



Western Balkans Stability Monitor

March 2020 Issue

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Make or Break

With 2020 already in full swing, the year is taking on a ‘make or break’ character in many corners of the region.

For one thing, the year will be one of key elections. In North Macedonia, voters go to the polls on April 12th to cast their votes in Parliamentary elections that could decide the future trajectory of the country. Will they opt to return the SDSM to power to implement further reforms, however slow, and keep the country on a pro-European, pro-Western course? Or will they lend their support to the VMRO-DPMNE, allowing the country to slide back to a more illiberal path? Polls suggest that the race is too close to call, perhaps much to the surprise of many supporters of the SDSM government outside the country, who do not appreciate the scale of unfulfilled expectations among ordinary Macedonian voters on the domestic front.

In Serbia, a very different ‘make or break’ moment beckons. Parliamentary elections are due to be held on April 26th, with little or no doubt that the ruling SNS will once again be returned to power. Indeed, citing lack of conditions for the holding of free and fair elections, the bulk of the opposition parties are threatening to boycott the elections. In doing so, they hope to deprive the next SNS-led government of democratic legitimacy and force the SNS to permit the holding of future elections on more free and fair terms. In a sense, the elections will be make or break for either the SNS or the boycotting opposition. A successful opposition boycott – and a resulting Parliament made up almost entirely of representatives of the ruling parties – may finally force the SNS to row back on the slide towards ever more illiberal rule. Yet if opposition supporters ignore the call to boycott and vote for whatever opposition parties take part in the elections, the main opposition parties will have achieved nothing, other than to exclude themselves from Parliament.

Bosnia and Montenegro both face their own domestic crises. The crisis in Montenegro over the controversial Law on Religious Freedom will likely be neither make nor break. While it is hard to predict how it will evolve at this point, it seems likely that some kind of negotiated exit from the current impasse between Church and State will be found. Yet in Bosnia, the political and constitutional impasse seems much more dangerous and profound. Political, constitutional and

institutional crises are no longer the exception, but the norm, in the country's life.

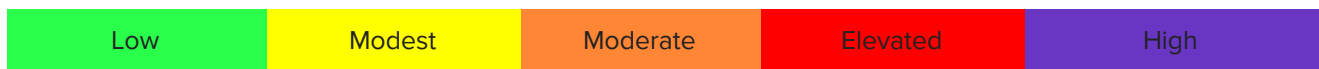
Ethno-nationalist leaders seem to thrive much better when they plunge the state into deep crisis than when political calm reigns. Yet such tactics are dangerous – small miscalculations risk tipping the fragile country over the edge.

In Kosovo, a peculiar government – made up of a radical-revolutionary populist movement and an old, institutionalist and slightly conservative party – will be tested now that it has come to power. Vetevendosje and the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) are very different political 'beasts'. Yet there will be no honeymoon to their governing relationship, as the government is pressed to tackle major domestic and foreign problems on the hoof. In neighbouring Albania, 'regular' politics was put on hold following last year's devastating earthquake. Yet as the reconstruction effort begins and life returns to normal, in which direction will political life drift? Specifically, will the country return to the very confrontational politics and street protests of 2019, or will they find common ground on how Parliamentary elections due in 2021 will be conducted?

Albania

Albania’s main political parties - the Socialists, the Democrats, and the Socialist Movement for Integration - agreed in January to form a commission to work on electoral reform. They also declared their resolve to find a solution to their dispute over electoral legislation and conditions for holding elections by March 15th, something that could boost the country’s chances of securing a date for opening accession negotiations, which at present appear modest, ahead of the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in May. Yet this rather positive picture was spoiled somewhat at the end of February when President Ilir Meta organized a protest rally against what he referred to as a plot organized by the government against the country’s constitution. Meta also threatened to dissolve Parliament and call early elections, something that the Albanian constitution does not give him a free hand to do. Having abandoned (at least temporarily) controversial anti-defamation laws, the Rama Government generated fresh controversy in February by proposing that police should be allowed to conduct surveillance without prior authorization by the courts. Meanwhile, a major donor conference convened by the EU to help Albania rebuild after the devastating earthquake of 26th November 2019 ended successfully on February 17th with just over €200 million pledged in grants.

| Trajectories | | Outlook | | |
|----------------|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| | | 1 month | 6 months | 12 months |
| Risk Dimension | War | Low | Low | Low |
| | Terrorism | Modest | Modest | Modest |
| | Government Instability | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate |
| | Civil Unrest | Moderate | Moderate | Modest |
| | Ethnic Unrest | Low | Low | Low |



Government Stability

The Albanian Government faced a calmer political environment in January, as the country's main political parties – the ruling Socialists (SP), the Democrats (DP) and Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) – announced a deal to form a commission which would seek to reach an agreement on reforming electoral legislation, including resolving all disputes regarding the administering of elections, in line with OSCE/ODIHR recommendations. Ambitiously, the three main political parties set themselves a deadline of March 15th to reach a deal.

European and US officials in Tirana welcomed the deal, which could help reduce political tensions significantly in the country. Moreover, reaching agreement on electoral legislation reform is one of the conditions laid down by the EU for Albania to be able to move ahead with its EU accession process. Yet whether any deal is reached remains to be seen. In late 2019, there were suggestions that the OSCE was trying to broker a deal between the different parties, but plenty of potential obstacles and disagreements remain. As the March 15th deadline approaches, politicians on all sides have hinted that the deadline for completing the commission's work is not set in stone and could be extended. To date, the Commission has held several rounds of meetings behind closed doors and appears to have made some progress. Of course, none of this is any guarantee that it will end its work successfully and – perhaps more importantly – that agreement over legal changes will translate into practical improvements in the electoral environment.

At the end of February, there was a slight uptick in tensions when President Ilir Meta announced his plans to hold a protest rally on 2nd March against what he referred to as a conspiracy against the constitution and an attempted coup d'état. Meta appears to have been angered by legal changes adopted by the governing majority which would remove the President's powers to swear in Constitutional Court judges – instead, they would now be considered sworn in even if he did not swear them in. It was this that Meta appears to have been referring to as a coup d'état. However, the reason for Meta's anger appears to be that the legal changes would remove his ability to block the appointment of Constitutional Court judges. Filling the

Constitutional Court with judges to enable its work would, in turn, enable the Court to make a possible ruling on the efforts by the governing majority to have Meta impeached and removed from office.

Consequently, Meta threatened that he would dissolve Parliament after March 15th – the date by which the electoral reform commission was to agree on reforms – unless the legal changes were withdrawn. However, even if Meta were to sign a decision dissolving Parliament, it is questionable what effect such a move would have. Constitutionally, the President can only dissolve Parliament under very clearly defined conditions – when Parliament fails to elect a new Prime Minister/Government or when a motion of no confidence is passed in a Government.

In the face of concerted domestic and international pressure, the Socialist dominated majority in the Albanian Parliament decided not to press ahead with a controversial anti-defamation law, whose main goal was to create a regulatory body that would control online media. While this was welcomed by a broad array of domestic and international actors, no sooner had the Rama Government abandoned these proposals then it embarked on pushing through another piece of controversial legislation. In the first half of February, the Rama Government sent legislative changes to Parliament which would enable the police to carry out surveillance without securing the permission of the courts – as is currently the case – in order to ‘prevent crimes’. This is not the first time that the Rama Government has tried to push through such legislation. When it was last proposed in 2015, the opposition referred similar changes to the Constitutional Court, which ruled that they were incompatible with the constitution. However, Albania currently has no working Constitutional Court.

On a more positive note, a donor conference convened by the European Commission to collect funds for the reconstruction effort following the major earthquake that hit Albania on November 26th 2019 was deemed to be a success. The conference received pledges for about €250 million euros in aid and about €800 million more in loans and development projects to help reconstruction efforts.

Despite the calmer political atmosphere, we have decided to maintain the government instability risk at the moderate level, unchanged from the previous report. The fact that the commission on electoral reform has begun work has channelled political energy and disputes in a more constructive direction. However, it is far from certain that the commission will be successful in its efforts, meaning that political tensions could spill back onto the streets at any time. At the same time, we assess the risk of civil unrest in the six-month outlook as being reduced, hence we are upgrading the six-month trajectory risk outlook to moderate.

Opposition Activities

Opposition activities have significantly reduced in intensity – compared to most of 2019 - in the aftermath of the November earthquake. The willingness of the opposition parties to engage in the work of the election reform commission is a major step forward towards both potentially resolving the long-running disputes over the conditions under which elections are held and moving that dispute from street protests – often violent in 2019 – into a more institutional setting. Yet the protest rally staged by President Ilir Meta – the former leader of the opposition LSI, now led by his wife Monika Kryemadhi – showed just how quickly opposition (or opposition-affiliated) politicians and leaders can return to street protests when feeling under pressure.

Looking ahead, one potential trigger for further opposition protests could be efforts by the government to push ahead with the legal changes that would allow police to carry out surveillance without gaining prior approval from the courts. Not surprisingly, the opposition fears that such powers could be abused by the police and Government.

Regional Relations

Albania's relations with neighbouring countries remained largely stable and, in some cases, showed modest signs of improvement.

On February 17th, at the donor conference summoned by the European Commission, neighbouring countries pledged aid for reconstruction in a sign of solidarity with Albania. Among them was Serbia, which pledged some €2 million. At the beginning of March, the European Commission published a fresh progress report on Albania, in which it noted that the country had made 'tangible and sustainable results in key areas', including rule of law, judicial vetting and fighting organized crime, including combating drug growing and trafficking. The European Commission once again underscored its recommendation to open accession negotiations with Albania.

