



Western Balkans Stability Monitor

March 2023

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Make or Break?

Two important make or break moments, potential turning points, are approaching in the Western Balkans. One may be coming in the EU and US mediated negotiations on normalising relations between Belgrade and Pristina. The other are Montenegro's presidential elections. While the former could have an impact on the region as a whole, the latter's impact will be much more limited to Montenegro, though significant nevertheless.

Almost half a year of intense EU and US mediation, negotiations, pressure, cajoling, sticks and carrots directed at Kosovo and Serbia may be about to bear 'fruit'. What began as the Franco-German proposal for moving the process of normalising relations forward was first turned into a 'European' proposal and then set out more explicitly in an agreement that the two sides are expected to accept and – perhaps – sign. The Agreement on a path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia was, after many leaks and rumours, finally made public on February 27th. It is, to all extents and purposes a significant step towards securing Serbia's acceptance of Kosovo's independence, without explicit recognition.

If implemented, the Agreement would mean that Serbia would essentially abandon its very active campaign of challenging and trying to roll back Kosovo's proclaimed independence. For its part, Kosovo would also have to deliver on the Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo as a vehicle for some kind of autonomy for the Kosovo Serb community.

If implemented in word and spirit, the Agreement would not just relax relations between Belgrade and Pristina, but also within the entire Balkan region and, to a lesser extent, beyond. The Western Balkans have often been caught up in the dispute between Belgrade and Pristina, which has complicated regional cooperation initiatives and left different countries under pressure to take sides. Of course, as is clear to most observers, the key question is – will the agreement be implemented? If the last decade is anything to go by, there is more than ample room for scepticism.

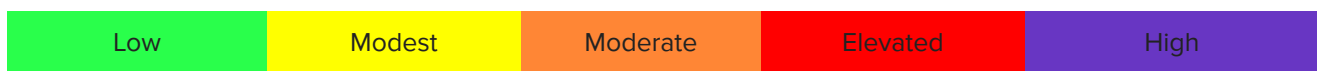
As the region awaits a summit between the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo pencilled in for March 18th, many observers of the region will also be keenly following the Montenegrin presidential elections. The first round of the election is scheduled for March 19th, when Montenegrins will choose between seven candidates, two of who will go into a second round run-off. The election is particularly interesting not just to Montenegrins, but to the region as a whole, as it will pit Montenegro's current President and ruler of three decades, Milo Djukanovic, against a range of challengers. Djukanovic's defeat would be the end of an era in every sense and complete the process of Montenegro's first change of ruling elite since the fall of Communism begun in August 2020. Yet the outcome of the election is so uncertain that few analysts would dare to call it.

Stay tuned.

Albania

Ten years since Edi Rama first became the Prime Minister of Albania, his grip on power has arguably never been stronger. A strong Parliamentary majority means that there is little to undermine the stability of his Government, while in 2022 his preferred candidate also took over the office of President of Albania. Local elections are due on May 14th, yet with the opposition largely in disarray, Rama’s Socialists are once again likely to emerge victorious. Having boycotted the last elections, opposition parties will be returned to power in some municipalities, but this will be far from a threat to Rama’s grip over Albania. Indeed, if anything, the return of the opposition to local government in some corners of the country will help improve the veneer of democracy in Albania. The recent arrest of a former FBI official accused of corrupt dealings involving an Albanian businessman and former intelligence officer could yet damage Rama, but this is very much dependent on the further revelations the case could throw up.

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

After a decade in power, one might expect a ruling party – such as Albania’s Socialist Party (PS) – and its leader – Prime Minister Edi Rama – to show signs of tiredness, or see signs of their popularity, or grip on power, sliding. Yet in Albania, this is anything but the case. A decade since he first came to power as Prime Minister in September 2013, Edi Rama and his Socialists have never been in a stronger position politically. A strong Parliamentary majority won in the 2021 Parliamentary elections means that Edi Rama’s Government is very much stable and in control. Having elected his chosen candidate – Bajram Begaj – as President in the summer of 2022, Rama gained control over another key institution of the state which has previously been occupied by a rival. Meanwhile, the opposition remains in a complete state of disarray, further reducing any threat to Rama’s grip on power.

At the beginning of February 2023, the Economist Intelligence Unit published its annual Democracy Index for 2022, which contained some good news for Albania. The country’s democracy score continued to improve – indeed, the country was in the top 10 countries in terms of its score improvement globally. This is part of a steady score improvement for the country under Rama’s rule, which in 2020 shifted from the category of hybrid regime to the flawed democracy category.

For ordinary Albanians, this news might seem surprising, particularly given the sense that Rama rules largely unchallenged and has managed to consolidate his grip on power in a way that makes it hard to imagine him being removed any time soon. In the country’s Parliament, the ruling Socialist majority is effectively blocking - through time consuming procedures - any attempt by the divided opposition to hold the Government accountable. Requests for ad-hock Parliamentary investigative committees into scandals relating to the Government are simply being ignored by the majority. This is the case with a recent attempt by the opposition to secure a commission of enquiry into what has become known as the McGonigal scandal.

At the end of January, US Federal prosecutors announced that a former FBI counterintelligence official, Charles McGonigal, had been arrested on charges of laundering money, violating sanctions against Russia and – not least – taking a cash payment of \$225,000 from a former employee of a foreign intelligence service and businessman. According to some media reports, the businessman and ex-intelligence agency employee who handed the payments to McGonigal was in fact an Albanian-American individual. He had allegedly acted to arrange meetings for McGonigal with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and other senior officials from Kosovo, Bosnia and Montenegro. According to the charges, one of the reasons why the money was paid to McGonigal was so that he would ensure that the FBI started investigations in relation to the Albanian opposition's lobbying in Washington, D.C. So far, no new details have been released, but the case has the potential to cause further serious damage to Rama.

It is in this context that Albania heads to local elections scheduled for May 14th. Compared to the previous 2019 local elections, which the opposition boycotted, the current elections are being held in a much better environment. However, this is hardly saying much. The country remains in a state of deep political polarisation. Major problems persist and are likely to persist, not least pressure on media outlets critical of the government and legal and administrative manoeuvring to block part of the opposition from taking part.

Albanian voters will go to the polls in all 61 of the country's municipalities. In the process, they will directly elect local mayors and councillors for local assemblies. Given that the opposition boycotted the previous elections – leaving the Socialists in control of almost all local authorities – the current elections will see the opposition return to power at the local level in some corners of the country. However, Rama's Socialists are still expected to emerge victorious from the elections overall.

Official campaigning for the elections begins on April 14th, yet effective campaigning is well under way. A pre-election assessment report produced by the OSCE flagged widespread concerns in Albania over the prospect of misuse of administrative resources at the disposal of the ruling party, in particular pressure on public sector employees. In this context, some media

in Albania have been reporting on the use of a controversial app by the ruling party – Aktiv1st – which many fear will be misused by the Socialists precisely in order to pressure public sector employees to support the party. Officially, the app has been described by the PS as a ‘tool of communication’ for party activists and supporters. Thus, activists have the opportunity to score ‘points’ by engaging with content offered to them. This content includes stories that redirect users to the social media pages of the Socialist Party and its officials on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

Points are won, among other things, through clicking on, sharing, commenting and liking content linked to the Socialist Party and offered through the app. While the PS presents the app as an innocent enough tool to be voluntarily used by its activists, media and other observers are already warning of potential abuses. Among the biggest problems are reports that public sector employees are being forced to download and use the app, while being told that their level of activity is being ‘monitored’. All in all, some observers believe that the app is intended to boost the social media profile of the ruling PS ahead of the local elections by forcing many in the public sector into using the app. Following complaints from the opposition, the Central Election Commission has agreed to look into the use of the app, though few expect a serious investigation.

In what appears to be another calculated pre-election move, at the end of January Prime Minister Edi Rama suggested that an increase to the minimum wage could be imminent. The pledge was framed in terms of needing to deal with increased costs of living and high inflation. Rama also suggested that ways were being looked into to help certain professional categories such as medics, policemen and soldiers. While Rama did not specify when these increases in minimum and other wages could take place, it seems very likely that it will be timed to coincide with the local election campaign.

Finally, the Rama Government remains on a collision course of sorts with the EU, ranging from the proposed and controversial fiscal amnesty mooted in the past, to its ‘golden passport’ schemes and various controversial concessionary contracts negotiated with no competition and little transparency. The EU has threatened Albania with suspension of its visa-free travel

regime in relation to the controversial golden passport scheme. During the first half of March, the European Parliament prepared to debate a highly critical resolution on Albania. Among other things, the draft resolution drawn up by the European Parliament's rapporteur for Albania, Isabel Santos, criticises not only the cash-for-passports scheme, but also a lack of progress in freedom of expression and freedom of the media, as well as institutional transparency. The cash-for-passports scheme and controversial fiscal amnesty are described as being 'incompatible with EU norms and visa policy'.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

Unlike 2019, Albania's opposition parties do not plan to make the mistake of boycotting the upcoming local elections. Yet competing in the elections is also not proving a simple matter, particularly for the internally split Democratic Party.

Following the resignation of former party leader Lulzim Basha in March 2022, the Democratic Party's (PD) founder and one-time leader Sali Berisha stepped up his attempts to wrestle control over the party. A court in Tirana effectively handed control over the party to Berisha in March 2022, though the ruling was appealed by a rival faction of the party. In due course, Berisha's faction of the PD organised a leadership contest in late May, in which Berisha was elected as the new party leader. Yet the legality of the leadership contest was challenged by a rival faction within the PD, nominally led by Enkelejd Alibeaj, which believes that Berisha and his wing of the party had no legal authority to organise the leadership race. The dispute over who controls the PD has also split the party's MPs, who effectively function as two rival blocks within the Albanian Parliament.

