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Westen Balkans briefing: December 2024

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The image shows the flag of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which consists of a blue triangle with white stars on the left and a yellow triangle on the right, set against a dark blue background.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In 2024, a Bosnian group named Panteri (Panthers) gained widespread attention for confronting alleged paedophiles and posting videos of these encounters on social media. The group, posing as underage teenagers online, lures men to meetings where they are recorded confessing their intentions and contacting their families. With over 150,000 followers across platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram, their videos have amassed millions of views since October. The group claims to have thousands of members and says their actions are supported by the public, although police investigations remain undisclosed. Originally an animal rescue organization, Panther expanded to aiding domestic violence victims and confronting predators. Public interest in paedophilia spiked after a well-known actor avoided jail by paying a fine for lewd acts with a minor, prompting calls to reform laws allowing such penalties. Critics question the legality of Panther's methods, but they insist their actions aim to "teach a lesson." Despite the controversy, the group continues to operate, drawing both support and scrutiny.

Bosnian Security Minister Nenad Nesic was arrested on December 26 on charges of corruption, abuse of office, bribe-taking, and money laundering, linked to his tenure as director of a public road company in Republika Srpska. His Democratic People's Alliance (DNS) party condemned the arrest as politically motivated, calling it part of a campaign against the Serbian people in Bosnia. Nesic allegedly pressured road maintenance companies between 2016 and 2020 to purchase overpriced materials from Legend d.o.o., whose director, Mladen Lucic, was also arrested. DNS representative Darko Banjac linked Nesic's arrest to recent Republika Srpska National Assembly actions against Bosnia's state institutions and the High Representative, citing it as an attempt to undermine Serbian interests.

Sources:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/09/bosnia-vigilantes-targeting-alleged-paedophiles-gain-social-media-following/>

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/27/bosnian-serb-party-condemns-ministers-arrest-on-corruption-charges/>



Montenegro

On December 13, Montenegro's Special State Prosecutor arrested two former Agriculture Ministers, Petar Ivanovic and Milutin Simovic, on charges of abuse of office and corruption. The arrests involve allegations of misappropriating over €300,000 by channelling funds to specific NGOs between 2014 and 2019. Ivanovic, a former minister and advisor to ex-President Milo Djukanovic, is already on trial for misuse of funds from a \$50 million Abu Dhabi loan meant for northern agricultural development. The case also implicates Nemanja Katnic, a former State Secretary, and a former finance department head. Simovic, a high-ranking Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) member, served as Minister and Deputy Prime Minister until 2020. The charges further spotlight corruption tied to the DPS, which ruled Montenegro for three decades before 2020. Prosecutor Vukas Radonjic emphasized the significant financial damage caused by these actions. Both ministers deny the allegations, with trials and investigations ongoing.

RFERL summarised the year 2024 for Montenegro as a year of protests. The country experienced a series of protests addressing various social and political issues. In May, citizens demonstrated against the reduction of a prison sentence for a man convicted of repeatedly assaulting a 15-year-old girl. In November, thousands in Ulcinj demanded justice for Drita Tafa, a woman whose death during childbirth raised concerns about medical negligence. Later in November, residents of Cetinje continued their tradition of protesting against Russia's aggression in Ukraine. In October, tensions arose in the village of Štitarica near Mojkovac over the display of Serbian and Montenegrin flags. In December, citizens gathered in front of the Montenegrin Parliament, demanding the release of Montenegrin nationals detained in Kosovo for displaying license plates with the inscription "Kosovo is Serbia."

Sources:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/13/montenegro-arrests-two-former-agriculture-ministers-on-corruption-charges/>
<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-2024-protesti-tenzije/33258020.html>



Serbia

A Belgrade court sentenced Vladimir Kecmanovic to 14-and-a-half years and his wife Miljana to three years for neglecting their son, who carried out a 2023 school shooting that killed ten and injured six. The father taught the boy to shoot and failed to secure firearms, which the 13-year-old used in the attack. Judge Zoran Bozovic highlighted the severe consequences of their negligence, though Miljana was acquitted of weapon-related charges. The shooter could not be tried due to Serbia's age limit for criminal responsibility. A shooting range instructor was also sentenced, while the range owner accepted a plea deal.

In December, Serbia charged 13 individuals in connection with the deadly collapse of a railway station roof in Novi Sad, which killed 15 people. The accused include former Transport Minister Goran Vesić, his deputy, and senior officials from Serbian Railways Infrastructure, who face allegations of endangering public safety. The collapse, which occurred on November 1, has been linked to substandard renovations carried out as part of a project involving Chinese contractors. Critics blame government corruption and lack of oversight for the tragedy. Vesić resigned following the incident, as public outrage and protests over the government's role intensified. Prime Minister Miloš Vučević has called for accountability, but opposition groups allege systemic corruption and demand broader investigations. Meanwhile, widespread protests continue, with citizens calling for transparency and reforms to prevent further tragedies. These protests are primarily student-led and are gradually spreading to other smaller towns across Serbia. The largest protests so far have taken place in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Nis in southern Serbia.

