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Natolin Friends of the Balkans Society



# BALKANnews

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# Kosovo's unpredictable weather forecast?

Iris van Loon



The images on Kosovar TV and social media when Albin Kurti's anti-establishment Albanian nationalist party Vetëvendosje (in English: Self-Determination) won the elections in October 2019 were really remarkable. It was as moving as the moment when Kosovo born Xherdan Shaqiri, playing for Switzerland, scored the late winner (2-1) against Serbia in the 90th minute during the World Cup of 2018 in Russia, folding his hands in the Albanian eagle. With both moments, there were scenes of Kosovar citizens honking their cars, singing, waving Kosovo's and Albania's flag, gathering in cafes and on the streets to celebrate a victory.

Already the fourth election since Kosovo's independence from Serbia in 2008, it seemed difficult even prior to the election that Vetëvendosje and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) would be able to form a coalition. Against all odds, after four months of negotiations, an agreement to form a new government was agreed upon. Now, following a 12-hour Parliamentary session on the 25th of March 2020, 82 deputies out of 120 voted for the motion of no-confidence that brought down Kosovo's government - on its 52nd day.

## *What happened and who is to blame?*

Kosovo's latest government was brought down amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the discussion regarding a suitable response to COVID-19 in Kosovo that triggered the motion of no-confidence. While Interior Minister Agim Veliu (LDK) spoke out in favour of a state of emergency, Kurti called this a "disproportionate response" to tackle the coronavirus, regarding the low number of cases in the country. Consequently, the LDK urged parliament to launch the motion of no-confidence in the government, with success.

Our colleague from the Friends of the Balkans Society, Grégoire, called this new government Kosovo's "Wind of Change" in our Balkan newsletter no. 3. However, staying with weather metaphors, we read in Johanna Deimel's article for BIRN of Kurti's "Albanian spring having turned into early frost". And with this, opinions differ on who is to blame. Again Deimel, refers to Kurti's own overconfidence and inexperience as the reason for why this government failed. Another reason is given by Besa Luci, in an article for Kosovo2.0, who mostly blames president Thaçi, a former Kosovo Liberation Army/guerrilla leader who maintained his grip. For that reason, she refers to it as "Thaçi's coup d'état."

However, there were signs for disruption from the beginning. It cannot be too big of a surprise that a coalition of two opposition parties hasn't succeeded. Especially, when in the four months of negotiations it was merely a discussion of distributing positions instead of defining new policy.

Additionally, as Kosovo's previous government, the main issues were already showing over a disagreement over Kosovo's 100% tariff on imports of Serbian goods and the future of the EU-facilitated dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. In that regard, the motion of no-confidence can be seen as merely the last straw.

Moreover, critics say that the U.S. support for the motion of no-confidence also played a big part, pointing out that the U.S. was not a fan of Kurti's idea to chair the future dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. The U.S. government froze millions of dollars of aid to Kosovo, to persuade Kurti to remove the tariffs on Serbian goods.

### *What's next?*

Currently, the present government will continue in a "caretaker role", with Kurti as acting prime minister. The question is whether President Thaçi will allow the parliamentary group election in October 2019 to form a new government, or if new elections will be called. Bringing down a government amidst the COVID-19 pandemic is considered as a sign of non-recognition and no respect to Kosovar citizens and those who fought for Kosovo's independence. Even more, it is once again showing Kosovo's unpredictable political situation and the strong influence that the U.S. has over the small country.

Unfortunately, in Kosovo, more perhaps than in other countries, there are lots of people in the periphery with no access to health care, no running water, and no option to work from home. However, the success of Kosovo's citizens to successfully go into lockdown within a short amount of time, abandoning Pristina's ever so busy streets, is true evidence of solidarity in the city and within the country. This should be recognized and acknowledged. Then, when all this is over and daily life returns, the country can hopefully soon again celebrate. But for now, and apologies for staying with the weather metaphors, Kosovo is facing yet another "stormy period."

