



Western Balkans Stability Monitor

September 2021 Issue

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Fireworks

It seemed like it would be such a quiet summer in the region. How wrong this expectation proved to be!

The intensity of the summer heat began to sizzle and dry out the entire Balkans from the end of June, turning much of the countryside into a tinderbox. Devastating wildfires followed, particularly in Greece and North Macedonia.

If the early heat had the effect of turning the natural environment into a tinderbox, it should perhaps have reduced the political temperature in the region. Yet in many countries, the political ecosystems also proved to be a tinderbox, particularly susceptible to being lit up by those playing with political 'matches'.

In Bosnia, the summer quiet that had engulfed the country's politics was turned upside down at the end of July, when outgoing High Representative Valentin Inzko decided to wake up from his prolonged hibernation and use his powers to impose legal changes criminalising the denial of genocide in the country. Bosniaks and many international observers applauded his move as long overdue; Bosnian Serb political representatives walked out of state institutions in protest, paralysing all decision making at the state level. Bosnia was plunged into an even deeper political and existential crisis than before. The rights and wrongs of Inzko's move can and are being debated both in Bosnia and outside. Yet there can be little doubt over whether the outgoing High Representative was aware of the political firestorm he was unleashing through his decision.

While the political crisis simmered in Bosnia, 'political pyromaniacs' were busy lighting wildfires in neighbouring Montenegro. The enthronement of Joanikije, the Serbian Orthodox Church's Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral, in his seat at Cetinje Monastery, should have been a routine religious ceremony, albeit one arousing the usual positive and negative emotions in different quarters of a divided country like Montenegro. In the end, the ceremony turned into anything but an ordinary event. Fighting for its political survival and always on the lookout for an issue which it can use to radicalise the political environment and mobilise its core supporters, the opposition Democratic Party of Socialists of President Milo Djukanovic turned the ceremony

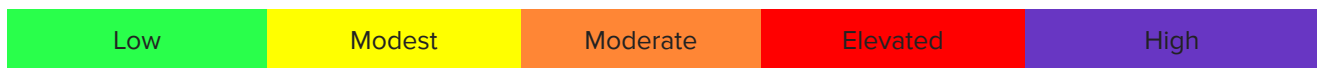
into no less than an attack on the Montenegrin state and nation. Tensions were inflated to the level of violent conflagration, bringing Montenegro to the brink of a dangerous precipice.

In the rest of the region, things were quieter. Citizens of Serbia took the opportunity to go on holiday to enjoy the waves of the sea between waves of COVID-19, while some of those who remained behind engaged in environmental activism and protests. Albania basked in the relative tranquillity imposed by the conclusion of a tense electoral cycle in the spring. North Macedonia was afflicted by wildfires and other disasters, but political life remained quiet. Kosovo, meanwhile, still seems to be adjusting to the political stability brought about by Vetevendosja's strong victory in Parliamentary at the beginning of the year.

Albania

A little over four months after the April 25 Parliamentary elections, Edi Rama, the current Prime Minister and leader of the winning Socialist Party (SP) announced the line-up of his new government. The headline grabbing story was that 12 of the 16 members of his new government would be women. A formal vote on Rama’s proposed government is expected in the first half of September, after the new Parliament holds its first session. Albania is thus waking up from its post-election and post-summer calm. Meanwhile, the main opposition, the Democratic Party (DP) is set to return to the country’s legislature, after a two year boycott. On balance, the return of the opposition to the main legislative body of Albania should help to reduce tensions in the country and anchor political competition within the main representative body in the country.

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



GOVERNMENT STABILITY

Socialist Party leader and old-new Prime Minister Edi Rama presented his new cabinet on September 2. The biggest, most surprising and attention-grabbing news was that the new Rama Government will have a female majority – 12 of its 16 members will be women, while four are new to politics. The context in which the announcement was made is also noteworthy. It was only during a livestreamed Socialist Party congress that Rama informed his old ministers and proposed new ministers of who would remain in office from his old cabinet and which new members would be joining the new cabinet. In doing so, Rama clearly sought to demonstrate his undisputed grip over the SP.

A formal Parliamentary vote to appoint the new government is now expected to take place at the beginning of September, around when the new Parliament elected in the April 25 Parliamentary elections will convene for the first time. Given that the SP won an absolute majority – 74 of 140 seats – the vote should be little more than a formality. Rama is thus on course to set a new record in Albania's post-Communist politics by securing a third mandate as Prime Minister.

In terms of specific appointments, Arben Ahmetaj, formerly a Finance Minister in the previous Rama Government, is set to be appointed Deputy PM, while Delina Ibrahim, previously a director of the country's Tax Authority, will take Ahmetaj's old job. Olta Xhaska will continue as Minister of Foreign Affairs, while Niko Peleshi is set to continue as Defence Minister and Bledi Cuci returns as Minister of Interior. The important Ministry of Justice will go to a new member of the cabinet, Ulsi Manja. Meanwhile, Ogerta Manastirliu will continue in the post of the no less important Minister of Health, while Belinda Balluku continues as Minister of Infrastructure. Elvis Kushi is set to continue as Education Minister and Elva Margariti will retain the Culture portfolio. One of the other new faces in the government will be Frida Krifca, previously the head of the country's Agency for Agriculture and Rural Development. Finally, the new government will have four ministers without portfolio – Bora Muzhaqi will cover youth and children's issues, Edona Bilali will have a focus on protecting entrepreneurship, Milva Ekonomi will deal with standards and services, while Elisa Spiropali will handle relations with Parliament.

Part of the political theatre of the Socialist's congress involved Rama lecturing his party on the need to avoid turning party work and activism into a route for securing public sector jobs. Rama acknowledged that handing out jobs to party faithful had become an important part of Albanian political life, but warned against such an approach to politics. Given that Rama and the Socialist during his tenure have been accused of going further than most predecessors in blurring the line between the public administration and party, such warnings will have caused bemusement among many of Rama's critics.

There have been some modest gains in the country's fight against corruption, with the Special Prosecution carrying out at least three significant operations, arresting several low and mid-level officials and, not least, a former deputy-minister and a mayor. They are all variously accused of manipulating public procurements in two cases, or for taking bribes for allocating public sector job in a third. Yet the investigations only appear to have tackled the most immediate culprits, rather than following the wider web of individuals involved in these affairs. Meanwhile, the Special Prosecution has not shown much interest in investigating suspected electoral crimes.

At least three powerful and controversial MPs from the Socialist Party or its allies had unexpectedly resigned just after the Parliamentary elections. There have been no credible explanations for the reasons behind their moves. The first, Tom Doshi, head of the Social Democratic Party, made his resignation public immediately after the elections, in which his party won three MPs. Doshi has been designated by the Department of State as being involved in significant corruption and Albanian PM Edi Rama has been under constant pressure not to work with him. However, Doshi seems able to win parliamentary mandates amidst allegations of vote buying. Gramoz Ruçi, who had controlled the Socialist Party from the position of Secretary General since the final days of the Communist regime, resigned also after winning a difficult confirmation battle in the election. A US diplomatic cable leaked by Wikileaks in 2011 had described him as a politician with 'long-standing ties to narcotics traffickers and organized crime'. However, that did not stop him from becoming Speaker of the Parliament during the last four years. Lefter Koka, an MP from Durrës, accused of corruption, also resigned after being elected MP. He claimed that this was the right time to do so but did not elaborate further.

Not long after the country's Parliamentary elections and shortly before the summer holiday season, Albanian PM Edi Rama took the opportunity to criticise the EU for the lack of progress in

opening Albania's EU accession negotiations. Rama blamed the nationalism of big EU member states, which had trickled down to smaller states, for this failure. Currently, the opening of accession negotiations was being blocked by Bulgaria's nationalism in Rama's view. Speaking of his country's dashed hopes, Rama colourfully compared the process to a wedding in which the bride had repeatedly failed to turn up several times despite pledging to do so.

With a new government set to be elected this September and the Albanian opposition due to return to the country's political and representative institutions, Albania seems set to enter a period of greater political calm in the year ahead. Consequently, we retain our government instability and civil unrest outlooks at modest for the foreseeable future.

With the end of the summer, Albania, like several other Balkan states, has seen an early spike in the number of new COVID-19 infections. Given that vaccination levels are still relatively low, this is a worrying sign. It will be important to watch how the public health situation develops in the coming months and how this will affect the country's economy.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

The opposition Democratic Party (DP) held its own National Council in early September, where it pledged to return to the country's Parliament after a protracted boycott. However, it was shaken by the decision of one of its MPs, Mark Marku, to resign from his position. Marku declared that the DP is powerless to confront the Government, is serving the personal interests of its historical leader Sali Berisha and has lost its reason to exist. His comments echo to a wider sentiment that the country is heading in the direction of a semi-democracy controlled by a dominant party that controls the state, economic recourses and independent institutions while defeating repeatedly in elections a weak opposition, similar to the situation in Serbia or Russia.