Regardless of the legal wrangling, it would appear that Berisha has much more support among PD rank and file members. Given that the court in Tirana handed control of the party to Berisha in March 2022, many observers had become accustomed to referring to him as the leader of the party.

Yet almost a year after the initial court ruling that handed control of the PD to Berisha and the appeal against this decision submitted by Alibeaj's faction, on March 3rd Albania's Court of Appeals handed down a ruling quashing the initial decision by the Tirana court and ordering a retrial over who has control of the Democratic Party. Until a new ruling is made, the faction of the PD around Alibeaj will be considered to represent the Democratic Party.

The ruling could not have come at a worse time for the Democratic Party – nor indeed at a better time for its main rival, the ruling Socialist Party – as the deadline to submit applications

for taking part in the local elections approached. In the days after the Appeals Court ruling, both Berisha's faction and Alibeaj's faction of the PD submitted requests that their faction be registered as representing the Democratic Party in the coming local elections. In the end, both were rejected by the Central Election Commission. That Berisha's request was turned down was not particularly surprising in light of the recent Appeals Court decision. Yet the decision to turn down the request of Alibeaj's faction seems to have been more controversial and based on a technicality. Despite the fact that Lulzim Basha, the former PD leader, had resigned in March 2022 and delegated his responsibilities to Enkelejd Alibeaj, the leadership change had not been registered through the courts. Hence, the Election Commission took the view that one symbolic document – the Solemn Declaration that the party would not take part in vote-buying, receive illegal funds and would take part in the elections honestly and with integrity – had to be signed by Basha, rather than Alibeaj. This was deemed sufficient grounds to reject the request to represent the PD in the elections submitted by Alibeaj's faction.

Alibeaj's wing of the Democratic Party is currently appealing the Central Election Commission decision, yet there is a very real possibility that it will not be able to take part in the elections as the Democratic Party. For its part, Berisha's wing of the Democratic Party appears set to compete in the elections together with former president Ilir Metas's Freedom Party and run on its lists. In such a scenario, Albania's biggest opposition party could end up not being formally present on electoral ballots in the May local elections.

There are other smaller parties aiming to carve out a space for themselves in the upcoming local election though what, if any, success they will have remains to be seen. One of them, a group of left-wing young outsiders organised as "Levizja Bashke", has had a rather rough ride. They requested to be registered as a party on January 9th this year and the relevant court has, by law, 30 days to register them. However, the presiding judge decided to hand down the decision on their registration on March 7th, well beyond the legal deadline and a few days after another deadline that the parties have to register themselves at the Central Election Commission for participation in the local elections. The Commission decided to apply the law and refused to register them after the deadline, although in the past it has been much more tolerant with such requests. Levizja Bashke leader Arlind Qorri is now collecting signatures to

run as an independent candidate in Tirana. Yet the Municipal Police is harassing his volunteers, taking the view that pavements are municipal property where they have no right to stay and collect signatures without permission. Meanwhile, a request for permission was promptly denied by municipal authorities.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

Albania's bilateral relations with its neighbours were largely calm and uneventful over the last two months.

The Government of Albania has been largely quiet and stood aside during the EU and US mediated negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, to the surprise of many who expected it to take a clearer stance in backing Kosovo.

Meanwhile, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama visited Montenegro on February 27th. During the official visit, Rama signed several agreements with his Montenegrin counterpart, Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic. Among others, they agreed to the opening of a new border crossing and the construction of a bridge over the Buna river.

SECURITY

The security situation remained calm and uneventful in Albania during the previous two months.

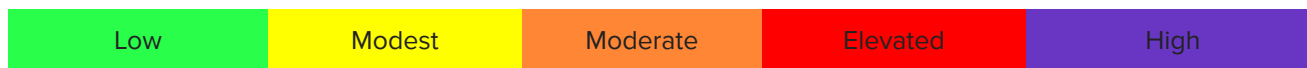
LOOKING FORWARD

- **Opposition participation in elections:** Given the ongoing dispute between the different wings of the Democratic Party over who controls the party, there is a very real possibility that the party will not be able to compete in the local elections under its name. Such a situation could contribute to increasing political tensions ahead of the elections, as well as to some extent undermining their legitimacy. It remains to be seen if either fraction of the Democratic Party will attempt to organise protests if they are prevented from taking part in the elections under their party's name.
- **Local elections:** The local elections are scheduled for 14th May. However, as the opposition is in disarray, there is little to expect in terms of change. Doubtless the opposition will take back control of some local authorities, but a major swing away from the Socialists seems unlikely. The ruling Socialist Party has started to distribute a mobile app, which apparently manages to count the number of interactions of the user with various government social media pages. The opposition is claiming that the app is being used to violate public employees' freedoms by cataloguing their interactions with ruling party social media pages and by threatening those who fail to show support through likes, shares or comments with dismissal. Between now and May 14th, the political atmosphere in Albania is set to become a lot more tense.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

At the end of January, Bosnia’s State Parliament voted into office a new Council of Ministers, with Borjana Kristo of the HDZ as the new Chair. In this way, the new ruling majority made up of the HDZ, SNSD and ‘Coalition of Eight’ was confirmed at the State level. Prior to this, the Republika Srpska entity also elected a new government in the second half of December. This leaves the Federation as the missing part of the Bosnian ‘government puzzle’. Despite a coalition agreement signed in November between the Coalition of Eight and the HDZ, the SDA has managed to block the process of government formation in the Federation, at least for the time being. Currently, there seems no easy way out of the deadlock in the Federation entity, which may ultimately require intervention by the Office of the High Representative to ensure that the Federation can finally elect a new government for the first time since 2015. Regardless of the outcome of this power struggle in the Federation, the prospects for improved governance and reforms in Bosnia remain bleak.

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



GOVERNMENT STABILITY

The process of government formation following Bosnia's October national elections has proceeded at a relatively quick pace – by the standards of Bosnia's complex institutional set-up – but now appears to have become stalled once again. At present, it remains unclear if and when the process will be able to resume again.

As widely expected – and discussed in our previous report – the State-level Council of Ministers was voted into office on January 25. In total, 23 out of 42 MPs in the State House of Representatives voted for the new government, which is a coalition between the Bosnian Serb Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and its junior partners, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ BiH) and its partners, and what was initially a coalition of primarily Bosniak parties known as the 'Coalition of Eight'. The 'Eight' initially included the Social Democratic Party (SDP), People and Justice (NiP), Our Party (NS), People's European Alliance (NES), Bosnian-Herzegovinian Initiative, Movement for Democratic Action (PDA), For New Generations and the Party for BiH (SBiH). Subsequently – and ahead of the vote for the Council of Ministers - NES and SBiH distanced themselves from this coalition, which is now referred to as the 'Coalition of Six' by some observers.

The HDZ's Borjana Kristo thus became the new Chair of the Council of Ministers. Meanwhile, the SNSD's Zoran Tegeltija, the previous Chair of the Council of Ministers, became the new Finance Minister. NiP's Elmedin Konakovic has become the new Foreign Minister, while Edin Forto, the NS leader, becomes the Minister of Communication and Traffic. Particularly controversial has been the election of Nenad Nesic, the leader of the Democratic People's Alliance (DNS) and an SNSD coalition partner, to the position of Minister of Security, given that he has in the past been accused of serious corruption and links to organised crime. The nomination of Sevlid Hurtic for Minister of Human Rights and Refugees has also been controversial, given that the proposal has come from the RS. Given that Hurtic is a Bosniak, on one level his nomination could be seen as a concession to Bosniak parties at the State level.

On the other hand, some Bosniak politicians have accused him of being RS President Milorad Dodik's 'Trojan horse' within the Council of Ministers.

The formation of the State-level Council of Ministers was preceded by the formation of a new government in the Republika Srpska entity. The new government, headed by incumbent Prime Minister Radovan Viskovic, was voted into office on December 21st with the votes of 51 of the 83 members of the National Assembly. As before, the SNSD will be the backbone of the ruling coalition, which will include the Socialists, United Srpska, Demos and other small parties.

However, government formation efforts in the Federation entity have hit a major hurdle. At the end of November 2022, the Coalition of Eight and HDZ had signed a coalition agreement stipulating that SDP leader Nermin Niksic would be their candidate for the Prime Minister of the Federation, while Kristo would head the Council of Ministers. In addition to this, they also agreed that while the HDZ would nominate the Bosnian Croat Federation President, the 'Eight' would nominate the Bosniak and Bosnian Serb vice-presidents of the Federation.

However, these plans were disrupted by the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), which - in part through luck and in part through pressure, bribery and blackmail - managed to secure a narrow majority in the Bosniak caucus of representatives in the Federation Parliament's House of Peoples, together with the Democratic Front. This meant that the SDA, rather than the Coalition of Eight, was in a position to elect the Bosniak member of the Federation's three-person presidency. On February 20, the Federation Parliament thus elected Lidija Bradara (HDZ), Igor Stojanovic (SDP) and Refik Lendo (SDA) to the three person presidency.