**\*\*Please note that this article was written when new developments in the current situation might have happened.\*\***

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## NATO bombings in Serbia and their environmental consequences

Louise Guillon

From March 24 to June 10 1999, NATO bombings devastated the former Yugoslav territory, in particular Serbia and Kosovo. As a consequence, soils were massively polluted by depleted uranium (DU) ammunitions, affecting the environment but also very likely human health in Serbia. The destruction of industrial installations - Pancevo Chemica Plant among many others - increased further the risk of contamination by other substances (ammonia, coolant and machining oil, mercury, petroleum etc.).

Right after the disaster, NGOs and UN experts confirmed the ecological catastrophe. Already in 2001, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe stated that "the bombing subjected ecosystems, surface water, groundwater, soil and air in the Balkans to unprecedented contamination involving over 100 toxic substances". Yet, in 1999 and 2002, the United Nations Environment Programme were surprisingly very reassuring regarding the level of toxic and radioactive contamination.

Twenty years after the conflict, DU particules can still be detected in the soils and in the air according to independent reports. This was of course highly politicised by the Serbian authorities, which have committed themselves to link the NATO bombings with the rise of cancer patients and malignant and autoimmune diseases in the country since 1999. Still, experts expressed their concerns about that connection, which is very difficult to prove, as additional factors shall be considered. The debate remains therefore open.

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## Earthquake wakes up Croatia on a Sunday morning

Grégoire Soria

Many Croats woke up suddenly on March 22. At 6.24 local time, a 5,3 magnitude earthquake shook Croatia, the epicentre located 7 kilometres out of Zagreb, according to the European-Mediterranean Seismological Centre (EMSC). Smaller tremors followed in the coming hours.

If most were slightly wounded (around 3000 people), a 15-year-old girl, severely injured, died the following day. Prime Minister Plenkovic said it was the biggest seism recorded since 1880.

There is widespread damages. Many walls and roofs were cracked, as well as educational facilities. One hospital had to be evacuated in emergency. Historic buildings for the old city of Zagreb suffered most of the damages. The cathedral saw its spires collapsing during the quake. Rubbles were lying on the streets. Damages at the Croatian Parliament resulted in the postponement of parliamentary activities for a couple of days.

The situation is already tense, since the number Covid-19 cases are rising in the country. "We have two crisis situations which contradict each other" says the Prime Minister Plenkovic. The government recommended to stay outside in the hours following the quake, while maintaining social distancing. These spontaneous gatherings fragilize the partial lockdown previously implemented.

Very quickly afterwards, the Army worked on cleaning up the city. Solidarity has been expressed through the Commission's adoption of financial aid for Zagreb's reconstruction. In the following days, throughout France sent humanitarian assistance, while the Croat diaspora launched crowdfunding.

It is the third major quake in the region in one year, after the two seisms of last November (Albania and another in Bosnia-Herzegovina).

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## Opening of the Turkish borders: Multiple reactions in the Balkans

Louise Guillon

Since President Erdogan opened Turkey's border in late February as a response to Europe's lack of support in Syria, South-Eastern countries expressed very deep concerns regarding their ability to manage a hypothetical new immigration wave. About 35 000 people have tried to enter Greece so far, while Bulgaria, surprisingly, has been less affected. The Bulgarian Minister of the Interior, Mladen Marinov, declared indeed that very few attempts to cross the borders had been reported. This can be explained by Sofia's preferential relation with Turkey, but also its reputation to promote an alarming "no migrant policy" through the continuous use of violence by the Bulgarian police forces.

In the Western Balkans, even though the situation has been framed in security terms mostly, diverse interpretations and reactions can be observed. In Serbia, President Vucic has closed the Southern borders of the country. He stated that the situation was a clear "threat to national security" and that the region should not become a "parking lot for migrants", eliciting a direct response from Serbia's Commissioner for Refugees and Migration. Several anti-migrant protests were organised in March in Belgrade, Subotica and Pozarevac. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, fear seems to prevail as well.