Over the summer, the US put pressure on the DP to exclude its former leader, Sali Berisha, from its Parliamentary group. The demands were made by US Ambassador Yuri Kim at the end of July. Earlier in the year, the Biden administration had designated Berisha as being an official involved in 'significant corruption' and banned him and his family from entering the US. Berisha has resisted US calls to resign his seat, but at the beginning of September Basha announced that Berisha would indeed be excluded from the DP Parliamentary group. Berisha will remain an MP and member of the DP.

The other opposition party, the Socialist Movement for Integration, has had little activity over the summer.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

Albanian PM Edi Rama met in the North Macedonian capital Skopje with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and with Macedonia's Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, on July 29 to declare plans for strengthened regional collaboration through an initiative called “Open Balkans”. Among other promises, they pledged to remove border controls by 2023.

Kosovo refused to join the initiative along with Montenegro. This was followed by a personal spat between Rama and Kosovo’s Prime Minister Albin Kurti. Rama’s media allies began attacking Kurti almost every day in press comments and in the Albanian tabloids. Rama claims that the Open Balkans Initiative will improve business relations and boost regional economic growth while Kurti’s office claimed the initiative was an alliance of corrupt leaders and an initiative that re-enacts Yugoslavia.

Meanwhile, a concert organized as part of a beer festival in Korça, south-east Albania, with participation of several musicians, turned out to be about more than just beer and music after it was announced that Balkan music star Goran Bregovic was invited to attend. Some Albanians argued that he should not have been invited, assigning him a role in the nationalism and wars of the 1990s. Particularly vitriolic was Kosovo’s Vetevendosje in its accusations against Bregovic. A 25 year old Albanian was arrested by police, accused of releasing a tear gas canister during the concert.

SECURITY

The security situation has remained calm and uneventful. Over the summer, a low intensity spat centred on allegations of Russian spying activities in Albania trundled on. In June, Albanian media reported on two Russian citizens who had entered the country in May, around the time of the Defender Europe 21 NATO military exercises. A drone was later found on one of them and the Albanian prosecution reportedly opened an investigation into their activities. At the beginning of July, Russia's Foreign Ministry described the spying allegations as 'hype' and 'NATO propaganda'.

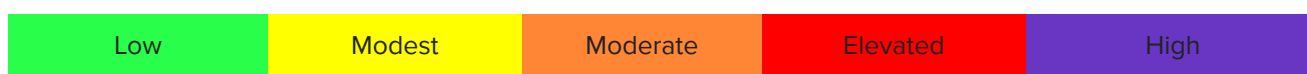
LOOKING FORWARD

- **Program of new Rama Government:** By law, the new-old Prime Minister is required to state before Parliament the policy program and priorities of his government over the next four years. Rama is expected to lay this out on September 10 – there are no suggestions of any major surprises, but it will be important to follow Rama's words in order to get a better sense of Albania's policy course over the next few years. Rama is certainly a fan of political surprises.
- **Justice Reform:** The mandate of vetting institutions created to vet judges and prosecutors, will expire by June 2022. As more than 60% of judges and prosecutors have not yet been vetted, a political compromise between the government and the opposition would be needed to extend the vetting institutions' mandates. It remains to be seen whether such a compromise will be possible. Lack of such a compromise will leave most of the country's institutions unvetted, which could jeopardise the public's – as well as international community's - trust in the whole process.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Expectations of a quiet political summer in Bosnia were dashed when, on July 23, the outgoing head of the Office of the High Representative (OHR), Valentin Inzko, imposed changes to the country’s criminal code criminalising genocide denial, a particularly sensitive issue due to internal disagreements within Bosnia over whether the massacres committed by Bosnian Serb forces in Srebrenica in 1995 constituted an act of genocide or not. Bosniak political leaders and the public applauded Inzko’s decision as long overdue. Bosnian Serb leaders and most of the public were outraged, given that most of them contest the verdicts handed down by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that determined that the Srebrenica massacres constitute genocide. It remains to be seen how the changes to the criminal code will be implemented in practice. In the meantime, Bosnian Serb ruling and opposition parties began a boycott of the central state-level institutions, effectively blocking all decision making. The prospects for any kind of reforms – in particular desperately needed electoral law reforms – appear more bleak than ever. Bosnia is closer to the precipice of destabilisation and disintegration than it has been for a long time.

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



GOVERNMENT STABILITY

At the beginning of July, Bosnia-Herzegovina could perhaps best be described as being in a period of tense calm, heading into the summer holiday season quiet period, yet with dark clouds gathering on the autumn horizon due to the hotly contested problem of how to reform the country's election law ahead of national elections in 2022. This entire situation was turned on its head on July 23, when Bosnia's outgoing High Representative Valentin Inzko imposed changes to the country's criminal code through which he made genocide denial a criminal offence. The question of genocide and genocide denial is particularly sensitive in Bosnia due the Srebrenica massacres of 1995 committed by Bosnian Serb forces. The ICTY and ICJ have both qualified the killing of between 7,000 and 8,000 Bosniak men and expulsion of a further 25,000-30,000 Bosniak civilians in the aftermath of the fall of Srebrenica to Bosnian Serb troops in July 1995 as an act of genocide. For Bosniak politicians and an overwhelming majority of the Bosniak public, Inzko's decision was applauded as something long overdue. Yet among most Bosnian Serbs and the Bosnian Serb political elite, the decision caused anger, given that the qualification of the Srebrenica massacres as genocide is hotly disputed.

In protest at Inzko's decision, on July 26 Bosnian Serb ruling parties – the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and Socialist Party (SP) among other – and opposition parties – the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) and Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) among others – agreed to begin a boycott of state-level institutions. Their key demand was reversing Inzko's decision as a condition for ending their boycott and – by extension – unblocking decision making at the state level. On July 30, Bosnian Serb parties in the Republika Srpska (RS) Assembly unilaterally adopted two important laws. The first one prevents the implementation of the legal changes imposed by Inzko on the territory of the RS entity; the other changes the criminal law of the RS in order to make anyone who blames that entity for genocide punishable by law.

Bosnia is thus in a very dangerous crisis. The boycott of state institutions by Bosnian Serb political representatives will prevent almost any kind of decision making from taking place which will increasingly make the functioning of the state difficult, perhaps impossible. A case in point if

the current situation with the state budget for 2021. Given that no budget has been adopted for this year, the central state level has been functioning on temporary financing, which must be extended by the Council of Ministers every three months. The next extension is due to take place by the beginning of October at the latest and it remains to be seen whether this can be done without the presence of Bosnian Serb members of the Council of Ministers. Without an extension of the temporary financing, state-level civil servants will be left without salaries and the state-level institutions will not be able to function.

A way around this problem may be found, as it is also in the interest of Bosnian Serb politicians to keep receiving their salaries. Yet temporary financing cannot last indefinitely and the non-functioning of state-level institutions is not sustainable even in the medium term, let alone the long term. Potentially even more dangerous are the other two laws adopted by the RS Assembly on July 30. If implemented, they would create a situation in which Bosnia's state and two entities implement different and conflicting legal regulations. In effect, this would represent the beginning of RS's separation from Bosnia in a legal sense.

Some sources suggest that Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik initially planned an even more radical response to Inzko's legal changes, but was pressured by Bosnian Serb opposition parties to soften the RS response. Nevertheless, Dodik is rumoured to be keeping a 'second round' of his response up his sleeve for the moment if and when any RS citizens are arrested and prosecuted for genocide denial. This would involve several additional laws to be adopted by the RS Assembly that would block the work of state-level judicial, prosecutorial and law enforcement and investigation institutions in the RS. In effect, this would leave the RS more or less separated from the rest of the Bosnia's legal system.

The path from there to RS' de facto separation from Bosnia would not be particularly long, though it remains to be seen how far Dodik would be prepared to tread down this very dangerous path, with all its potential consequences both for him personally and the RS as a whole. In the past, Dodik has perfected the art of playing with the fire of RS separatism without crossing lines that would bring about his downfall.

In this sense, one of the consequences of Inzko's decision is that it has put both Dodik and Bakir Izetbegovic – Dodik's 'twin' in the endless game of Bosniak-Bosnian Serb nationalist political baiting – back in the game. Unofficial polling data and anecdotal evidence in both the RS and Federation entity (FBiH) has suggested that popular support for Dodik and Izetbegovic was slipping; both men also faced major internal discord and/or disintegration within their respective parties – the SNSD and the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) – and within their ethno-national political blocks. With the political atmosphere in the country deeply radicalised and polarized, both leaders are 'back in the game', playing on their preferred turf of nationalist politics.

