



Briefing

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The Far Right in the EU and the Western Balkans

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POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

A FES DIALOGUE SOUTHEAST EUROPE PROJECT

Peace and stability initiatives represent a decades-long cornerstone of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's work in southeastern Europe. Recent events have only reaffirmed the centrality of Southeast European stability within the broader continental security paradigm. Both democratization and socio-economic justice are intrinsic aspects of a larger progressive peace policy in the region, but so too are consistent threat assessments and efforts to prevent conflict before it erupts. Dialogue SOE aims to broaden the discourse on peace and stability in southeastern Europe and to counter the securitization of prevalent narratives by providing regular analysis that involves a comprehensive understanding of human security, including structural sources of conflict. The briefings cover fourteen countries in southeastern Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries and Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

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EDITORIAL

Alida Vračić, Jasmin Mujanović and Ioannis Armakolas

On October 12, Slovak far-right politician Marian Kotleba, leader of the far-right People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS), was sentenced to four years and four months in jail. This verdict was part of a wider crack-down on extremism in the country, which has seen several high-level figures charged with racist crimes in recent years. Earlier this month Greece's Nazi Golden Dawn party was ruled a criminal organization and found guilty by a court in Athens of operating a gang of hit squads targeting the group's opponents and critics. These rulings are part of a broader confrontation with the far-right, which has been forced upon European governments in light of the growing popularity and influence of such reactionary movements.

In past years, these groups have often been dismissed as marginal actors, which has served to obscure the danger they pose to democratic societies. Such an approach has helped to facilitate the dramatic growth of far-right parties and movements in Europe, who have, in turn, successfully tapped into feelings of political alienation, while promoting sectarian grievances, to establish themselves as a definitive part of the contemporary political mainstream on the continent.

Online the growth of far-right radical and extremist viewpoints is even more pronounced, with sophisticated, and tailored messaging easily deployed across social media networks by these groups reaching millions of people in the EU and the Western Balkans. And while the online far-right sphere is "diverse", with differently constituted local and continental groups appealing to particular, regional grievances, there is nevertheless a set of shared values among them: a general tendency towards xenophobia and chauvinism, with a particular emphasis on antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-feminism, and anti-immigrant/refugee sentiment.

To date, the brunt of the academic and policy literature has focused on these manifestations in the West. In this issue of the Political Trends and Dynamics newsletter, we show, however, that the far-right has made major inroads in Southeastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Moreover, local radical and extremist groups have benefited from association with and tutelage by similar groups based out of the EU and the U.S., as well as government-backed far-right groups from Russia, such as the Night Wolves motorcycle gang. And far-right terrorist attacks in the West - as in Christchurch and Norway in 2011 - have shown a deep ideological familiarity with Serb ultra-nationalist themes from the 1990s.

The contributions in this issue examine the narratives, tactics, and tools used by far-right across Southeastern Europe, their links to like-minded groups in the continent's West, and the acute threat they represent to regional and collective security and democracy in the 21st century. These timely interventions offer important educational perspectives for civil society activists and policymakers in how to deal with the

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threat of a newly resurgent far-right. In short, these are no longer marginal groups; they are mobilized, well-organized, and militant. The defense of European democracy — within the EU and on its edges — will require a sustained policy framework that recognizes the true nature of the threat.

Drawing on the perspective of local experts and policy analysts, we offer a series of essays on this topic with the hope that they will stimulate policy debate and conversation, as the global community tentatively looks to the “new normal” in the post-coronavirus world. After all, as much as the pandemic has dominated international attention, it has not eliminated the need for broader policy conversation. And as another wave of flooding presently strikes the region, we argue that now is the time to take stock — to prepare for the inevitable.

READY FOR THE RIDE ON THE CRISIS WAVE? ON NARRATIVES, TOOLS AND TACTICS OF FAR RIGHT IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Vedran Džihic and Gazela Pudar Draško

In a trial that involved 120 witnesses and took more than five years, in October 2020, Greece's neo-Nazi Golden Dawn was been ruled to be a criminal organization. A court verdict in Athens also found the far-right group guilty of operating a gang of hit squads that aimed at eliminating perceived enemies. At least this time, Greece sanctioned the violence which is an extreme but integral part of the political horizon of the far-right.

The far-right and neo-fascist extremist party, Golden Dawn, was riding on the wave of popular anger about EU-mandated austerity measures implemented in Greece in 2010. At the height of the crisis, it won 21 seats in the Greek parliament and became the third biggest political party in the country. But, even before the financial crisis, there were signs that political trust in the established parties was rapidly declining. With the outbreak of the financial crisis, this potential for protest increased. Golden Dawn's extreme xenophobic, racist, and authoritarian discourse focused on anti-immigrant scapegoating and a rejection of the democratic political system in Greece. It was in particular young and disillusioned Greeks, who, plagued by high unemployment and a lack of opportunities, were attracted by the party's right-wing ideology and racist stance vis-à-vis immigrants and other groups. Finally, it was also young people's general lack of historical awareness of the history of fascist movements in the country that helped Golden Dawn increase their votes and promote its revisionist and fascist views.

As the economic crisis and a disillusionment with the EU served as a catalyst for a massive rise of Golden Dawn, its fall will have ramifications for the far right across Europe. But will they reemerge once the negative social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic hit Europe with full force? What can we learn from Golden Dawn's rise and fall as it informs far right movements and parties in southeastern Europe and Europe in general?

In the past decade we have witnessed a significant rise of far-right politics in almost all of Europe, and the main features of far-right in Southeast Europe are not very different than those of their Europe-



Vedran Džihic is a Senior Researcher with the Austrian Institute for International Affairs, Co-Director of the Center for Advanced Studies of Southeastern Europe (Rijeka), and Senior Lecturer at the Institute for Political Sciences, University of Vienna.



Gazela Pudar Draško (1982) is a researcher at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade. She is actively involved in the policy research and activities of the civil society sector in Serbia, but also in the SEE region. Her fields of interest are political sociology, particularly social engagement. She writes on the intellectual engagement, social movements and gender.

an counterparts. Analyst and philosopher Boris Buden argues that together, they form a "right-wing pro-fascist International."¹ These groups' skepticism towards Europe (and frustration with globalization in general) often goes hand in hand with a strong affirmation of national identities and the territorial unity of the nation-state. The main discursive tools of the far right are hauntingly reminiscent of the Second World War - including "Natives First", "blood and soil", xenophobic and chauvinistic constructions of the "Other". In Europe it was mainly the so called "migration crisis" of 2015 that sparked the big resurgence of the far-right: the fear of mass immigration and Islamophobia (toward refugees and already-existing Muslim communities in Europe) resulted in serious social tensions and polarization of societies.

In Southeast Europe, plagued by the legacy of the wars and ethnic nationalism and chauvinism, Islamophobia and the perceived threat posed by radical Islam plays a significant role in far right mobilization discourses. Several patterns of far right

¹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/24/we-are-their-voice-german-far-right-builds-balkan-alliances/>

and extremist narratives were exposed by investigative reporting by BIRN in 2019 about the activities of extreme right-wing groups in the Bosnian town of Prijedor, where many Muslims were killed during the war. Graffiti of the symbols of two notorious far right organisations, Blood and Honour and its affiliate, Combat 18, appeared on buildings in Prijedor from February to May 2019. The name of Combat 18, which in Germany and Canada is banned or declared a terrorist organisation, was spotted on the wall of a Prijedor high school in February and removed only in May. Other instances of extremist graffiti, including Nazi swastikas, can be found at other locations in this Bosnian town.

In parallel, an internet far right extremist blog promoting intolerance and hatred in Republic of Srpska was found to be operated from Prijedor. It was linked to many other websites and blogs across the region promoting “white unity”, anti-liberal politics, or strong anti-migrant and anti-abortion stances. Similar to European far right circles and networks, migration featured prominently in the regional networks and discourse. As this particular case shows, the discourse is the same even though the context is slightly different. The region’s far-right is inspired both by similar trends and narratives in the European Union and the West as well as by analogous trends in the East, first and foremost in Russia. For instance, many far right actors in the region not only support the Russians in Ukraine, but even fought for the Russian forces in Crimea. Here we see the contours of the pan-European “far right international” spreading throughout the continent and inspiring, stimulating, and supporting each other.

As the example of Golden Dawn, but also many other European far right movements from Germany, France, and Italy to Hungary or Poland show, historical revisionism plays an important role both as a dominant narrative but also a strategy to mobilize supporters based on a view of the past directly opposed to the objective historical accounts. Specific to the region of Former Yugoslavia is a very strong historical revisionism that goes back to events of the Second World War and spans to the latest wars in the 1990s. Reinter-

preting history along with glorifying war criminals and ethnic cleansing features prominently on the agenda of the far right movements and parties in Southeast Europe, but is particularly strong in Croatia and Serbia. There, the far right has engaged in rehabilitating local Nazi collaborators or attempting to whitewash the legacies of fascist ideologies, seen in the highly politicized debates about the Bleiburg massacre, the use of the slogan “Za dom spremni” in Croatia, and reclaiming the legacy of the antisemitic quisling regimes in wartime Serbia. These debates show how strongly the public relates to the events of the past and remains prone to revisionist discourse. This discourse can also spill over into violence - one journalist was physically attacked in 2019 while covering the Bleiburg memorial in Austria by Velimir Bujanec, a notorious Croatian extreme right-wing public figure and a group of his supporters. This case serves as a reminder of the immanent violent potential of far right and extreme groups.

