



Vol. #03 - February 2020
Natolin Friends of the Balkans Society

BALKANews

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Chinese policemen on Serbian streets

Louise Guillon



Since September 2019, Chinese police forces have been walking the streets of Belgrade, Novi Sad and Smederevo together with their Serbian colleagues. Earlier in May 2019, Serbian Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic and Chinese Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi signed a memorandum of understanding aiming at deepening security cooperation between both countries. The agreement provides for joint police patrols, common exercises dedicated to the anti-terrorism fight and the installation of 1,000 cameras with facial recognition technology. Serbian NGOs - such as the CRTA – have already raised their concerns about the facial recognition technology and its compatibility with European data protection standards.

Such measures have been justified by the need for enhanced confidence building among Chinese visitors, who were expected to increase by 40% in 2019. But this is not a matter of economies only. Let's recall that China belongs to the list of states which have yet to recognize Kosovo's independence. As observed by Sasa Djordjevic, a Belgrade-based researcher, "Serbia does not seat on two chairs anymore, but three – the EU, Russia and China".

Wind of change in Kosovo

Grégoire Soria-Metais



Albin Kurti, winner of the October 2019 general election, has been formally elected prime minister. On February 3, the Kosovo parliament voted in his governmental new coalition. This is the end of four months of long negotiations, between Kurti's leftist party, Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) and the centre-right Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK).

Change is in the air in Pristina, twelve years after Kosovo's independence. Kurti indeed is one of the few politicians in Kosovo to have been victim of the last war, imprisoned and tortured for two years, rather than a war veteran. In his party, no one has ever had power at state level. This change reflects a political shift.

For the multi-ethnic based government, composed of Serbs, Turks, Bosniaks and others, the task is colossal. Besides fighting corruption, the government undertook to radically re-organise Kosovo's public administration. Kurdi's government will also face issues with the opposition.

A strong obstacle, in particular for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, which is one of the most pressing issues for Pristina. Another challenge what it presents for Kosovo's efforts to make EU-compatible reforms. Despite this, for Donika Emini, Executive Director of the CiviKos Platform, the last election is a "revolution reflecting the political maturity of the voters [...] showcasing the immense potential for a new wave of democracy".

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The Current State of EU Enlargement as seen from Albania and North Macedonia

Bernhard Moshammer

The Current State of EU Enlargement as seen from Albania & North Macedonia was the topic of a panel hosted by the Friends of the Balkans Society with the following panellists: Ilir Aliaj - Executive Director of CDDI and also Member of Board of Directors and Founder of European Movement Albania, Francois Lafond - Adviser to the Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs in the Republic of North Macedonia, Clive Rumbold - Deputy Head of the Western Balkans Division at the EEAS - and moderated by Marta Szpala - Senior Fellow at Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (Centre for Eastern Studies).

At the heart of the discussion was the question of how to proceed with the currently blocked enlargement negotiations. Both in Albania and North Macedonia progress has been made and there is a strong willingness among Albanians and North Macedonians for EU integration, as Ilir Aliaj highlighted. The experience with Bulgaria and Romania, but also the current state of the negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia, have cast doubts on whether the current enlargement methodology still suits. These considerations have led, among French domestic political issues, to the French blockade of opening enlargement negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Given the historic dimension of the Prespa agreement between North Macedonian and Greece, and the fact that this agreement has not been uncontested in North Macedonia, not to open negotiations could lead to the agreement not being implemented, as Francois Lafond pointed out.

The new enlargement methodology, with its stronger focus on conditionalities, could open a new angle on enlargement negotiations. However applicants will have to be convinced that the new methodology will be working. Above all, the EU perspective remains the biggest tool of the EU, as Clive Rumbold highlighted. All panellists agreed that they see the future of the Western Balkans within the EU. As to when and how the enlargement is to be completed remains to be seen.