At the same time as agreeing to withdraw from state-level institutions, Bosnian Serb ruling and opposition parties also agreed to cease all communication and cooperation with the OHR, in response to what they see as the illegal appointment of Inzko's successor, High Representative Christian Schmidt. Bosnian Serb politicians argue – with much legitimate grounds – that the failure to seek UN Security Council approval for Schmidt's appointment – where Russia and China have the right to veto it – makes it illegal. Opponents of this view point out that Schmidt is not the first High Representative to be appointed without formal UN Security Council approval, even if this practice is normal. Despite this, Schmidt formally assumed his office on August 2. Yet his power and legitimacy remain challenged.

Where Bosnia goes next is anyone's guess. The issue of Schmidt's acceptance by Bosnian Serb political parties may prove the easier part of resolving this crisis. There are suggestions that Dodik wanted to meet with Schmidt, but was prevented due to pressure from the RS opposition and fear that the opposition would use such a meeting to undermine him. Nevertheless, it was indicative that Schmidt visited Serbia at the beginning of September and met with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, as well as the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Porfirije. Observers believe that these well-prepared visits are intended to pave the way for RS politicians to accept Schmidt in his new role as OHR head.

On the other hand, it remains to be seen how the dispute over Inzko's criminalisation of genocide denial will be resolved. It is hard to imagine the international community and OHR reversing the decision, but it is equally hard to see how Bosnian Serb politicians could find a

way to walk back from their rejection of it and return to state institutions. Nor do any ‘creative compromises’ present themselves on the visible horizon.

What makes the current situation even more dangerous is the approach of national elections in October 2022. Institutional boycotts and paralysis are nothing new to Bosnia and something that the country has learned to live with without collapsing (just about). Yet holding elections in such an environment is particularly challenging. Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb leaders had already threatened to boycott and/or prevent the holding of these elections unless changes are made to Bosnia’s broken electoral system. The prospects for a deal on electoral reform being struck between Bosniak and Bosnian Croat politicians – and actually passed through state institutions – were already not great. In the current environment, they are close to zero. Yet time is already running out – Bosnia’s complex electoral system requires the Central Election Commission (CIK) to begin making preparations – collecting candidate nominations, signatures, registering out of country voters, etc. – in early Spring. Meanwhile, Bosnian Croat leader Dragan Covic has threatened that Bosnian Croat political representatives will also withdraw from state institutions unless changes to the electoral law are adopted.

Bosnia’s political crisis and stalemate looks more intractable than ever. As a result, we are elevating the government instability 1-month outlook to elevated – in line with the existing 6- and 12- month outlooks – with downward pressure on the war, civil and ethnic unrest outlooks unless the current crisis is resolved quickly.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

Opposition activities, already subdued due to the summer holiday season, have been almost completely eclipsed by the latest political crisis which has engulfed Bosnia.

In the RS, the crisis has had the effect of forcing an artificial ‘rallying around the pole’ between ruling and opposition parties. For the time being, the RS political elite has closed ranks in opposition to Inzko’s decision. The RS opposition likely felt that it had little option than to rally with Dodik and the SNSD. Yet in the medium term, it will need to find a way to escape Dodik’s embrace and resume its opposition stance ahead of elections in 2022. Failing to do so would jeopardise their chances of unseating Dodik and the SNSD in 2022, which look better than they have in some time. This is also precisely why Dodik will do his best to keep them in his embrace.

When it comes to the opposition political scene in Bosnia, perhaps the most interesting aspect to watch out for will be any sign of who the opposition parties will field as their candidates for leading positions in the 2022 elections. This is particularly the case in the RS, where the opposition parties have traditionally fielded a single candidate to challenge Dodik and/or his chosen candidates for the post of RS President and RS member of the State Presidency. Currently, the popular mayor of Banja Luka, Drasko Stanivukovic, is gaining in popularity and appears to have a good chance of defeating the SNSD/Dodik. Assuming, that is, that he and the rest of the RS opposition can agree over his candidacy for one of the two leading positions in RS.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

Bosnia's relations with its neighbours remained largely uneventful, as the country was preoccupied with its own internal political crisis.

SECURITY

The security situation in Bosnia remained calm and uneventful over the last couple of months.

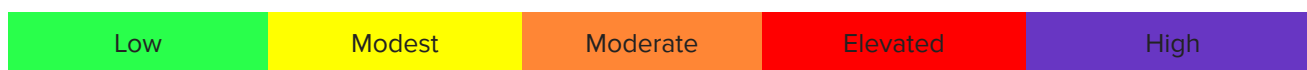
LOOKING FORWARD

- **Institutional boycott:** in the short and medium term, the most difficult question facing Bosnia-Herzegovina is whether a way will be found for Bosnian Serb political representatives to end their boycott of state institutions. Without this, decision making at the state level will grind to a halt and the business of state government could come to a standstill.
- **Inzko's legal changes:** The most intractable problem facing Bosnia is how to resolve the dispute over Inzko's imposition of legal changes criminalising genocide denial. No creative solutions to the problem are visible on the horizon and it remains hard to see how the Bosnian Serb political elite could walk back from its institutional boycott and accept the legal changes. In the short-term, it will be particularly important to watch how Inzko's legal changes are operationalised; arrests and prosecution in line with the legal changes would likely lead to a further escalation of the country's political crisis.
- **Electoral changes:** The clock is slowly counting down time for a deal to be reached over electoral reforms in Bosnia, yet the crisis sparked by this summer's events means that the prospect of a deal being struck and ratified is even further away than ever. Yet without some kind of agreement between the country's political leaders, the holding of next year's national elections would be brought into question.

Kosovo

The government of Prime Minister Albin Kurti remains stable thanks to a strong majority in the Kosovo Parliament and an opposition that is still adjusting to life outside of government. On the domestic front, Kurti’s government has been primarily focused on dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic – in particular securing vaccines and repairing damage to Kosovo’s economy. Due to its limited capacities, little progress has been made on other fronts, such as tackling corruption or implementing wider governance reforms pledged while Vetevendosje was in opposition. On the foreign policy front, Kurti and his government have avoided making past mistakes of rejecting participation in the dialogue with Serbia. Yet when it comes to substance, there is no real progress in the dialogue. Indeed, the fact that periodic meetings between Belgrade and Pristina take place – usually in an acrimonious environment – is just about the only ‘success’ of this dialogue at present.

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



GOVERNMENT STABILITY

Political stability – rather than chronic instability – is still something that Kosovo and followers of its politics are adjusting to, after many years of chronically unstable governments, perpetually on the brink of collapse and early elections. The government of Prime Minister Albin Kurti continues to enjoy a stable majority in the Kosovo Parliament, with Kurti in undisputed control of his government.

As in most other corners of the region, the summer months have been politically quiet in Kosovo. The Kurti Government has mostly been focused on dealing with various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the summer approached, Kosovo found itself far behind most other countries in the region in terms of securing adequate doses of vaccines against COVID-19. Having secured adequate supplies of vaccines, the Kosovo Government began a mass vaccination campaign, which gained in intensity from July onwards. According to available data, around one million doses of vaccines have been handed out in Kosovo, with 347,000 people reported to have received both doses of vaccines against COVID-19.

In parallel to the mass immunization campaign, the number of new infections began to rise steadily during the course of August. During the second half of the month, the daily number of new infections surpassed 2,000 in a population of no more than 1.8 million. Kosovo's fragile health system is once again struggling to cope with the large number of patients requiring hospitalization and the daily death toll is thought to be one of the higher ones in the region. At the same time, the spike in cases has also helped to persuade many Kosovars who are 'vaccine sceptic' of the need to get immunized as soon as possible.

In response, the Kurti Government has imposed fresh restrictions intended to stem the spread of the virus. Among them is a night-time curfew, as well as restrictions on the work of bars and restaurants – only outdoor seating is permitted – and a ban on mass gatherings at social events such as weddings. The beginning of the school year was initially postponed to September 13 and then again to September 26.

Upon coming to power, the Kurti Government quickly moved to replace the management of many state owned companies and public institutions, such as telecommunications company PTK or the public broadcaster, RTK. A number of ambassadors were also recalled and new ones appointed. However, beyond that, the Kurti Government has done little to unleash any deeper reforms aimed at improving governance, strengthening the rule of law and fighting corruption, despite the fact that its previous election campaigns were built on pledges to radically overhaul Kosovo's political and institutional set up and improve governance and living standards in a wider sense.

This is perhaps not surprising, given that Vetevendosje is primarily an activist party of opposition and has only had one brief stint in power in the past. Consequently, the party is still adjusting to the reality of being in power and having the levers of government at its disposal. Learning what to do with them and how will take time. Dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic is also taking up much of its time, energy and skills. Yet while all of this is perfectly understandable, it also points to one of the Kurti Government's key future challenges – its supporters have wildly unrealistic expectations of what it can and will do to improve governance and living standards in Kosovo, yet its abilities to do so – particularly in terms of experience and human capital – are limited. Unless it makes quick progress in this regard, it could see popular support begin to cool.