This revisionism serves as a tool which promotes antagonistic politics and the polarization of the society. Those who agree with the far right interpretation of the past tend to have exclusive ideas

about ‘us’ versus ‘them’, creating a clear set of enemies, within and outside of their borders. Irredentism is embedded in historical revisionism, and these movements do not hide their desire to redraw boundaries based on ethnic lines. All of this results in an animosity towards the very ideals of representative democracy. This is where far right ideology and tools meet the dominant tendency of autocratization in some countries of the region, particularly in Serbia. While in Europe we see a strong trend

of centrist parties moving to the right (i.e. Austria), in Southeast Europe we have the phenomenon of pronounced right-wing parties moving to the centre and incorporating some of the tools and techniques usually used by far right and extreme rightist groups (such as Serbian Progressive Party after 2012). In this sense, it is clear that the far right profits of the crisis of the political centre, which leads to mobilized swing voters and the hyper-personalization of the far-right leaders as combined with demagoguery and opportunism.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Golden Dawn has been taken down, but narratives and tools of the extremist far right have entered politics and society across Europe. Southeast Europe is no exception. The far right is fed by the historical revisionism spanning the Second World War and the Yugoslav wars. It serves as a tool of promoting antagonizing politics and polarization of the society. “Us” and “them” is being moralized in ethnic terms, fueling strong anti-establishment and anti-representative democracy feelings, and finally serving as a tool to autocratization of societies.

While the far right in Southeast Europe is still seen as a marginal phenomenon, its ideological closeness to pervasive authoritarian patterns and ideologies in the region is very worrying. The COVID-19

pandemic and the socioeconomic crisis that is already hitting the region will increase fears in societies and create favorable conditions for a rise the popularity of radical ideologies and the far right.

UNDERSTANDING THE ORBÁN-VUČIĆ RELATIONSHIP

András Bíró-Nagy and James Hare

The Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, have developed a close working relationship, which has seemingly intensified in recent months. This article discusses the relationship between the two leaders in the context of Hungary-Serbia relations as well as discussing their shared approaches to politics, both in a domestic and European context.

Orbán and Vučić have met with surprising regularity, especially in the past 18 months. The duo met in April 2019 in Subotica to discuss the treatment of ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina, Hungarian investments in Serbia, and the construction of the TurkStream gas pipeline. This was followed by a meeting in Budapest in September 2019, which covered Serbia's path to European Union membership, economic cooperation, and issues relating to Kosovo. The first meeting of Orbán and Vučić in 2020 took place on March 15 in Belgrade, with the stated aims of discussing the migrant crisis, Serbia's path to European integration and the coordination of measures to deal with the Coronavirus pandemic, followed by a meeting in Budapest one week later to discuss the same issues. They then met again in Belgrade in May, once again discussing the same topics, though with the issue of Serbia's European Union membership seemingly being the priority for the two leaders. Finally, the two leaders met virtually at the Europe Uncensored conference in July alongside Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša.

Besides meetings between the two leaders, economic ties between the two states have also intensified in recent years. The Hungarian government has invested heavily in Vojvodina, with 46 billion HUF (around 139 million Euros) spent on the Vojvodina Economic Development program, which has brought in around twice that amount in investments. It is likely that this incursion into the region, which was annexed by Hungary dur-



András Bíró-Nagy is director of Policy Solutions, a Hungarian think-tank and Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Social Sciences, Budapest (TK PTI).



James Hare is political analyst at Policy Solutions.

ing the Second World war, is only seem as unproblematic only in the context of this Orbán – Vučić connection. Cross border trade has also increased in volume in recent years, and strategic projects between the two states such as the Budapest-Belgrade Rail Link and the potential expansion of the TurkStream pipeline have been also given high importance – the former with the support of Chinese investment, and the latter connecting the two states to Russian gas fields.

Domestic Approaches

Both Orbán and Vučić are right-wing populists making nativist appeals to the importance of their respective Hungarian and Serb nations, taking authoritarian stances, and adopting the populist rhetoric of the people versus the elite.

However, both their respective parties Fidesz and the SNS have made conscious attempts not to be seen as extremist forces, instead seeking to dominate the centre ground of their respective electorates, as well as aligning themselves with the mainstream centre-right at the European level in the form of the European People's Party.

Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) first came into being when pro-European members of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) broke away to form a new political force. The SNS originally took a moderate stance, aiming to present itself as a traditional party of the centre-right and even showing willingness to consider the formation of a grand coalition with the main pro-European force in Serbia, the Democratic Party (DS). However, upon taking power, the SNS swiftly moved to take control of state resources, and sought to present the DS as corrupt and monopolise the centre ground of Serbian politics. Yet despite the inclination of the SNS to state capture, it has struck a balancing act when dealing with the legacy of the SRS. While remaining nationalistic, the SNS has shown enthusiasm for European integration and sought to emphasise the economy, as well as present themselves as an insurgent force, committed to fighting corruption while maintaining the law and order rhetoric of the SRS. Under the leadership of Vučić, the SNS has progressed to more overtly nationalistic positions, yet has still remained relatively restrained compared to the SRS.

On the other hand, Orbán and Fidesz have moved rightwards over time, undergoing a transformation from liberals to national conservatives, and later into right-wing populists. Starting out as a student movement opposing the communist regime, Orbán took advantage of the weakness of the Hungarian right in the 1990s and transformed Fidesz to dominate that political space. Originally, this took the form of appeals to social conservatism combined with an interventionist approach to the economy, but since the return of Orbán to power in 2010 Fidesz have concentrated on building what could be termed as an "il-

liberal democracy", similar to how the SNS have sought to bring state institutions under party control. The use of nativist rhetoric by Fidesz has become more pronounced, and early enthusiasm for European integration has given way to a form of soft Euroscepticism, characterised by repeated clashes with European institutions, particularly during the migrant crisis of 2015. At the same time, Fidesz has doubled down on the populist rhetoric of the elite versus the people, with Orbán presenting himself as unlike the opposition, who are portrayed as corrupt and self-serving.

Orbán and Vučić have consolidated their positions by limiting media freedom, ensuring that the public are able only to see them how they choose to be seen. Government friendly businessmen have gradually taken over the media market

in Hungary over the last decade, while the media regulator has been stacked with Orbán loyalists and state advertising has grown exponentially. Vučić has taken a leaf out of Orbán's playbook in his approach to controlling the media in Serbia, adopting many of the same strategies. Privatization processes have handed control of many large media outlets to those friendly to the regime, and SNS politicians have sought to undermine the remaining independent outlets by launching costly defamation lawsuits. State advertising and co-financing projects have been used as tools to

fund pro-government media, while Vučić has taken advantage of friendly media coverage to benefit his political position. In this frame it is therefore understandable why Vučić and Orbán have built a close relationship – neither is used to challenge or criticism, and as a result they are able to emphasize closely with each other's respective positions.

KEY TAKEAWAY

The close ties between the leaders of Hungary and Serbia have flourished in recent years, on the basis of economic cooperation, similarities in nativist and populist rhetoric, autocratic ruling styles, and mutual gain in Serbia's accession to the European Union. Hungary's support for secessionist Serb leadership in Bosnia threatens stability in the region, and the illiberal model championed by Orbán imperils the normative power of the European Union, given that autocracy has taken roots within its own borders. In addition, both Serbia and Hungary's economic and political ties to non-EU actors such as Russia and China threaten to destabilize the primacy of the EU's influence over Southeast Europe.

European Issues

A key aspect of understanding the importance of the relationship between the two leaders is their respective attitude towards the European Union (EU). For the two leaders, there is a mutual benefit to working together closely on Euro-

pean issues – Serbian membership in the European Union would give Orbán an additional ally at the negotiating table, while Vučić has staked a great deal of domestic capital on being the Serbian leader who brings his country into the EU.

A large part of Orbán's domestic appeal has been based upon championing Hungarian nationalism. However, instead of seeking to redraw the map, Orbán's approach is best understood by the concept of Transsovereign Nationalism. Accepting that border changes – be they peaceful or otherwise – are not a realistic prospect in the contemporary age, he has instead sought to tether Hungarian communities in neighbouring states to the Hungarian state through transnational institutions, such as an assortment of various cultural and heritage associations. Orbán has used European Union membership as a tool to build stronger connections with Hungarian minority communities – as seen already in the cases of Slovakia and Romania. That leaves only Serbia and Ukraine as neighbouring states with large Hungarian minorities, and considering the challenges to be overcome for Ukraine to even be considered for EU membership, it is unsurprising that Orbán has focused his energies on supporting Serbia's accession.

While Orbán's government has eased the path to citizenship for Hungarians living outside of Hungary's borders, there remains a rationale for wanting to bring Serbia, and therefore by extension the Vojvodina Hungarians, into the EU. In the short term, Serbia joining the Common Market would make doing business easier for those Hungarian companies already present in Serbia, as well as enabling others to easily expand their operations over the border. Similarly, the free movement of persons between Serbia and the EU would aid those Vojvodina Hungarians who are yet to acquire citizenship, and enable stronger cross border links between Hungarian communities, which in the long term would be augmented by Serbia joining the Schengen Area.

Leadership Styles

Finally, Vučić and Orbán have also likely found common ground in their respective leadership styles and approaches to party management. They share many common character traits in leadership terms, with both leaders exhibiting high degrees of self-confidence and competence, as

well as presenting themselves as men of integrity. Orbán has held a position of almost unquestioned power within Fidesz since the early 1990s and has in that time taken personal command of the direction of his party. In Orbán's view, success in politics requires controlling events through demonstrations of power, resulting in a naturally confrontational style rooted in his high degree of self-confidence. His appetite for confrontation also plays into the construction of his image as a charismatic leader willing to fight for Hungary, which he combines with strongly moralizing language and the perception of integrity he holds with the public due to his role as a prominent anti-communist for political gain. For Orbán, flexibility means adapting to the changing public mood in order to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves, which also serves a dual purpose by showing that he is in command of events. However, he avoids getting caught up in complex policy debates, instead preferring to focus his energies on strategic thinking and delegating policy decisions.