Initially, the three could not agree on who would be president and who would be the vice-presidents. Bradara and Stojanovic agreed that the former should be Federation President, while Stojanovic and Lendo should be the vice-presidents. However, Lendo challenged this, hence the dispute had to be resolved by the Federation Parliament's House of Representatives, which upheld the proposal of Bradara and Stojanovic.

While this small dispute has been settled, a much bigger one remains. While the Coalition of Eight (now the Coalition of Six) and the HDZ agreed to form a coalition government in the

Federation entity and have the votes to do so in the Federation's House of Representatives, procedurally this cannot happen until the three-person Federation Presidency agrees to hand the mandate to form the government to the candidate of the HDZ-Eight/Six coalition. Yet the SDA's vice-president Refik Lendo is refusing to agree to hand the Prime Minister's mandate to Nermin Niksic, the chosen candidate of the HDZ and Eight/Six. Indeed, Lendo – and the SDA – maintain that they must also be part of any ruling coalition in the Federation, threatening to block government formation unless this happens.

For their part, the HDZ and Coalition of Eight/Six refuse to agree to what they see as political blackmail. Consequently, the stage is set for a political deadlock very typical for Bosnian politics. Neither side seems to have any desire or motivation to budge, at least for the time being. In theory, the same Federation government of PM Fadil Novalic which was elected in 2015 could continue in a caretaker role as it has done since the 2018 national elections indefinitely.

However, this would be extremely bad for governance in the Federation – the Novalic government was elected so long ago that some ministers have died, while Novalic himself has been subject to arrest and investigation by law enforcement officials.

One obvious path for unblocking the government formation process would be for Bosnia's High Representative Christian Schmidt to intervene and remove Lendo's veto powers, in the spirit of the legal changes which he imposed in October 2022 to prevent the blockage of state institutions and government formation. While Schmidt seems reluctant to do this, many local observers believe that, if there is no other option, Schmidt – with the backing of the US and most European officials – will prefer to intervene than leave the Federation government formation process in a state of indefinite paralysis. Before this happens, US and other European officials will certainly lean on Lendo and the SDA to abandon their blocking tactics.

A complicating factor for Schmidt is that, aside from the fact that the SDA would bitterly oppose such an intervention, it may also not enjoy the support of the HDZ. The main Bosnian Croat party would not welcome any intervention which would, in the future, deprive it of similar

veto-mechanisms. The challenge for Schmidt and the OHR is thus to find a way to potentially bypass Lendo's current veto without imposing major change to the carefully calibrated mechanisms of ethnic power-sharing within the Federation.

In the meantime, regardless of how the current standoff is – or is not – resolved, it is important to note growing frustrations among the Bosniak public in the Federation – both among intellectuals, public figures, journalists, commentators and many ordinary voters. This frustration is being bred out of a sense that Bosniaks lack capable and competent leaders – let alone statesmen – who are capable of engaging with – and standing up to – Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik and Bosnian Croat leader Dragan Covic. From the point of view of many Bosniaks, Dodik and Covic are exploiting their own relatively firm grip over the Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat political scene to play off divided Bosniak politicians against each other. In the process of doing so – many Bosniaks feel – state institutions are being further undermined, sparking fears that this could lead to the breakup of the country. Adding salt to these wounds, US and some European officials seem focused on ousting the SDA and its leader Bakir Izetbegovic from power at all costs, while leaving Dodik and Covic unchecked.

In a recent interview for a local TV station, the head of Bosnia's Islamic Community, mufti Husein Kavazovic, made comments to the effect that Bosnia is defended in its institutions, but that if these institutions were to collapse as happened in 1992, Bosniaks needed to be ready to defend the State by arms if necessary. Such rhetoric was met with immediate condemnation from Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat officials, who described it as warmongering threats, as well as some international officials. Some local observers, however, commented that this was precisely a reflection of the state of political frustration among Bosniaks in the country.

Rather than calm tensions, true to form Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik is doing his best to antagonise Bosniaks. On December 28, the Republika Srpska entity Parliament adopted the Law on Immovable Property, which stipulates that land assets such as agricultural land, forests or rivers are the property of the entity, rather than the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina. While the RS has been keen to assert in the past that public property is owned by the entities rather than the State, Bosniak politicians in the Federation have rejected this, maintaining that such

property must be owned by the State. A similar law adopted in the Republika Srpska in early 2022 was suspended by Bosnia's High Representative and then struck down by the Constitutional Court the same year. Regardless, the RS Parliament adopted a similar law for a second time. Shortly before it was due to come into force at the end of February, High Representative Christian Schmidt again suspended it.

Dodik, however, vowed that Schmidt's decision would be ignored by the RS and that the law remained in force, claiming that a 'passing traveller' had no right to suspend the law. The 'passing traveller' dig at Schmidt and his authority was a reference to the fact that Dodik and other Republika Srpska entity officials challenge the legitimacy of Schmidt's appointment as High Representative. In later comments, Dodik threatened that the RS would secede if anyone threatened to take away what he described as its property.

Aside from antagonising the Bosniak public, Dodik's rhetoric is also undermining his Bosniak coalition partners at the state level – the Coalition of Eight/Six. In the process, it is further complicating the process of government formation in the Federation entity. All in all, after a brief period which showed signs of positive developments in the country, Bosnian politics seems to be sliding back to its more destructive settings.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

The question of who will be the opposition in Bosnia over the next few years is still not completely clear, even if it is coming into focus.

The situation is perhaps clearest in Republika Srpska, where the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) and Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) remain in opposition, despite mounting a credible challenge to Dodik and the SNSD in the last elections. For the time being, both parties remain in disarray due to internal feuding. The SDS is in the prolonged process of selecting a new leader, following the resignation of Mirko Sarovic. No date has yet been set for a party congress and it remains to be seen whether the contest to control the SDS will fuel any splits in the party. Meanwhile, the PDP is deeply split following a public feud between its two rising stars, Banja Luka Mayor Drasko Stanivukovic and Jelena Trivic, its presidential candidate who came close to unseating Dodik at the last election. One, or both, could well leave the party in the coming months.

The SDA has been pushed into opposition at the State level, after a long time in power. The same seems likely in the Federation, though it is much more uncertain at present. The big question remains what will happen to the SDA once in opposition. Dissatisfaction with SDA leader Bakir Izetbegovic has been evident within the party for years. Following the party's ouster from power, Izetbegovic's position looks much more delicate. Until recently, it seemed that his remaining opponents would soon be in a position to oust him from the party leadership. Yet the growing frustrations within the Bosniak political bloc and the apparent campaign of both Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat politicians together with parts of the international community to remove Izetbegovic and the SDA from power could yet backfire and help the long-serving SDA leader cling on to the party leadership.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

Bosnia's relations with neighbouring countries were relatively calm and uneventful.

Borjana Kristo, the new Chair of the State Council of Ministers, chose Zagreb as the destination for her first official state visit. While in Croatia, Kristo met with Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic and President Zoran Milanovic. The meetings were long on supportive rhetoric, but not much else. Plenkovic expressed his support for further electoral reforms in Bosnia-Herzegovina to ensure the upholding of equal rights for all communities – coded speak for ensuring that Bosnian Croat representatives are elected by Bosnian Croat voters – while also offering support on Bosnia's EU accession path. The possibility of building a gas interconnection which would deliver LNG from Croatia's Krk LNG terminal to Bosnia was also discussed, though this remains very much blocked by internal disagreements on the Bosnian side.

Expectations that relations between Bosnia and Kosovo could see improvement appeared to be dashed at the beginning of March. On November 3, the leaders of the Western Balkan Six had agreed on a set of agreements to facilitate freedom of movement in the region, among them an agreement to allow citizens to cross borders with ID cards only. In practice, this would have scrapped the current complicated visas that Kosovars need to secure in order to enter Bosnia. However, Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik suggested that he – and other RS officials at the State level – would not support legal adoption and implementation of these agreements within Bosnia, citing the lack of respect of the Kosovo Serb community's basic rights and the fact that the EU had also not yet permitted visa-free travel for Kosovars.

SECURITY

The security situation in Bosnia remains calm and uneventful for the time being.

In mid-January, an incident occurred in Sarajevo when masked hooligans broke into a hotel and threw teargas at a group of parents from neighbouring Serbia, who were in town with their children as part of a football tournament. Some observers claimed that the attack was politically motivated and intended to stir up ethnic tensions within the country, in so doing torpedoing the creation of a new State-level ruling coalition. Ultimately, if this was the intent behind the attack, political actors did not fall for the bait.

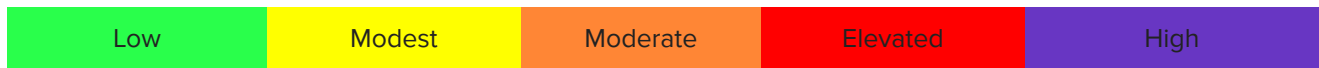
LOOKING FORWARD

- **Federation government formation:** over the next few weeks, heavy pressure will be exerted on the SDA and its Federation Vice-President Refik Lendo to cease blocking the formation of the Federation entity government. Should that fail, there will be few good options for de-blocking the government formation process. It is not impossible that a deal could be struck to include the SDA in a new governing coalition, though that is still hard to imagine at this point. An OHR intervention to remove Lendo's effective veto is a more likely scenario, though one that the international community in Bosnia would prefer to avoid.
- **SDA power struggle:** With the SDA set to be pushed into opposition at the State level and – most likely – in the Federation entity, the future trajectory of the party will become an increasingly explosive issue. There is strong discontent with party leader Bakir Izetbegovic and his leadership style within the party. Without the levers of power, Izetbegovic may no longer be able to keep a lid on internal dissent. Yet it is also hard to imagine a smooth transition of power within the party. Plenty of internal feuding and further fragmentation are the most likely outcome over the next year.
- **International community and Dodik:** with the OHR's rediscovered activism in Bosnian politics, it remains to be seen over the next few months whether Dodik will persist with separatist rhetoric and further attempts to pass constitutionally problematic laws. If he does so, he will likely place himself on a collision path with the OHR and international community.