Albania's relations with Kosovo became more complicated after Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama sued outgoing Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj for defamation. Rama claimed Haradinaj's accusations against him for 'treason' were defamatory. However, there is little sign that relations with officials in Pristina will improve any time soon. Rama also has a testy relationship with Kosovo's new Prime Minister Albin Kurti, whose firebrand leftist-nationalist organization Vetevendosje has lately attempted to export its politics into Albania, opening a branch in Tirana. This is seen as an unacceptable encroachment and political threat by Rama.

Meanwhile, Albania's relations with regional powerhouse Turkey became more intensive and, for some rights activists, more troublesome. On 1st January, Albanian police stopped and detained Harun Celik, a reputed Gulenist teacher, and placed him on a Turkey bound flight. After arriving in Istanbul, Celik was arrested. The Albanian Government claimed he was not deported to Turkey as a Gulenist but merely as an illegal alien and deny having knowledge about his belonging to the international Gulenist movement. However, media investigations revealed that Albanian police denied Celik's desperate pleas for asylum, undermining the claims made by the Government. In a separate development, in February - in a mysterious and

non-transparent way - Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama started to use a Vip Airbus 319 plane previously used by Turkey's President Erdogan. International flight trackers show the plane belongs to the Government of Albania. However, both Albania and Turkey refuse to explain how and on what terms the plane was transferred to Albania.

Relations with Greece remain tense over the Albanian Government's plans to confiscate some land in Greek inhabited areas along Albania's south coast for tourism development. Omonia, an organization representing the Greek minority in Albania, protested again in February against such plans. The Greek government has conditioned Albania's EU accession path with respect for Greek minority rights.

Security

The security situation in Albania remained calm and uneventful over the reporting period.

In mid-January, Albanian authorities announced that they had expelled two more Iranian diplomats from Iran's Embassy in Tirana. According to the Albanian Foreign Ministry, they were engaged in activities 'not compatible with their status'. The development comes on the tails of the expulsion of another two Iranian diplomats in December 2019 over an alleged terrorist plot, whose details have not been made known to the public.

At the time of writing, Albania remains free from coronavirus, despite close links with Italy, where over the last weeks a major outbreak of the virus had occurred. However, amid rising concerns within the country about the dangers of the coronavirus and its imminent arrival, prosecutors have stated that they are opening investigations into the alleged dissemination of fake information regarding the virus aimed at 'creating a state of insecurity and panic among the people'.

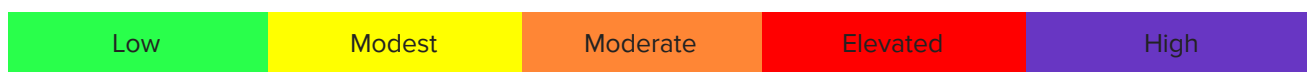
Looking Forward

- **Electoral reform:** In the coming period, it will be important to keep an eye on what results, if any, the work of the commission on electoral reforms produces. A deadline of March 15th was originally set, but will likely be extended. Despite regular meetings of the commission, civil society expectations are not high. Indeed, many observers expect only cosmetic changes to the electoral system and administration at best, arguing that more profound changes do not suit the interests of any of the political party leaders.
- **Judicial reforms:** The much-awaited Office of the Special Prosecution Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) was established and started operation. However, the new supportive structure - the Bureau of Investigations - which should support SPAK, is not yet ready. Meanwhile, the dispute between Government and President continues to hold up the recreation of the Constitutional Court, while the High Court's work also remains blocked. The judicial vetting process is set to continue – at the end of February, 221 officials had been vetted out of around 900, with only 42% remaining in their posts after being vetted; the rest were either dismissed or withdrew from the judiciary and prosecution.
- **Coronavirus:** Albania remained free of the coronavirus at the time of writing. However, the country does not appear very well prepared for a major outbreak. Albania has some of the lowest ratios of healthcare specialists per capita in Europe while its regional hospitals, especially outside the capital, are severely understaffed with specialized doctors.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

The political calm following the election of the state government in late December was not long-lived. Having just exited one bitter and protracted political crisis, Bosnia was plunged into a new one, potentially even more dangerous in early February after a controversial ruling by the country's Constitutional Court to strike down a law adopted by the RS Parliament. In the aftermath, RS members of the state Parliament, Council of Ministers and other bodies decided not to take part in any decision making, thus blocking the work of the state government and legislature. Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb member of the Bosnian Presidency, led RS demands for changing the law on the Constitutional Court, threatening 'RSexit' from Bosnia if this did not happen. Whether this is just the beginning of the long campaign ahead of local elections in October or a more dangerous political crisis remains to be seen.

| Trajectories | | Outlook | | |
|----------------|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| | | 1 month | 6 months | 12 months |
| Risk Dimension | War | Modest | Modest | Modest |
| | Terrorism | Modest | Modest | Modest |
| | Government Instability | Elevated | Elevated | Moderate |
| | Civil Unrest | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate |
| | Ethnic Unrest | Moderate | Modest | Modest |



Government Stability

Bosnia has once again been thrown into a dangerous political crisis, which could yet become more intractable than some of the recent crises which have engulfed the country. On February 7th, the country's Constitutional Court ruled that a law on agricultural land passed by the RS Parliament – which would have enabled the RS to register all state agricultural land as belonging to the entity – was unconstitutional, ruling that the land belonged to the Bosnian state. The Court ruling caused outrage among Bosnian Serb politicians – Milorad Dodik, the Bosnian Serb member of the state presidency, referred to the Constitutional Court as an 'occupation court' while RS President Zeljka Cvijanovic declared that the Court had been adopting rulings against the interests of the RS for years. For RS officials, the presence of international judges on the Constitutional Court – who typically side with Bosniak judges in their rulings – is seen as particularly controversial.

Other Bosnian Serb political representatives from RS were also angered by the ruling. In due course, Dodik led them into a boycott of all decision making processes at the state level. Thus, Bosnian Serb representatives sit in the Council of Minister and Bosnian Parliament, but do not vote or take part in other forms of decision making. As a result, decision making has been blocked in both the Parliament and Council of Ministers. Not surprisingly, Bosniak politicians roundly condemned the move by RS officials. **As a result of the boycott by RS officials, we have downgraded the government instability outlook from moderate to elevated in the one- and six- month outlook.**

On February 17th, the RS Parliament adopted a resolution which, among other things, called on RS representatives in the state institutions to boycott all decision making processes. The resolution also called on RS representatives in state institutions to put forward a new law on the Constitutional Court, which would abolish the presence of international judges on the Constitutional Court and see their replacement by local judges. Moreover, the RS Parliament essentially conditioned the return of RS representatives to any decision making activities with the adoption of these legal changes relating to the Constitutional Court and obligated RS

institutions not to implement Constitutional Court decisions until then. Finally, a 60 day deadline was given for adopting the legal changes.

Dodik also managed to secure the support of Dragan Covic, leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the party representing the bulk of Bosnian Croats. In return for the support of Covic and the HDZ for the demand for foreign judges to be removed from the Constitutional Court, Dodik and Covic agreed to demand the adoption of a new election law – a long standing Bosnian Croat demand – along with the new law on the Constitutional Court. In reality, given the way that these demands have been framed, they leave no room for negotiation with the Bosniak side and therefore have no real chance of being adopted.

While the written decision of the Constitutional Court regarding the particular ruling has not yet been published, it does seem controversial at first sight. Similar laws pertaining to the Federation entity and the Brcko District were not ruled as being unconstitutional by the same Court, hence it is unclear what the grounds for declaring the RS law unconstitutional were. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Bosnian Serb leadership has reacted disproportionately.

In reality, the Constitutional Court's ruling presented a double opportunity for Dodik. For a long time, the Bosnian Serb leader has sought an opportunity to bring the Constitutional Court under his control, as one of the few institutions in the country which he has no way of bringing under his influence. While Dodik may have launched an all-out assault on the Constitutional Court, it is hard to see how he will get his way. However, the crisis also serves another purpose. Namely, it allows Dodik to build his nationalist credentials as part of a long campaign leading up to local elections due in October. A Constitutional Court-centred crisis will also provide a good side-show to distract attention from more every-day problems related to poor governance faced by voters.

The Dodik-Covic ultimatum to adopt a new election law and new law on the Constitutional Court will likely lead nowhere during the stated 60 day period. Yet the more apt question is what Dodik will do after this deadline passes? So far, he has threatened to begin repatriating competences previously transferred from the entities to the central state back to the entity level.

However, this can only be done in the state parliament, where Bosniaks would block any such moves almost certainly. Dodik and the Bosnian Serb leadership could attempt to wrestle back these competencies through the RS Parliament, but there does not appear to be a clear legal basis for doing this.

A bigger threat to Bosnia's stability are Dodik's fresh threats to call a referendum on the status of RS, made on February 15th following a meeting with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. Despite Vucic's calls for peace and calm, as well as avoiding actions that could destabilise the region, Dodik insisted that the people of RS had to be asked to decide on the entity's status. Addressing the RS Parliament ahead of the adoption of the February 17th resolution, Dodik sent an equally clear message in English, declaring 'goodbye BiH, hello RSexit'. Just how serious Dodik is about a status, or independence referendum is hard to gauge. He has made similar threats in the past, only to pull back from them. However, he may also be becoming the hostage of his own threats, which he has not seen through, and which therefore increasingly leave him compelled to act. In all likelihood, an RS independence referendum still seems to have low odds of taking place. However, Dodik made similar threats ahead of the 2016 local elections, only to tone down his rhetoric in the end while holding a referendum on a lower importance issue. In this way, he kept the RS public mobilised and delivered on at least a part of his pledge – to hold some kind of referendum.