Vučić has not yet been able to consolidate control over the SNS to the extent that Orbán has over Fidesz, but he has started to take steps in the same direction, creating a perception of the SNS as his personal electoral vehicle. While Vučić does not publicly project self-confidence to the same extent that Orbán does, he has shown an increasing willingness over his time in office to present himself as more secure in his beliefs, rather than seeming conflicted between his radical past and more moderate positioning. However, he projects an image of competence both within his party and with the wider electorate, and has made integrity a core part of his appeal through his commitment to tackling corruption – though unlike Orbán, his political transformation is seen as a weakness in this regard. Where the two men are most alike is undoubtedly in their need for power and approach to party management, with Vučić silencing all internal opposition within the SNS and seeking to control as much of the state apparatus as possible.

Conclusion

While projects such as the Budapest-Belgrade rail link and the gradual intensification of economic ties require the two leaders to have a constructive relationship, the depth of the relationship that has emerged can only be explained by common

interests and a shared worldview, as evidenced by the approaches taken by Orbán and Vučić to ruling their respective states. Going forwards, the relationship should continue to be afforded a high degree of importance by the two leaders, especially as Serbia progresses down the path to European Union membership, although challenges to the warm relationship could emerge if the interests of Hungary and Serbia begin to diverge. It cannot be ruled out that tension could emerge in the future, as was seen in 2015 when Hungary decided unilaterally to build a border fence between the two states. In the event of a similar situation occurring in the future, the warm personal relationship between the two men would undoubtedly be put to the test – and it would become clear if this is simply a marriage of convenience, or a deeper political friendship.

In the wider context of the Western Balkans, the friendship between Orbán and Vučić has a number of significant implications for the politics of the region. Both leaders have sought to entrench the positions of their respective states as dominant actors within the region and working in tandem they are more likely to realize their aims. For example, the leadership of Milorad Dodik in the Republika Srpska is not only supported by Vučić but also by Orbán, who has sought to intensify relations between Hungary and the Bosnian Serb entity. This is despite the overt secessionism espoused by Dodik, and his wholesale rejection of many of the aspects of the constitutional settlement provided for in the Dayton Agreement, which has made him

a frequent target of criticism from other European leaders. Orbán's tacit support for Dodik threatens the stability not only of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also that of the region more widely, particularly as he provides cover for Vučić to seek greater influence in Bosnian affairs.

Orbán and Vučić also act as models for other Western Balkan leaders to follow, secure in the knowledge that a tendency to autocracy and authoritarian rule is not an impediment to greater European integration. Indeed, the public support of Orbán for the membership in the European Union of Serbia (as well as that of North Macedonia) has taken on greater significance with the appointment of his ally Olivér Várhelyi as the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. The leaders of the Western Balkan states now have less reason to adapt in order to gain EU membership, knowing that they can count on Orbán's support for the accession of their regimes regardless, as he seeks to build an illiberal bloc in his image. The alliance between Orbán and Vučić also takes on additional importance when considering the tripartite relationships their regimes have formed with Russia and China respectively, acting in concert as the main conduits of their interests in a region that the European Union has long been keen to bring into its sphere of influence. Not only will the relationship between the two leaders have a significant impact on the destinies of their respective states, but it will also shape the destiny of the region as a whole.

THE SOUTHEAST FRONT: THE FAR RIGHT AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE WIDER BALKANS

Mark Galeotti

Southeast Europe in Moscow's Eyes

Although Russia has for centuries involved itself in SEE, it has almost always been less for its own sake, and more as part of wider conflicts. Even today, while it has a range of economic, political, historical and cultural connections with the region, its primary motivator is a belief that Russia faces an existential struggle both for its autonomy and its self-declared great power status with a West that would constrain, marginalize, and even dismember it.

In response, Moscow seeks to divide, distract and demoralize the countries it regards as its enemies, to neutralize them such that the Kremlin can advance its own agenda.¹ This does not only mean direct Russian interests, but also ensuring that it has a stake in areas of general concern. After all, to the Kremlin, one of the basic attributes of great power status is a voice in all major global concerns, a counterpart to the US contention that

¹ Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War* (Routledge, 2019)

it is, as former Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright put it, the 'indispensable power'.² This requires inserting itself into such regions and issues.

In the context of SEE, Moscow sees it as the European Union's soft underbelly.³ Bulgaria, Greece and Romania are all, in their own ways, problematic members of the Union, facing problems of corruption and economic sluggishness. As for the Balkans, the EU is deeply involved, but reluctant to move as quickly as many nations desire on integration and membership. The Kremlin hopes to use this as an opportunity either to penetrate countries before they join, as potential 'Trojan horses', or else to capitalize on resentment at perceived EU foot-dragging. At the very least, by involving itself in such issues as the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, it retains relevance and leverage on an issue of importance to both the US and EU.⁴

Influence Operations and the Far Right

Given that its traditional instruments of military pressure and economic influence have little bearing on the region – even Serbia, the most connected with Russia, trades substantially more with Italy and Germany⁵ – Moscow must instead rely more on political tools. Along with conventional diplomacy, this means covert campaigns of disinformation and subversion. These are informed by a fundamental and cynical pragmatism. In Soviet times there was at least a rhetorical commitment to evangelizing Marxism-Leninism; Putin's Russia is not interested in trying to export any particular model or worldview. It is free to work with disruptive forces of the left or the right, social conservatives and radicals, autocrats and anarchists.

This helps explain why, for all its celebration of the struggle against fascism in the Second World War, Russia is willing and able to work with the far right. Sometimes it does so covertly or through intermediaries, but at others it does so



Dr. Mark Galeotti is a lecturer, writer and consultant on Russian politics and security affairs. He is an Honorary Professor at UCL SSEES, a Senior Associate Fellow at RUSI and a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Institute of International Relations Prague, as well as Director of Mayak Intelligence.

openly, appealing to their nationalistic, populist and militarist interests and playing on their sense that the West in general and the EU in particular have become degenerate, decadent and weak.

The rise of the extreme right in Southeast Europe is an alarming and general trend, as groups presenting themselves in opposition to liberal values and, especially, migration from the Middle East, continue to attract support, despite a widespread desire to remain within or join the EU.⁶ This has provided the Russians with opportunities on three inter-connected axes.

Three Battlefields on the Southeast Front

First, the Russians directly cultivate political parties of the right, ranging from the relatively moderate VMRO-DPMNE in North Macedonia, to more radical ones including Montenegro's Democratic People's Party, Golden Dawn in Greece and Bulgaria's Ataka. As well as diplomatic connections, far right Russian parties such as the Rodina National Patriotic Union are used to this end. Some parties, such as Ataka, may play a part in government, but on the whole the value of such affiliations is to acquire a toehold in political circles and gain access to other domestic influencers, from businesspeople to journalists.

Secondly, they encourage informal contacts that also embrace wider cultural and historical movements, from the Orthodox Church to Bulgaria's Russophile Movement. This often involves individuals whose activities can be disclaimed by the Kremlin if need be. While nationalist ideologist Alexander Dugin has lost much of his influence

2 Stephen Walt, 'Indispensable or insolvent?', *Foreign Policy*, 21 June 2010

3 Mark Galeotti, 'Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?', *ECFR Policy Brief*, April 2018

4 Dimitar Bechev, 'Russia's strategic interests and tools of influence in the Western Balkans,' *New Atlanticist*, 20 December 2019

5 In 2018, Italy and Germany accounted respectively for 12% and 11.7% of Serbia's exports, to Russia's 5.31%, and 8.04% and 12.9% of exports, to Russia's 7.21%. The Observatory of Economic Complexity, Country Profile: Serbia (2019) @ <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/srb>

6 Vedran Džihic et al, 'Overcoming the Democratisation Deficit in the Western Balkans: A Road to (No)Where?', *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Belgrade Analysis*, August 2018; Damir Kapidžić, 'The rise of illiberal politics in Southeast Europe,' *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20:1 (2020)

at home, for example, he is nonetheless has connections with European far-right intellectual circles dating back to the 1980s. Konstantin Malofeev, an oligarch strongly committed to the Orthodox faith, has a network of business and political interests in Southeast Europe,⁷ where his monarchist Double-Headed Eagle Society is also active on a cultural and historical level.⁸

Likewise, Leonid Reshetnikov, formerly of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and then director of the government-linked thinktank the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, has been active – although it is hard to say how much because of his own convictions, and how much he has been tasked by the state – in working with far right and nationalist groups such as the Russophile Movement.

Finally, Russia develops and maintains connections with the militant far-right such as Bosnia's Blood & Honour and Combat 18 movements and an array of violent groups from football hooligans to motorcycle gang members.⁹ This tends to be handled on a covert or arm's length basis, sometimes via comparable Russian organisations. The far-right MC Srbi biker gang, for example, active in Serbia and also the Bosnian Republika Srpska, has ties with Russia's Night Wolves, a gang under Putin's own patronage.¹⁰

In other cases, intelligence officers handle liaison directly. Russian military intelligence, the

KEY TAKEAWAY

Moscow's interest in Southeast Europe is primarily as a way of challenging the EU and US and asserting its great power status. To this end, it seeks to disrupt more than capture, and far-right parties and movements represent one potential instrument. However, it cannot generate support for them where none exists, and its capacity to control them is limited.

To Moscow, Southeast Europe (SEE) is a secondary but nonetheless important front in what it sees as its geopolitical struggle with the West. It uses a wide range of instruments and tactics, from soft power overtures to, in the most extreme case, an attempted coup. A particularly alarming aspect to its influence operations abroad is its cultivation and support for the far right, both mainstream political parties and fringe groups, which has a particular dynamic in Southeast Europe.¹²

GRU,¹¹ has been connected with arming and organising the Serb nationalist Montenegrin rising, as well as training paramilitary nationalist group *Srbski Ponos* ('Serbian Honour'). Likewise, through Reshetnikov, the SVR was connected with the Atamans of the Balkan Cossack Army, a pro-Russian, far right union of veterans of conflicts in Ukraine, the Caucasus and the former Yugoslavia.