By contrast, North Macedonia has favoured a reassuring and moderated rhetoric. Benefiting from Serbian military support, the country has strengthened the presence of the police and the military at its border with Greece. Croatia is representing the 'Balkan voice' at the Council, arguing that European solidarity should not be limited to Greece.

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# Opening of EU negotiations to Albania and North Macedonia

Grégoire Soria

## *Tirana is pleased and Skopje make a double-win: both open talks with Brussels, and Skopje accesses NATO*

The wait is over. After two years of blockade, and a rejection five months ago, the EU integration process for North Macedonia and Albania can finally progress. For North Macedonia, it is even a double-win. On Monday 30th of April, Skopje formally joined the Atlantic Alliance. On EU accession progresses, the General Affairs Council of the EU met on Tuesday 24. They reached unanimity on “opening the accession talks”, according to a tweet from Commissioner Olivér Várhelyier. North Macedonia and Albania have been granted the right to start their membership negotiations.

This is the end of a political soap opera between these Western Balkans republics and the EU member-states. It has been months since Skopje and Tirana were waiting for a “green light” from Brussels. Especially since France, along with the Netherlands, had dashed expectations in October, expressing serious doubts in the progress made on democracy and fight against corruption.

Five months after, and a new integration methodology presented by Paris, they have been allowed to move to the next step. It was no easy thing. Up to the last moment, Greece expressed scepticism over that decision, refusing to support the Council’s final statement.

On Friday 27, things got more interesting for Skopje. After Spain’s approval, the latest to complete the protocol accession, North Macedonia formally became the 30th member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). It is “one of the three jewels” of the last coalition government, according to Ivana Jordanovska from the European Western Balkans.

It is also a victory for the progressist SDSM, that was in power until January, before being dismissed by a non-confidence vote. During the three years under Prime Minister Zoran Zaev’s leadership, Skopje resolved its name-dispute with Greece, which unblocked its EU integration progress as well as allowed North Macedonia to complete its NATO accession.

Despite this very tense beginning of decade (earthquake in Croatia, Covid-19 outbreak in Europe), new perspectives are more than ever open in the Balkans.

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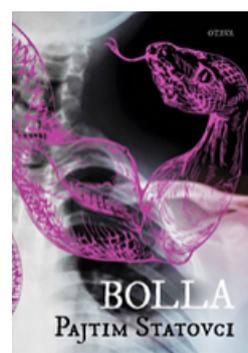
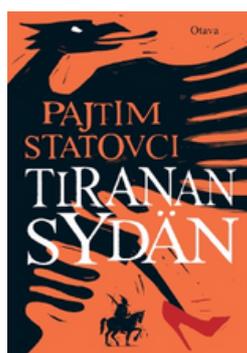
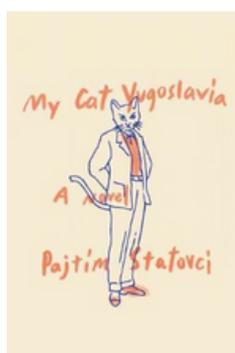
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## Library

### #1 My Cat Yugoslavia – Pajtim Statovci

Statovci's first novel "My Cat Yugoslavia" (2017) is about a Kosovo immigrant, Bekim, trying to find its way in Finland. Being an outcast, a foreigner and a gay man in an unaccepting society is the main topic of this complex book, in which demons and a troubled family history are confronted. Statovci's novels have been described as if you are having "lucid dreams" and he knows how to take you to Yugoslavia in the 1980s, to present-day Finland, on a journey to Kosovo. Try to read over the absurdity of the story and try to merge yourself into it. Statovci's debut novel from 2017 is one that really makes you ask for more. Thankfully, he has published his second novel called "Crossing" (who knew Albania's eagle could wear heels), and his third novel "Bolla", both in 2019.