Opposition Activities

Bosnia's complex and decentralised system of government often leaves few political parties in complete opposition, hence it can sometimes be difficult to determine which parties should be treated as being in opposition.

Nevertheless, the picture is relatively clear in the RS entity, where the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) and the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) are both firmly in the opposition camp. For a time, the latest crisis over the Constitutional Court brought them into unity with Dodik and his Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), as they entered into a common boycott of decision making at the central state level. However, the unity in the Bosnian Serb political camp

did not last too long. Officials from the PDP have, for example, criticised Dodik's decision to take part in the Bosnian Presidency's decision making to invoke his veto as inconsistent, while also accusing the SNSD of instrumentalising the crisis.

In the Federation entity, the SDA, SBB and DF are all in the new state-level government, and are likely to be included in any future Federation government. This leaves the once-powerful Social Democratic Party (SDP) as one of the biggest parties in opposition, along with various movements and parties which have, over the last few years, split away from the SDA. Yet all of these parties and groups are weak and prone to further splits and divisions, with little sign that they will be able to crystalize into a strong and coherent opposition. The HDZ, meanwhile, appears largely unchallenged within the Bosnian Croat electorate, even if the party does face internal divisions at the local level.

Regional Relations

Bosnia's relations with its neighbours have largely been calm, albeit in the shadow of the latest domestic crisis which has engulfed the country.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic criticised the ruling of the Bosnian Constitutional Court, but otherwise called on Dodik and the Bosnian Serb leadership to act with calm and restraint and in the interests of peace and stability. Dodik acknowledged Vucic's words, but asserted the right of the people of RS to decide on the entity's status nevertheless. Meanwhile, Vucic's criticism of the Constitutional Court's decision was criticized by a number of Bosniak politicians, who accused Vucic of inappropriate meddling.

Relations between Bosnia and Montenegro also took a turn for the worse. Breaking his own boycott of decision making at the state level at the end of February, Dodik invoked the 'vital national interest' to block the visit of Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic to Bosnia. Dodik argued that, given the tense situation and religious protests in Montenegro, such a visit would do nothing good for either country. Djukanovic promptly cancelled his planned visit to Bosnia.

Bosnia's relations with Croatia also remained conspicuously quiet. Having roundly backed former President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic in her failed re-election bid in the recent Croatian Presidential elections, Bosnian Croats and the HDZ waited with some trepidation to see what attitude the new Croatian President, Zoran Milanovic, would adopt towards Croats in Bosnia.

Security

Aside from the domestic political crisis engulfing Bosnia, the wider security situation in the country remained stable. Indeed, the only potential security risk looming on the horizon would be any arrival of large numbers of migrants, up through Greece, North Macedonia and Serbia, into Bosnia. The risk comes not so much from the migrants as Bosnia's own dysfunctionality and demonstrated ability to handle even the existing modest number of migrants and refugees in the country. Given the lack of willingness among state institutions to work together in caring for migrants, a significant wave of refugees and migrants would quickly overwhelm existing reception capacities.

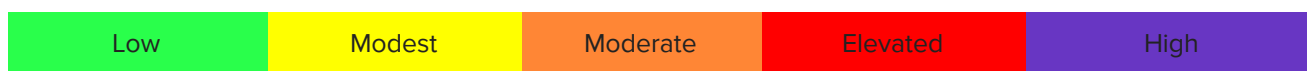
Looking Forward

- **Constitutional Court crisis:** a key moment in the crisis sparked over the Constitutional Court will come in mid-April, when the 60 days deadline for adopting a new law on the Court, along with a new election law, expires. Dodik has threatened further radicalization, threatening to repatriate competences from the state level to the entities. It will be important to keep an eye on whether he actually moves ahead with this threat in any way, as well as whether there are any further signals about the holding of a possible referendum in RS.
- **Federation entity:** the prospect that the Federation entity will gain a new government any time soon seems bleak, as neither the SDA nor the HDZ have much motivation to unblock the process of government formation. A key bellwether for the formation of the Federation government to be watched will be any sign of the question of how the Croat member of the Bosnian Presidency is elected being resolved in some way. In all likelihood, unless quick progress is made in this regard in the first few months of 2020, it is unlikely to be made before local elections have taken place.
- **Migrant crisis:** Bosnia is ill prepared for the potential influx of a large number of migrants and refugees passing up the Balkan route. Primarily, this is due to a lack of willingness by governments at different levels of the state to assume responsibility for caring for migrants. Any large influx of migrants could therefore add to Bosnia's growing internal instability.

Kosovo

Almost four months after Parliamentary elections were held, Kosovo finally elected a new government led by Prime Minister Albin Kurti on February 3rd. The government is a coalition between Kurti’s Vetevendosja (VV) and Isa Mustafa’s Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), as was widely expected after the outcome of the October elections had become apparent. However, the process of coalition negotiations between VV and the LDK proved very turbulent and relations within the governing coalition are tense. The LDK and VV are very different parties and will find it hard to walk in step with each other. Despite this, we still expect the government to be more stable and effective than its predecessor. The most immediate challenge for Kurti and his government will be positioning itself within the Belgrade-Pristina negotiations.

| Trajectories | | Outlook | | |
|----------------|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| | | 1 month | 6 months | 12 months |
| Risk Dimension | War | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate |
| | Terrorism | Modest | Modest | Modest |
| | Government Instability | Moderate | Moderate | Modest |
| | Civil Unrest | Modest | Modest | Modest |
| | Ethnic Unrest | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate |



Government Stability

Four months of tense and turbulent negotiations finally yielded a new Kosovo government led by Prime Minister Albin Kurti on February 3rd this year. Immediately after the votes were counted following the October Parliamentary elections, it was apparent to most observers that the most plausible governing coalition would be one made up of VV and the LDK. Going into the elections, the two parties were also eyeing a mutual post-election coalition. With all this in mind, most observers expected rapid progress towards the formation of a VV-LDK government. Yet progress was anything but rapid. Initially, the two parties claimed that they had quickly reached agreement on a new government program, but the talks then seemed to hit a roadblock. The most important hurdle seemed to be the wider division of positions within the new government. That Kurti would be the new Prime Minister was more or less a given, as was the broad distribution of ministerial jobs. Equally, it was broadly agreed that the LDK would be given the post of President of the Kosovo Parliament. Key sticking points, however, were who would get the Ministry of Interior and who would nominate the next President of Kosovo once Hashim Thaci's mandate expired in the first half of 2021.

After the two sides became deadlocked on this issue, the LDK suggested that it could give its support to a minority VV government, yet the offer seemed rather disingenuous. The situation became more complicated when, on 26th December, VV managed to secure the election of its own candidate, Glauk Konjufca, as President of the Parliament. After this, VV and LDK were also engaged in a battle of wills over whether Konjufca should relinquish the post or not.

As the clock ticked down time and the prospect of another election began to loom, President Thaci formally handed the mandate to form the next government to Kurti. This move left Kurti until the first days of February to form a government or return his mandate. Thaci's move seems to have focused minds in both VV and the LDK on a deadline. At the eleventh hour, a new government led by Kurti was voted in on February 3rd. In the end, the LDK gained control of the much coveted Ministry of Interior. With Konjufca elevated to the position of Foreign Minister, he neatly avoided having to resign as President of Parliament and left the position open for the

LDK's Vjosa Osmani to assume. Despite Kurti's initial reluctance, Srpska Lista was also included in the new government, meeting the constitutional requirement for Kosovo Serb representatives to be included in the government.

Overall, we believe that – despite evident tensions between the LDK and VV – the current government will be more stable and effective than its predecessor. Consequently, we are upgrading the 1-month government instability outlook from elevated to moderate, with a mind to potentially upgrading it further to modest in the future.

Despite the government's formation, relations between the VV and LDK remain tense at best. Aside from the turbulent coalition negotiations, the two parties – and their representatives – remain very different creatures. The LDK boasts of being Kosovo's oldest party, an 'institutionalist' party, and a party of gradualism and evolution. Meanwhile, VV is a movement forged out of protests, radicalism and sometimes street violence, more prone to quick action or revolution than the LDK's slow and deliberative style.

To date, friction between the two parties is perhaps most visible when it comes to the issue of lifting tariffs on goods from Serbia and Bosnia – imposed by the previous Haradinaj government – and resuming negotiations with Belgrade. The US administration has exerted strong pressure on Pristina to lift the tariffs unilaterally. The LDK – which never really supported the tariffs in the first place – is traditionally very open to US influence and backs lifting the tariffs quickly, in line with US demands. It has therefore been exerting pressure on Kurti, who is not necessarily opposed to lifting the tariffs, but insists on doing it on his own terms – i.e. by demanding that Serbia cease with its efforts at de-recognition of Kosovo and reciprocally remove non-tariff barriers on Kosovo goods entering Serbia. Crucially, unlike the LDK, Kurti and VV chafe at the idea of giving in to foreign pressure and would like to chart a more independent foreign policy course.

Another likely coming source of tensions will probably be related to corruption and nepotism in a very broad sense. VV is keen to tackle, investigate and prosecute corruption where it can, particularly relating to abuses committed by previous governments. Meanwhile, the LDK, having

been in government in the past itself and not immune to corruption, will likely be more cautious. Similarly, Kurti has taken steps to fire the boards of a number of public companies which were packed with ineffective political appointees. The appointment of new boards will, more than likely, be another source of friction between the two parties, particularly if they happen to disagree over whether they should be politically or professionally staffed.

