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Westen Balkans briefing: September 2024

Richard Straka



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

On October 4, torrential rains and high winds struck four municipalities in southern and central Bosnia, destroying homes and roads and causing widespread power outages. The disaster left 27 people dead, with the village of Jablanica hardest hit; a collective funeral was held for 19 victims there on October 15. A Radio Free Europe podcast later discussed the lack of accountability, particularly noting that an unregulated quarry contributed to the flooding but that no government body accepted responsibility. Volunteers, soldiers, and locals undertook a cleanup of the whole region, which did not conclude in October and continues in November. Elections were held in Jablanica in early November, symbolizing the community's resilience despite the ongoing challenges and the political and environmental issues brought to light by the tragedy.

October 6, local elections brought minimal changes in municipal leadership. Major national parties struggled in big cities like Banja Luka, Tuzla, and Zenica but maintained strong control in smaller towns. Turnout was low, at just over 47 percent. In Srebrenica, a contentious region for Bosniak and Serb parties, Serb candidate Milos Vucic, a relative of Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic, was elected as mayor. The ruling Serb party, SNSD, won a significant portion of seats, claiming 81 percent of mayoral positions in Republika Srpska. The elections were marked by irregularities, including attempted vote-buying and issues with fingerprint scanners. The mayors of Mostar and Sarajevo are chosen indirectly by the cities' councils, not through the elections like the rest.

Sources:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/poplave-klizista-kamenolom-jablanica-berilo-bih/33163644.html>

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/22/worse-than-war-bosnian-flood-survivors-struggle-to-rebuild-their-lives/>

<https://n1info.ba/english/news/final-jablanica-victim-of-devastating-floods-found-collective-funeral-to-be-held-for-19-victims/>

<https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/preliminarni-rezultati-u-cetiri-opcine-daju-jasnu-sliku-bez-promjene-na-vladajucim-pozicijama/241020127>

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/07/bosnias-big-parties-maintain-grip-outside-cities-in-local-elections/>



Montenegro

The US Treasury Department announced sanctions on 275 individuals and entities supplying advanced technology and equipment to Russia's military, including companies from Serbia and Montenegro. Among the sanctioned is Montenegro-based Sergey Kokorev, a Russian national, and his company, International Business Corporation Bar (IBC). Kokorev reportedly used IBC to send European-origin machining centres and ball bearings to Russian entities, including AMS Tekhnika, a Russia-based industrial machinery distributor. Additionally, Kokorev exported military equipment from Montenegro to Russia, leading to sanctions against him and IBC for their involvement in Russia's manufacturing sector. US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo emphasized that the US and its allies will persist in disrupting Russia's access to military tools to prevent further support for its "illegal and immoral" war against Ukraine.

The European Commission's report praises Montenegro for progress in judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts, especially following milestones in EU accession. Despite positive developments, the report highlights that Montenegro's institutions remain vulnerable, with ongoing challenges in handling high-level corruption and organized crime cases. Political instability has strained institutions, while unresolved tensions with Croatia have impacted regional relations. Recommendations include expediting judicial appointments and reducing case delays. The Commission underscores Montenegro's alignment with EU policies and urges vigilance against foreign influence. Overall, Montenegro is encouraged to sustain reforms towards EU membership.

Sources:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/31/us-sanctions-companies-from-serbia-montenegro-for-military-exports-to-russia/>

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-evropska-komisija-izvjestaj/33178127.html>



Serbia

Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net 2024* report highlights significant issues with internet freedom in Southeast Europe, particularly in Turkey and Serbia. According to the report, Serbia's internet space saw political manipulation, especially surrounding the December 2023 elections. Pro-government tabloids spread misinformation targeting opposition figures and women in politics, according to the report. Serbian activists faced spyware attacks, and journalists were hit with lawsuits aimed at silencing criticism. Globally, internet freedom has deteriorated, particularly in countries experiencing pivotal elections, where misinformation and censorship have threatened public trust. Freedom House found at least 25 countries with elections impacted by a restricted information environment.

During a visit to Belarus, Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin agreed on joint police training with Belarus, covering counter-terrorism, organized crime, and high-tech crime. The Serbian government stated that Vulin met with Belarusian Interior Minister Ivan Kubrakov, who faces EU and U.S. sanctions for alleged repression after Belarus's 2020 presidential election. Vulin also observed Belarusian special forces in action during his visit.