Kosovo

Tensions in Kosovo have slowly calmed since the beginning of the year, even if they still remain relatively high after a tense end to 2022. Tentative agreement on a deal towards normalising relations between Belgrade and Pristina, reached at the end of February, holds out the prospect for a wider improvement in relations. Yet both sides feel that EU and US mediators are forcing many elements of a deal which they are reluctant to accept upon them. Consequently, the incentives are there for both sides to pursue actions which could undermine the deal. For the time being, all attention in Kosovo remains focused on ongoing diplomatic efforts to agree an implementation plan for the deal. Within Kosovo, perhaps the most relevant and impacting aspect of the deal will be the potential creation of an Association of Serb Municipalities during 2023, assuming implementation goes according to expected plans.

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	Elevated	Elevated	Modest
	Ethnic Unrest	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate



GOVERNMENT STABILITY

Compared to the high tensions which marked the second half of 2022 in Kosovo – and in particular the last month of the year – 2023 has got off to a relatively calm start, despite the occurrence of some inter-ethnic incidents – most notably the injuring of several Kosovo Serb youths on January 6th, Orthodox Christmas eve. As before, the Kurti government remains stable, with a solid majority in the Kosovo Parliament. The only small change on this front was the departure of one MP from Vetevendosje, yet this development will not fundamentally alter the stability of the ruling majority.

Following the removal of barricades erected by local Serbs in north Kosovo at the end of last year, a tense calm has returned to the area, though tensions remain high and an institutional vacuum persists. The four Serb-majority municipalities in north Kosovo remain without effective local administrations, after local Serbs walked out of Kosovo institutions back in early November. The same applies to the Kosovo police, judiciary and other institutions. A very basic police presence in the north is provided by units rotated from other parts of Kosovo, as well as special police units, which on the whole create more of a sense of insecurity for the local Serb community in the north, than security.

As tensions in north Kosovo began to subside, EU and US mediators once again resumed intense shuttle diplomacy efforts aimed at securing the agreement of both Belgrade and Pristina to the ‘Franco-German plan’ for normalising relations. Given that both Belgrade and Pristina seemed extremely reluctant to sign up to anything that involved substantial concessions to the other side, many observers remained understandably sceptical that a deal would be struck. Indeed, both Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic seemed to hope that the other would let them ‘off the hook’ by rejecting the deal. For Kurti, the creation of the Association of Serb Municipalities – something that he had dedicated much of his political career to resisting – was the chief obstacle to accepting the Franco-German proposal – and something that the Serbian side was particularly insistent had to be implemented before any deal could be agreed.

It was somewhat surprising, then, that following a meeting in Brussels on February 27th hosted by the EU's Foreign Policy chief Josep Borrell and Miroslav Lajcak, the EU's mediator-in-chief, it was announced that the two sides had agreed to the text of an agreement, albeit one which would not yet be signed. While according to Borrell the two sides had agreed that further negotiations over the wording of the agreement were not necessary, further negotiations were very much necessary over an annex setting out an implementation plan and the obligations of the two sides.

Shortly after the meeting, the EU published the wording of the agreement, which is not an agreement on normalising relations as such but an 'Agreement on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia'. It is apparent from the wording of the agreement that it is more of a stepping stone to eventual full normalisation of relations through a legally binding mutual agreement, albeit one which – if implemented in word and spirit – would bring about a major change in their relations. The first article of the agreement envisages that the two sides would develop 'normal good-neighbourly relations with each other on the basis of equal rights', including the recognition of mutual documents and national symbols – passports, customs stamps, licence plates, etc. The second article states that the two sides would adhere to the 'aims and principles laid down in the United Nations Charter, especially those of the sovereign equality of all States, respect for their independence, autonomy and territorial integrity'. Article 4 stipulates that 'neither of the two can represent the other in the international sphere or act on its behalf', specifically stating the Serbia would not object to Kosovo's membership in international organisations. Among other things, Article 6 notes that the two sides would continue to work towards a 'legally binding agreement on comprehensive normalisation of their relations'. Articles 7 and 10 make a nod to the need to create some kind of mechanism for self-rule by Kosovo Serbs, albeit avoiding the term Association of Serb Municipalities. Article 8 envisages more formalised relations between Belgrade and Pristina with the exchange of Permanent missions. Meanwhile, as a deal sweetener, Article 9 notes that international donors plan to establish a special investment and financial support package to fund joint projects.[1]

The final article of the agreement makes reference to an implementation roadmap in the form of an annex to the agreement. This, however, has still not been made public at the time of writing and appears to be a topic of negotiation. Given the past experience of all parties involved in these negotiations – Kosovo, Serbia and the EU and US – with Belgrade and Pristina avoiding the implementation of past deals, there is a clear intent to prevent this from occurring again. Exactly what the implementation annex will include – and what level of detail – remains to be seen. However, Belgrade has made it clear that the creation of the Association of Serb Municipalities – originally agreed in the Brussels Agreement of 2013 – is a condition for the implementation of the latest agreement.

Until now, creation of the Association has been something that Kurti and Vetevendosje have bitterly rejected, first while in opposition and then once in power. Indeed, Kurti had for months rejected the creation of the Association, refusing to budge under significant US and EU pressure. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic seems to have pinned his hopes that the Franco-German proposal might be sunk precisely by Kurti's rejection of the Association.

However, over the past month or so, Kurti seems to have moderated his rejection of the Association. This evolution seems to be a consequence of US pressure in particular, with US officials taking a firm line that Kosovo could not back out of its existing obligations and that if Kurti continued refusing to negotiate on the establishment of the Association, the US would find partners willing to discuss its creation. With some conditions – some more and some less realistic – Kurti appears to have inched in the direction of accepting that an Association of Kosovo Serb Municipalities will be created, though it is not clear if he has completely digested this. Quite what form it will take may not be known any time soon, but it seems unlikely that it will have powers akin to Bosnia's Republika Srpska entity, as many in Pristina had feared and Belgrade had hoped.

The next meeting of the two leaders has – tentatively – been pencilled in for March 18th in the North Macedonian town of Ohrid. At present, the expectation is that the two leaders could finalise – and perhaps sign the agreement and implementation annex – at this meeting, though

it is still far from clear whether this will happen or not. At this point, the next – practical – steps in normalising mutual relations will become clearer.

Even if the implementation annex is agreed, many observers still worry that actual implementation will remain a challenge. Going by the experience of the last decade or more of EU mediation efforts between Kosovo and Serbia, it would be surprising if implementation of all that is agreed actually did go smoothly. The fact remains that both Belgrade and Pristina are hostile to key parts of the current ‘normalisation package’, seeing it as something that is being forced upon them. Given this, they have strong incentives to try and sabotage it in the implementation phase – and, most likely, plenty of points at which they will be able to (try to) do so. Assuming that any signing ceremony on March 18th truly is the beginning of the end of the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia would be premature.

On a more practical level, both Belgrade and Pristina will have to reckon with the planned holding of local elections in north Kosovo at the end of April. The local election, originally scheduled for December 18th, were rescheduled for April 23rd given that it was not possible to hold the elections amidst barricades and a tense stand-off in north Kosovo in December. Yet it remains highly uncertain whether the elections will be held in April either. At the beginning of March, Srpska Lista has made it clear that it will not take part in the elections, given that its reasons for leaving Kosovo’s institutions – among them the failure to establish the Association – still stood. By March 13th, the deadline to register for taking part in the elections had passed without Srpska Lista registering.

It seems hard to imagine that local elections in the north could be held without the participation of Srpska Lista as the dominant political grouping among Kosovo Serbs, nor that Belgrade and Srpska Lista will allow such elections to be held. At the same time, Pristina will not want to be seen to be giving in to Belgrade and Srpska Lista. The stage is thus potentially set for yet another stand-off between Belgrade and Pristina in April. How they handle the holding or rescheduling of local elections in the four northern municipalities – i.e. whether they find a quick and smooth way to reschedule the elections for another date or use the opportunity for another escalation of tensions in the north – will be highly indicative regarding whether they

have any real intent to implement the latest agreement on a path towards normalising relations, or whether they plan to stick to 'business as usual'.

Meanwhile, the EU's Council of Ministers approved the long-awaited visa free travel for Kosovo at the beginning of March. According to the decision, Kosovars will be able to travel to the EU without visas either from November 1st if the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) becomes operational by then or, failing that, from January 1st 2024. The decision should mark the final step in what has been a visa liberalisation negotiation process running for more than a decade. It should also bring the rules for Kosovars wishing to travel to the EU in line with the rules (and freedoms) enjoyed by other residents of the region.

[1] The full text of the Agreement can be found here:

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-eu-proposal-agreement-path-normalisation-between-kosovo-and-serbia_en

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

Kosovo's opposition parties have struck somewhat different positions in relation to the deal which was made public on February 27th. Ramush Haradinaj, the leader of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) has been supportive of the deal, calling on Kurti and his government to accept it and arguing that it amounts to implicit recognition of Kosovo by Serbia.