Finally, another short-term source of tensions will be relations between President Thaci and PM Kurti. The two men have an extremely bad relationship and are barely on speaking terms. Thaci insists on pursuing foreign policy independently of the government, particularly when it comes to negotiations with Serbia. However, Kurti maintains, as per previous rulings by Kosovo's Constitutional Court, that it is he and his government which have exclusive competence over negotiations with Serbia. Aside from this, it is likely that the two men will needle each other over any issue that presents itself as an opportunity. A case in point came at the end of February, when Kurti revealed that Thaci – while Prime Minister – had signed a secret deal with NATO in April 2013, obliging the Kosovo Government to request permission from NATO before deploying the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) in northern Kosovo. Kurti claimed that Thaci had violated Kosovo's constitution, while Thaci responded with an accusation that Kurti was undermining Kosovo's relations with NATO.

In the more medium term, the other major stumbling block between VV and the LDK will be the issue of electing the next President of Kosovo, as Thaci's mandate expires in the first half of next year. The process of selecting the next president should begin in February 2021, so that the person can be sworn in during April. During the coalition negotiations, the LDK made it clear that it wanted the right to nominate the next president and expected VV's backing for their candidate. However, judging from the outcome of the coalition negotiations, the issue may well have been swept under the carpet; if agreement was reached between the two parties, it has certainly not been made public. Agreeing on who will be the ruling coalition's candidate for president in 2021 will thus be a major test of the VV-LDK coalition.

However, it will not only be a test of the coalition, as the LDK and VV cannot elect the next president on their own. Namely, Kosovo's institutional set up requires that 80 out of 120 MPs in

Parliament be present and vote for a proposed presidential candidate in Parliament; if this condition cannot be met in the first two rounds of voting, then a simple majority of 61 MPs along with a quorum of 80 is needed to elect a president in the third round of voting. Currently, VV, the LDK and non-Serb minorities have around 65-66 MPs in Parliament; with Srpska Lista, whose support is questionable, this number rises to 75-76 MPs. While this gives the ruling coalition a majority, it does leave it short of the 80 MPs that need to at least be present in Parliament in order to elect a president. Consequently, support for a presidential candidate will also need to be sought out among at least some opposition MPs.

Opposition Activities

By and large, Kosovo's opposition parties seem to be somewhat lost in their new, opposition role.

This is particularly true of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), the biggest opposition party currently led by Kadri Veseli and formerly led by Hashim Thaci. After more than a decade in government, holding the different levers of power, it has little clear idea of how to behave in opposition effectively. Moreover, PDK officials are finding it inherently hard to criticise the new government, given that their own track record on most issues while in government is in any case problematic. Just about the only area where the PDK's criticism has any traction is when it criticises Kurti and VV for challenging Kosovo's US backers and risking the support of the US administration for Kosovo, yet even here this traction is limited. Nevertheless, for the time being the PDK remains more or less united, biding its time.

The Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) is in a slightly less confused situation, although it will also need to redefine itself to some extent now that it is in opposition. Its long-term leader Ramush Haradinaj is no longer an MP and has resigned as party leader. Internal elections in the AAK are coming up and it will be important to watch whether Haradinaj once again runs for leader. This seems likely, as without him the party's future would be brought into question.

Regional Relations

Kosovo's relations with its neighbours were calm, with relations with Serbia remaining the most complex and fraught.

Kurti has made it clear that he does not wish to be rushed into a dialogue with Serbia, or any kind of hasty deals. At the same time, Kurti wishes to be in control of negotiations with Serbia and rejects the involvement of Hashim Thaci in this area. Yet despite this, the US administration is pushing negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina hard. In January, representatives of Belgrade and Pristina signed an agreement – more akin to a statement of intentions – on establishing a direct air link between Belgrade and Pristina. This was followed in February by an agreement on re-establishing rail connections. Then, at the beginning of March, Vucic and Thaci met with senior US officials in Washington (separately and jointly) in discussions regarding which limited details – but plenty of rumours – are available. The thrust of these rumours is that some kind of grand bargain between Serbia and Kosovo – represented by Vucic and Thaci – is being mediated by the US special representative for these talks, Richard Grenell, a trusted ally of US President Donald Trump. There is also speculation – particularly in the Balkans – that the US administration is keen for a foreign policy success by the end of the year, ahead of US presidential elections.

Whether anything will come of these talks is hard to gauge with any accuracy. Kosovo-Serbia relations are anything but a simple problem to solve. Some observers have speculated that the US might simply be looking for a broad agreement to be signed, without being too concerned about its implementability. In any case, while Vucic may be able to ram such a deal through in Serbia, Thaci has little ability to deliver anything other than his own signature. Without the support of Kurti and the LDK, any agreement signed by Thaci would have little meaning in Kosovo.

As a result, there will likely be growing pressure on Kurti to moderate his rather tough stance towards Serbia. The first phase of this involves pressure on Kurti to unconditionally scrap tariffs

imposed on Serbian and Bosnian goods by the previous Haradinaj government. So far, Kurti has announced plans to lift tariffs on a limited list of raw materials imported from the two countries by March 15th. However, a full lifting of tariffs would be conditioned on Serbia's commitment to cease with its efforts at securing the de-recognition of Kosovo around the world, as well as removal of non-trade barriers for the entry of Kosovo goods into Serbia. If Serbia were to fail to do this after a 90 day period, Kosovo would restore the tariffs and apply reciprocal measures. Such conditioning was immediately dismissed by Belgrade, but – more worryingly for Kosovo – it also provoked a sharp rebuke from Pristina's US ally.

Relations between Pristina and Tirana remained somewhat cool as well, particularly between Prime Ministers Kurti and Rama. Kurti visited Rama shortly after being elected PM, but their joint press conference was a very cold affair. On the whole, Kurti objects to Rama's apparent willingness to entertain supporting the idea of a land swap mooted in the past by Vucic and Thaci. Nor is he thrilled by Rama's close relations with Vucic and Thaci. For his part, Rama sees Kurti as a potential threat, particularly after VV established a branch in Albania in 2018.

Kosovo's relations with North Macedonia and Montenegro remained uneventful.

Security

The security situation in Kosovo remained calm. The biggest potential source of instability remains the possible raising of indictments by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers in the Hague against former members of the Kosovo Liberation Army. After a long period of interviewing possible witnesses and/or suspects, the Special Prosecution Office announced that it had asked a pre-trial judge to review charges for crimes committed during and just after the war in Kosovo. If these are approved, indictments will formally be issued, though it is thought that any such move is still several months away. Any indictments against senior ex-KLA figures will certainly cause a spike in tensions within Kosovo. For his part, having been a bitter opponent of the Specialist Chambers, PM Albin Kurti appears to have moderated his tone on the court. In a recent interview, he merely noted that, as Prime Minister, he was obliged to cooperate with it.

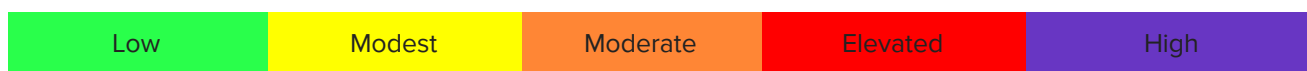
Looking Forward

- **New government:** with the new Kosovo government finally sworn into office, it will be important to watch whether still tense relations between VV and the LDK shift in a more relaxed direction or continue to remain difficult. The two parties and their officials are quite different in both style and substance, hence the potential for friction exists. In particular, there may be sharp differences over how quickly to move ahead with domestic reforms, particularly when it comes to tackling corruption.
- **Tariffs/Dialogue with Serbia:** One of the main points of pressure and tension surrounding the new Kosovo Government will be the linked issues of tariffs imposed by the previous government on goods imported from Bosnia and Serbia and resuming negotiations with Belgrade. Pristina is under heavy international – primarily US – pressure to abolish the tariffs unconditionally, which Kurti has resisted for now, insisting on ‘reciprocity’. While Kurti may well be forced to back down on the issue, the ruling coalition could come under significant pressure in the process. A bigger challenge will be how to bring Kurti and the new government into negotiations with Serbia.
- **Indictments by the Specialist Chamber:** with the Special Prosecution having filed charges against unknown individuals, which are now being reviewed by a pre-trial judge, the Specialist Chambers seems to be inching closer to issuing its first indictments. If and when that moment comes, it will certainly create new tensions in Kosovo, particularly if senior ex-KLA figures are indicted.

North Macedonia

A caretaker government has been installed to pave the way for Parliamentary elections due on April 12th this year. The government includes members of the ruling SDSM and DUI, as well as the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, the idea being that the parties will act as a check on each other to prevent abuses. However, the outcome of the elections remains extremely close. Although the SDSM is thought to have a slight lead over the VMRO-DPMNE, the two parties are more or less neck-and-neck and the winner of the elections will not be known until all the votes are counted. Indeed, even then the matter of who will actually form the next government may not be clear, likely to be determined by the distribution of seats in Parliament as much as anything else.

| Trajectories | | Outlook | | |
|----------------|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| | | 1 month | 6 months | 12 months |
| Risk Dimension | War | Low | Low | Low |
| | Terrorism | Low | Low | Low |
| | Government Instability | Elevated | Elevated | Moderate |
| | Civil Unrest | Moderate | Moderate | Modest |
| | Ethnic Unrest | Modest | Modest | Modest |



Government Stability

In line with the Przino Agreement's requirements, a caretaker government was sworn in on January 3rd in North Macedonia to prepare the way for the holding of early Parliamentary elections on April 12th. The caretaker government is not a technocratic government, but very much a political one which, aside from the ruling SDSM and its junior coalition partner DUI, includes the main opposition party, the VMRO-DPMNE. The idea behind installing a caretaker government is for the main parties to act as a check on each other and thus prevent any abuse of the state apparatus ahead of the elections.