The dialogue with Serbia remains another ongoing and constant preoccupation for both the Kurti Government and the public in Kosovo. Prime Minister Kurti has avoided previous mistakes of refusing to engage with the EU and US backed negotiations with Serbia, which significantly contributed to the collapse of his first government. Several rounds of talks between Belgrade and Pristina have been held, including one round in July and one round in early September. Yet the fruits of the dialogue are modest, to say the least, and there seems little reason to expect any breakthroughs in the near future. Both Belgrade and Pristina seem set to continue treating the EU-mediated talks not as a forum for making any kind of breakthroughs, but rather as a 'necessary evil' in which they have to keep up the pretence of a dialogue in order to keep their EU accession hopes alive.

In line with this, the July 19 meeting between Kurti and Vucic seemed to produce no results whatsoever, other than acrimonious statements from the two leaders, trading blame for the lack

of progress. A high-level meeting held in early September was only slightly more productive. The two sides reportedly agreed to open their military archives relating to the issue of missing persons and hidden graves. Yet implementation of this agreement is something that remains in doubt. The pledge to open the KLA's wartime archives has been highly controversial in Kosovo, with debate over whether such archives even exist.

Meanwhile, a more real and practical problem in Kosovo-Serbia relations looms this month. A decade old agreement between Belgrade and Pristina regulating recognition of each other's licence plates is due to expire this month. Under the agreement, Kosovo recognized Serbian car licence plates, while Serbia recognized the old car licence plates with the letters 'KS' (Kosovo) on them, issued by Kosovo's former UN administration, but newer licence plates with the letters 'RKS' (Republic of Kosovo) are not recognized by Serbia. Drivers with these licence plates have to take temporary licence plates when crossing into Serbia. Kosovo officials have made it clear that they do not intend to extend the agreement and the issuing of 'KS' plates in Kosovo has been stopped. The scale of the problem remains to be seen – at present, Kosovo officials report that only 2,147 'KS' plates are in circulation, of which only a minority are used by Kosovo Serbs, the group who the deal was initially intended to help. Most are, in fact, used by bus and truck transport companies which frequently cross between Kosovo and Serbia.

Bigger and more substantive issues – such as establishing the Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo or a legally binding agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, nominally the goal of the EU mediated talks – appear not to be under discussion, at least in public. With local elections due in Kosovo on October 17, there seems little likelihood that such thorny issues will be tackled before then.

The local elections will be an important opportunity to test the pulse of Kosovo voters half a year into the life of the second Kurti Government. As usual, Pristina will be one of the most important battle grounds to watch, where Vetevendosje, currently in power, will square off against the opposition Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). On balance, Vetevendosje is the favourite to win in Pristina, as well as many other municipalities across Kosovo, but its LDK challengers should not be dismissed lightly. In Kosovo Serb areas, the Belgrade-backed Srpska Lista seems set to run largely unchallenged. The only exception to this is Gracanica municipality, where

Branimir Stojanovic, a former Srpska Lista minister, is challenging the official Srpska Lista candidate.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

Opposition activities in Kosovo have been quiet over the summer, as the main opposition parties, the LDK and Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) – long used to being in power – adjust to their new opposition role. Indeed, perhaps the only noteworthy development is that both LDK and PDK officials seem to have a new spring and new confidence in their step, having found in the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic a good opportunity to criticise Prime Minister Kurti and Vetevendosje.

Otherwise, both the PDK and LDK are preparing for local elections on October 17. For the LDK, the elections are particularly tricky. The party currently holds power in numerous local municipalities across Kosovo, a reflection of its past popularity. In the upcoming local elections, it is inevitable that the party will shed support and lose control of some municipalities. A measure of the LDK’s new leadership’s success or failure will thus not be whether it wins more or less votes, more or less municipalities in these elections, but rather how extensive its losses are. More modest losses would allow the LDK leadership to claim a relative success; a deeper rout would be bad news for the LDK leadership. Particularly important to watch will be how the LDK performs in Pristina, a traditional stronghold of the party.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

Aside from the obvious tensions with Serbia relating to their unresolved bilateral relations, Kosovo's relations with its neighbours were largely calm and quiet.

At the Forum on Regional Cooperation held in Skopje at the end of July, the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia relaunched their regional 'Mini-Schengen' initiative under the name 'Open Balkans Initiative' and called on other countries in the region to join. Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti sharply criticised the initiative yet again, claiming that it lacked vision, was damaging to Albanian interests, and called on everyone in the region to refocus on EU accession. In the next couple of weeks, a war of words ensued between Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, a firm proponent of the Initiative, and Kurti and his advisors. More than anything, this reflected the continuing personal animosity between the two leaders.

After Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti suggested that he would seek to revise a 2018 border demarcation agreement with Podgorica, Montenegro's interior ministry dismissed such a suggestion, noting that the dispute had been settled and was not up for renegotiation. Few regional observers and diplomats took Kurti's words seriously, but were nevertheless nervous about the prospect of the dispute, which took much time and energy to resolve, being reopened.

SECURITY

Kosovo's Defence Ministry announced in August that the Kosovo Security Force's (KSF) capabilities would be boosted with the purchase of 50 American made armoured security vehicles. The move suggests that, although NATO still officially does not support the transformation of the KSF into a regular army, individual NATO member states are supporting the upgrading of KSF capabilities.

Around 700 Afghan refugees evacuated by NATO troops have temporarily found refuge in Kosovo, as they await the processing of their applications to settle in the US. At the beginning of September, US news network Fox News claimed that US officials had told it that evacuated Afghans who had not passed an initial round of vetting due to criminal or terrorist concerns would be initially sent to Kosovo before their applications to enter the US are processed. The news sparked alarm in Kosovo, yet the story was quickly denied by the Kosovo Government and US Embassy in Pristina.

LOOKING FORWARD

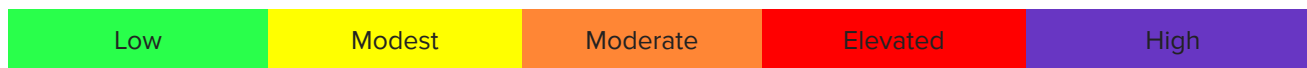
- **Local elections:** Campaigning for Kosovo's local elections due on October 17 is gathering pace. The elections are not expected to produce any major surprises, merely confirming Vetevendosje's political dominance. Nevertheless, they will be an interesting test of support for the Kurti government six months into its term in office. For the opposition parties, they will be an important test of whether they have managed to stop the haemorrhaging of popular support.
- **Dialogue with Serbia:** Negotiations on normalising relations are set to continue, but there is very little good will on both sides for any kind of compromise. While Prime Minister Kurti is reluctant to negotiate on just about anything other than Serbia's immediate recognition of Kosovo's proclaimed independence, he is under strong international pressure to engage in meaningful negotiations with Belgrade, particularly on establishing the Association of Serb Municipalities. Yet such sensitive issues will remain off the table until the passage of local elections, in the run up to which there may be even more sparks flying around the 'dialogue' than usual.
- **COVID-19:** with the number of COVID-19 infections and active cases having spiked substantially already in August, Kosovo is bracing for a potentially tough autumn and winter. Mass immunization has begun, but is far from levels at which the virus could be contained. It will be important to watch how the authorities handle the ongoing pandemic as infections gather pace.

North Macedonia

The government of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev remains stable, enjoying a narrow majority in the current Parliament. There seems little threat to its stability in the coming period. Yet the ongoing blockade of North Macedonia’s EU accession negotiations due to an ongoing bilateral dispute with Bulgaria is damaging to the Zaev Government and will affect support for it in the medium and long term, unless resolved. Currently, all eyes in Skopje are focused on the outcome of the repeated Bulgarian Parliamentary elections, due on July 11. Yet it is far from certain that they will deliver a ruling majority in Sofia more accommodating towards Skopje.

Meanwhile, most political parties are turning their gaze towards local elections in October, which will be an opportunity to test their strength vis-à-vis each other.

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

Despite its narrow majority – 61 seats in the 120 seat Parliament – the governing coalition made up of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev’s Social Democratic Party of Macedonia (SDSM) and the ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) remains remarkably stable. Many observers note that, in public appearances at least, officials from the two parties increasingly resemble natural-born allies, which was certainly not always the case. As we have observed before, the biggest threat to the functioning of the ruling majority is, in reality, the possibility that one of its MPs might fall ill, in which case an opposition exit from the assembly chamber would deprive the Parliament of a working quorum. While this may slow down the legislative process, it cannot unsettle the government, which in March called a snap vote of confidence, calling the opposition’s bluff and demonstrating that the ruling majority was stable and coherent.