€1.15 billion for Albania

Louise Guillon

Following the devastating earthquake of November 2019 in Albania, the international community gathered in Brussels in February at the so-called International Donors' Conference. The EU seems deeply involved and convinced more than 100 states, banks and NGOs to join the conference. Prime Minister Edi Rama declared himself extraordinary pleased by these donations. "Some magic has happened. This is beyond our wildest imagination", he stated in his closing statement.

Let's recall that Tirana and the Adriatic's coastline were hit by an earthquake of 6.3 Richter scale magnitude, causing serious building destruction including homes, schools and health care facilities in 11 municipalities. According to the European Commission, "51 people died, more than 900 were injured, about 17,000 temporarily displaced, with the earthquake ultimately affecting more than 200,000 people in 11 municipalities." An estimated €1.08 billion would be necessary to overcome the effects of the earthquake.

A €15 million grant from the EU budget has been pledged by the Commission to support reconstruction efforts in the country. An additional €100 million in grant must however be discussed jointly by the Council and the Parliament. International banks such as the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and the European Investment Bank actively took part in this process too. It has to be noted that Serbia, despite old-established political disagreements, pledged €2 million. Earlier in December and as a direct response to that catastrophe, the EU Civil Protection Team was deployed across the territory to search and rescue the victims.

The disastrous consequences of the earthquake have put the emphasis on another structural issue in Albania, namely housing construction in a post-communist and corrupted system. Safety norms have often been disregarded by fraudulent property developers, or even by successive Albanian governments, which "encouraged building booms in the 1990s, during the transition from Communism to capitalism" according to the New York Times.

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The Commission's new enlargement methodology

Annamaria Levai

After much anticipation, the new Commission presented its renewed methodology for enlargement in early February. With its proposal the Commission claims to aim for a more credible, dynamic and predictable political EU accession process. The new methodology takes up a lot from the French non-paper about reforming enlargement policy to satisfy French President Emmanuel Macron, who vetoed opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in October. Instead of negotiating chapters, the document proposes 6 clusters ("internal market", "resources, agriculture and cohesion", "external relations" and others) that could be opened simultaneously.

Two new elements have been introduced: Positive and negative conditionality. That practically means that if a country has a good performance in meeting the criteria set by the EU (to be defined by the Commission later on), it can access extra resources and accelerated integration. But if there is backsliding in reforms, Member States can decide to put the negotiations on hold or even suspend them. The benefits of closer integration could be stopped or withdrawn. This way the Member States would have a bigger role in the whole process. The Commission would still evaluate the progress made by the candidates however.

The Croatian EU Presidency has great anticipations towards the upcoming Zagreb Summit, where, according to Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, the Commission will come forward with an economic and investment development plan for the region. The European Council has agreed to revisit the question of opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia before the Zagreb Summit. There are good reasons to be optimistic about the Council's decision this time. On the Munich Security Conference, President Macron stated that if there is progress made by the countries, and if there is confidence that the enlargement process will work, the EU should be able to start negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. The new methodology cannot only satisfy the French yet. Dutch and Danish concerns shall be met as well, as these countries also voted against opening enlargement negotiations.

So what's next? First of all, EU leaders need to adopt the final version of the methodology in March. The candidate countries reacted quite positively to the new methodology, which would primarily concern Albania and North Macedonia. Montenegro and Serbia – who have already begun accession talks with the EU - could also "opt-in" to the renewed process. In the European Parliament most of the political groups endorsed the Commission's proposal after Commissioner Várhelyi presented the offer on 10th February. Let's hope that the new methodology will revitalise the enlargement process and helps both European and Western Balkans leaders to have more confidence in reforms and each other!

What's next?

Monday 20th April - SIMULATION GAME "25 years after the Dayton Agreement"

On the 20th April, you will have the opportunity to replay the 1995 negotiations on the fate of Bosnian Serbs, Croats, Muslims and the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This simulation will therefore give you a better understanding of the complex Dayton peace resolution. This simulation will be organised in cooperation with the Natolin Simulation Nexus. More information will be displayed in the coming weeks. We will keep you posted!