Impacts

It is questionable how far Russian activity can and does actually increase the footprint of the far right in SEE. Rather, it amplifies its impact through direct and indirect

support, and seeks to nudge movements towards objectives that suit Moscow.

It is important not to overstate the Russia's influence on the regional information space – to a large degree, its strength is precisely when its messages align with those of local forces. Asya Metodjeva, 'Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans,' *German Marshall Fund Policy Paper*, 5 June 2019. Nonetheless, with a branch of the Sputnik news agency in Belgrade, but above all strong links to SEE media outlets and online news services, Moscow is able to inflate the importance of its allies and proxies and amplify their narratives.

In particular, they are encouraged to block agreements that might otherwise resolve disputes which Moscow leverages – or to punish states seeking such concordats without Russian involvement. Around the 2018 Prespa Agreement that ended a dispute between Greece and North Macedonia, for example, it seems the Kremlin encouraged Slav Macedonian and Greek nationalists to protest the deal.

7 'Ruski tajkun u timu za destabilizaciju,' RTCG, 2 March 2017; Christo Grozev, 'The Kremlin's Balkan Gambit: Part I,' *Bellingcat*, 4 March 2017

8 Irina Pankratova, 'Russia's "Orthodox tycoon" is bankrolling a monarchist movement — but where does he get his money?,' *The Bell*, 21 November 2019

9 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/12/ultra-right-groups-show-their-face-in-bosnian-town/>

10 'Putin's Night Wolves landed in Belgrade and – disappeared,' *Telegraf*, 22 March 2018 @ <https://www.telegraf.rs/english/2944309-putins-night-wolves-landed-in-belgrade-and-disappeared-we-reveal-their-mysterious-mission-heres-the-entire-planned-route-map>; Gordana Knezevic, 'Putin's Pals, the Night Wolves, Troll Bosnia and the Region,' *RFE/RL*, 20 March 2018 @ <https://www.rferl.org/a/night-wolves-motorcycle-club-troll-bosnia-region-putin/29111436.html>

11 Technically now the GU, but almost universally still known by its old acronym, standing for Main Intelligence Directorate.

12 The best study of Moscow's outreach to the European right is Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Routledge, 2017)

Likewise, although previously considered a Russian ally, Alexander Vučić has been charting an increasingly independent and pro-EU course, edging towards settling Serbia's outstanding dispute with Kosovo. Moscow has no role in this process, and would lose leverage if it succeeded, so Russian-backed extremists have become more active. They were at the heart of violent protests in Belgrade against the reintroduction of a coronavirus lockdown in June, which government sources squarely blamed on Russia's intelligence agencies.¹³

However, it is important to keep this in context. Just as Moscow is using far-right movements for its own ends, so too the sentimental bond they may feel with Russia does not make them helpless proxies. They have their own agendas and work with the Kremlin so long as they feel they gain from the deal. This is certainly a recipe for disruption in SEE, but not for state or social capture. There is much talk of Russian influence in the region but much less clear evidence of it having a serious and lasting impact, as the economic and even soft power strength of the European

¹³ Ivana Jovanovic, 'Serbia's president claims foreign intelligence influence in anti-government protests,' *BNE Intellinews*, 8 July 2020

Union continues to exert an attraction, even to figures who affect to despise many of its values. Western Europe may worry about 'losing' the Southeast – but few observers in Moscow feel they are 'gaining' it.

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THE TRANSATLANTIC CONNECTIONS BETWEEN AMERICAN AND SOUTHEAST EUROPEAN RACIST EXTREMISTS

Heidi Beirich

A revisionist interpretation of the history of Southeast Europe, in particular the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, has become inspirational to American white supremacists. As white supremacy is an increasingly international movement, Southeast Europe has become a destination for extremists who view immigrants and Muslims as the primary threat to white supremacy worldwide. For this movement, the Yugoslav Wars have been mythologized as a successful enterprise that reduced the demographic threat of the Muslim population to white people living in the region. Radovan Karadžić, the Bosnian Serb leader who was sentenced to life in prison by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, is seen as a hero for the ethnic cleansing Muslims from what is now the

entity of Republika Srpska. For American white supremacists, Karadžić's ethnic-cleansing campaign in the 1990s is regarded as a roadmap for white supremacists to emulate.¹

This interpretation of the Yugoslav Wars dovetails with the most popular propaganda pushed today in white supremacist circles, the so-called Great Replacement, which argues that white people are being "replaced" in their home countries by non-white immigrants. In Europe, this applies particularly to Muslims who are viewed as an "invading" people, whether they are citi-

¹ Hussain, Murtza (2019): From El Paso to Sarajevo: How White Nationalists Have Been Inspired by the Genocide of Muslims in Bosnia, in: *The Intercept*, (1.9.2019).

zens or not. As white supremacists increasingly see demographic change as the main threat to their existence, a handful have engaged in mass violence to stem the tide of migrants and refugees. This propaganda has inspired six mass attacks just since October 2018. These included the mosque attacks in Christchurch, N.Z., attacks staged at two American synagogues, an El Paso, Texas, Walmart, a synagogue in Halle, Germany, and two shisha bars in Hanau, Germany.² The mass murderers in these incidents, and many similar ones in the last decade, are extolled for taking a stand against demographic change. What is interesting is many of these terrorists were inspired by the white supremacist reinterpretation of the events of the Yugoslav Wars.

Brenton Tarrant, who killed 51 people at two New Zealand mosques in 2019 was an admirer of the Serbian forces in the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, particularly those involved in the genocidal violence. Tarrant, who traveled through the Balkans, views the battle against Muslims in the region as a centuries long campaign, even going so far as to inscribe the names of historic Balkan leaders who fought the Ottoman Empire on the rifle he used to carry out his massacres.³ During his Facebook livestream of the attacks, he played a song performed by Bosnian Serb soldiers during the war originally called “Karadžić Lead your Serbs” and intended to boost troop morale, but later renamed by white supremacists outside the region as “Remove Kebab,” an anti-Muslim reference.⁴ In the video of the song, widely shared in white supremacist online forums, the tune is performed by three males in Serbian paramilitary uniforms.⁵ The video displays footage of captured Muslim prisoners being held in Serb-run internment camps.⁶ In Tarrant’s manifesto on the reasons for his shooting spree, he described himself as a “Part time kebab removalist” in reference to the song.⁷

2 Beirich, Heidi and Wendy Via (2020): *International White Nationalist Movement Spreading on Twitter and YouTube*, Montgomery, Alabama: Global Project on Hate and Extremism (9.7.2020).

3 Zivanovic, Maja (2019): New Zealand Mosque Gunman ‘Inspired by Balkan Nationalists,’ in: *Balkan Insight* (15.3.2019). <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/03/15/new-zealand-mosque-gunman-inspired-by-balkan-nationalists/>

4 Al Jazeera (2019): Mosque shooter brandished material glorifying Serb nationalism, in: *Al Jazeera* (15.3.2019).

5 Coalson, Robert (2019): Christchurch Attacks: Suspect Took Inspiration From Former Yugoslavia’s Ethnically Fueled Wars, in *Radio Free Europe* (15.3.2019).

6 Gambrell, Jon (2010): Mosque shooter brandished white supremacist iconography, in *AP News* (15.3.2019).

7 Al Jazeera, Mosque shooter brandished material glorifying Serb nationalism.



Heidi Beirich, Ph.D., is an expert on American and European extremist movements, including the white supremacist, anti-migrant, antisemitic and antigovernment movements, and is the author of numerous reports and academic publications on hate and extremism movements. Prior to co-founding the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, Beirich led the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project, the foremost organization tracking hate and extremism movements in the United States.

Another anti-Muslim killer extolled by white supremacists is the Norwegian Anders Breivik, who murdered 77 people during a 2011 shooting and bombing rampage around Oslo. He was obsessed with the massacres of Muslims in Bosnia, praising wartime Serb leaders in his manifesto. A domestic terrorist in Pennsylvania, Eric Frien, who killed a state trooper in 2014 was similarly infatuated with the wartime Bosnian Serb military, posting images of himself on social media in a uniform from the notorious Drina Wolves unit.⁸

Longstanding Ties

A handful of American hate movements have had a presence in Southeast Europe for decades. These have included white supremacist, neo-Nazi and racist skinhead groups. The Hammerskin Nation, a violent racist skinhead group founded in 1988 in Dallas, Texas, has long had chapters throughout the region and still does. A Europol report from 2019 documented two other skinhead groups that have had American chapters over the years — Blood and Honor and Combat 18 — active in Serbia. In May, *Balkan Insight* reported that symbols from both groups were found on buildings in Prijedor, Bosnia, alongside a blog address promoting the far right in the region.⁹

The Europol report says these organizations and networks are getting “increasingly popular among younger and better-educated demographics.”¹⁰ It

8 Morgan-Besecker, Terrie and David Singleton (2014): Eric Frein infatuated with Serbian military, in: *The Morning Call* (12.10.14).