Politically and diplomatically, the summer months have been rather quiet. North Macedonia’s hopes of actually opening accession negotiations with the EU look as distant as they have ever been for much of this year. Modest hopes that the Bulgarian side might abandon or moderate its veto ahead of the EU Council meeting at the end of June came to nothing. Bulgaria then went to a second Parliamentary election on July 11, with hopes high in Skopje that this repeated election could finally deliver some kind of new government in Sofia, as a precondition to lifting the Bulgarian veto. Ultimately, these hopes were also dashed by the beginning of September, when it became apparent that, after a second inconclusive election, Bulgaria’s political parties would again be unable to form a government. A third Parliamentary election is now due to be held on November 14, in parallel with Presidential elections. Yet it seems far from guaranteed that Bulgaria will get any kind of government even after these elections. Perhaps even more worryingly for Skopje, even if a new government is finally elected in Sofia, there are no guarantees that it will abandon Bulgaria’s demands and related veto on beginning accession negotiations with North Macedonia.

On the domestic front, the summer has been relatively quiet, though the Zaev Government – and North Macedonia with it – have had somewhat of a run of bad luck. What positive events there were often turned out to be overshadowed by negative ones. As a case in point, as the

annual celebrations of the Ilinden Uprising in Krusevo were winding down on August 2, reports began to trickle in of wildfires which had started, or been started, across the country. The fires raged for the next three weeks, with municipalities across the country being affected. The country's dry east was worst affected – while around 10,000 hectares of forest are estimated to have been destroyed, in some areas of the country's east the destruction engulfed as much as 10% of forests at the local level.

Clearly, the Zaev Government could not be blamed for the wildfires, or the summer dryness. Yet the fires also exposed North Macedonia's lack of preparedness to deal with the fires. Local firefighters found themselves overstretched and struggling to contain the fires and prevent them from engulfing villages and smaller towns. Media quickly dusted off previous reports about understaffing in the country's firefighting units, or fact that firefighting engines were on average around three decades old, the oldest functioning one dating back to 1966. Perhaps most embarrassingly for the government in Skopje, despite the fact that North Macedonia possessed three firefighting airplanes, they could not take off as they had been out of service for two years. Despite previous media reports that they were not operational, it was not until the fires had kicked off that the government sent the airplanes off to be serviced and repaired. In the end, the fires were put under control in part thanks to assistance from firefighting crews from Serbia, Romania, Slovenia and Austria. As a result, the lack of preparedness to deal with the fires is something that the current government will take at least some of the blame for, even if underinvestment in fire-fighting capacities is a problem that predates the Zaev Government.

A month later, on September 8, North Macedonia marked 30 years of independence, in honour of the referendum held on 8 September 1991 to secede from Yugoslavia. Among other events, a military parade was organized in the capital Skopje. Yet the day ended with tragedy – in the evening hours, media reports began to trickle in that a fire had struck a modular COVID-19 hospital in the town of Tetovo, killing 14 patients and injuring a dozen. Several days of national mourning were declared. In the meantime, North Macedonia awaits answers to how the fire occurred, with concerns over the safety of 18 other modular hospitals across the country. One of the companies which won the contract to build some of the hospitals was 'Brako doo', owned by Kocho Angjushev, a former SDSM deputy Prime Minister. Having initially refused to resign until the results of the investigation into how the fire started, on the evening of September 10 Health

Minister Venko Filipce resigned, citing moral reasons. It now remains to be seen what cause the official investigation will establish, but the Zaev Government could be further damaged by the outcome of the enquiry.

Having been delayed from the Spring, North Macedonia officially began its population census on September 3, the first in two decades. Formally kicking off the census was an achievement of sorts for the Zaev Government, particularly given the efforts of the opposition VMRO-DPMNE to delay or even prevent the census from taking place at all. Yet even this success has been brought into question – special software created for the purposes of collecting census data immediately malfunctioned as soon as the census had begun. This, in turn, has caused days of delay as authorities try to fix the problems, creating another headache for the government.

These glitches would be less of a problem were it not for the fact that local elections are due to take place on October 17. According to the agreement between political parties, the census needs to finish well ahead of these elections, in part to avoid the politicization of the census. Consequently, some observers are already wondering whether the technical problems and lack of time could undermine the legitimacy of the census. Ahead of the local elections, the SDSM and DUI have agreed to cooperate and support each other's mayoral candidates in municipalities that have a clear majority of either ethnic Macedonians or ethnic Albanians. Meanwhile, a number of small parties which ran in coalition with the SDSM at the last election – including the Democratic Alliance (DS), the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM) – plan to field a small centrist coalition in the local elections. Together, these parties hold four seats in the current Parliament. Yet while their plan to field their own list in the local elections – in what appears to be an attempt to preserve their own distinct political identity – there seems little chance that they would do anything to undermine the ruling majority at the national level.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

The VMRO-DPMNE is continuing its strategy of trying to maintain pressure on the ruling coalition, accusing it, variously, of anything from national betrayal to corruption and criminal activity. Its tactics could be described as trying to rock the government's boat politically in the hope that, should they get lucky, they might be able to overturn the government's 'boat' and capsize it. In parallel to its rhetorical attacks on the Zaev Government, the VMRO-DPMNE has constantly been threatening that it will bring its supporters out onto the streets.

To date, such tactics have not succeeded, nor are they likely to. In the simplest of terms, the VMRO-DPMNE still lacks any kind of wider strategy or vision for how to win over more moderate voters. Despite this, the VMRO-DPMNE is likely to get a small boost from the upcoming October local elections. Compared to the rout it suffered in the 2017 local elections, the party can only improve its performance. This should give party leader Hristijan Mickoski enough room to claim a modest victory, present the party as taking a step to returning to power and – perhaps most crucially for Mickoski – see off any threat to his leadership position within the party.

Meanwhile, on July 26, the Criminal Court in Skopje handed down first instance verdicts against former Parliamentary Speaker Trajko Veljanoski and several other senior VMRO-DPMNE figures for the attempted storming of the Macedonian Parliament on April 27, 2017. The convicted men were found guilty of 'terrorist endangerment of the constitutional order', with Veljanoski sentenced to six years and six months in jail, while former transport minister Mile Janakieski and former labour minister Spiro Ristovski were sentenced to six years and three months each in jail. Vladimir Atanasovski, the former head of the secret police, was sentenced to six years.

Another party to watch out for is the Left. This maverick party blends nationalism with leftist ideas and some anecdotal evidence suggests that it might do well in these elections.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

While North Macedonia's relations with Bulgaria remain at a record low, bilateral relations with other neighbours remain positive.

At the Regional Economic Forum held in Skopje at the end of July, the leaders of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia renamed their Mini-Schengen regional cooperation process as the 'Open Balkans Initiative'. As part of their latest agreement, they pledged to work to scrap any border obstacles for citizens and businesses by 2023 at the latest. The three leaders also invited other neighbours – such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro – to join the Initiative.

SECURITY

The security situation remained calm and uneventful in North Macedonia during the previous period.

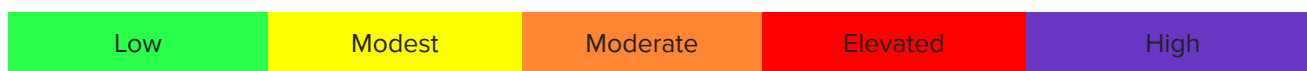
LOOKING FORWARD

- **EU accession/Bulgarian elections:** North Macedonia's EU accession hopes still remain closely pinned to the outcome of Bulgaria's latest – third – Parliamentary elections due on November 14. However, there are no guarantees that Bulgaria will be able to elect a stable government even after this election. In a sense, the more stable any governing coalition that emerges from these elections, the greater the chances that Skopje's EU path is unblocked. Perhaps the worst outcome for Skopje would be yet another inconclusive Bulgarian election.
- **Census conduct:** Having pushed hard for the conduct of a population census this year, the Zaev Government was embarrassed by initial technical problems in carrying out the census. It will be important to watch for whether these are resolved quickly and whether the census can be carried out effectively. A census with disputed legitimacy and accuracy would only do further damage to the Zaev Government.
- **Local elections:** North Macedonia's political parties have begun campaigning for local elections in earnest. The local polls will be a good opportunity to test the popularity (or perhaps unpopularity) of the two main parties, the SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, relative to each other. While no major surprises are expected, it will be important to keep an eye on turnout and watch for how the ruling parties in particular perform. A bad result for the SDSM in particular could undermine the government's stability.

Montenegro

Despite the depths of the tourist season on which the Montenegrin economy is so dependant, August turned out to be a month of intense political activity and posturing. Following the announcement that the enthronement ceremony of the Serbian Orthodox Church’s Metropolitan Joanikije of Montenegro would take place in Cetinje at the beginning of September, the opposition Democratic Party of Socialists began whipping up nationalist, anti-Serbian Orthodox Church feelings among its core supporters, wowing that it would prevent the ceremony from being held. Despite the increasingly tense security situation ahead of the ceremony, until the very last minute few observers, or indeed the Montenegrin Government, seemed to anticipate the violence that would occur during the first weekend of September. The DPS appears to have opted to radicalise political divisions in Montenegro further in an effort to retain support. For its part, the ruling coalition has been badly shaken by the events in Cetinje. The weakening of URA and the alignment between Prime Minister Krivokapic, the Democratic Front and the centrist Democrats in the aftermath of the violence in Cetinje is likely to profoundly influence the reshuffling of the Krivokapic Government which was already on the cards.

