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Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia marked the 29th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide with a mass burial for 14 newly identified victims, bringing together thousands to honour the over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys killed by Bosnian Serb forces in 1995. The United Nations General Assembly recently designated July 11th as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the Srebrenica Genocide, emphasizing the importance of remembering and seeking justice for the victims.

Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) published a report warning about legal changes in Bosnia and Herzegovina that threaten to shrink online freedoms. The report highlights increasing government measures aimed at controlling the online narrative, such as proposed laws that could limit free expression and impose harsher penalties for online content. These developments raise concerns about censorship and the protection of digital rights, especially for journalists and activists who rely on online platforms to share information and advocate for human rights. Criticism is directed primarily towards Banja Luka and Republika Srpska. Republika Srpska also attempted to pass a new election law, but it was suspended by the Constitutional Court.

Germany extended its participation in the Althea mission in Bosnia, where it has approximately 50 soldiers.

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Montenegro

In July, Croatia declared the President of Montenegro's parliament, Andrija Mandic, Deputy Prime Minister Aleksa Becic and Democratic People's Party MP Milan Knezevic persona non grata. Croatia's move follows the adoption of a parliamentary resolution on the Jasenovac concentration camp, which was operated by Croatian Nazi collaborators. This was also seen as a reaction to the resolution on Srebrenica. Croatia repeatedly requested that such a resolution should not be adopted. According to their official communication, this step threatens their view of Montenegrin integration into the European Union

A new BIRN report points out that Montenegro needs to modernize its cyber security institutions to be able to deal with potential threats more effectively. According to the report, it is also necessary to raise public awareness about the protection of private data, digital rights and the online safety of every individual. *"The data shows that about 55 per cent of organisations had not detected any cyber incidents, which might reflect underreporting or lack of detection capabilities rather than a true absence of incidents. Moreover, with only 6 per cent of citizens aware of how to respond to cyber threats, there is an urgent need for expansive education initiatives. This dichotomy underscores the necessity for comprehensive educational programme"* claims BIRN in their report (BIRN, pp. 20).

Montenegro also experienced a partial change in the government, which included what many call a pro-Russian party. The consequences of this change will only become apparent over time.

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Serbia

The EU and Serbia agreed to develop a significant lithium mining project in the Jadar Valley. This initiative aims to secure lithium for electric vehicle batteries, crucial for the EU's clean energy goals and for reducing reliance on Chinese imports. The agreement was signed in Belgrade by Serbian and EU officials, including German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. However, the project has faced considerable opposition within Serbia due to environmental concerns. Local activists and residents fear that mining operations could cause water pollution, habitat destruction, and other ecological damages. Although protests halted the project in 2022, a recent court ruling has allowed it to proceed, causing widely supported protests and debates among the Serbian population. From the geopolitical perspective - this agreement represents a strategic move by the EU to diversify its sources of critical raw materials and boost its clean technology sector. For Serbia, the project promises substantial foreign investment and job creation, despite its contentious nature among the local population.

According to a recent report by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), Serbian authorities have been using high-tech surveillance methods to monitor political opponents, activists, and journalists. They claim that the government employs advanced technologies such as facial recognition software and spyware tools to collect biometric data and covertly track individuals. These practices have raised significant privacy concerns. Most of the hardware is purchased from China.

In the context of China, it is important to mention that since 1 July, a free trade agreement between Beijing and Belgrade has entered into force.

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Kosovo

The Kosovo government has banned the use of TikTok on state institutions' devices due to cyber security concerns. Effective as of June 28, 2024, the ban requires public officials to remove the app and its installation files from official devices and implement technical restrictions to prevent its use on state networks. Deputy Minister for Internal Affairs Bardhyl Dobra stated that this move aims to safeguard Kosovo's information and communication infrastructure from potential cyber threats, aligning with similar actions taken by other countries. Kosovo is following a trend, where numerous Western countries also banned TikTok on official devices.

A new report by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) informs that Kosovo's laws fail to address technology-facilitated abuse of women. The report points out that current legal frameworks do not sufficiently protect women from online harassment, cyberstalking, and other digital abuses. BIRN emphasizes the urgent need for legislative reforms to better safeguard women's rights in the digital realm in Kosovo.

NATO-led KFOR increased patrols along the Kosovo-Serbia border due to rising tensions. Northern Kosovo, a Serb-majority area, has experienced problems with smugglers and militants crossing the porous frontier, sometimes leading to deadly clashes. The heightened security measures aim to prevent further attacks, like the one in Banjske last year, and maintain stability in the region. However, due to the problematic terrain, these patrols face many issues or obstacles and their results are limited.

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North Macedonia

A new report by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) highlights the impact of online smear campaigns on the recent elections in North Macedonia. These campaigns spread false information and personal attacks against political candidates, undermining the election's integrity. BIRN stresses the importance of stronger regulations to combat digital disinformation and ensure fair future elections. Victims included minorities, women, and the LGBTQ community. BIRN analyzed 117 online sources, with 108 targeting ethnic Albanian politicians. In contrast, only six sources focused on LGBTQ narratives, and just one targeted the Roma minority.

Hristijan Mickoski, North Macedonia's centre-right leader, secured parliamentary approval to lead a new coalition government. He faces challenges in advancing the country's EU membership efforts while dealing with his party's nationalist stance. Mickoski's VMRO-DPMNE party, which won 58 seats in May's elections, formed a coalition with an ethnic Albanian party and a leftist party to secure a majority. In a vote, 77 lawmakers supported his new government. Mickoski, a former engineering professor, has pledged to continue efforts to guide North Macedonia into the EU despite the problematic stances. The biggest questions surround key agreements with neighbouring Bulgaria and Greece, which could block European integration if Skopje fully withdraws from them. The international community has long fought for agreements to be made and for a shift in the issues that have divided these countries. If Skopje refuses, there could be a leap backwards in integration by a number of years, delaying possible accession by a decade.

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Albania

According to the recent census, Albania's population fell from 2.8 million in 2011 to 2.4 million in 2023, with a significant increase in the elderly population. The 2023 census, conducted after delays due to COVID-19 and a 2019 earthquake, revealed a decrease of about 409,000 people. The average age has increased by two years to 42, with young people decreasing by 6.4% and the elderly increasing by 13.7%. This alarming demographic shift, with a population smaller than in 1976, underscores the impact of the immigration crisis and rapid ageing. In 2022, around 12,000 Albanians crossed to Britain by small boats, with 16,000 applying for asylum.

The agreement between Italy and Albania on the transfer of migrants to Albanian territory is taking real shape. Under Europe's first "offshoring" scheme, migrants will be housed in centres in the northern Albanian port of Shengjin, capable of accommodating up to 3,000 people monthly. Managed and funded by the Italian government, the camps will process asylum requests for migrants rescued en route to Italy, excluding women, children, and vulnerable individuals. If asylum is denied, migrants will be sent back to safe countries. The five-year agreement, extendable if successful, aims to reduce Italy's migrant burden. The plan, costing over €650m, has faced criticism for its expense and treatment concerns. Fabrizio Bucci, Italy's ambassador in Tirana, views the plan as a necessary experiment to manage migration effectively. Supported by 15 EU members, the Italy-Albania deal is distinct from the UK's Rwanda plan, as it operates under Italian jurisdiction and complies with EU laws.

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