9 Kuloglija, Nermina (2020): Ultra-Right Groups Show Their Face in Bosnian Town, in: *Balkan Insight* (12.5.2020).

10 Bjelotomic, Snezana (2019): Europol’s report: Right-wing extremists recruiting in Serbia, in: *Serbian Monitor*, (10.2.2019).

found that international extremist movements including Soldiers of Odin, which has American members,¹¹ were actively seeking to recruit members from European army personnel and police forces, including in the Southeast.¹² The Hammerskins continue to hold events, many attracting members from other country's chapters, including the U.S. In February 2020, members of the neo-Nazi Rise Above Movement (RAM) attended a "Day of Honor" event the Hungarian Hammerskins organized to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Nazi and Hungarian forces killed by the Soviet army during the 1945 Siege of Budapest.¹³ The RAM members then headed to Sofia, Bulgaria, where they had planned to attend the subsequently cancelled Lukov march along with neo-Nazis from Germany, France, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Scandinavia. And then they traveled to Belgrade to meet with members of Kormilo, a radical Serbian nationalist organization.¹⁴ In April 2018, members of RAM then traveled to Kiev, Ukraine, to visit and train with the Azov Battalion, originally a paramilitary force that fought against Russian irregular forces working with separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

A group that is quite similar to RAM, the Atomwaffen Division (AWD), also sent members to events in the region. AWD is a neo-Nazi group whose members have been responsible for five killings since 2017. It is now mostly defunct, but in December 2018, AWD members Aiden Bruce-Umbaugh and Kaleb James Cole traveled to the Czech Republic, Poland, and Ukraine, posting pictures of themselves online posing with the AWD flag.¹⁵ One photo was taken at the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Other relationships have been longstanding between white supremacists in both regions. Members of the Greek neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn have a long history of working with American neo-Nazis¹⁶ (and interestingly, were known to have participated in the Srebrenica massacre of

Muslims in 1995¹⁷). In 1998, Golden Dawn hosted William Pierce, leader of the most important American neo-Nazi organization, the National Alliance, for a speech in Thessalonica. By 2013, Golden Dawn had three offices in the U.S. and connections to multiple American neo-Nazi groups including the American Nazi Party, the National Socialist Movement, which directed its supporters to the American Golden Dawn website, and with Craig Cobb, who led an effort to takeover a North Dakotan town by buying up land and giving it to prominent white supremacists.¹⁸ In 2014, the party also hosted in Athens one of the most prominent American neo-Nazis, Andrew Anglin, who runs the Daily Stormer, which has an international reach.¹⁹

With the recent migrant crisis, particularly the refugee camps on Lesbos, white supremacist members of Generation Identity (GI) have traveled to Lesbos, Greece, in the last year to confront refugees. GI has chapters in dozens of countries and prominent adherents in the U.S., particularly Brittany Pettibone Sellner, wife of the unofficial leader of the entire movement, Martin Sellner. News reports have documented Identitarians from France, Austria, the Netherlands, the UK, and the U.S. attempting to stoke violence on the island. Several aid groups on Lesbos announced in recent months that they were suspending work and evacuating personnel because of attacks on staff.²⁰

One prominent American white supremacist has extremely close ties to the region and works to bring Croat and American extremists together. Tomislav Sunić is a Croatian-American who lives in Zagreb and ran unsuccessfully for a European Union parliamentary seat on the Sovereignists platform, an alliance of three far-right parties which came in at a surprise third place in the Croatian May 2019 elections.²¹ The alliance intended to focus on Croat identity, rejecting globalism and the European Union.²²

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11 Anti-Defamation League (2016): Soldiers of Odin USA.

12 Hume, Tim (2019): Europe's Far Right Is Recruiting from the Military and Police to Get More Weapons, in: *Vice News* (25.9.2010).

13 Anti-Defamation League (2020): American White Supremacist Groups Exploiting International Connections, (16.3.2020).

14 Ibid.

15 Thayer, Nate (2020): U.S. Nazi Domestic Terrorist Vowing a Race War on the Loose, in: *Nate Thayer Blog* (6.1.2020).

16 Southern Poverty Law Center (1999): National Alliance Leader, William Pierce, Looks to Build Far-Right Alliances, in: *Intelligence Report* (15.3.1999).

17 Mezzofiore, Gianluca (2014): Golden Dawn: Greece's Neo-Nazi Party is Europe's 'Dark Stain,' in: *International Business Times* (2.7.2014).

18 Anti-Defamation League (2014): Neo-Nazi Golden Dawn Party Expands Presence in the U.S., in: *adl.org* (11.10.13).

19 Trilling, Daniel (2020): Golden Dawn: the rise and fall of Greece's neo-Nazis, in: *The Guardian* (3.3.2020).

20 The Globe Post (2020): Refugee Aid Groups Attacked as Tensions Rock Greek Island, in: *The Globe Post* (3.3.2020).

21 Colbourne, Croatia Key to Ukrainian Far Right's International Ambitions.

22 HINA (2019): Three Sovereignist Parties Sign Agreement on Joint Participation in Elections, in: *Total Croatia News*, (11.12.2019).

Though his involvement in Croatian politics is more in the vein of far-right populism, in the U.S. Sunić works with white supremacist groups. He serves on the board of the racist American Freedom Party²³ and has spoken many times to the neo-Nazi National Alliance,²⁴ the National Policy Institute and the white supremacist Council of Conservative Citizens.²⁵ Sunić also has connections in Ukraine and believes its struggles are similar to those facing Croats. He is a fan of the Azov Battalion and in regular touch with its leadership. "On a more sentimental, subconscious level for Croats, Ukraine is a friend," Sunić has said.²⁶ Like other far right Croats, Croatia's fight for independence in the early 1990s against Serb rebels backed by its larger neighbor Serbia has echoes in the ongoing fight against Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine.²⁷

Foreign Fighters Travel Through Southeast Europe to Ukraine

As these narratives reinterpreting Karadžić's actions and the Yugoslav Wars have pulsed through American white supremacist circles, a host of extremists have finished off their travels through Southeast Europe with stops in Ukraine. In the minds of American white supremacists, these Eastern and Southeast European regions are one entity, seen as communities that have been able to maintain white dominance and, in the case of Republika Srpska, used violence successfully to reduce the size of the Muslim population.

American white supremacists have traveled to Ukraine to train with the Azov Battalion, which was originally formed as a volunteer militia to fight Russian irregular forces working with eastern Ukrainian separatist forces starting in 2014, in particular with the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Foreign fighters have been drawn to both sides of the conflict in the Ukraine, but research suggests that right-wing extremists have been more likely to be involved on the side of Azov and other groups that

worked to repel Russian involvement in the region.²⁸ There is a parallel here to the history of foreign fighters during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. Americans, as well as Italians, Spaniards, Brits and French fighters joined Croatia's Black Legion in 1991 and the majority of were linked to extreme-right organizations within their own countries.²⁹

The Azov Battalion's politics are infamous. The regiment has been accused of engaging in torture and war crimes and for using neo-Nazi symbology.³⁰ Azov representatives claim this has nothing to do with Nazism, but in 2014 a spokesman for the regiment said 10 to 20 percent of the unit were neo-Nazis.³¹ Other reporting has documented members' neo-Nazi beliefs and widespread use of Nazi symbols, including the Wolfsangel and the Black Sun, by its adherents.³² In 2018, the American Congress banned any form of military assistance to Azov.³³

American white supremacists have gained even greater exposure to the ideas of racial extremists from Southeast Europe through their involvement with Azov, as it has attracted white supremacist foreign fighters³⁴ from many countries including Greece and Croatia, with some 20 Croats joining the battalion in 2015.³⁵ Also, Azov moved to form a "foreign legion" of sorts under the leadership of a Croat living in Zagreb. According to BIRN, Bruno Zorica, a retired Croatian army officer and former member of the French Foreign Legion, was repeatedly mentioned in Azov social media posts as a key figure in the unit's creation. Zorica commanded a special forces unit of the Croatian army during the

23 American Freedom Party: Category: Leadership.
 24 Potok, Mark (2003): Neo-Nazi Groups Use Traditional Folk Music Festivals to Recruit Radicals, in: *Intelligence Report* (15.8.2003).
 25 Southern Poverty Law Center (Undated): Tomislav Sunić.
 26 Colbourne, Croatia Key to Ukrainian Far Right's International Ambitions.
 27 Ibid.

28 Marauskaite, Elge E. (2020): Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Assessing Potential Risks (Vilnius: Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis, 2020).
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 31 Pugliese, David (2015): Ukrainian unit accused of Neo-Nazi links wants Canada's help, in: *Ottawa Citizen* (26.7.2015).
 32 Walker, Shaun (2014): Azov fighters are Ukraine's greatest weapon and may be its greatest threat, in: *The Guardian* (10.9.2014); Nemtsova, Anna (2019): Ukraine's Anti-Russia Azov Battalion: 'Minutemen' or Neo-Nazi Terrorists?, in: *The Daily Beast* (15.11.2019).
 33 Kheel, Rebecca (2018): Congress bans arms to Ukraine militia linked to neo-Nazis, in: *The Hill* (27.3.2018).
 34 Parfitt, Tom (2014): Ukraine crisis: the neo-Nazi brigade fighting pro-Russian separatists, in *The Telegraph* (11.8.14).
 35 Croatia VL (2015): I quit, left my wife and children, and set out to help the Ukrainians, in: *Croatia VL* (11.2.2015).

country's war against Belgrade-backed Serb rebels in the early 1990s.³⁶

According to a 2019 report by The Soufan Center, approximately 35 American fighters have traveled to Ukraine in recent years with far-right extremists attracted mostly to the anti-Russian side.³⁷ This mixing of white supremacists from around the world in Ukraine is now seen as a terrorism threat. "I believe Europe is in great danger," Alberto Testa, an expert on far-right radicalization at the University of West London told Vice News in 2019. Testa believes eastern Ukraine has become a critical staging ground for the international "white jihad struggle" of the far right, where extremists could "train for what some would call racial holy war."³⁸

Azov successfully recruited well-known American white supremacists to train with the unit. Joachim Furholm, a Norwegian citizen and self-described "national socialist revolutionary," led Azov's effort to bring Americans to Ukraine. Azov framed participation in Ukraine's war against Russian aggression as an opportunity for Americans to acquire combat and other training for use in the United States after returning home.³⁹ In 2018, members of the American, neo-Nazi group, Rise Above Movement (RAM), traveled to Ukraine to visit Azov as part of a tour that started in Southeast Europe. Robert Rundo, head of RAM, was depicted in a now deleted Facebook video in a cage match with an Azov fighter.⁴⁰ Azov's hierarchy was thrilled to have the American neo-Nazis on hand. "We think globally," Olena Semenyaka, an Azov official, told Radio Free Europe in 2018.⁴¹ She hosted Rundo along with RAM members Michael Miselis and Benjamin Daley, who participated in the white riots that occurred in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017 and ended in the murder of antiracist counter protester. In the case of Rundo, Miselis, and Daley, Semenyaka said, "they came to learn

our ways" and "showed interest in learning how to create youth forces in the ways Azov has."⁴² Semenyaka has spoken of other important Azov allies in Southeast Europe, in particular Greece's Golden Dawn.