## #2 Blood and Vengeance. One Family's Story of the War in Bosnia – Chuck Sudetic

*'For the first time in its history, the UN Security Council was sending a neutral military force, a peacekeeping force, into a country where there was no peace to keep' (Chuck Sudetic, Blood and Vengeance, p.130)*

Sudetic's holistic account of the war combines politics and family into the real-life wartime stories of his own relatives. Sudetic follows several generations of a Bosnian family. The Celik family lived close to Serbia in a Mountain village, called Mount Zvijezda (Star Mountain), 13 miles from Srebrenica. Under Tito's rule, the Celik family and other Muslims in the area lived happy and peacefully next to their Serbian neighbours. Sudetic quickly moves from this happy time to the first violence in 1991 and the ethnic cleansing of the village. With this book, Sudetic has provided an extraordinary family story of the war while still being accessible for every reader to fully understand and to get a grip of the war.



## Cinema

### #3 Lepa sela lepo gor – (Pretty Village, pretty Flame) directed by Srđan Dragojević (1966) (115 Minutes)



This film, shot even during the war, gives a unique look to the Bosnian war (1992-1995). It is based on the novel *Tunel*, from Vanja Bulić. The film tells the story of a small group of Serbian soldiers trapped in a tunnel, called "Tunnel of Brotherhood and Unity". We witness the story seen from Milan's perspective, being hospitalised, having flashbacks to his childhood and his early adulthood and his time being trapped in the tunnel. We see how childhood friendships get contested by war and nationalism. The film is a good example to get another perspective of the war. After the war, the tunnel was dubbed "Tunnel of Peace".

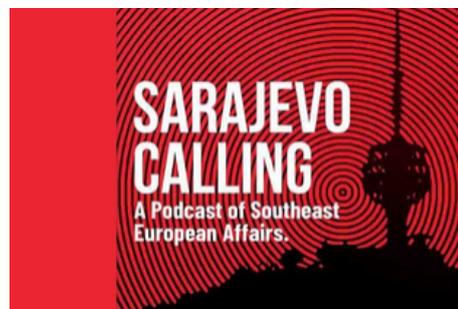
## Radio

### #4 Sarajevo Calling – A podcast of Southeast European Affairs

Sarajevo Calling is a podcast about Southeast European affairs. There is a particular focus on the contemporary politics of the Western Balkans. Although the last few podcasts are very interesting and up to date, do take time to go back to the beginning of their podcasts as the subjects are numerous and insights thought-provoking. **This might just be the easiest way to study for the study-trip exam!**

Hosted by journalist Aleksandar Brezar and political scientist Jasmin Mujanović.

Available on Spotify and <https://sarajevo-calling.simplecast.com/>



### #5 Homemade Balkan Tunes

See the Spotify Playlist “Western Balkan Trip – the Musical”, sent on Monday 30th of March for the true Balkan Tunes!

## Language class: Serbo-Croatian

**Dobar dan** - Hello / Good Day (more formal)  
**Zdravo / Bok / Ćao** - Hello, Hi / Bye  
**Do viđenja / Zbogom** - Goodbye (more formal)  
**Laku noć** - Good Night  
**Molim** - Please  
**Hvala (lijepa)** - Thank you (very much)  
**Dobrodošli** - Welcome  
**Idemo / Hajdemo** - Let's go  
**Gospođa, gospođica** - Madam, Miss  
**Gospodin** - Mister  
**Da / Ne / Možda** - Yes / No / Maybe  
**Oprosti / Oprostite** - Excuse me (informal / formal)  
**Žao mi je** - I'm sorry

**Žao mi je** - I'm sorry  
**Kako ste?** - How are you? (formal)  
**Dobro** - I'm fine  
**Možete li mi pomoći?** - Can you help me?  
**Odakle ste?** - Where are you from?  
**(Ne) Govorim ...** - I (don't) speak...  
**(Ne) razumijem** - I (don't) understand  
**(Ne) znam** - I (don't) know