On the whole, despite the inclusion of bitter rivals – the SDSM and VMRO-DUI – in the same cabinet, the caretaker government – led by the SDSM's former Interior Minister Oliver Spasovski – has been broadly stable. The VMRO-DPMNE now runs the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Social Affairs, where its ministers are shadowed by SDSM deputies, while VMRO-DPMNE appointees shadow SDSM ministers in other ministries. To date, most squabbles within the caretaker government have related to appointments to more junior positions, or attempts to remove certain existing appointees, but they have been resolved. Perhaps the biggest problem to date related to Labour Minister Rashela Mizrahi, who provoked a storm of controversy and criticism by holding a press conference in front of a plaque bearing the country's old name – Republic of Macedonia – infuriating both the SDSM and neighbouring Greece. North Macedonia's Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov demanded her resignation, insisting that she was violating the Prespa Agreement, constitution and jeopardizing relations with the EU and NATO. Mizrahi defended her actions, arguing that she was merely correcting an injustice. In the end, Parliament removed her from her post before being dissolved. The VMRO-DPMNE did not support her removal, but did not choose to make a problem out of it, likely being satisfied that it had made a point over the issue of the Prespa Agreement, which it was bitterly opposed to, and scored the political points that it wanted in the first place.

The election campaign itself is only beginning to heat up, but is so far causing relatively little excitement. Indeed, most of the political parties – ruling and opposition – are rehashing their

usual, often repeated messages, which are unlikely to inspire many undecided or swing voters one way or another. The SDSM is trying to play on its usual themes and successes, such as having managed to end the country's partial international isolation, bring it to the point of NATO membership and – in part – remove the 'name issue' as the stumbling block to EU accession. Unfortunately for the SDSM, even if it has removed this particular stumbling block and the Greek veto on North Macedonia's EU accession, the country's EU accession hopes are now hostage to a French veto.

Yet the SDSM's Achilles heel is its track record on domestic policy. To be sure, it has had some small successes on the economic front. Yet, overall, its domestic reform achievements have been limited, falling far short of the (often unrealistic) expectations of its supporters. This is particularly true when it comes to the issue of prosecuting past corruption and abuses committed by previous VMRO-DPMNE governments and preventing corruption on its own watch. In reality, the SDSM's narrow majority in Parliament and reliance on the support of DUI, which had been in successive governments with VMRO-DPMNE, hardly left the ruling party with much room for manoeuvre to implement bold reforms. This is particularly true when it comes to reforming the judiciary, where many legal changes required special majorities and the support of the opposition. As an example, the SDSM only managed to push through a new law on the prosecution hours ahead of Parliament's dissolution, only just securing the 80 MPs (out of 120) needed to approve it.

Thus, even if the SDSM's track record in power when viewed from outside the country may seem positive, many of its non-core supporters are unenthusiastic about what it has achieved on the domestic front. As things stand, the upcoming elections are still very much the SDSM's to lose, rather than the VMRO-DPMNE's to win. Both parties have the ability to bring their core supporters out to the polls; but while the VMRO-DPMNE has little room to expand support beyond this core at present, the SDSM's challenge will be to bring its 'soft', 'swing' or 'non-committed' supporters – who would typically not support the VMRO-DPMNE, but feel let down by the SDSM – out to vote. There is little accurate new polling available at the time of writing (other than the December data in our previous report), but what data exists reflects the

view of many observers that the SDSM at present has only a slight lead over the VMRO-DPMNE. Bringing its 'soft' supporters out to vote will thus be crucial if the party is to clearly pull ahead.

Since the beginning of the year, tensions between the SDSM and DUI, its ethnic Albanian coalition partner in government, have become more visible. Yet on February 27th, they moved in the direction of a much bigger long-term rupture, when the SDSM announced a pre-election coalition with BESA, a small ethnic Albanian party and bitter rival of DUI for ethnic Albanian votes. Not surprisingly, DUI declared that it was dismayed; that aside, the SDSM's alliance with BESA makes it much more difficult for the SDSM to form any kind of post-election government with DUI. In reality, the SDSM's move is a gamble that could prove to be an astute move. On one level, SDSM hopes that the coalition with BESA will bring it additional votes in the ethnic Albanian camp, which will push it clearly ahead of the VMRO-DPMNE in terms of votes and seats after ballots are counted on election day. In particular, it hopes that anti-DUI motivated ethnic Albanians – not few in number – will be motivated to vote for the SDSM-BESA coalition if they see it as the quickest route to removing DUI from government. Furthermore, by distancing itself from DUI and signalling that it does not wish to form the next government with it, the SDSM hopes that those of its supporters which dislike DUI – no small number – will be encouraged to come out and vote for the SDSM after all. Finally, the SDSM is also signalling that, rather than with DUI, it would probably like to form the next government with another ethnic Albanian coalition – that between the Alliance for Albanians and Alternativa, which is also vying with DUI for ethnic Albanian votes.

While the outcome of the upcoming elections is thus very uncertain, it does allow us to predict that – at present – the outcome with the greatest likelihood of unfolding could well be an SDSM-BESA-Alliance for Albanians-Alternativa government. However, this is still a relatively modest level of probability, or certainty. One problem when it comes to forming the next government is that, for some time, the unwritten rule in Macedonian politics has been that the party with the most votes in the ethnic Macedonian camp forms a governing coalition with the party that wins the most votes among ethnic Albanians. Despite losing support over the years, there is still a very strong chance that DUI will emerge as the biggest party representing ethnic Albanians. As such, it will not be shy about asserting its 'right' to be included in the next

government. Moreover, it is not likely to take any decision to exclude it lightly, potentially stoking ethnic tensions within the country.

One additional card that the SDSM is hoping might give it a boost ahead of April's elections would be a decision by the EU to grant the country a date for opening accession negotiations. After the European Commission recently reaffirmed its recommendation and support for the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, citing real reform progress in both countries, there are hopes in some quarters that, with the new enlargement methodology, French President Emmanuel Macron could be persuaded to grant permission for the opening of accession negotiations at least in the case of Skopje. However, such a development is still very much uncertain.

Given the expected closeness of the electoral contest and the uncertainty over who will form the next government, we have opted to maintain the government instability risk outlook at elevated in the one- and six- month outlook.

Opposition Activities

Like the SDSM, the VMRO-DPMNE is also repeating its own tried and tested themes in this election campaign. Thus, its constant references to the 'Zaev cartel' seek to paint the SDSM leadership as a nexus of organized crime and corruption in the country. The VMRO-DPMNE has even linked Zaev with the growing of cannabis, which can legally be cultivated in North Macedonia for medicinal purposes, including export. The VMRO-DPMNE has also tried to play on national(ist) feelings and identity politics to the extent that it can. Thus, it constantly accuses the SDSM of selling out the country's national interests, particularly in relation to (North) Macedonia's name. However, the VMRO-DPMNE does not wish to go so far as to pledge that it will repeal the Prespa Agreement and constitutional changes to the country's name. Party leader Hristijan Mickoski has often repeated his line that he does not like the Prespa Agreement and is/was opposed to it, but cannot do much about it.

As noted above, the VMRO-DPMNE has still not fundamentally been able to reinvent itself or cast off the negative legacy that it carries from its days in power. Most swing voters still remember its mismanagement and abuses from the time that it was in power and do not wish to see a return to those days. In reality, the party is still stuck within the confines of the votes that it can gain from its core, loyal supporters and will find it extremely hard to break out from this ahead of these elections.

However, the SDSM may have done the VMRO-DPMNE one favour. In forming a coalition with BESA, the SDSM may be pushing DUI back into the embrace of the VMRO-DPMNE, its long-standing old partner in government. Even during the time that DUI was in government with SDSM, it still maintained its links with VMRO-DPMNE officials. Spurned by the SDSM, if it has to choose between the two parties representing ethnic Macedonians after the elections, DUI may now be more likely to drift in the direction of VMRO-DPMNE.

For its part, DUI will be under pressure and competing for ethnic Albanian votes not just from the SDSM-BESA coalition, but also from the Alliance for Albanians-Alternativa coalition. Whether DUI can prevent its votes from haemorrhaging remains to be seen – it has steadily been losing votes among ethnic Albanians, but it is still likely to emerge as the single biggest party representing this community.

It is worth noting that some observers fear that DUI and the VMRO-DPMNE could seek to create incidents on election day, particularly since the SDSM's move to distance itself from DUI, if one or both parties sense that they are heading for defeat. The idea would be to use such incidents to challenge the legitimacy of the elections and blame irregularities for their defeat, rather than lack of popular support. How founded such speculation is, at this point, is hard to gauge.

Regional Relations

North Macedonia's relations with its neighbours remained calm and uneventful. Not surprisingly, the actions of former Labour Minister Rashela Mizrahi brought a verbal note of protest from official Athens to Skopje. However, the crisis was nipped in the bud rather effectively before it could further escalate, with Mizrahi being removed from the caretaker government.