On the other hand, the two biggest opposition parties – the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) and Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) – have adopted a critical stance, albeit one more aimed at Kurti than the internationally brokered deal as such. Specifically, they have attacked Kurti's failure to secure mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia as part of the negotiations. However, few observers take such criticism too seriously. In reality, the PDK and LDK are taking the opportunity to score points at Kurti's expense, particularly given his rigid stance in the past towards negotiations with Serbia.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

With the exception of Serbia, Kosovo's relations with its other neighbours were calm and uneventful.

SECURITY

The security situation in Kosovo remains fragile after the tensions of late 2022. While it has calmed significantly over the last month or so, there is still plenty of potential for inter-ethnic incidents and fresh tensions across Kosovo. Particularly problematic from a security point of view is the lack of local Serb police officers in the Serb-populated north of Kosovo. The situation in the north is further complicated by the heavy presence of special police units made up exclusively of ethnic Albanian personnel, which often deploy heavy handed tactics towards the local Kosovo Serb community. A particular source of friction over the last month have been plans by the government in Pristina to build a new police base on land expropriated from local Serb residents in the north of Leposavic municipality.

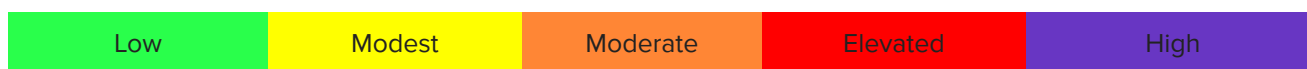
LOOKING FORWARD

- **Normalisation Agreement:** While Belgrade and Pristina have tentatively agreed upon the core details of the agreement on the path to normalising relations, the deal still remains far from fully approved, let alone signed, ratified or implemented. A crucial component of the deal – the implementation annex – is yet to be thrashed out.
- **Association of Serb Municipalities:** Given the recent determination by US officials to push forward with the creation of the Association of Serb Municipalities, it will be important to watch for any signs of progress in this regard. The implementation annex of the agreement on the path to normalising relations should provide more details of the timeline regarding setting up the Association.
- **Local elections in the north:** Local elections are scheduled to be held in four Serb-majority municipalities in north Kosovo on April 23rd. However, Srpska Lista, the main party representing Kosovo Serbs, is refusing to take part, meaning that it will be hard or impossible to hold the elections. Whether Belgrade and Pristina find a way out of this situation or use it to inflame fresh tensions in north Kosovo will be an important clue regarding whether they genuinely wish to normalise relations, or whether they wish to continue with 'business as usual'.

Montenegro

Following the failure of efforts to form a new government at the end of last year and beginning of this year, political attention in Montenegro has shifted to the coming presidential elections. The first round of voting is scheduled for March 19th, with a second-round run-off due two weeks later. By the beginning of April, Montenegro should have a new president, but the outcome of the election is wide open and hard to predict. Current President and veteran Montenegrin leader of three decades Milo Djukanovic faces six challengers, at least two of whom have a good chance of unseating him. Zooming out of the presidential race, the political parties are also using the elections to test their relative strength compared to one another. The lessons they draw from this will shape their preferences regarding the possibility of organising early Parliamentary elections.

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



GOVERNMENT STABILITY

On January 16th Danijela Djurovic, the Speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament, formally set the date of the country's Presidential elections for March 19th. Ever since then, political life in the country has been focused on the presidential election race.

One somewhat unusual feature of the presidential election race has been the fact that a clear line-up of candidates in the election has been slow to emerge. Indeed, the presidential election campaign has involved as much manoeuvring over who would run as over how certain candidates could be prevented from running. It was only on March 4th that the final line-up of candidates became apparent, which is also perhaps why any reliable, publicly available opinion polling data is lacking.

After it became apparent that the 'anti-DPS' grouping of parties which won the August 2020 Parliamentary elections would not field a joint candidate for the presidency, the Democratic Front's (DF) Andrija Mandic became one of the first candidates to confirm his bid for the presidency. While Mandic is the leading figure of the DF, his candidacy is nevertheless somewhat surprising, as Mandic has a track record of being a deeply divisive figure, associated with ethnic Serb nationalist politics and as such off-putting to many voters opposed to the DPS and its leader, Milo Djukanovic. In recognition of this fact, Mandic's campaign has sought to present a more moderate face of the DF candidate, who has sought to atone for his divisive past rhetoric and present a more conciliatory face to voters. Most analysts believe that, while such gestures are noteworthy, they come too late to make much of a difference in the current election campaign.

Another early declaration to run for the presidency came from Milojko Spajic, one of the leaders of the Europe Now movement. Spajic and Europe Now's other leader, Jakov Milatovic, are in many ways seen as the rising stars of Montenegrin politics, particularly after their strong performance in the October 2022 local elections, when their Europe Now movement managed to unseat the DPS from power in the capital Podgorica. On February 16th, Europe Now submitted the necessary signatures for Spajic's candidacy. However, even before this had happened, in an unusual move, the Montenegrin State Election Commission (DIK) sent a

request to its Serbian counterpart, requesting information regarding whether either Milojko Spajic or Andrija Mandic had residency in Serbia and, by extension, were Serbian citizens. Under Montenegrin law, citizens are not permitted to have dual citizenship, except if the citizenship of Serbia was gained before 2006. In the past, Spajic had claimed that he was not a citizen of Serbia.

Even more unusual was the speed with which DIK received an answer from the Serbian Ministry of Interior, which responded that while Mandic did not have residency in Serbia, Spajic did. On the basis of this response, Mandic's candidacy was confirmed, while Spajic's was rejected by DIK. That Spajic had misled the Montenegrin public and possibly broken the law was clear. Yet it was also apparent to most observers that DIK had shown an unusual agility in seeking to verify rumours regarding the Serbian citizenship of Spajic and Mandic before they had even submitted their candidacies. Indeed, many experts in Montenegro argued that DIK had no obligation – or right – to delve into this. It is noteworthy that DIK members themselves were split over whether to send such a request to Serbian authorities, with only DPS and DF representatives in DIK voting in favour. The speed with which Serbian authorities responded also raised eyebrows in Montenegro. Spajic, as well as a number of local analysts and observers in Montenegro, expressed, in various ways, a suspicion that the DF and DPS had colluded, together with the Serbian Government, to act in concert so as to exclude the strongest candidate in the presidential elections.

These claims are far from lacking in credibility. The Democratic Front and its candidate, Andrija Mandic, have for long enjoyed the backing of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which therefore had an interest in seeing Spajic removed from the race. Similarly, the DPS' Milo Djukanovic only confirmed his candidacy in the presidential race after his strongest rival – Spajic – had been disqualified by DIK.

Given DIK's decision to reject Spajic's candidacy on February 18th, Europe Now opted to put forward former Economy Minister Jakov Milatovic, who had run for the Mayor of Podgorica in the October local elections, as its presidential candidate. Milatovic's candidacy was confirmed on March 3rd by DIK, after some wrangling over whether Europe Now had the right to put forward another candidate at all.

Following Spajic's disqualification, Democratic Montenegro also decided to put forward its leader Aleksa Becic as its candidate for the presidency. In addition to Becic, Djukanovic, Mandic and Milatovic, the presidential race will also feature Draginja Vuksanovic of the Social-Democratic Party, Goran Danilovic of United Montenegro and Jovan Radulovic, an independent candidate from Podgorica.

As already noted, there is no reliable, publicly available opinion polling data in which to ground any analysis of how the presidential race will pan out. It is evident from the line-up of candidates that the race will go to a second-round run-off, which will take place two weeks after the first round.

Despite the lack of polling data, most observers expect that Djukanovic will go through to the second round. Despite the fact that the DPS has been constantly losing support since its key defeat in August 2020, the party still holds sway over perhaps the biggest block of voters on the otherwise fragmented Montenegrin political scene.

The main question thus remains who will head into the second round with Djukanovic as his challenger. Vuksanovic, Radulovic and Danilovic can be safely ruled out. Had Spajic been successful in his bid to enter the presidential race, he would have been a clear favourite. Few observers believe that Becic will make it through to the second round, even if this cannot be ruled out. Yet the race for runner-up to Djukanovic in the first round appears to be between Mandic and Milatovic.

Milatovic and Becic both primarily appeal to the same block of centrist voters who are put off by the divisive nationalist Montenegrin politics of the DPS and the nationalist Serb politics of the DF. This block of voters combined is likely larger than the block of votes on which the DF can rely. Yet with two candidates competing for these votes, there is a strong chance that this vote will split, allowing Mandic to forge ahead into second place.

Whether Milatovic or Mandic become the runner up to Djukanovic will thus, in all likelihood, depend on how well or poorly Becic performs. The popularity of Becic and the Democrats appears to have been sliding since the rise of Europe Now, which has encroached on its block of supporters. It is entirely possible that many Becic and URA supporters will vote tactically for

Milatovic in the first round to prevent Mandic from making it to the second round. Moreover, as the Podgorica elections in October showed, Milatovic and Europe Now also have the ability to peel away some of the DPS' voters.