Other American extremists have been in contact with Azov. In October 2018, American white nationalist Greg Johnson, who runs the San Francisco, Calif., based Counter-Currents Publishing, visited Ukraine and attended a series of events hosted by Azov.⁴³ According to Bellingcat, the late Andrew Oneschuk, a prominent member of the now defunct but very violent American neo-Nazi organization Atomwaffen Division (AWD), was in contact with Azov on its podcast.⁴⁴ Also, an alleged U.S. Navy veteran, "Shawn Irwood," enlisted in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and maintained contact with Azov's National Corps.⁴⁵

Ties Online

The white supremacist online space is filled with networking between Americans and Southeast European extremists, where they share the sentiments expressed by Tarrant and Breivik about the Yugoslav Wars. Since the 2000s, an array of white supremacists and other aspiring extremists worldwide have seized on this mythologized version of the Yugoslav Wars, demonizing Muslims and recasting them as non-white "immigrants," ideas widely shared online.⁴⁶ On the unregulated message board 4chan, it is not hard to find the Bosnian genocide favorably discussed as an example for racists in other nations.⁴⁷

Other parts of the Internet circulate similar material. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) found in 2019 both pro-Azov and pro-Serbian extremist comments on Discord, a voice and chat application.⁴⁸ BIRN scoured leaked Discord messages and found no shortage

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36 Colbourne, Croatia Key to Ukrainian Far Right's International Ambitions.

37 Soufan Center (2019): *The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement*. New York: The Soufan Center (2.2019).

38 Hume, Far-Right Extremists Have Been Using Ukraine's War as a Training Ground.

39 Kuzmenko, Oleksiy (2019): Defend the White Race: American Extremists Being Co-Opted by Ukraine's Far-Right, in: *Bellingcat* (15.2.2019).

40 Miller, Christopher (2018): Azov, Ukraine's Most Prominent Ultranationalist Group, Sets Its Sights on U.S., Europe, in: *Radio Free Europe* (14.11.2018).

41 Ibid.

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42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Kuzmenko, Defend the White Race.

45 Ibid.

46 Hajdarpasic, Edin (2019): How a Serbian war criminal became an icon of white nationalism, in *The Washington Post* (20.3.2019).

47 Anonymous (2020): 4chan message No. 265675389 (3.6.2020).

48 Colbourne, Croatia Key to Ukrainian Far Right's International Ambitions.

of Azov devotees. One user wrote that Azov “will have the foreign legion set up within the next 18 months or so,” a project that was launched from Zagreb.

Another node distributing these ideas developed in 2018 was run out of Belgrade with the help of British anti-immigrant hardliner Jim Dowson, who founded Britain First.⁴⁹

The Knights Templar International (KTI) distributed inflammatory material across its online platforms, referring to Muslim communities as “rat’s nests” and Roma as a “criminal scum caste.” *Balkan Insight* documented Dowson and those working on the site filming “news” videos from Belgrade, and helping to launch websites and training far-right groups and activists in the region on how to win an “online war.”⁵⁰ Beginning in March 2018, more than a dozen KTI news segments were filmed in Serbia and uploaded to YouTube channels and shared on social media. The presenter of these reports was Marina Milenov, a young Serb who read out far-right material in front of a superimposed panorama of Belgrade. Showing ties with American extremists, Dowson explained these activities in an interview with American white supremacist Jamie Kelso, a one-time moderator of the oldest hate site in the world, Stormfront, in January 2018.

The site Kelso once moderated, Stormfront, has an entire section devoted to “white nationalists in Serbia & Southeast Europe.”⁵¹ In Stormfront’s library section, the thread has links to “My Defence” by Karadžić,⁵² Serbian epic poetry, and a piece on the “Battle on the Kosovo field 1389.”⁵³ These texts glorifying the Serbs are in a list with

others by prominent American white supremacists taking the Serbian side in the Balkan Wars. Louis Beam, a one-time Klansman and advocate of terrorism in the form of leaderless resistance, penned “Kosovo, The Alamo of Europe,” which praised the “Alamo-like stand of Serbian manhood against the invading foes of Western Christian Civilization.”⁵⁴ Another is by William

Pierce, the now deceased leader of the neo-Nazi National Alliance, who wrote “Hands Off Yugoslavia!” which blamed President Bill Clinton’s decision to use military force in the region on Jewish multiculturalists.⁵⁵

Other forums where these sentiments can be found include Telegram, VK, and Bitchute, all of which are largely unregulated. A BIRN investigation found Balkan activity on the neo-fascist Iron March forum, which is where the American Atomwaffen Division was conceived, after it was leaked.⁵⁶

KEY TAKEAWAY

White supremacists in the United States and Southeast Europe are forging strong links and working across borders to push and share their ideas. The legacy of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, reinterpreted as a glorious battle against Muslim invaders, has become popular among white supremacists worldwide, inspiring mass casualty attacks and drawing American foreign fighters to the region. The rise of illiberal, xenophobic quasi-democratic regimes in the region provides fertile ground for these growing links and points to the need for a concerted push-back against racism and xenophobia to both counter white supremacy and bolster democratic politics.

Nationalist Governments & Extremism

The growing links between American extremists and those in Southeast Europe are of great concern. But so too is the fact that increasingly illiberal governments in the region provide a ripe environment for these groups to grow their relationships and spread the white supremacist ideas they share.

A 2020 report from Freedom House,⁵⁷ an independent human rights group that rates countries’ support for liberal democratic government, found that in the Balkans region, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Romania and Slovenia remained “free” in 2019. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia

49 Cosic, Jelena, Lawrence Marzouk and Ivan Angelovski (2018); British Nationalist Trains Serb Far-Right for ‘Online War,’ in *Balkan Insight* (1.5.2018).

50 Ibid.

51 <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/f43/>

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and Serbia were “partly free.”⁵⁸ In general, the report found that “illiberal populists in Central and Southeast Europe defended their ground or made gains in 2019, undermining democratic norms even in the face of mass protests.”⁵⁹

Far right parties in other parts of the Southeast have also had successes. Perhaps most notable is the anti-immigrant Slovenian Democratic Party, which entered into government in March of 2020.⁶⁰ The party is led by former Prime Minister Janez Janša, a staunch supporter of Hungary’s Viktor Orban, with a long record of attacks on immigrants and the press. Janša, sounding much like the Croatian Sovereignists, has advocated that Slovenia “become a country that will put the wellbeing and security of Slovenians first.”⁶¹ Bulgaria’s center right government includes three anti-immigrant parties and wants the EU to close its borders and move refugees outside the bloc.⁶² The anti-immigrant Greek Solution received 3.7 % of the votes in Greece’s 2019 national election, giving it 10 seats in the 300-seat parliament.⁶³

Xenophobic hate speech against immigrants that is very similar to what is argued by white supremacists is pushed by governments in Eastern European countries that influence the politics of Southeast Europe. Viktor Orban, head of the Hungarian government, has reviled immigrants, particularly Muslims. “If things continue like this, our culture, our identity and our nations as we know them will cease to exist. Our worst nightmares will have become reality. The West will fall, as Europe is occupied without realizing it,” Orban said in February 2018, even though Hungary has only accepted a handful of refugees.⁶⁴ After Hungary built a barrier along its borders with Croatia and Serbia at the end of 2015, the number of arrivals dropped from more than

7,000 people a day to ten.⁶⁵ In 2018, Czech President Miloš Zeman was re-elected on a wave of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment even though only a handful of individuals had lodged asylum claims in the country.⁶⁶

This xenophobia is beloved by white supremacists worldwide, who have reframed the Serbian agenda in the Yugoslav wars as necessary violence against Muslims to protect against a mortal demographic threat. For white supremacists, no matter how incorrect or ahistorical this recrafted history is, it serves to legitimize the ethnic cleansing that took place of Muslims during the war and their own wish to ethnically cleanse their own countries of immigrants and non-white populations. In their view, the Yugoslav Wars were successful and glorious, not destructive. As Murtaza Hussain has written, “their vision lives on in the imaginations of the international far right and among a young, ultranationalist generation present not just in Serbia, but across the Balkans” and now the world.⁶⁷ Hussain concludes, “The parallels with how Serbian leaders psychologically primed their society for violence are unsettling. The manifestos left behind after every new shooting are the calling cards for a new era of violence — driven by a sense of demographic threat — that we are only starting to understand.”⁶⁸

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POLITICAL TRENDS & DYNAMICS

OVERVIEW

THIS SECTION AIMS TO PROVIDE A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS AND UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN SECURITY, WHICH INCLUDES STRUCTURAL SOURCES OF CONFLICT SUCH AS SOCIAL TENSIONS BROUGHT ABOUT BY UNFINISHED DEMOCRATIZATION, SOCIAL OR ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES OR ECOLOGICAL CHALLENGES, FOR INSTANCE. THE BRIEFINGS COVER FOURTEEN COUNTRIES IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE: THE SEVEN POST-YUGOSLAV COUNTRIES, ALBANIA, GREECE, TURKEY, CYPRUS, BULGARIA, ROMANIA, AND MOLDOVA.

HIGHS AND LOWS

Two significant developments marked the end of the summer in the Balkans, one long-expected but ultimately anticlimactic, the other unexpected, sending shockwaves around the region.