Sanctions case with Montenegro: In Serbia, Subotica-based Ventrade DOO was also sanctioned for exporting military-grade radios to the Russian firm Promsvyazradio, which provides essential radio equipment and dual-use technologies to Russia. Ventrade's owner, Hungarian citizen Zsolt Lajgut, took over the company shortly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Sources:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/31/us-sanctions-companies-from-serbia-montenegro-for-military-exports-to-russia/>

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/16/threats-to-internet-freedom-persist-in-turkey-and-serbia-report-warns/>

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2024/struggle-trust-online>

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-belorusija-saradnja-sankcije/33179812.html>



Kosovo

Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, urged the international community to respond after Serbia passed a draft law declaring Kosovo an "area of special social protection." Kurti expressed concern, stating that this law represents an attack on Kosovo's constitution, sovereignty, and territorial integrity by its northern neighbour. He pointed out that Serbia's actions contradict the March 2023 agreement, which Serbia has now disregarded, claiming non-recognition of Kosovo's territorial integrity. Serbia's government argues that the law aims to support vulnerable populations in Kosovo and preserve cultural heritage, with a focus on demographic and economic development. Additionally, Serbia approved a draft law to establish specialized courts for prosecuting crimes committed in Kosovo, intended to streamline trials and enhance the legal process.

Kosovo and Serbia's negotiators met in Brussels but did not agree on steps toward normalizing relations. Kosovo's Besnik Bislimi emphasized the need for Serbia's full commitment to the 2023 Basic Agreement. Serbia's Petar Petković countered, urging Kosovo to begin by establishing the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities. Kosovo insisted on Serbia's commitment to past agreements, including economic and legal obligations. The EU mediator, Miroslav Lajčák, facilitated the meeting and urged progress. Both sides managed to agree on technical points, such as border veterinary certifications. NATO and EU representatives expressed frustration with the lack of substantial outcomes.

Sources:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/29/kurti-protests-serbian-draft-law-naming-kosovo-area-of-special-protection/>
<https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-kosovo-eu-talks/33171698.html>

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

Lake Ohrid, a UNESCO World Heritage site in North Macedonia, faces severe environmental risks from pollution and unsustainable development. UNESCO has urged authorities to address pollution, waste management, and unregulated construction threatening the lake's ecosystem and biodiversity. This site is among the oldest lakes in Europe, supporting unique plant and animal species. However, untreated sewage and harmful construction projects jeopardize its status as a protected area. North Macedonia has pledged to improve waste systems and control urban expansion to preserve the lake. UNESCO has warned that continued neglect could result in Ohrid losing its World Heritage status.

North Macedonia and Bulgaria agreed to restart construction of a long-delayed rail link between their capitals, mediated by the European Commission. The line, part of Corridor 8, would link North Macedonia with Bulgaria and broader European networks, but the project stalled due to disagreements over costs and construction. North Macedonia recently argued that Bulgaria was not advancing its side of the project, which would require a cross-border tunnel. After the recent Brussels meeting, both countries pledged to hold regular talks and coordinate construction efforts for the railway. Earlier delays led North Macedonia to consider shifting funds to other infrastructure but were advised by the EU that such reallocation isn't allowed. The project receives EU support alongside funds from European financial institutions, aiming to link the Albanian port of Durrës with Bulgaria's Black Sea. Following the meeting, North Macedonia committed to building the eastern railway section and advancing European integration.

Sources:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/north-macedonias-unesco-world-heritage-site-lake-ohrid-risk-pollution-2024-10-30/>
<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/17/eu-helps-north-macedonia-bulgaria-settle-dispute-over-railway-link/>



Albania

The Italian military vessel *Libra* brought 16 migrants to Albania, where they were taken to a reception centre in Shengjin before moving to the Gjader camp nearby. This transfer plan, delayed due to construction, was established by Italy and Albania in 2022. Despite criticisms from activists, the Albanian Constitutional Court approved the arrangement in January. Italy is funding the facilities, which include sections for detention and trial, managed by Italian police. Migrants stay for 28 days, after which rejected applicants are sent to the Gjader centre for repatriation. However, later in October, an Italian court ruled that 12 migrants from Bangladesh and Egypt, previously transferred to Albania under a recent Italy-Albania migration agreement, must return to Italy, as their home countries aren't considered "safe." This decision, based on EU law, challenges Italy's ability to process asylum claims offshore. Although the ruling can be appealed, it complicates Italy's arrangement with Albania to send intercepted migrants there. The project, criticized by human rights activists, was approved by Albania's Constitutional Court earlier this year.

Albanian opposition activists held roadblocks nationwide, demanding a technocratic government before the 2025 election. Led by Democratic Party lawmakers, protests blocked major roads, including in Tirana, where cars were parked to disrupt traffic. The opposition accuses Prime Minister Edi Rama's government of corruption and judiciary manipulation. Police presence was heavy, and brief clashes occurred before activists dispersed. The opposition alleges arrests of their leaders are politically driven. With parliamentary elections approaching, the EU and the U.S. have urged peaceful dialogue to support Albania's EU membership efforts.

Sources:

<https://apnews.com/article/albania-opposition-protest-corruption-election-cabinet-tirana-76e08889c6cc00aeb552a5cda65a04fd>

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/18/italian-court-rules-migrants-shipped-to-albania-must-be-sent-back/>

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/10/16/first-italian-ship-with-refugees-arrives-in-albania/>