The presidential race is thus wide open. Were Milatovic to make it to the second round, it seems that he would be the favourite to beat Djukanovic, given that the block of anti-DPS voters who want to see Djukanovic and his party ousted from power is thought to be larger than the DPS' remaining base of support. On the other hand, a second round featuring Djukanovic and Mandic would be a much more closely fought race. While a majority of Montenegrin voters want to see the DPS out of power, Mandic is off-putting to enough of them that many would choose to stay at home rather than vote for either candidate. Some, particularly ethnic minority voters, would likely vote for Djukanovic simply to prevent Mandic from winning.

Aside from the obvious contest for who will become head of state, the presidential race is also an opportunity for Montenegrin political parties to test their standing with voters ahead of any Parliamentary elections. The last effort to form a new government led by Miodrag Lekic has largely been abandoned. Although there has been some recent speculation that it could be revived, the chances for this seem very slim. In any case, no serious developments can be expected on this front before the presidential elections are out of the way. What happens after that will for good measure depend on what different parties conclude about their standing with voters during the course of the presidential race. In principle, the Abazovic government could limp on in a caretaker role indefinitely if political parties cannot agree on dissolving Parliament. However, a Parliamentary election some time before the summer would seem like the more likely outcome, particularly as a population census awaits Montenegro in the autumn.

Meanwhile, Montenegro took an important step towards fixing the judiciary and, indeed, stabilising the political system as a whole with the election of three new judges to the Constitutional Court on February 27th. The Constitutional Court had been left without a functioning quorum in September 2022, when judge Miodrag Ilickovic retired, leaving only three of the seven judges of the Court in position. From the point of view of the smooth holding of elections, the Constitutional Court plays a key role, as the last instance of appeal. Given that

it had no functioning quorum, several appeals to the Constitutional Court relating to the local elections in Podgorica and Pljevlja last October could not be ruled upon, holding up the implementation of the results of the election indefinitely.

Had the three judges not been elected, the same situation could have occurred in the context of the presidential elections, which could have become delayed indefinitely. This danger has now been removed in principle, though the risk remains that the politicised Constitutional Court could find itself split evenly, given the even number of judges presently sitting on the Court.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

Determining who the ‘ruling’ and ‘opposition’ parties in Montenegro are at present is not a simple task. In principle, the parties which have ministers in the current government have some nine MPs in the 81 seat Parliament. Previously, the Abazovic government was elected with the votes of the DPS and Social Democratic Party (SDP), which have since withdrawn their support. Now, the government – in a caretaker mandate – enjoys the support of the DF and Democrats as well, in a minority capacity.

It thus makes sense to refer to the DPS and the SDP as the ‘opposition’, as well as the smaller Social Democrats and, not least, Europe Now (ES), the rising star of Montenegrin politics. At the same time, ES is ideologically closer to the block of anti-DPS parties – the DF, Democrats and URA – which are part of the current loose ruling majority.

The picture becomes even more complicated when discussing who the opposition is in the context of the presidential elections, as the ‘opposition’ DPS’ candidate is current Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic.

Nevertheless, if the DPS is perceived as an ‘opposition’ party, then it makes sense to discuss its presidential candidate in the context of the opposition. Until the end of February, it remained unclear if Djukanovic would run for a second term in the presidential elections. Djukanovic had made noises suggesting that it would be better to let new faces enter the political arena, thus hinting that he would not run again. Some sources close to the DPS argue that Djukanovic wished to put forward Ivan Vukovic, one of the DPS vice-presidents and until October’s elections the Mayor of Podgorica. Yet this plan did not seem to enjoy much backing within the party. One faction, led by former Prime Minister Dusko Markovic, initially pushed veteran former DPS politician Milica Pejvanovic-Djurisic to become the DPS’ presidential nominee, but Djukanovic did not favour her as a candidate. Markovic himself also seems to have mooted putting his name forward as a candidate, something that Djukanovic did not wish to see happen.

In the end, Djukanovic seems to have decided to run at least in part to prevent internal party struggles from spinning out of control.

For both Djukanovic and the DPS, much is at stake in these elections. A victory for Djukanovic would help stabilise the party and could perhaps stop or slow the constant haemorrhaging of support it has seen since August 2020. On the other hand, defeat and ouster from this position of power would likely speed up the shedding of the party's voters and could even bring about fragmentation of the party.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

Relations with Montenegro's neighbours have been largely quiet and uneventful as the country has been focused inward on the presidential elections.

SECURITY

The security situation in Montenegro remained calm and uneventful over the previous two months.

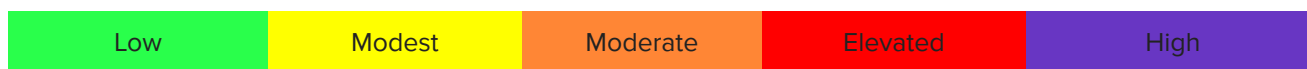
LOOKING FORWARD

- **Presidential elections:** the coming presidential elections will be an important test of popular support for the different political parties in the country. They also offer an opportunity for Montenegro to complete its transition from DPS rule and – perhaps – make a break from the style of ethnically divisive politics of the last couple of decades, depending on who is ultimately elected president. At the same time, a particularly close election result – which could be contested by one or more parties – has the potential to destabilise the country's fragile political system.
- **Government formation/Parliamentary elections:** efforts to form a new government in Montenegro seem to have been abandoned for the time being. At present all political attention is focused on the Presidential elections, but the ongoing government crisis will return to focus once Parliamentary elections are out of the way. In principle, the best way out of the current political dead end in Montenegro would be fresh Parliamentary elections, perhaps in June. Whether this happens or not will depend as much on the calculations of different parties regarding how they would fare in the elections as anything else.
- **Judicial appointments:** While the appointment of three Constitutional Court judges gives the highest judicial institution in the country a functional quorum once again, there is still one judge to be elected for the Court to have a full panel of judges. Electing the seventh judge is important, as it would ensure that the court has an odd number of judges and cannot split evenly in handing down rulings.

North Macedonia

The SDSM-led Government of Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski has carried out a cabinet reshuffle which dragged on in February and into early March and brought the opposition Alliance for Albanians into government. The reshuffle was intended to expand the Government majority in the North Macedonian Parliament. However, given that it sparked the departure of several MPs from the ruling majority – as well as that several other MPs from DUI may (or may not) have left the ruling majority – the net result is marginal at best. When it comes to pushing through constitutional amendments, the Kovacevski Government has still not found some 7-8 hands in the opposition camp, which it needs in order to pass the changes to the constitution to include Bulgarians as an officially recognized minority and – in doing so – enable the country’s EU accession negotiations to make headway. Formal and informal negotiations with the opposition will now begin in earnest, but the make or break moment for the constitutional amendments will likely come in the autumn.

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



GOVERNMENT STABILITY

On March 2nd, the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM) led Government of Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski completed a cabinet reshuffle after a prolonged, three-week Parliamentary debate, which the opposition did its best to drag out for as long as possible. Yet the reshuffle will do next to nothing to change the fundamental problem facing the Kovacevski Government – a lack of vision, ideas and ability for how to deliver better governance and living standards to the country. Since coming to power in 2017, SDSM-led governments have had a number of successes (not all of which have been popular domestically) on the foreign policy stage. However, the SDSM's popularity is sinking from one low to another in recent years, primarily due to disappointment over its failure to deliver on domestic reforms which would improve living standards, tackle corruption and bring about better governance.

The government reshuffle initiated in this first half of February was intended to increase – and thus stabilise – the ruling coalition's majority in Parliament from around 64 MPs to some 72 MPs by bringing on board the ethnic Albanian Alliance for Albanians, until then part of the opposition. Aside from stabilising the ruling coalition and expanding its majority, the government reshuffle was also intended to consolidate a wider block of political parties in favour of European accession and – in particular – support changes to the North Macedonian constitution required for accession negotiations to begin in earnest. These constitutional changes, as per the 'French proposal' of 2022 which helped remove the Bulgarian veto on opening EU-North Macedonia accession negotiations, are a condition for continuing the accession negotiations with the EU.

Within the new Kovacevski Cabinet, the Alliance for Albanians (AA) will have three ministries. Its ministers include Krenar Loga who becomes the new Justice Minister, Fatmir Mexhiti who takes over the Health Ministry and Azir Aliu who will lead the Ministry of Information Society and Administration. In addition to this, the SDSM's Kaja Shukova becomes the new Minister of Environment.

Yet while the government reshuffle process was completed – albeit after a tortuous three week debate in Parliament – it did not quite produce the planned results. The AA may have joined the government with its eight MPs, but Alternativa, another small ethnic Albanian party, left the government as a result. The AA and Alternativa are not on good terms, competing for similar votes. The government thus lost the support of three MPs due to Alternativa's departure. It also lost the support of MP Pavle Trajanov, the leader of Democratic Union, a tiny party which ran on the SDSM ticket in the last elections. Another independent ethnic Albanian MP, Kastriot Rexhepi, also appears to have left the ruling majority.

Finally, the support of a further two ethnic Albanian MPs from the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), the SDSM's main ethnic Albanian ally, also seems to be in question. The two have indicated that they no longer support the ruling majority, primarily due to internal DUI factional infighting. Yet their status (opposition or ruling majority) is not entirely clear and will become more clear when laws are voted on in future.

Prior to the government reshuffle, the Kovacevski Government had been thought to enjoy the support of some 64 MPs in the North Macedonian Parliament. Following the reshuffle, the number is not clear – it seems that it has the support of at least 65 MPs, while depending on the status of the two DUI MPs, it may have the support of 67 MPs.