Nevertheless, the return of the VMRO-DPMNE would be bad news for relations with Greece. Although the VMRO-DPMNE would be extremely unlikely to repeal the Prespa Agreement, there would likely be plenty of small incidents such as the one caused by Mizrahi which, over time, would leave the Prespa Agreement dead, or on life support at best.

Security

The security situation in North Macedonia remained stable.

As the last member state not to have ratified North Macedonia's accession to NATO, Spain began the process of ratification this year, which is now winding its way through the Spanish Parliament. Prior to disbanding, the Macedonian Parliament also adopted a key law on defence, which incorporates NATO's collective security principles into Macedonian legislation. With this, Skopje fulfilled the last of its obligations to become a full NATO member. North Macedonia will now likely become a full NATO member by the end of March.

At present, the only possible threat to the security situation in North Macedonia comes from any arrival of a large number of refugees and migrants on the country's borders from Greece. With Turkey effectively having opened the path to migrants seeking to enter Greece – for the time being – there is added pressure on Greece's land and maritime borders. So far, Greek border police have, by and large, managed to halt the wave of migrants seeking to cross into the country. However, if large numbers of migrants head for Greek islands, there will only be so

much that the country's border guards can do. North Macedonia's abilities to do much more than wave migrants through northwards towards Serbia are constrained.

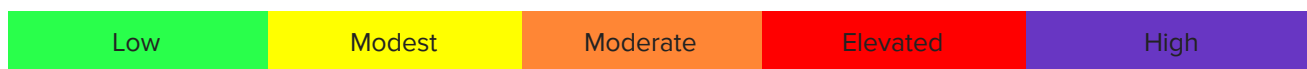
Looking Forward

- **Early Parliamentary elections:** the outcome of April's early Parliamentary elections is hard to call at this point. The SDSM appears to have a small lead, but the race is too close. Yet the outcome of the elections could be decisive for the country's future trajectory and stability. While the SDSM would continue with reforms, however slow, gradually moving the country forward, a return of the VMRO-DPMNE would take North Macedonia in a more illiberal direction.
- **NATO membership:** Once Spain completes North Macedonia's membership ratification process, the country will finally become the 30th member of NATO. This is finally expected to occur at the end of March, after much delay.
- **EU accession:** with the new enlargement methodology proposed by the Commission having been broadly welcomed inside the EU, there is a glimmer of hope in Skopje that the EU could set a date for opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia by the end of March, ahead of the EU-Western Balkans summit due to take place in May in Zagreb. While it will be important to keep an eye on any developments on this front, which would boost the SDSM going into the elections, the likelihood of such a development is still moderate at best.

Montenegro

2020 has got off to an unexpectedly turbulent start in Montenegro. The controversial Law on Freedom of Religion has sparked mass protests across the country, led by the Serbian Orthodox Church. At their height, more than 100,000 people were taking part in protest processions against the Law, making these the largest protests since Montenegro’s independence. The scale of the popular backlash against the Law seems to have caught the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) off guard, with even some of its own local officials being critical. Negotiations over the Law’s implementation are due to begin between Government and Church officials, but it remains to be seen whether a solution that could satisfy both sides can be found. Meanwhile, the DPS will be closely watching the outcome of local elections in the coastal town of Tivat, which will be a good indicator of whether the Law has damaged support for the DPS or not. A good performance may encourage the ruling party to call snap Parliamentary elections in late Spring, rather than waiting for the Autumn.

| Trajectories | | Outlook | | |
|----------------|------------------------|---------|----------|-----------|
| | | 1 month | 6 months | 12 months |
| Risk Dimension | War | Low | Low | Low |
| | Terrorism | Low | Low | Low |
| | Government Instability | Modest | Modest | Modest |
| | Civil Unrest | Modest | Modest | Modest |
| | Ethnic Unrest | Modest | Modest | Modest |



Government Stability

Since the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion at the end of December, Montenegro has been plunged into an unusual and unexpected crisis. Aside from incidents in the Montenegrin Parliament during its adoption, the Law has proved controversial and sparked protests in the country at large. At their height, protests across the country drew more than 100,000 people onto the streets, by far the biggest protests since Montenegro gained independence in 2006. Despite the large numbers protesting, the Democratic Party of Socialists-led (DPS) government of Prime Minister Dusko Markovic has remained stable.

However, the scale of popular opposition and mobilization against the Law seems to have caught the DPS off guard. As noted in our previous report, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro – as well as many independent observers – believe that the central goal of the law is to allow the Government to transfer ownership over churches and other properties dating prior to 1918 from the Church to the State. In the process, the responsibility to prove ownership prior to 1918 would be on the Church; hence, religious properties currently owned by the Church would be transferred to state ownership unless the Church can document its ownership prior to 1918, something that is not possible in most cases.

Not surprisingly, this has been met with opposition not just by the Church leadership – led by Metropolitan Amfilohije - and clergy, but also ordinary members of the Church, regardless of whether they identify themselves as ethnically ‘Serb’ or ‘Montenegrin’. Anger was so strong that thousands of people demonstrated in the middle of the winter cold for days on end. At present, the protests have settled into a rhythm of taking place on Thursdays and Sundays, attracting tens of thousands. Most worryingly for the ruling DPS, the protests have not merely attracted those citizens who identify themselves as ethnic Serbs – and are thus typically opposition supporters – but also those who see themselves as ethnic Montenegrins and are more likely to support the DPS. Even worse, some DPS officials have chosen to speak up against the Law, or join the Church-led protests against it.

This has particularly unnerved the DPS leadership. Party leader and Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic yet again felt compelled to start visiting local party branches to shore up support within the party, telling party members that they were free to belong to whichever religious group they liked, but that taking part in Church-led protests against the Law was not acceptable. Other senior DPS officials have threatened party officials with expulsion for taking part in the protests.

What exactly the DPS hoped to achieve by ramming the Law through Parliament is hard to decipher. Disciplining the influential Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, which has been at odds with the DPS for a long time, certainly seems to have been one goal. Some believe that after 2019, a year in which much public attention was devoted to corruption and abuses within the DPS, Djukanovic and the party leadership wanted to round off their internal consolidation effort and successful party Congress by refocusing political discourse on identity issues, on which the DPS thrives. According to this logic, the adoption of the Law and Djukanovic's talk of building an independent Montenegrin Orthodox Church was intended to homogenize his own 'ethnic Montenegrin' support base firmly behind the DPS. Equally, it was meant to drive a wedge of division into the opposition, split as it is between pro-Serb parties and more civically minded parties. At the same time, opening the Pandora's box of identity issues would distract debate from issues such as the DPS' corruption and misrule. It would also help to distract public discourse from issues such as creating free and fair electoral conditions, as demanded by the opposition.

The crisis provoked by the adoption of the Law on Religious Freedom has, at least, refocused public attention away from issues such as corruption, or the work of the Parliamentary Commission on electoral reforms. Indeed, members of the Democratic Montenegro opposition party – the only opposition group taking part in the work of the commission on electoral reforms – abandoned talks on electoral reforms after the DPS refused to withdraw the Law on Religious Freedom. However, the controversial Law has not succeeded in dividing either the opposition parties (more than they already are) nor in sharpening the ethnic Montenegrin-Serb cleavage in the country further. On the contrary, it may have had the opposite effect, potentially undermining support for the DPS within its own 'ethnic Montenegrin' electoral base.

Quite how the DPS will extricate itself from this particular crisis is still not clear. Church leaders have gone to great lengths to ensure that the Church-led protests do not become politicised and remain focused against the Law on Religious Freedom, rather than the DPS-led government. To date, this has largely succeeded, despite the efforts of Djukanovic and the DPS to cast the protests as being oriented against the state and government. While Djukanovic has played 'bad cop', attacking the Church leadership, Prime Minister Markovic has held out an olive branch of sorts, offering the Church talks about how the Law will be implemented. For its part, the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro is open to negotiations, but insists that the Law should be withdrawn, offering to negotiate on an agreement between Church and State similar to the one between Montenegro and the Vatican/Roman Catholic Church in Montenegro. Both sides clearly have an interest in finding a mutual resolution to the dispute, but whether they will find a way forward remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, the DPS is rumoured to be considering bringing Parliamentary elections, due by October, forward to the Spring. The coastal town of Tivat will hold local elections on April 17th, which will in many ways serve as a bellwether for the rest of Montenegro, in particular for assessing whether the protests sparked by the Law on Religious Freedom have dented support for the DPS. Tivat is a municipality in which the opposition parties have never been in power. At the same time, it has also seen solid support for the protests against the Law on Religious Freedom, which have even been attended by some local DPS officials. If support for the DPS holds up in this bastion, then the DPS leadership could take this as encouragement to go to a snap national election. By contrast, if support for the party slides, the DPS will double down on efforts to negotiate a way out of the current crisis with the Church in order to repair damage to its support base before October.

Opposition Activities

Rather unexpectedly, the crisis surrounding the Law on Freedom of Religion has only modestly aggravated divisions among the opposition parties, mainly in the sense of sharpening divides between pro-Serb and civic and/or pro-Montenegrin parties. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) is the only opposition party that voted in favour of the Law in Parliament, while the pro-Serb Socialist People's Party (SNP), United Montenegro and independent MP Nedjeljko Rudovic did not vote. Before the vote on the law, Democratic Front (DF) lawmakers tried to assault SDP MP Ranko Krivokapic and accused him of working with the DPS.

While pro-Serb opposition parties supported Church demands and urged supporters to participate in the protests, some opposition parties such as the SDP, URA and Demos did not support the Church protests. Unlike other opposition parties, the SDP accused Metropolitan Amfilohije of protesting against the state itself and misusing believers.