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



GOVERNMENT STABILITY

The political and security situation in Montenegro has been profoundly shaken by the violence surrounding the enthronement of Metropolitan Joanikije, the head of the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral (MCP) of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Joanikije was elected Metropolitan of Montenegro in May, at the regular session of the Holy Assembly of the Serbian Orthodox Church, having previously headed another diocese with its seat in Niksic. That his formal enthronement would happen at the beginning of September in the Cetinje Monastery, the seat of the MCP, was announced in the early days of August. Almost immediately, it became clear that many in Cetinje were opposed to the ceremony taking place. Cetinje is a stronghold of those Montenegrin citizens who see themselves as ethnically Montenegrin rather than ethnically Serb Montenegrins. Montenegrin nationalist groups have a particularly strong following in Cetinje. While the Serbian Orthodox Church and the MCP see Cetinje Monastery as the historic seat of the Orthodox Church in Montenegro which, in their view and that of most of the Eastern Orthodox world, has always been part of the Serbian Orthodox Church, some ethnically Montenegrin citizens and most Montenegrin nationalists have a different view of history. In their narrative, the Cetinje Monastery was the seat of a supposedly autocephalous Montenegrin Orthodox Church which, they claim, was subjugated and merged into the Serbian Orthodox Church after 1918, when the Kingdom of Montenegro was absorbed into Yugoslavia.

Between the MCP's right to enthrone its spiritual leader in its seat in the Cetinje Monastery and genuine opposition to this act among a majority of citizens in Cetinje, the ceremony was always going to be a tense affair, particularly given the likelihood that many ordinary faithful from other corners of Montenegro would have come to Cetinje to attend the ceremony. However, the opposition Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) sought, along with minor allied parties, to exploit and capitalise on opposition to the religious ceremony in order to radicalise the political climate and mobilise its own electorate.

In mid-August, Aleksnadar Kascelan, the DPS' Mayor of Cetinje, wrote a public letter stating that the residents of Cetinje were opposed to the enthronement ceremony taking place in their town, calling for it to take place elsewhere. Somewhat ominously, Kascelan also referred to the

potential for violence, noting that insisting on holding the ceremony was playing with fire. Other, more fringe nationalist movements, such as Civic Initiative 21 May (GI 21 May) issued more vitriolic statements referring to the enthronement of the MCP's Metropolitan as 'the crowning moment of Greater-Serbian assaults on Montenegro' and the 'occupation' of Cetinje Monastery by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Democratic resistance to the enthronement was described as the duty of all Montenegrins.

In a further escalation of the DPS' rhetoric, Veselin Veljovic, the former Police Chief until the defeat of the DPS in the August 2020 Parliamentary elections and the current advisor to President Milo Djukanovic, published an op-ed in which he called on Montenegrins to rally in Cetinje on September 5, the day of the enthronement, and prevent the ceremony from taking place. In carefully worded language, Veljovic also called on his former subordinates in the police to refuse orders from their superiors, should they be told to use force against demonstrators. In effect, Veljovic was calling on the police to mutiny.

Further ratcheting up tensions, on August 28 President Milo Djukanovic said that, unless the enthronement was moved elsewhere, or abandoned, he himself would go to Cetinje on September 5 to join the defence of the 'honour and dignity' of Montenegro. In the days prior to this and particularly in the days after, DPS officials and other allied groups did their best to further inflame the passions of those opposed to the enthronement ceremony with rhetoric suggesting that the ceremony amounted to a humiliation of Montenegro at the hands of Belgrade or that Montenegro was under the occupation of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Calls for calm and peaceful protest by these same officials were intermingled with ominous warnings that there would be violence if the ceremony was not cancelled.

For its part, the Montenegrin Government seems to have been caught off guard by the DPS' manoeuvring and the passions which were inflamed. Its strategy all along seems to have been to try to avoid confrontation. Thus, Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapic, known for being a committed member of the Serbian Orthodox Church, abandoned his own plans to attend the enthronement. The Government also appears to have suggested to the Church that it should abandon plans to bring masses of faithful to the Monastery in Cetinje to attend the ceremony, which the Church obliged. Yet none of this helped to sooth tensions.

As police and security officials warned of the high risks of violence and confrontation ahead of the September 5 weekend, pressure built on the Church – both within the Government and from outside – to abandon the entire ceremony, or move it elsewhere. A day before the enthronement, DPS-organized demonstrators erected barricades using stones and burning tyres on the main road from Podgorica to Cetinje, in a clear attempt to physically prevent Joanikije, Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Porfirije and other dignitaries from attending the enthronement ceremony. Police prevaricated and did nothing to remove the barricades. In Cetinje itself, a group of demonstrators – reportedly criminal underworld figures and football hooligans organized by Veljovic – removed police crowd control fences protecting the Monastery.

On the night between September 4 and 5, both Government and Church officials spent a sleepless night in Podgorica weighing up whether to cancel the enthronement or go ahead with it. URA officials had for some days been pushing for the ceremony to be relocated or deferred; on the other hand, the ruling Democratic Front (DF) and the Democrats, the two largest blocks in the ruling coalition, strongly pushed for the ceremony to take place. Amidst disagreements on whether the safety of the Church's bishops could be guaranteed or not, a final decision was taken during the night hours to transport Porfirije and Joanikije by helicopter to Cetinje.

On the morning of September 5, Montenegrin police moved to clear the barricades on the road between Cetinje and Podgorica by force. Meanwhile, in Cetinje, Veljovic and a group of demonstrators – described more accurately as thugs and criminal underworld figures by many observers – tried to break through a police cordon protecting the Monastery. Violent clashes between police and organized hooligan groups ensued, while genuinely peaceful demonstrators got caught up in the violent clashes and fired teargas. Amid scenes of carnage in Cetinje and the roads leading to the town, Montenegrins witnessed the spectacle of Porfirije and Joanikije running from the helicopter under the cover of an armoured blanket to reach the Monastery buildings.

The entire crisis has badly shaken the ruling coalition and Montenegrin Government, which had already been in serious crisis. Recriminations began between URA on the one hand – whose officials control the police – and the DF and Democrats on the other. In particular, both the DF

and Democrats, as well as Prime Minister Krivokapic, appeared to be demanding the sacking of the Minister of Interior, Sergej Sekulovic, and the chief of police Zoran Brdjanin. However, given that both are seen as being close to URA and Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic, URA and Abazovic have firmly rebuffed such demands, at least for the time being. On September 9, Abazovic explicitly threatened to bring down the Government if either Brdjanin or Sekulovic were removed from office.

The latest feuding within the ruling Montenegrin coalition appears to represent the beginning of an important realignment. In the past, Prime Minister Krivokapic, URA and the Democrats were largely aligned within the coalition in an attempt to keep their largest partner – the DF – at bay and outside Krivokapic's Cabinet. Excluded from the division of ministerial posts, it was primarily the DF that sought any opportunity to attack Krivokapic in particular and his Cabinet as a whole, repeatedly undermining its stability.

Following the weekend of carnage in Cetinje, Prime Minister Krivokapic – who pushed for the enthronement to go ahead – appears to have found himself pushed into the open embrace of the DF and in conflict with URA. The Democrats have also begun a bitter war of words with URA and appear more aligned with the DF and Krivokapic. Meanwhile, Abazovic is fighting a rearguard action to protect Brdjanin and Sekulovic.

The internal balance of power within the ruling coalition has also now changed, or is changing. The standoff created over the enthronement in Cetinje has been particularly difficult for URA, given that many of its own supporters are pro-Montenegrin and critical of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Indeed, many of its supporters in Cetinje were just as bitterly opposed to Joanikije's enthronement as DPS supporters. URA was thus caught between its own supporters, who would have preferred not to see Joanikije's enthronement go ahead, and its pro-Serb coalition partners, who demanded that it should go ahead. Forced to choose between antagonising its coalition partners – as well as failing to uphold constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religion – and the wishes of its own supporters, URA at first sought not to antagonise either. In the end, by prevaricating and failing to ensure timely police action to prevent road blocks and violence and using force against demonstrators when a peaceful end to the standoff could no longer be

avoided, URA ended up antagonising everyone – its own supporters, its coalition partners and the Church.

With its popular support damaged at best and in tatters at worst, the negotiating hand of Abazovic and URA in the face of demands to sack his minister and police chief is much weakened. Both the DF and Democrats are aware that Abazovic's threat of bringing down the Government is little more than an empty bluff at a time when his own party would probably lose the most from an early election.