A long-awaited summit in Washington on September 4th – organized by the Trump Administration which hosted highest level delegations from Kosovo and Serbia – proved rather anticlimactic. For a year ahead of this summit, much of the region – and indeed the international community of Balkan-watchers – had been consumed by speculation that the US – represented by President Donald Trump's special envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia negotiations Richard Grenell – was mediating a behind-the-scenes grand deal to end the dispute between Belgrade and Prishtina. There had been persistent rumours that some kind of land swap – whereby Serbia would get to keep the Serb-populated northern part of Kosovo while the Albanian populated areas of Serbia around Preševo and Bujanovac would be transferred to Kosovo – was a key plank of this deal, which would also result in some kind of mutual recognition by the two sides. Some welcomed this as a pragmatic way to solve the conflict between the two sides, while others dreaded it, fearing that it might open up a Pandora's box of regional conflicts, particularly in Bosnia.

With rumours abounding that a deal had been drawn up on paper and was awaiting signature, the Washington Summit was initially intended to take place at the end of June. However, the announcement by the Kosovo Specialist Prosecution in the Hague on June 24th that it had filed an indictment against Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi, which was waiting to be confirmed by the Specialist Chambers, put a spanner in the wheels of this plan. With Thaçi's indictment hanging in the balance, the summit had to be delayed. In the meantime, the focus of the summit shifted to a normalization of economic relations. Quite what this meant was unclear – indeed, many observers argued that it was not economic but political relations between Belgrade and Pristina that were the real problem.

The references to economic normalization merely helped to fuel even more speculation about what the US-mediated deal between Kosovo and

Serbia might entail. As September approached, most observers seemed to have rather low expectations of the summit, but were nevertheless intrigued as to what Grenell and the Trump Administration would pull out of their hat after months and months of speculation.

In the end, the Washington summit proved to be somewhat of a non-event. Rather than a mutual agreement, the two sides signed separate pieces of paper, which were more akin to letters of intent. Moreover, the contents of what they signed up to were extremely vague. Many of the points had already been agreed to in principle without any practical implementation to date; others simply read as a wish list. The most specific were plans for building new road and rail connections.

While Richard Grenell tried to convince the US and international public that something of historical significance had been signed – and Trump claimed to have ended the killing between the two sides – much of the world looked on in bemusement at the spectacle.

It took a while to decipher the real ramifications of the signed 'agreements'. In all likelihood, they will have little real impact on relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Yet some of the – seemingly misplaced clauses of the agreement, which have little to do with the mutual dispute between Belgrade and Pristina but everything to do with current US foreign policy priorities, could have a more long-lasting effect. For example, Belgrade and Pristina both signed up to excluding untrusted vendors from the roll-out of their 5G networks – a clear reference to Huawei, which the US had been working hard to exclude from 5G networks around the world. A clear win for the Trump Administration, but dangerous for Serbia, which has worked hard to build close relations with China. Then there were the elements relating to Israel – Israel agreed to recognize Kosovo, while Kosovo agreed to open its embassy in Jerusalem. This allowed the Trump Administration to crow that the first 'Muslim-majority' country had decided to move its embassy to Israel, a clear carrot to pro-Israeli voters in the US ahead of November's presidential elections. While recognition by Israel was certainly good news for Kosovo, its instrumentalization in the Arab-Israeli conflict threatened to damage its relations with much of the Muslim world. More strangely, Serbia also pledged to

move its embassy to Jerusalem – in doing so gaining nothing, other than the possible wrath of traditional Arab allies.

Montenegro opposition supporters celebrate as opposition claims election victory in Podgorica, Montenegro on August 31, 2020



A much more stunning – and possibly significant – event took place just days before the Washington Summit. On August 30th, Montenegrin voters went to the polls to elect a new Parliament. The elections did not generate much interest outside the country, with most observers expecting another routine re-election of the DPS, the ex-Communists who had ruled the country for the last three decades since the fall of Communism. Consequently, when the last votes were counted and it emerged that the opposition had gained a majority in the new Parliament (discussed in more detail below), there was shock not just in Montenegro, but in much of the region as well. While many celebrated, others were deeply worried, both inside and outside of Montenegro. On a regional level, most Serbs in Serbia and Bosnia were happy to see Djukanović's DPS defeated. Yet concerns were raised about what would happen to Muslims and Albanians in Montenegro if the pro-Serb opposition came to power.

ELECTORAL UPS AND DOWNS

Parliamentary elections held in **Montenegro** on August 30th produced one of the biggest surprises of any election over the last few years in the region. After three decades of rule by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) – the ex-Communists – few, including the country's opposition parties, had dared to expect any other outcome

than a DPS victory, one way or another. However, as the final votes were counted, it became clear that three opposition coalitions – who, ahead of the elections, had pledged to work together and form a government to remove the DPS from power – had won a tight majority in the new Parliament. While the DPS came first with 30 seats in the new Parliament (35.1 % of votes), the For the Future of Montenegro (ZBCG) coalition gathered around the pro-Serb Democratic Front won 27 seats (32.6 % of votes). The centrist, pro-Serb Peace is Our Nation coalition won 12.5 % of votes and 10 seats, while the Black on White coalition, gathered around the more civic, pro-Montenegrin URA movement, won 5.5 % of votes and 4 seats. All of this gave the opposition the 41 seats needed for a minimal majority in Parliament, which may be boosted with the help of parties representing the country's minorities. The total turnout for the elections was over 76 %.

Montenegro opposition supporters celebrate as opposition claims election victory in Podgorica, Montenegro on August 31, 2020.



It would seem that neither the DPS nor the opposition coalitions and parties had expected such an outcome. Indeed, the DPS seems to have been quietly confident of winning a narrow, if perhaps somewhat reduced, majority. Why the DPS leadership missed that the tide had turned against it is unclear, but may be down to a mix of false reporting of voting intentions by ordinary voters as well as fear among local party activists to report the true mood of voters to higher party ranks. Many analysts point out that support for the DPS had slowly been wearing away for some years, with some arguing that the way in which the party secured a majority in the 2016 Parliamentary elections was also dubious at best. How-

ever, it is ironic that the blow that sealed the DPS' fate seems to have been dealt by the party itself, when it suddenly pushed through the controversial Law on Religious Freedom in December 2019. Most controversially, this law envisaged transferring ownership of churches built prior to 1918 from the Serbian Orthodox Church to the State. It was also accompanied by pledges by President Milo Djukanović, the DPS leader, to establish an independent Montenegrin Orthodox Church. With more than 70 % of the population defining themselves as members of the Serbian Orthodox Church, these moves sparked outrage, as well as the biggest (Church-led) protests in the country's recent history. One of the effects of this seems to have been to fire up apathetic opposition supporters who had given up hope of deposing the DPS at the ballot box into actually voting. More fatally for the DPS, it would seem that thousands of its own supporters defected to the opposition. A second reason for the surprisingly weak result of the DPS could be a strong disapproval by the population of the current situation in Montenegro concerning corruption and the rule of law. Montenegro has witnessed many scandals involving top-level politicians and high DPS functionaries, which have also sparked nationwide protests and demonstrations. Weaknesses in rule of law and the fight against corruption are also main points of criticism by the EU in Montenegro accession process. A peaceful change of government in Montenegro constitutes a major step in the further democratization of the country. The feasibility of a stable government consisting of partners as diverse as the three coalitions and their proclaimed dedication to EU-integration will, though, have to stand the test of reality.

Montenegrin President and Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) Milo Djukanović holds a press conference over parliamentary election in Podgorica, Montenegro on August 31, 2020.



Parliamentary elections in **North Macedonia** proved to be a more predictable – if equally tightly contested – affair. Originally, they were to be held on April 12th, but were delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic. After much wrangling over a new election date, they were held on July 15th. Polls had predicted an extremely close contest between the ruling SDSM and the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, which was reflected in the final vote count. The SDSM won 35.9 % of the votes cast, securing 46 seats, while the VMRO-DPMNE won 34.6 % of the votes and 44 seats. However, both of the main parties representing ethnic Macedonians lost seats, as well as absolute votes, compared to the previous Parliamentary elections in 2016. Voter turnout declined from 66.8 % in 2016 to 52.0 % in 2020, seemingly reflecting disillusionment among ethnic Macedonians. Perhaps the biggest beneficiaries of this were ethnic Albanian parties, who increased their combined seat tally from 20 to 28 MPs in the new Parliament.

The self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of **Northern Cyprus** held the first round of its presidential elections on October 11th. Originally, the election had been scheduled to take place on April 26th, but was delayed due to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. The first round produced a tight result, with current President Mustafa Akıncı winning 29.8 % of the votes cast, trailing his main challenger – Ersin Tatar of the National Unity Party – who won 32.3 % of the votes cast. Given that no candidate won an overall majority of the votes, a second round was held on October 18th between the two front-runners. Tatar received nearly 52 % of the vote in a surprise victory. The election has been held amidst an economic recession, fuelled in part by a downturn in the tourism sector driven by the coronavirus pandemic. However, the strong involvement of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had added an additional degree of bitterness to the campaign. While Akıncı is a social-democrat and moderate favouring reunion with the southern, internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus, Tatar, who is also the Prime Minister of Northern Cyprus, is a nationalist and more hard-line when it comes to relations with the Republic of Cyprus. During the campaign, Erdoğan has weighed in heavily in support of Tatar, helping his cause among one part of the Northern Cypriot electorate, while angering others.

Romania saw the holding of local elections on September 27th across the country. They turned out to be a very bad day for the previously ruling Social Democrats, with the currently ruling centre-right PNL and its ally USR PLUS making major gains, taking cities such as Bucharest and Constanta among others. Yet the significance of these elections goes well beyond the local – they amount to a test run of how voters will cast their ballots in the Parliamentary elections set for December 6th.

Looking ahead, a number of other elections await the region during the coming months. **Bosnian** voters will go to the polls to elect local governments on November 15th, in what is – aside from a local – also a Bosnian ‘mid-term’ election, coming half way between the national elections held in 2018 and those due in 2022. Meanwhile, **Moldova** will hold the first round of its presidential elections on November 1st in what is already proving to be a tense contest with accusation of foul play and foreign meddling.