Meanwhile, Democratic Montenegro officials came to the protests, saying that they will talk with the Prime Minister about election reforms only if the Government withdraws the Law on the Freedom of Religion. Because he participated in the protests, the president of the non-parliamentary, but fiercely pro-Montenegrin party Crnogorska (literally: Montenegrin) Vladimir Pavicevic resigned at the request of the party membership.

Metropolitan Amfilohije did not allow opposition parties to get involved in leading the protests, saying that they have no political demands. During the protest processions, clergy did not allow chanting against the authorities and Milo Djukanovic, while opposition MPs were not allowed to be at the head of the processions. Amfilohije met with the leaders of the pro-Serbian opposition in late January, but the Church demanded that they act in unity.

Following the start of the protests, Democratic Front leaders Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic called on Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic to visit Montenegro and help Serbs and the Church in resolving the crisis. Before the vote on the Law in Parliament, Mandic and Knezevic

met with SPC Patriarch Irinej, saying he had given them his blessing not to pass the law. After that they initiated incidents in Parliament, after which police arrested them. DF officials' statements were further radicalized after the arrests in Parliament and their activists participated in roadblocks and clashes with police in Podgorica, Pljevlja, Niksic and Zeta.

After police arrested the mother of Milan Knezevic – she allegedly insulted officers during a search of the Knezevic family house - the Democratic Front said the Government was trying to radicalize the political situation and provoke them to start riots. Indeed, many observers also believe that the bizarre arrest of Knezevic's mother may have been an attempt by the DPS to provoke the opposition into a violent escalation, particularly as it targeted the family of Knezevic, who is known for being a short-fused, impulsive and hot-headed individual. Fortunately, the DF did not fall for this possible bait, urging supporters not to undermine the peaceful nature of the Church protests nor clash with police.

After they launched a campaign of drawing murals with the Serbian flag in late January, supporters of smaller opposition parties were arrested.

The opposition's demands for electoral reforms and a technical government remained in the shadows of Church protests. Opposition leaders had no joint meetings or discussions about electoral reform or the possible boycott of the Parliamentary elections. After the PM's call for dialogue, talks may be initiated with the part of the opposition that does not support the Church protests. Pro-Serbian parties will remain with the Church for the duration of the protests, but in case of serious negotiations about a technical government, it is possible that some of these parties will engage in discussions.

Regional Relations

Relations with Montenegro's neighbours remained calm and uneventful. Relations between Montenegro and Serbia have deteriorated – at least on the surface - because of the Law on Freedom of Religion. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic supported the Church protests in Montenegro and demanded the law's withdrawal, but also said that he has no right to interfere in the internal affairs of Montenegro. On the other hand, President Milo Djukanovic declared there were no hostile messages from the Serbian president, although he understood Vucic's interest in the topic. After their discussion regarding the law at the World Forum on the Holocaust in Jerusalem, both presidents said they would continue their dialogue despite distant positions on the issue of the law. Vucic had planned to visit Pljevlja ahead of Orthodox Christmas Day, but he cancelled his visit to Montenegro after Church authorities warned him that they did not want the politicization of the protest.

Unlike the presidents, Serbian and Montenegrin government officials exchanged allegations and insults over the freedom of religion law. Montenegrin PM Dusko Markovic and Defence Minister Predrag Boskovic have accused Serbia of fake news campaigns and an attempt to destabilize Montenegro. Serbian Health Minister Zlatibor Loncar said he does not employ those who speak Montenegrin in his ministry. Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic accused the Montenegrin government of pursuing anti-Montenegrin policies and proposed seizing the Serbian citizenship of Montenegrins who support Djukanovic.

Security

The security situation in Montenegro has remained broadly stable and uneventful. Church led protest processions against the Law on Religious Freedom have been remarkably peaceful. In the more medium-term, implementation of the Law's property clauses has a much bigger potential to undermine stability. If and when the government moves to transfer property ownership over important old churches from the Church to the State, further – potentially violent

– protests can be expected. Yet most destabilising would be any attempts by the authorities to give the self-proclaimed Montenegrin Orthodox Church – a group not recognised by any other Orthodox Churches – any rights to use churches currently used by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

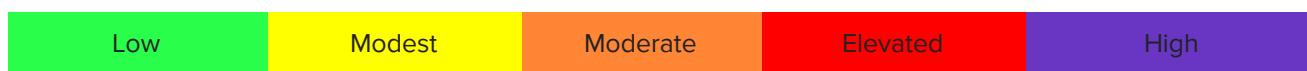
Looking Forward

- **Church protests:** with the Church-led protests against the Law on Religious Freedom showing only modest signs of abating in numbers, the crisis sparked by the adoption of the controversial Law seems unlikely to go away of its own accord. In this context, it will be important to watch whether protest momentum is maintained in the coming weeks.
- **Negotiations between Church and State:** following a meeting between PM Markovic and Church leaders in February, the Montenegrin government issued a formal invitation to the Church to begin negotiations regarding the Law at an ‘expert’ level at the beginning of March. However, it remains to be seen what the two sides will be negotiating over, with the Government offering talks over the Law’s implementation and the Church demanding the Law’s withdrawal. Either way, the negotiations seem like the only path to resolving the crisis.
- **Tivat elections:** voters in the coastal municipality of Tivat will vote in local elections on April 17th. The election will be a bellwether for support for the DPS and opposition across the country. If the DPS’ vote holds up, it could encourage the ruling party to call a snap election in late spring or early summer. By contrast, if its vote share slides, it will likely be forced to hold off until October with the holding of Parliamentary elections.

Serbia

Parliamentary and local elections in Serbia have been called for April 26th, with all eyes now focused on them. With most of the opposition parties planning to boycott the elections and caught up in bitter feuding with other opposition groups planning to take part, the ruling SNS faces little or no credible challenge in the elections. Indeed, the biggest risk for the SNS is a substantial boycott of the elections, which could deprive any future government led by the party of much of its legitimacy, though not legality. Consequently, over the next two months, the SNS will do what it can to help smaller opposition parties wishing to take part in the elections to pass the electoral threshold and enter Parliament, in order to avoid a situation where the next Parliament is – more or less exclusively – made up of members of the ruling SNS and SPS and minority representatives.

| Trajectories | | Outlook | | |
|----------------|------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| | | 1 month | 6 months | 12 months |
| Risk Dimension | War | Low | Low | Low |
| | Terrorism | Low | Low | Low |
| | Government Instability | Modest | Modest | Low |
| | Civil Unrest | Moderate | Moderate | Modest |
| | Ethnic Unrest | Low | Low | Low |



Government Stability

On March 4th, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic set the date of Parliamentary elections for April 26th. With this, the election campaign will gather steam. Going into the elections, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) faces an unusual challenge. Rather than needing to see off any threat to its grip on power from opposition rivals, its main challenge is to neutralise the effects of a threatened opposition electoral boycott. Namely, the main opposition Alliance for Serbia (SZS) is still more or less firm in its intention to boycott the elections, even if some small cracks are beginning to emerge in this.

The lesser challenge for the SNS will be to ensure that its own supporters turn out to vote in the absence of any real risk that the SNS could be unseated from power. However, given the vast SNS party machine and the relatively disciplined behaviour of its supporters, it should not be a problem to encourage, cajole or coerce SNS supporters to come out and vote for the party on election day.

A much bigger headache for the SNS is how to ensure that the next Parliament is not exclusively packed with MPs from its own coalition list, its Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) ally and just a small number of minority representatives, whose electoral lists have only the natural threshold for entering Parliament to surmount. Such an outcome is precisely what the SZS and other opposition parties intent on boycotting the elections would like to see, as it would allow them to claim that their electoral boycott had succeeded and, in doing so, deprived the SNS of democratic legitimacy.

A Parliament stacked with its own MPs and those from the SPS would be a serious embarrassment for the SNS. Consequently, the ruling SNS-SPS majority moved in February to reduce the electoral threshold for entering Parliament to 3%. In doing so, the SNS hopes that it will be able to entice a number of smaller opposition parties into taking part in the elections. So far, the tactic seems to be yielding results, with a number of smaller opposition parties and groupings queuing up to take part in the elections. However, even a 3% threshold will be a

distant dream for all but one or two of these parties or groups, if they are left to their own devices.

In all likelihood, the SNS leadership will be trying to gauge which of these parties have the best odds of passing even this reduced threshold. Given its interest in ensuring some semblance of opposition presence in the next Parliament, it is likely that the SNS will seek to discretely help those parties and coalitions with a chance of entering Parliament by opening up space for them in the media – particularly on television – as well as making some limited funding available to them.

Despite the fact that the SPS leadership briefly floated the idea of fielding a single list with the SNS in the elections, the two parties have decided to submit separate lists. In the atmosphere of opposition boycott, this was entirely expected. Indeed, the entire idea appears to have been more an exercise in the SPS demonstrating its loyalty to the SNS than a plausible plan to field a single list.

Overall, despite the approach of elections, the governing coalition between the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its junior partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), remains stable and under the firm domination of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. There is little doubt that the SNS will form the next government with the SPS, though there has been little discussion about individual appointments in any future government. For the SPS, the only real danger of being excluded from the next government would be if no other parties or lists made it into Parliament, other than minority representatives, leaving the SNS compelled to turn the SPS into a reluctant opposition.