It now remains to be seen how the current crisis within the ruling coalition will be resolved. Given the acrimony and tensions that have been sparked, the possibility of the ruling coalition falling apart and early elections taking place cannot be excluded. The Democrats and DF both believe that they could gain from an election right now, while URA would clearly lose. Yet, on balance, an election will probably be avoided, with a government reshuffle a more likely scenario. To begin with, the political and security situation in Montenegro is at present so volatile that even small incidents seem to have the potential to cause wider violence. Inserting a tense and closely fought election into this equation would probably prove incendiary. Western powers are also almost certainly opposed to any early elections, particularly in the current environment.

A government reshuffle to give the DF and the Democrats, in one way or another, a greater stake in the current Krivokapic Government, is thus the most likely way ahead. Yet the path to striking an agreement between the coalition partners will be thorny. Nor is there much time, given the paralysis of the ruling majority over the last few months and the fact that the Montenegrin Parliament resumes its session in October.

Given the latest developments in Montenegro, we have decided to downgrade the 6-month Government instability outlook to elevated, as well as the 1-month Civil unrest outlook.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

Having spent three decades in power, the leadership of the opposition DPS cannot have failed to be aware that, while it clearly had the right to peaceful protest against the Serbian Orthodox Church, it did not have the right to obstruct a religious ceremony. In fact, as local civil society activists have pointed out, obstructing religious ceremonies is a criminal offence in Montenegro. Despite that, the party and its officials chose to systematically inflame passions, call on police to mutiny and organized violent protests, barricades and clashes with the police.

It would appear that, for one reason or another, the DPS saw both a political benefit and a political need to radicalizing national and religious divisions in Montenegro, whatever the consequences. In one sense this is not out of tune with the DPS' wider strategy since being ousted from power. Ever since the August 2020 elections, the DPS has played on the card of Montenegrin nationalism. By seeking to portray the current Montenegrin Government as lackeys of Serbia undermining the country's independence and sovereignty, the DPS has sought to inflame passions among ethnic Montenegrins and Montenegrin nationalists. At the same time, it has sought to portray itself as the defender of the Montenegrin nation and in doing so remain politically relevant.

Joanikije's enthronement came at a handy moment in the context of the DPS' wider strategy. Cetinje is due to hold local elections this autumn and is a key battle ground for the DPS, one in which it cannot afford to lose support. By putting itself at the helm of the protests against Joanikije's enthronement, the DPS saw the perfect opportunity to fire up its own local supporters in Cetinje ahead of these elections, while also dealing a blow to URA, one of its rivals for the 'ethnically Montenegrin' vote. In a wider sense, by casting itself as the defender of Montenegro in the face of 'Serbian assault' in Cetinje, the DPS also found a good opportunity to fire up its supporters across Montenegro.

The show of force by the DPS in Cetinje was also a good opportunity for the DPS to rock the boat of the stability of the ruling coalition. With the ruling coalition already in deep trouble, pushing the DF and Democrats on the one hand and URA on the other into confrontation had a

good chance of sinking the Krivokapic Government and sparking early elections. Indeed, for good measure the ruling coalition has been seriously destabilised by the latest events.

Yet the fact remains that the DPS could have achieved more or less all of these goals through a peaceful but fired up protest against Joanikije's enthronement. The fact that it chose to go further, organizing violent protests, burning barricades and deploying its former chief of police to call on police to disobey orders and charge at police cordons suggests that much more is at stake for the DPS.

Given that the current Montenegrin Government has been pursuing reforms within the judiciary and prosecution with a view to paving the way for investigations into corruption and organized crime, it seems entirely possible that the weekend's carnage was in fact intended to send a signal to those in power in Montenegro that, should they consider raising indictments against senior DPS figures, the DPS had the ability to take the entire country down in flames with it.

In the aftermath of the protests, the DPS finds itself radicalized politically and more than ever aligned with Montenegrin nationalism. It remains to be seen what impact this will have on its support among voters and whether it could drive moderate voters away from the once ruling party. An interesting test of support for the party will be upcoming local elections, due to be held before the end of the year in the municipalities of Cetinje, Mojkovac and Petnjica. All three are – to a greater or lesser extent – DPS strongholds and will offer a good indication of how support for the party is faring nationally.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

Relations with official Belgrade remained customarily tense over the last couple of months. In parallel to the DPS' campaign to stir up passions in Montenegro, Belgrade tabloids under the control of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party waded deep into the stand-off between pro-Serb and pro-Montenegrin camps in Montenegro. As usual, their ire was particularly fervently directed at Prime Minister Krivokapic and his Government, who were variously labelled as traitors to the Serb cause in Montenegro. Serbian tabloids also did their best to pour oil onto the fire of tensions in Montenegro, with incendiary characterisations of those opposed to Joanikije's enthronement as 'Milo's ustashas' and other similar constructions. Yet despite the attacks on the Montenegrin Government by Serbian tabloids and the attacks of the DPS and its allies on Serbia, relations between ordinary people in Montenegro and Serbia remained remarkably warm, evidenced by the large number of Serbian tourists flocking to the Montenegrin coast as if nothing was happening.

Relations with Montenegro's other neighbours remained calm and uneventful.

SECURITY

A major new story from Montenegro was the police operation as part of which authorities discovered a consignment of 1,400 kilogrammes of cocaine, hidden within a shipment of bananas. This represents the largest haul in the country's history. Montenegro is a well-trodden route for drug gangs and smugglers moving their goods into Western Europe. So far, authorities have not revealed who the narcotics are thought to have belonged to. Yet the country has seen a bloody turf war between the Kavac and Skaljari organized crime clans, which have claimed more than 40 lives across the region in various shootouts. Sources in Montenegro suggest that the entire operation was carried out under the guidance of US law enforcement agencies, as well as that Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic and most of the government were kept in the dark about it. Some observers have suggested a possible link between the DPS' show of force in Cetinje and the interception of this haul of narcotics.

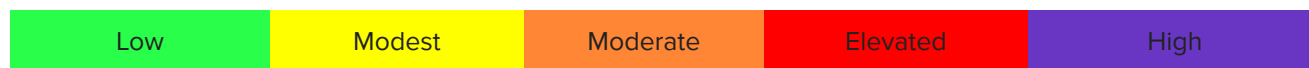
LOOKING FORWARD

- **Ruling coalition:** Following the recent events in Cetinje, the ruling coalition has been thoroughly shaken, with an acrimonious war of words breaking out between the coalition partners in its aftermath. The DF and Democrats are demanding the resignation or removal of URA's appointees in the Ministry of Interior and the Police Directorate. This comes amidst a realignment within the ruling coalition in which the Democrats and Krivokapic appear to have aligned with the DF against a weakened URA. It remains to be seen whether the ruling coalition partners can find a way to resolve their differences, or whether their coalition will further disintegrate, leading to early Parliamentary elections.
- **Government reshuffle:** Related to the state of relations within the ruling coalition is the question of whether the current Krivokapic Government will be reshuffled or recast in some way. Nominally, the current Cabinet is one of 'experts', yet many are in reality political appointees. The DF, largely excluded from ministerial posts, has long been pushing to be included in the division of ministries within the government. Now, the Democrats appear keen to get their own share of ministerial spoils as well. Yet none of the other coalition partners seem keen to let DF leaders into the Government, something also not looked kindly upon by Montenegro's Western partners. It thus remains to be seen whether a formula can be found to reshuffle the current Montenegrin government. Retaining the principle of an 'expert' government but with more DF and Democrat 'experts' may be the most plausible way forward.
- **Organized crime:** Following the seizure of 1,400 kilogrammes of cocaine by Montenegrin police at the end of August, little is known about who the narcotics belonged to or where they were headed. As authorities continue to investigate the drug haul, it is possible that they may move to make arrests among Montenegro's criminal clans. This would be a welcome development, but also comes with the risk of gang violence in the country.

Serbia

Unlike some of its immediate neighbours, Serbia has had a politically calm and uneventful summer. After some signs of recent turbulence and purges within the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) – most notably the ongoing feud between party leader and President Aleksandar Vucic and Defence Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic – internal party relations appear to have settled into a tense calm, at least for the time being. With Presidential and – most probably – Parliamentary elections approaching in the Spring, the political temperature will begin to rise this autumn. Government and opposition are in the midst of negotiations over improving electoral conditions, which the ruling SNS seems keen to drag out and concede little to the opposition. The next elections are thus unlikely to be held in an atmosphere accepted as democratic by all sides. This autumn will be make or break for the negotiations on electoral conditions. Meanwhile, Serbia has seen a sharp spike in COVID-19 infections from the second half of August onwards.