Sources:

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/30/parents-of-serbian-school-shooting-perpetrator-convicted-of-negligence/>

<https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-railway-station-accident-minister-transport-milos-vucevic-construction/>

<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/docek-nove-godine-studenti-protest/>



Kosovo

Kosovo's Central Election Commission (CEC) banned the main ethnic Serb party, Srpska Lista, from participating in the upcoming parliamentary elections, citing its nationalist stance and close ties to Serbia. This decision drew criticism from Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who accused Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti of attempting to eliminate the Serb presence in Kosovo. However, the Electoral Panel for Complaints and Appeals overturned the ban, allowing Srpska Lista to field candidates in the February 9 election. The initial exclusion had raised concerns among Western observers about escalating tensions between Kosovo and Serbia.

The Pristina Basic Court has delivered Kosovo's first war crimes verdict in absentia, sentencing former Serbian fighter Cedomir Aksic to 15 years in prison. Aksic was convicted of ordering expulsions, participating in murders, and causing destruction in Shtime/Stimlje municipality during the Kosovo War in 1999. This landmark trial stems from a 2019 amendment to Kosovo's Criminal Procedure Code, allowing war crime trials in absentia when defendants cannot be located. Prosecutors alleged Aksic led actions that included the murder of civilians and destruction of property, causing damages exceeding 300,000 euros.

U.S. Ambassador to Serbia, Christopher Hill, stated in late December that the United States has not seen any evidence linking Belgrade to the attack on the Ibar-Lepenac canal in November. He emphasized the importance of de-escalation and the need for both sides to engage in dialogue to resolve ongoing tensions. Hill reiterated the U.S. commitment to supporting stability and peace in the region. He also called for a thorough investigation to identify the perpetrators of the attack.

Sources:

<https://apnews.com/article/kosovo-serbs-election-srpska-lista-party-banned-e6528d0f7ee22b27513f9930ab18bc99>

<https://apnews.com/article/kosovo-serbs-election-srpska-lista-party-ban-kurti-5f6ca84f50fcd86980b176f2f2e34c73>

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/26/kosovo-issues-first-war-crimes-verdict-in-defendants-absence/>

<https://kossev.info/kosovo-online-najnovije-vesti-hil-sad-ne-vide-nikakve-dokaze-koji-bi-vodili-ka-beogradu-oko-napada-na-kanal-ibar-lepenac/>

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

In December 2024, North Macedonia's Public Prosecutor's Office initiated investigations into citizens suspected of participating in the Ukraine conflict as fighters for Russian paramilitary groups, including the Wagner Group. Two individuals are under house arrest, facing charges of "Participation in a Foreign Army," which carries a minimum sentence of four years. One suspect reportedly joined Wagner, while another collaborated with the Donetsk People's Republic's military formations; a third individual is reported to have died in the conflict. The Ministry of Internal Affairs has conducted searches, uncovering documents and tactical gear that substantiate these allegations. Authorities are also probing potential organized recruitment networks within North Macedonia. These cases mark the first known instances of Macedonian nationals engaging in the Ukraine war, prompting concerns about the extent of foreign fighter involvement. The government is intensifying efforts to detect and prevent such activities, emphasizing the legal repercussions of participating in foreign conflicts.

North Macedonia's Interior Ministry has issued arrest warrants for former Deputy Prime Minister Artan Grubi and ex-lottery head Perparim Bajrami, both accused of embezzlement. Grubi, missing since December 15, claims to be abroad on a private visit, while officials allege he fled to Kosovo using diplomatic license plates. Prosecutors estimate the embezzlement cost the state-run lottery over 8 million euros, and investigations also implicate several other officials. The US State Department recently blacklisted Grubi for alleged corruption, further intensifying scrutiny of his actions.

Sources:

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/vagner-rusija-ukraina-borci/33252642.html>

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/12/18/north-macedonia-seeks-fugitive-ex-deputy-pm-over-embezzlement-allegations/>



Albania

On December 17, 2024, the EU and Albania held their third Accession Conference at the ministerial level. The meeting opened negotiations on Cluster 6, focusing on External Relations, including Chapters 30 and 31. The EU recognized Albania's progress in reforms, especially in the rule of law, human rights, and economic development, while urging continued efforts. Albania reiterated its commitment to EU integration, aiming for deeper political and economic alignment. Both sides emphasized constructive dialogue to resolve remaining issues and advance accession. This meeting highlighted the EU's commitment to Western Balkans integration, following earlier progress with Cluster 1 negotiations in October 2024.

In December 2024, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama announced a one-year ban on TikTok, set to commence in January 2025, following the fatal stabbing of a 14-year-old boy linked to social media disputes. The government cited concerns over TikTok's role in promoting youth violence and bullying, prompting this decisive action. This move has sparked significant debate among the Albanian populace. Many young users express frustration over losing a popular platform for expression and connection. Conversely, parents and educators largely support the ban, emphasizing the need to protect children from harmful online influences. TikTok has responded by seeking urgent clarification from the Albanian government, asserting that there is no evidence linking the involved individuals to its platform. Critics of the ban argue that it may infringe upon freedom of expression and set a concerning precedent for digital censorship. Nonetheless, the Albanian government remains steadfast, planning to implement educational programs alongside the ban to enhance digital literacy and safeguard youth.

Sources:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/12/17/third-meeting-of-the-accession-conference-with-albania-at-ministerial-level/>

<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/23/albanias-one-year-tiktok-ban-met-with-anger-among-video-platforms-young-users>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c93gxzergk2o>