Low-level tensions within the ruling SNS continued, though it remains hard to gauge what is really happening behind the scenes. The scandals surrounding Nebojsa Stefanovic, the Minister of Interior and a senior SNS figure, as well as his father Branko Stefanovic, who have been caught up in an affair over the privileged export of weapons from state-owned companies, has not gone away, but does appear to have subsided somewhat. In late January and early February, media attention shifted to the arrest of several close associates of Zorana Mihajlovic,

the Deputy PM and Minister for Construction, Transport and Infrastructure. At the end of January, Miroљub Jevtic, the director of state-owned Railways Infrastructure a.d. was arrested by police in his office, along with several other individuals, accused of taking bribes. Then, a couple of weeks later, Miodrag Poledica, the State Secretary in Mihajlovic's ministry was arrested, again on suspicion of involvement in abuses and rigging tenders in the same company. This arrest in particular led to widespread media speculation that investigations would lead all the way to Mihajlovic and that her days were numbered. While Vucic expressed his confidence in Mihajlovic, the fact that Stefanovic's Ministry of Interior was closely involved in the arrests further fuelled speculation regarding internal SNS feuding.

Opposition Activities

As elections approach, the main unknown remains which opposition parties and groups will decide to take part in them and whether the bulk of the Alliance for Serbia (SZS) will persevere in its planned election boycott, which still seems likely. Aside from the SZS, the Movement of Free Citizens (PSG), led by actor Sergej Trifunovic, is set to boycott the elections, along with other groups such as Lets Not Drown Belgrade, the Local Front and former president Boris Tadic's Social Democratic Party (SDS).

Some cracks have appeared in the Alliance however. At the local level, the Mayor of Sabac, Nebojsa Zelenovic, until recently one of the founding leaders of the Alliance, has decided to take part in the local elections in his town, citing the need to defend this opposition bastion from the SNS. Similarly, in the town of Paracin, Mayor Sasa Paunovic, the deputy leader of the Democratic Party (DS), one of the key members of the SZS, has decided to run in the local elections. Paunovic referred to his torn loyalties between his party – the DS – and the citizens of Paracin, who he felt he would be betraying if he surrendered Paracin to the SNS without a fight. Both men have now effectively been excluded from the SZS, or will be shortly.

Aside from this, some individual members of the parties that make up the SZS have abandoned their parties or been excluded from them after stating their intent to take part in the elections.

Many of them are current MPs of the DS or other parties and have grouped into the 'Serbia 21' bloc, which plans to take part in the elections. One section of those claiming to represent the '1 of 5 million' protest movement in Belgrade have also declared their plan to take part in the elections, much to the condemnation of most of their supporters. The small Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) is running with some tiny movements as part of the 'Broom' coalition. Meanwhile, the Vojvodina Front, led by the League of Socialdemocrats of Vojvodina (LSV) is vying for the support of voters from northern Serbia. The small Serban Patriotic Alliance (SPAS) of Aleksandar Sapic is also running. An array of far-right groups has also announced that it will run in the elections. The Serbian Radical Party (SRS) is positioned as the biggest nominally opposition party among them, with the best odds of entering Parliament.

All in all, few of these parties, aside from perhaps the SRS, have much chance of entering Parliament, unless they receive a helping hand from the SNS, in one way or another. Nevertheless, they are succeeding at least in diluting the opposition's boycott of the elections and causing further confusion among opposition voters over whether to boycott or take part in the elections. Their decision to take part in the elections has also fuelled an intra-opposition civil war of sorts, with the parties boycotting the elections accusing those groups and individuals planning to take part of being 'Vucic's opposition' and secretly working from him.

It remains to be seen whether any of the parties or groups positioning themselves on the opposition end of the political spectrum will actually manage to surmount the 3% electoral threshold. Yet the Serbian opposition may be facing the worst of all worlds – a boycott by the bulk of the opposition, whose effect is diluted by smaller groups and movements, some of which may enter Parliament, while an opportunity to challenge the SNS's rule is completely missed.

Regional Relations

Relations between Serbia and its neighbours continued in their usual up and down manner.

Most complex were relations with Kosovo. The arrival of the new government in Pristina led by Prime Minister Albin Kurti brought new uncertainty into the future of negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina. Kurti has taken a fairly hard stance towards negotiations with Serbia, seemingly in no rush to dive into either EU or US efforts at normalising relations between Belgrade and Pristina. Under heavy international – especially US – pressure, Kurti agreed to a partial lifting of the 100% trade tariff on goods from Bosnia and Serbia in late February. However, the partiality of the move – which was conditioned on Belgrade ceasing its efforts at Kosovo’s derecognition and removing non-tariff barriers for the import of Kosovo goods into Serbia – was heavily criticised by the US in particular, along with the Serbian side. The junior partner in the Kosovo Government, the LDK, also demanded a full abolition of the tariffs.

While this dispute continued to rumble on, Richard Grenell, the US Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue helped to mediate several agreements billed as placing efforts to normalise relations between the two sides back on track. One was an agreement to establish a direct flight link between Belgrade and Pristina, while another focused on (re-)establishing railway connections. Critics muttered that the deals were long on hype and short on substance, being more akin to letters of intent than actual agreements. Nevertheless, behind this, rumours abounded that Grenell and the US administration were actually negotiating a much wider deal between Kosovo and Serbia. It was even rumoured that a land swap deal was back on the table. To make matters more complex though, Kosovo was consistently represented by President Hashim Thaci in these talks, with Kurti taking a clear stance that Thaci had no mandate to negotiate in Kosovo’s name.

Serbia’s relations with Montenegro remained difficult, after the Montenegrin government pushed through the Law on Religious Freedom at the end of December, which caused uproar and street protests by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Namely, the Serbian Orthodox Church

believes that the law's goal is to confiscate most of its churches and other properties. Official Belgrade found itself in an awkward situation, seemingly unsure of how to respond – the fact that Metropolitan Amfilohije, the leading Serbian Orthodox bishop in Montenegro, is a bitter critic of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic may help explain the muted response from the Serbian leader. However, Belgrade has adopted an ever more critical tone towards the Montenegrin government's actions, leading to a deterioration in relations.

Security

The security situation in Serbia remained calm and uneventful over the reporting period, with few significant developments.

Looking Forward

- **Parliamentary elections:** The date of the Parliamentary elections has been set for April 26th. Unusually, the key element to watch will not be whether the ruling SNS will emerge victorious or not – which it almost certainly will – but whether the announced boycott of the elections by the bulk of the opposition will succeed in undermining the democratic legitimacy of the elections and the next government. A number of small opposition parties and movements are vying to pass the electoral threshold, but for the SNS there is a real danger that it will preside over a Parliament with no real opposition.
- **Opposition electoral boycott:** despite some cracks, the main opposition grouping, the Alliance for Serbia, seems firm in its commitment to boycotting the upcoming Parliamentary elections. However, a number of other small opposition parties, some of which are perhaps better described as pseudo-opposition parties, have announced that they will take part in the elections. This situation will only help to increase confusion among voters opposed to the SNS over whether to take part in the elections or not. Ultimately, for the Serbian opposition as a whole, the situation of a partial boycott would be the worst of all possible outcomes, as it will leave the SNS stronger than ever in the Serbian Parliament without denting its legitimacy or giving the opposition a strong bargaining hand when it comes to pre-election conditions in the future.
- **Dialogue with Kosovo:** amidst continuing speculation that the US administration is pushing – behind the scenes – for a grand bargain to be struck between Belgrade and Pristina, it will be important to watch out for signs that any such deal is in the making. Yet any such deal will not be possible without finding a way to bring PM Albin Kurti and the new Kosovo government into the negotiations – if this happens, it would be an indicator that the preconditions are being created to move towards a deal. However, the odds of a deal being struck as well as implemented still seem remote at this point.

About Risk Dimensions

War

We understand 'war' as the state use of armed force beyond regular policing. This category includes the risk of the state use of force in the context of inter-state war, civil war, border disputes, but also in response to terrorism or civil disorder.

Terrorism

Terrorism refers to activities, or the risk thereof, of organised groups (large or small) who are causing, or pose a credible risk of causing, death, injury, property damage, kidnapping or other forms of terror using violence (which may include shootings, assassinations, bombings, arson, beatings, etc). At risk may be individuals or assets. Motives may be wide ranging – religious, political, ideological, nationalist, ethnic, etc.

Government Instability

This category covers the risk of government collapse, protracted government instability and/or paralysis and/or deadlock and/or inability to take decisions, the risk of early elections, or even a protracted institutional or constitutional crises.

Civil Unrest

The category refers to unrest and/or disorder which is primarily political, socio-economic, labour, land/property issues, corruption or rights-based in terms of motives, or directed against a specific actor or issue. It can include mass protests, riots or strikes, whether peaceful or violent and national-level, regional or local.

Ethnic Unrest

This category refers to unrest and/or disorder which is primarily motivated by ethnic, religious or nationalist factors and/or grievances (real or imagined). It can include mass protests, riots, communal attacks or frequent physical attacks against members of a group. It can be violent or non-violent and national-level, regional or local in nature.

About

The Western Balkans Stability Monitor is produced by BIRN Consultancy, part of BIRN Ltd. BIRN Consultancy is an independent analysis, advisory and corporate investigation consultancy with a regional focus on the Balkans. Our mission is to help our clients better understand both the opportunities and challenges facing them in the south-east Europe. Often, our clients already have a degree of familiarity with the region. They turn to us for more detailed analysis of developments and trends or to investigate a particular problem, because our unique mix of knowledge and expertise gives us a competitive edge over others.

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