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	Moderate
	Ethnic Unrest	Low	Low	Low



GOVERNMENT STABILITY

The grip on power of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic remained without any serious challenge. Remarkably for a (semi-)democratic political system, the ruling coalition included almost all the MPs in the Serbian Parliament. Given such a broad majority, it is no surprise that the SNS-dominated government of Prime Minister Ana Brnabic remained very stable.

Of all the countries of the Western Balkans, Serbia probably had the quietest summer politically speaking. Following the resignation of Defence Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic from his position of head of the SNS' Belgrade Committee at the end of May, the ongoing conflict between Vucic and Stefanovic within the SNS has again entered a quieter phase. This is not to say that it has come to an end – senior figures within the SNS continued to shoot verbal 'poisoned arrows' in Stefanovic's direction, but the Defence Minister remains within the Party fold. Despite this, it seems that the settling of scores between Vucic and Stefanovic – as well as the purging of Stefanovic's people within the party – will continue and gain in visibility at some point in the coming months. During September, the party will be busy selecting delegates for its Congress, which will likely take place in October or November. Ahead of the Congress, it is possible that there will be more damaging revelations relating to Stefanovic, in an attempt to weaken him further. However, Stefanovic may well respond by leaking new revelations about either Vucic or other SNS officials to the media.

Serbian President Vucic continued to strengthen his ties with rulers with more or less authoritarian streaks near and far. Within the wider region, Vucic appears to enjoy the warmest relations with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. On July 8, Orban paid a visit to Vucic in Belgrade, in which he proclaimed that enlargement should be the EU's most important project, while describing Serbia as the central country of the region without which the region could not hope to become part of the EU. Incredibly, Orban declared that the EU had far more to gain from Serbia joining the EU than Serbia did.

For better or worse, Orban has positioned himself as one of the chief promoters of Serbia's EU membership, at least on the rhetorical and public level. Days before his visit to Belgrade, Orban

had taken out a paid advertisement in German newspaper Bild, setting out his ten point plan for reforming and strengthening the EU. Various, Orban proposed a halt to the deepening of EU integration, prioritising economic over political cooperation within the EU and less influence from civil society on policy decisions. In his tenth point, Orban called for the EU to urgently grant Serbia membership.

For many pro-European's in Serbia, the support of Orban, a leader usually seen as the key 'trouble-maker' within the EU, may have seemed more like the kiss of death for Serbia's EU accession hopes. Yet Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic expressed his sincere gratitude and lauded his guest. Joint infrastructure projects – particularly the ongoing upgrade of the Belgrade-Budapest railway line – were discussed, as was trade and economic cooperation.

Two months after Orban's visit to Belgrade, the Serbian side repaid the visit. On September 8, the governments of Hungary and Serbia held their sixth joint session, signing various agreements and making even more solemn pledges. Never short on bombastic words, Orban summed up the meeting in the following terms: 'I have thought a lot about how I could summarize what was discussed at the meeting, and I think it is best to say that the two countries have agreed to rebuild Central Europe'. Exactly what this meant appears to have been left to the imagination of listeners.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic also continued with his efforts to deepen relations with China. On July 6, Vucic tuned in to an online summit in honour of the 100 year anniversary of the existence of the Communist Party of China. Addressing the online summit in the presence of no less than 300 of his own party officials, Vucic declared that 'the century of the existence of the Communist Party of China was a century of the greatest changes in the history of humanity'. Vucic went on that the Communist Party and its leader, Xi Jinping, were an 'inspiration'. In earlier comments to media, Vucic had stressed that his own SNS had a lot to learn from the Communist Party of China.

Remarkably, Vucic's friendliness with the more authoritarian leaders of the world does not seem to have done much to damage his relations with leaders of the liberal democratic world. On her farewell tour of the Balkans, outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel planned to visit two of the region's leading 'stableocrats'. The German Chancellor was due to call on Serbian President

Aleksandar Vucic on September 13 and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama on September 14. The fact that Merkel left North Macedonia, which probably has the most pro-EU reforming government in the region at the moment, off her itinerary raised eyebrows among many observers.

At the end of August and the first days of September, Serbia saw a fresh wave of COVID-19 infections. By the first week of September, the number of new daily infections had surpassed 5,000 cases. The public health system seemed to be coping remarkably well for the time being. For its part, the government seemed to be doing little to impose any additional restrictions or measures, or indeed to ensure stricter adherence to existing measures in force. The idea of issuing COVID certificates for entry into areas such as bars, cafes or nightclubs was mooted, as was compulsory vaccination for some groups, such as health workers, but little more than that. From August 17, the Serbian government began vaccinating some sections of the population with a third dose of vaccines against COVID-19. Yet a much bigger problem remains the fact only half the population has received the initial two doses of vaccines against COVID-19, leaving a large pool of unvaccinated adults among whom the virus can spread easily.

Having begun local production of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine against COVID-19, Serbia also signed an agreement with China and the United Arab Emirates to build a local production facility for the Sinopharm vaccine. After the agreement was signed in mid-July, construction work on the vaccine production facility began on September 9.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

As crucial Presidential, early Parliamentary and Belgrade City elections approach – most likely to be held at the same time in April 2022 – Serbia’s opposition parties remained in a divided and unenviable state. Having successfully – for the most part – organized a boycott of the 2020 Parliamentary elections, and in so doing dented the democratic legitimacy of the current SNS government, the Serbian opposition has struggled to leverage this achievement by securing better electoral conditions ahead of 2022 elections. The ruling SNS has been happy to pay grudging lip service to the need to engage in a dialogue on how to create free(r) and fair(er) electoral conditions, yet with little apparent will to actually improve election conditions.

One dialogue process has been organized by the ruling majority with a number of right-wing opposition parties, some of which are accused by the rest of the opposition as being ‘fake’ or ‘loyal’ opposition parties in relation to the SNS. Another dialogue process, mediated by members of the European Parliament, has been going on since July 9 between the ruling majority and opposition parties and movements which, for the most part, boycotted the 2020 Parliamentary elections. Having begun late, this dialogue has been slow to produce results. A draft proposal produced by European mediators on how to improve electoral conditions was leaked to the Serbian media at the beginning of September. The draft contained various ideas about ensuring more equitable representation of the opposition in the media; broader opposition participation in the State Election Commission; more transparent electoral rolls; and ways to improve the secrecy of the ballot among other things.

Yet for the Serbian opposition parties, these proposals came as a disappointment. For the most part, opposition leaders rejected the European draft paper, describing it as too vague and lacking mechanisms to ensure that the proposed ideas would actually be implemented. Of course, the European proposals are just a draft and will be subject to further revision. Yet among the Serbian opposition parties, the lack of ambition and detail in the first draft suggested a lack of real interest among MEPs to pressure the Serbian government into implementing genuine changes. Rather, a lingering sense persisted that the primary goal of European mediators was

not ensuring free and fair electoral conditions, but rather opposition participation in elections whatever the conditions under which they were held.

The Serbian opposition will face some tough choices in the months ahead. On a basic level, it seems that the opposition parties cannot afford another election boycott if they are to have any hope of remaining relevant. A separate issue will be how to frame opposition cooperation and unity ahead of any elections. Opposition parties are aware that they have little chance of even a decent result if they run in their current fragmented state. Yet they are also far from achieving any kind of unity.

Within the Serbian opposition scene, environmental activism and Green politics appear to be becoming an increasingly salient issue. This has come on the back of several years of vocal opposition to mini-hydroelectric plants being built across the country, concerns about air quality – particularly topical in the winter months – and opposition to major proposed mining projects, such as the Rio Tinto planned lithium mining operation in western Serbia. The Serbian government has backed most of these environmentally damaging projects, pushing those opposed into opposition to it. Ahead of elections in 2022, it remains to be seen if ‘Green’ parties and environmental movements will be able to organise into a distinct column within the Serbian opposition and offer Serbian voters desperate for change a clear and interesting new alternative.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

Relations between Serbia and its neighbours remained calm, with the exception of relations with Kosovo and Montenegro (see previous sections).

SECURITY

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

LOOKING FORWARD

- **Internal SNS developments:** With the SNS party Congress scheduled for October, it will be important to watch for any more twists in the political saga orchestrated in order to purge Nebojsa Stefanovic from the SNS. Although Stefanovic has absorbed the blows dealt to him by his party colleagues seemingly without protest, it is still possible that he could retaliate by leaking new, damaging revelations to the press about the SNS' internal 'dirty laundry'.
- **Negotiations on electoral conditions:** Negotiations over creating free(r) and fair(er) electoral conditions in Serbia are entering a make or break phase as the time to agree and implement any changes ahead of elections slowly runs out. Based on what has been achieved so far, there is little reason to believe that either of the two dialogue processes initiated will deliver any substantial results. The Serbian opposition parties will thus likely find themselves yet again forced to choose between taking part in an unfair electoral contest and boycott. Given that they have already boycotted one Parliamentary election, there seems little likelihood of another electoral boycott taking place.

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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