections, unseating the ruling Social Democrat-led coalition (SDSM). Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, supported by VMRO-DPMNE, became the first female president of North Macedonia, securing 69% of the vote in the presidential runoff. In the parliamentary elections, VMRO-DPMNE and its coalition garnered 43% of the vote, significantly ahead of the SDSM-led coalition. Following these results, SDSM leader Dimitar Kovachevski conceded defeat and announced his resignation, citing public dissatisfaction with the slow progress toward EU integration and ongoing corruption issues. By the end of May, the new government had not yet been officially formed.

A noteworthy development hinting at a potential shift in foreign policy is President Siljanovska-Davkova's refusal to use the name 'North Macedonia,' which the country adopted to facilitate European integration.

Sources:

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2. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/05/09/north-macedonia-s-nationalist-opposition-sweeps-elections_6670837_4.html
3. <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-elections-nationalist-president-siljanovska-davkova-vmro-dpmne/32939285.html>
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Albania

The planned opening of the centre for migrants to be transferred from Italy to Albania had to be postponed due to the unfinished construction of the necessary infrastructure and facilities. An agreement for the construction of such facilities was signed in autumn 2023.

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama visited Greece in the first half of May, where he held a meeting with the Albanian minority at the Christmas Theatre in Athens. He was greeted by some 10,000 ethnic Albanians waving flags and other national symbols. The Prime Minister praised them for their contribution to Greece and for helping to move the country forward. He also addressed a few words to the current Greek government, with which Albania has a dispute over the detention of a Greek mayor of a small Greek municipality in Albania.

To underline the success of their partnership in tackling people smugglers and illegal migration, the UK Foreign Secretary travelled to Albania. The British representative arrived in the capital, Tirana, in the second half of May. Foreign Secretary David Cameron said: *“Our partnership with Albania is delivering for both our people and playing a key role in tackling illegal migration. Small boat arrivals from Albania to the UK fell by over 90% in 2023, which means that fewer Albanians are falling into the hands of criminal gangs and making dangerous channel crossings. Together we are reinforcing our partnership, strengthening European security, investing in the next generation of young people, building trade ties, and addressing corruption and organised crime to ensure that we build a stable and prosperous future for our countries”* (Gov.uk, 2024).

Sources:

1. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/migration/news/opening-of-italys-migrant-centres-in-albania-delayed/>
2. <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/10/albanian-pms-greek-odyssey-sparks-discord-in-tirana-and-athens/>
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4. <https://apnews.com/article/albania-britain-illegal-migrants-cameron-48c622e59dbf9698f1ca62366c70b512>