GOVERNMENT FORMATION

New governments were elected in Croatia and North Macedonia with speed after Parliamentary elections held in July. In both countries, the ‘new’ governments were similar affairs to their predecessors, given that they involved more or less the same parties.

Having held elections on July 5th, **Croatia** elected a new government under the same Prime Minister, HDZ leader Andrej Plenković, on July 23rd. The new government is a coalition between the HDZ and the ethnic Serb SDSS. Aside from the HDZ, its pre-election partners and the SDSS, the government relies on the support of a number of small parties or ethnic minority representatives and has a minimal majority of 76 MPs in the new 151 seat Parliament. The fact that the post-electoral arithmetic left no viable alternatives to this coalition majority certainly helped to speed along coalition negotiations. The new government is a slightly trimmed down version of the previous one, with some new faces and many old ones. Significantly, one of the new Deputy Prime Ministers is Boris Milosevic from the ethnic Serb minority.

Ahead of the July Parliamentary elections in **North Macedonia**, the SDSM had been hoping to ditch

DUI, the main ethnic Albanian party in the country, as its governing coalition partner after the elections. However, as in Croatia, the distribution of seats in the new Parliament left the SDSM with no real alternative to re-creating a government with DUI. Following the signing of a coalition agreement between the two parties on August 18th, the new government of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev was voted in on August 30th. Together, the SDSM and DUI have 61 seats in the 120 seat Parliament. Their extremely tight majority has been boosted slightly by bringing the small DPA’s one MP into the ruling coalition. Prior to the elections, DUI had campaigned on the pledge of ensuring that an ethnic Albanian would become Prime Minister. While this was never a particularly realistic scenario, the SDSM and DUI have agreed that, 100 days before the next election, Zaev will resign to make way for an ethnic Albanian PM nominated by DUI.

Members of the cabinet gather for a photo in Skopje on August 31, 2020.



The speed with which new governments were formed in Croatia and North Macedonia, despite very tight and unclear election outcomes, stands in stark contrast to **Serbia** in the aftermath of the June 21st Parliamentary elections. With most of the opposition boycotting the elections, claiming that the conditions for a free and fair contest did not exist, the ruling SNS and its coalition partners won 60.7% of the votes and 188 seats in the 250 seat Parliament. Despite this overwhelming majority, no government has still been sworn in. SNS leader and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić claimed to be too busy with international engagements and other pressing matters to focus fully on assembling a new government while also needing time to carefully consider who would fill which position in the new government – neither of which was part of his

constitutional prerogatives. After much ado about nothing, Vučić finally announced on October 5th that he would once again nominate Ana Brnabić to be the new Prime Minister. When exactly a new government might be sworn in is still unclear.

In neighbouring **Montenegro**, Zdravko Krivokapić, the nominal leader of the ZBCG coalition was formally given the mandate to form the next government on October 8th. However, tough negotiations lie ahead between the coalition partners on the distribution of ministerial posts. While the leaders of the opposition – Krivokapić, Aleksa Bečić and Dritan Abazović – have pledged to form a government of experts, the DF – the opposition block around which the ZBCG coalition was formed – is hostile to this idea, seeing it as an attempt to exclude its own leaders from government. Particularly sensitive has been the question of who will control the ministries of defence and interior, as well as the security services. Given the DF's pro-Russian leanings, there has been strong pressure from both within and outside of Montenegro that these portfolios should not come under the DF's control, something to which this block had naturally taken offence to.

EU ACCESSION

On October 6th, the European Commission published its long-awaited enlargement package, made up of country-specific reports on progress in implementing reforms necessary for accession for the countries of the Western Balkans along with Turkey. Together with these reports, previously known as 'Progress Reports', the Commission also unveiled

its Investment Plan for the Western Balkans. The Investment Plan is worth around €9bn, part of the EU's €12bn pre-accession funds, and will mostly be channelled into infrastructure and green energy investments intended to boost economic growth and decarbonisation in the region. Aside from this, the Commission also plans to establish a 'guarantee facility' worth €20bn, which aims to support additional public and private investments in the region.

When it comes to the actual individual country reports, there seems to have been an active attempt by the Commission to make them more detailed and less bureaucratic. In practice, this means that the reports are much longer than usual and have more specific examples both of problems and achievements in the countries in question. However, critics note that the Commission has still not managed to ditch the mindset of framing developments along the 'progress-no progress' axis, rather than a 'progress-no progress-backtracking' on reforms axis, as pitched. There is thus very little in the way of flagging up specific areas in which candidate countries have regressed, despite visible examples to the contrary in some countries. In terms of the tone of the reports themselves, the Commission appears most positive about the progress made by North Macedonia and Albania in implementing specific reforms, although it lists a number of conditions that Albania will need to fulfil in order to actually open accession negotiations. Progress has also been identified in Montenegro, the regional front-runner in terms of the number of negotiating chapters opened to date.

Meanwhile, the Commission was most critical in the case of Turkey, where it noted that the country had moved further away from democracy, rule of law and respect for basic rights and freedoms, while displaying severe setbacks in judicial independence. The almost non-existent separation of powers in the country was also flagged.

ECONOMIC FORECASTS

At the beginning of October, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) released its revised forecasts for growth in 2020 and 2021 for the countries in which the Bank has activities. For the most part, forecasts have been revised down. When it comes to the 'Western Balkan 6' (Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Monte-

European Commissioner in charge of Neighborhood and Enlargement Policy, Oliver Varhelyi (l) meets Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev (r) during his official visit in Skopje on October 07, 2020.



negro, and Serbia), the EBRD forecasts that growth will decline by –5.1 % of GDP, with growth averaging 3.4 % of GDP in 2021. While this represents a relatively small downward revision for 2020, the EBRD is much more pessimistic about the pace of recovery in 2021, which has been revised down by 3.7 %. Worst affected will be the economies of Albania and Montenegro which – mostly due to their large tourism sectors – are expected to contract by 9 % of GDP. Their 2021 growth figures have seen the most radical downward revisions as well. Serbia will see the smallest contraction in 2020 – 3.5 % of GDP with growth returning to 3 % in 2021. Bosnia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia are all set to see their economies contract by 5 % of GDP before returning to growth in the range of 3–4 % in 2021. Yet the EBRD predicts that GDP per capita will not return to 2019 levels before Q4 2021.

Even sharper contractions are expected in the 'South Eastern EU' group of countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Romania) with Greek GDP set to contract by a record –9.5 % of GDP and that of Cyprus by –7.5 %. Recoveries will be lukewarm in 2021, in the range of 3–4 %. More disturbingly, the EBRD predicts that Cyprus' GDP per capita will not return to 2019 levels before 2025, while that of Greece will see the same GDP per capita levels in Q4 2023. Croatia and Slovenia will be similarly impacted, with GDP contracting by –8.5 % and –7.5 % in 2020 respectively. Despite its sizeable tourism sector, Turkey's GDP is set to contract by a relatively modest –3.5 % in 2020, while rebounding by a strong 5 % of GDP in 2021.

Yet in all cases, there are significant further downside risks, primarily related to how the coronavirus pandemic will evolve during the autumn and winter. The severity of any new lockdowns will be closely correlated with further downward revisions.

SECURITY

From a security point of view, the regional centre of (in)security concerns seems to have shifted from the Balkan core to Turkey and its immediate neighbourhood. During the first half of August, Turkey dispatched a seismic survey vessel – the Oruç Reis – to a disputed area of the sea claimed by both Greece and Turkey to survey for natural gas deposits. The vessel was accompanied by Turkish naval ships, with Ankara threatening that it may even issue natural gas exploration licenses in the disputed area. Greece saw this as an incursion into its own

waters. The move came after both sides had signed agreements on exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean with neighbouring countries around the region, which were mutually overlapping. Turkey's moves were broadly condemned by both the US and EU member states, with the EU even threatening Turkey with sanctions on its energy sector if it continued with unilateral actions in the Eastern Mediterranean. Both sides held their own military exercises in the wider area, further raising the risk of accidental conflagration. Tensions subsided somewhat in mid-September, when the Turkish exploration vessel left the disputed waters. This briefly raised hopes of a negotiated settlement to the dispute between the two countries. However, an announcement on October 12th that the Turkish exploration vessel would return to disputed waters in the Eastern Mediterranean once again ignited tensions between Ankara and Athens and appeared to dash hopes about a negotiated de-escalation of tensions.

Turkey's Oruc Reis seismic vessel, escorted by Turkish navy, is seen offshores of Eastern Mediterranean on August 20, 2020 (© Turkish National Defense Ministry / Handout)



Meanwhile, Turkey seemed to become increasingly embroiled on yet another front. As the frozen conflict over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh exploded unexpectedly on September 27th, with Armenian separatists in the region and Azerbaijani forces engaged in a full-on war, Turkey swung heavily behind Baku. There were even accusations that Ankara had moved fighters and mercenaries under its control from the Syrian theatre of war to fight alongside Azeri troops. While Turkish officials encouraged Azerbaijan to press on with efforts to retake the breakaway Armenian region, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told Ankara that its allies in the military alliance expected it to use its influence to calm the conflict.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Southeast Europe

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Orders / Contact: info@fes-soe.org

Responsible: Dr Ralf Melzer, Director, Dialogue Southeast Europe

Project Coordinator: Harun Cero

Editor in Chief: Ioannis Armakolas

Editors: Alida Vračić, Jasmin Mujanović

Managing Editors: Dr Ralf Melzer, Harun Cero

Editorial Assistants: Tea Hadžiristić, Azra Muftić

Communications: Ema Smolo

Photos: Anadolu Agency (p. 22–25), Turkish National Defense Ministry (p. 26)

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