To add complexity to the Parliamentary arithmetic, it seems very likely that all 7 of the MPs who have left (or have threatened to leave) the ruling majority would still vote in favour of any constitutional amendments to include Bulgarians in the North Macedonian constitution, as there is basic agreement that this is of crucial importance for the country.

In the same way that the government reshuffle has ultimately not done much to expand the size of the ruling majority, it has not done much to advance the cause of assembling a two-thirds majority for changing the constitution. As noted above, part of the goal behind bringing the AA into government was to more firmly bind together a bloc supportive of the constitutional amendments in order to strengthen the Government's real and psychological

hand in negotiations with the VMRO-DPMNE. Given the chaotic way in which the reshuffle has unfolded, this has not been achieved.

Nevertheless, the Kovacevski Government can still rely on some 73-74 votes in favour of constitutional amendments to include the Bulgarian minority in the constitution, once this is tabled. Yet for the amendments to be adopted and take effect, the Government will still need the support of at least 7 or 8 MPs either from the VMRO-DPMNE or Levica, another opposition party, in order to reach at least 80 votes in Parliament.

So far, there is not much sign of the VMRO-DPMNE giving its support to the constitutional amendments. The main opposition party seems to be angling for a deal, whereby in return for supporting the constitutional amendments, openly or at arms-length (by allowing a minimal number of its MPs to vote in favour), the SDSM would agree to the holding of early Parliamentary elections before its term comes to an end. Given that the SDSM has little chance of retaining power in any future elections, it also has little incentive to concede the holding of early elections.

Should the VMRO-DPMNE refuse to lend its support to the constitutional amendments, a 'plan B' for the Kovacevski Government would be to try to co-opt 7-8 VMRO-DPMNE MPs and attempt to convince them in favour of the constitutional amendments. Something similar happened when the SDSM pushed through the ratification of the change to the country's name, yet it left a bad mark on the SDSM's reputation, as it was widely seen that corrupt incentives were used to persuade these opposition MPs to support the name change. Whether a much weakened SDSM could engineer something similar, even if it wanted to, remains unclear.

In any case, the Government's tentative plan, at present, seems to be to launch formal consultations with political parties on the constitutional amendments, with the goal of putting forward a draft of the proposals before the summer, perhaps including other tweaks to the constitution as well. These could then perhaps be brought to a vote in the early autumn. At this point in time, it is hard to predict whether the amendments will be pushed through. However,

one factor working in favour of the Kovacevski Government is that the VMRO-DPMNE senses that a return to power is within its reach. Given this, the party may calculate that it is better to oppose the constitutional changes but quietly permit some of its MPs to support them, so that it does not have to face this issue when it comes to power.

Government officials and political analysts in North Macedonia are also keeping an eye on the upcoming Parliamentary elections in neighbouring Bulgaria, which are due on April 2nd. However, it is far from clear whether the outcome of the elections will be a government more or less sympathetic to Skopje. Indeed, it is far from clear whether Bulgaria will be able to form a government at all after what seems set to be another inconclusive election.

In the meantime, tensions between the two countries continue to be stoked by nationalist groups and political actors using a host of historical disagreements and grievances. On February 4th, North Macedonia celebrated the birth of Goce Delchev, an Ottoman-era revolutionary and nationalist freedom fighter who fought for liberation from the Ottomans in historic Macedonia and surrounding areas. While in North Macedonia he is celebrated as a Macedonian national hero, in Bulgaria, he is celebrated as a Bulgarian national hero. Rather than bring the two countries and nations together, the figure of Delchev divides them. While North Macedonia holds official celebrations of his birthday in Skopje, where he is buried, nationalist figures from Bulgaria also called on Bulgarians to attend. Among them was the MEP Angel Dzhambazki of the Bulgarian far-right VMRO party. In what was doubtless a move to stir up tensions ahead of the birthday celebrations, Dzhambazki proclaimed that 'Macedonia was and will be Bulgarian' and called on Bulgarians to attend the Delchev celebrations in Skopje *en masse*.

Not surprisingly, these words riled up nationalist groups in North Macedonia, with calls for Macedonians to rally and prevent those who would deny their identity from attending. On the day itself, police in Skopje were out in visible force on the streets to prevent any incidents. Some Bulgarians did manage to make it to Skopje to pay their respects, but a large number were held up for hours on the border due to a sudden failure of the passport control system on the North Macedonian side of the border.

A declaration adopted by the Bulgarian Parliament several days before the commemoration of Goce Delchev's birth condemning an alleged 'anti-Bulgarian campaign in Macedonia also did not help relations between the two countries. Meanwhile, on March 12th North Macedonia commemorated the 80th anniversary of the deportation of the country's Jewish community to Treblinka concentration camp in 1943. At the time, North Macedonia was under the occupation of Nazi-allied Bulgaria and carried out the deportations. Yet when North Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski noted during the commemorations that genuine reconciliation between Bulgaria and his country required an apology from Sofia for the deportation of Macedonian Jews, the words struck a raw nerve in Sofia. While official Bulgaria has taken pride in the fact that local authorities refused to deport Bulgarian Jews to Nazi-run concentration camps, they have sought to turn a blind eye to the deportations which Bulgarian authorities carried out in occupied parts of what is now North Macedonia.

In sum, relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia show little sign of improvement. On the contrary, nationalist circles on both sides seem to be jumping at any opportunity to mobilise against the other side. In the process, aside from tense official relations, hostility towards the other ethnic group also seems to be bubbling away at the level of ordinary Bulgarians and Macedonians.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

The opposition VMRO-DPMNE appears to feel that its return to power is approaching, buoyed by recent opinion polling figures which showed that it had pulled ahead of the SDSM significantly when it came to popular support among voters. The party is thus pushing for early Parliamentary elections and needling the Kovacevski government at every opportunity.

When it comes to the issue of the constitutional amendments to the North Macedonian constitution that need to be adopted in order for accession negotiations to continue, the VMRO-DPMNE faces an opportunity and a challenge.

On the one hand, the party is under strong European pressure not to block the adoption of the constitutional amendments. For its part, the VMRO-DPMNE is keen not to antagonise Western governments as it seeks to return to power, fearing that this might cost it some votes. Moreover, given that it expects to return to power following the next elections – due in 2024 at the latest – the VMRO-DPMNE may be calculating that it would be better for the SDSM to push through these constitutional changes – generally not popular with voters and particularly unpopular with VMRO-DPMNE voters – than for them to have to deal with their adoption if and when they come to power.

Consequently, the VMRO-DPMNE may well try to have its constitutional cake and eat it. In practice, this would mean that the party would not officially support the constitutional amendments. However, it could quietly turn a blind eye to some of its MPs raising their hands in favour of the amendments. However, there is still much uncertainty over how this will pan out.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

With the exception of testy relations with Bulgaria, North Macedonia's relations with its other neighbours have remained calm and uneventful. On March 18th, the North Macedonian town of Ohrid appears set to host an EU-backed meeting between the leaders of Kosovo and Serbia, where some kind of agreement on normalising relations could be signed. However, Skopje will have little more than a hosting role here.

SECURITY

The security situation in North Macedonia has been broadly calm and uneventful over the previous two months.

LOOKING FORWARD

- **Constitutional amendments:** For North Macedonia to move forward in its EU accession negotiations, it will need to deliver on the commitment to adopt constitutional amendments to include Bulgarians in the country's constitution as a recognized minority. Formal and informal talks on securing the support of opposition parties for the constitutional amendments have begun, but there is – so far – little sign of any kind of breakthrough. Not just the country's EU prospects, but also the stability of the government, will be shaped by the course of negotiations with the opposition over the next few months.
- **Government survival/early elections:** the ruling SDSM has engineered a government reshuffle and brought the Alliance for Albanians into government, but achieved little in terms of actually expanding the government's majority. Securing the support of the opposition VMRO-DPMNE could come with a price tag in the form of early Parliamentary elections, perhaps in late 2023 or early 2024. On the other hand, forcing the amendments through in the face of committed VMRO-DPMNE opposition could also prove destabilising.

Serbia

The Government of Prime Minister Ana Brnabic remains very stable, despite some modest turbulence in relations with the Serbian Progressive Party’s (SNS) junior coalition partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). Political life over the last few months in Serbia has generally been overshadowed by events in Kosovo and EU-mediated negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, which have occupied both Serbian leaders, the media and the public. Given US and EU pressure to strike a new deal on normalising relations, this is likely to remain the case in the coming months as well. The Agreement on a path to normalisation is deeply unpopular in Serbia and will not be easy for Vucic and the SNS to sell to the public. Both Belgrade and Pristina have strong motives to try to sabotage any deal during the implementation phase. Meanwhile, a more imminent problem appearing on the horizon are local elections in north Kosovo scheduled for the second half of April.

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



GOVERNMENT STABILITY

Political life in Serbia over the past couple of months has been anchored around developments in Kosovo and the EU mediated negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia. As in Kosovo itself, most other issues have been pushed to the margins of public attention. For the time being, much of the Serbian public, along with political actors, are still trying to understand the implications of the Agreement on a path towards normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia whose draft Vucic in principle accepted in Brussels on February 27th.

The government of Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic has been broadly stable over the last two months, enjoying a solid majority in the Serbian Parliament. However, there was some visible turbulence in the relationship between Vucic's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its junior coalition partner, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). The problems between the two long-standing coalition partners began during a two-day session of the Serbian Parliament, during which Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic was to brief Serbian MPs on the state of play in negotiations with Kosovo. In the event, the Parliamentary session, which began on February 2nd, turned into a two-day heated verbal brawl between the ruling SNS and opposition parties, which at times was on the brink of a physical brawl.

Not long after this session, senior SNS officials began to express their displeasure with the SPS. Darko Glisic, the head of the SNS Executive Committee, on February 6th accused the SPS of flirting with the opposition and 'sitting on two chairs'. Vucic himself made some veiled comments in which he expressed his dissatisfaction with the fact that SPS MPs had failed to support him during the Parliamentary session on Kosovo. In the next couple of days, SNS ministers and senior officials began to call for the holding of early elections to resolve the 'crisis' in the ruling coalition. Glisic even suggested that the SNS was willing to go into opposition.

Most observers – and even senior SPS figures – appeared to be genuinely confused as to what the latest 'crisis' was all about. Branko Ruzic, the SPS' Education Minister, argued that

the claims that the SPS was flirting with the opposition and sitting on two chairs did not have any grounding. Political analysts wondered whether the crisis was more manufactured than real and whether behind it was a plan to deliberately cause a government crisis and call early elections in order to evade US and EU pressure to agree to some kind of deal with Kosovo.

In the end, the 'crisis' proved to be a storm in a teacup. Two days after it began, Vucic and SPS leader Ivica Dacic patched up their disagreements. The SPS and SNS would continue their coalition and there would be no early elections. It would seem that what had angered Vucic so much was the rather passive behaviour of the Socialists during the Parliamentary session dedicated to Kosovo, where SPS MPs were conspicuously quiet, failing to come to Vucic's 'defence'. However, it seems that – beyond this – Vucic may have been angry at the SPS' general lukewarm support to the Agreement being pushed by EU and US mediators in the negotiations with Kosovo. In this sense, the criticisms of the SPS and threats of early elections can be seen as a public disciplining of the junior coalition partner.

When it comes to the EU and US brokered negotiations with Kosovo, the Serbian public is still trying to digest the implications of the draft Agreement on a path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia, which was finally revealed on February 27th. On the whole, the Agreement did not meet with a lot of support in most corners. This is hardly surprising, given that it would essentially bring Serbia's current foreign policy of trying to oppose and roll back Kosovo's international recognition at every step of the way to a halt. The Agreement commits the two sides to 'good neighbourly relations', commits – more or less - to mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity and the recognition of each other's documents and national symbols. Particularly controversial for Serbia was Article 4, which would commit it not to oppose Kosovo's accession to international organisations and renounce the right of either side to represent the other in the international sphere.

All of this would not only bind Serbia to ceasing with its active efforts to block the recognition of Kosovo's independence around the world and its integration into international institutions, but also amount to a de facto acceptance of Kosovo's independence. Clearly, no small leap for the Serbian public to swallow.

It was precisely for this reason that Vucic initially subtly sought to downplay the significance of the Agreement. He stressed that he had signed nothing and that the version of the Agreement made public on February 27th was just a draft, though one that would not change.

Nevertheless, he sought to give all those opposed to the deal a fig leaf of hope that he would not sign the Agreement. Further feeding the same hopes, Vucic made it clear that there would be no Agreement without the establishment of an Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo and implementation of other aspects of the Brussels Agreement. At the same time, Vucic expressed his belief that Kurti would in any case not agree to the Association, implying that Serbia would never have to implement the Agreement.

In this way, Vucic sought to neutralise the shock and potential anger among the segment of the Serbian public opposed to the Agreement. At the same time, he sought to shift the focus away from the Agreement and its contents to saying that he would never recognize Kosovo's independence and that Serbia would never agree to Kosovo's membership of the UN. By presenting these 'red lines', he was essentially setting up a straw man, aware that – for now – nobody was asking him to recognize Kosovo. At the same time, Serbia's agreement or disagreement to Kosovo's membership of the UN is largely irrelevant, as it has little or no power to decide whether Kosovo can or cannot join the UN.

So far, Vucic has done a fairly good job of utterly confusing the Serbian public regarding the substance of the negotiations. While insisting that he has signed nothing, feeding hopes that he will sign nothing, he is letting the reality of the agreement slowly sink in. For those opposed to the Agreement, it is hard to attempt to mobilise public opposition to something that has – apparently – been neither signed nor fully agreed, given that an implementation annex is still being negotiated.

Yet Vucic faces a major hurdle on this path in mid-March. According to current EU and US plans, Vucic and Kurti should meet on 18th March to formally agree – and perhaps sign – the implementation annex to the Agreement. If this happens, it will be much harder for Vucic to try

to maintain that he has signed nothing and agreed to nothing. Nevertheless, even if this happens, Vucic will try to 'wink' to the Serbian public that, regardless of whether an implementation plan has been agreed, it will never be implemented in practice. This has been something that he has already more or less subtly hinted to the Serbian public.

How successful Vucic will be in these efforts to contain opposition to an unpopular Agreement remains to be seen. In order to have any chance of selling the Agreement to the Serbian public he will – at the very least – need to be able to show that he has – or will very soon – secure the establishment of the Association of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo, one that gives a significant degree of autonomy to Kosovo Serbs.

Aside from Kosovo, there has also been some renewed speculation in Belgrade over the possibility that Serbia might have to align with sanctions against Russia. Vucic seemed to set off such speculation himself when, on March 9th, he declared that he could not 'swear' that Serbia would not impose sanctions against Russia at some point, while adding that he hoped it would not come to that. A few days later, Minister of Economy Rade Basta called on the Serbian Government to adopt a clear stance on aligning with sanctions against Russia, adding that he personally was in favour, as Serbia was already paying a high price for not imposing sanctions, one that was becoming unbearable. United Serbia, the party to which Basta formally belongs and a coalition partner of the SPS, officially distanced itself from Basta's views, as did SPS leader and Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic. On the other hand, SNS officials and ministers appeared to remain largely silent.

Finally, at the beginning of March, Vucic also launched something resembling a new movement tentatively named the 'People's Movement for the State'. That he was mooted the idea of forming a new movement wider than his SNS was something the Vucic had hinted at for some months. However, it was – and indeed remains – unclear to most observers how this new movement will look and what its purpose will be.

Vucic himself stated that the new movement did not mean the end of the SNS, but the creation of a wider, non-party organisation, open to different political parties, organisations, intellectuals

and other individuals. It thus remains to be seen how the movement will be organised. Yet why Vucic is choosing to launch such a new movement is perhaps the more interesting question. Some political observers believe that Vucic is aware that his own SNS is losing support, amidst corruption affairs and general popular discontent with the behaviour and actions of its officials. Consequently, he may be trying to 'rebrand' or 'reinvent' his party in a new guise. All of this may well be true – the movement does resemble Vucic's existing coalition which includes a number of smaller satellite parties which formally compete with the SNS in elections.

However, the timing of the launch of the movement – which overlaps with the publication of the Agreement on a path towards normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia – suggests that the negotiations with Kosovo are another motivating factor. According to this line of thought, Vucic is building a broad front of parties, organisations and individuals to provide him with political support in pushing through the Agreement with Kosovo.

Ultimately, time will tell what agenda Vucic has with his newly announced movement. Given that the SNS already has a broad coalition of parties around it, as well as non-party figures associated with it in various ways, an apt question is who else Vucic could convince to join this new movement. The SNS is already seen by many as several parties or political movements inside one oversized party. Yet if nothing else, the newly announced movement will serve as a handy distraction from other political developments for the Serbian public.

OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES

The growing revelations regarding the kind of deal that the US and EU mediated negotiations could produce, as well as its final publication on February 27th, have finally given part of the Serbian opposition a tangible topic with some traction among voters on which to attack Vucic.

The parties which have been most vocal in criticising Vucic over the proposed Agreement include Vuk Jeremic's People's Party, the far-right Dveri, the New Democratic Party of Serbia, the Oathkeepers and other smaller parties and organisations. All of these parties span the right and far-right of the political spectrum. In addition, other, less formal groups, have managed to stage several relatively small protests against the Agreement with Kosovo, including students of Belgrade University. However, to date, they have displayed little ability to mobilise wider, mass opposition to the deal. In this respect, it will be important to see whether the signing of any implementation annex provides additional wind in their sails.

The other, more pro-European and left leaning parties have been more muted. Some have hinted at their support for any kind of deal that could speed up Serbia's EU accession process. Others have criticised the lack of transparency surrounding the negotiation process and implications of the Agreement, albeit without necessarily opposing it.

REGIONAL RELATIONS

With the exception of Kosovo, Serbia's relations with its neighbours remained calm and uneventful.

SECURITY

The security situation in Serbia remained broadly calm, with a visible relaxation in the security environment following the removal of the barricades erected in north Kosovo by local Serbs in December.

LOOKING FORWARD

- **Relations with Kosovo:** Even more so than usual, Serbian politics is focused on relations with Kosovo and the situation in Kosovo. Belgrade is under strong international pressure to sign up to the Agreement on the path to normalising relations between Kosovo and Serbia. However, the Agreement is a bitter pill for Belgrade to swallow and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has already suggested that he will try to wiggle out of the deal's obligations if at all possible.
- **People's Movement:** Having long hinted that he planned to create a new movement in addition to his SNS, Vucic finally launched the long awaited People's Movement for the State at the beginning of March. Yet the nature of the movement, its membership or functioning still remain very unclear. Over the coming months, it will be important to look for more details of how the movement will function and what agenda Vucic might have behind its creation.

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 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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