



Situation room

**** CURRENT EVENTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS ****

Period under review: from 1 February 2023 to 15 February 2023.

[This report is based on publicly available sources to describe the situation, which may change rapidly.]

Relations between Belgrade and Pristina:

- **(2 February)** Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti stated during a session of the Kosovo Assembly that it is possible to implement the Community of Serbian Municipalities (ZSO) under six conditions, the first of which is that it must be in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo. He said that the community cannot be uni-national, that it must change its name and must not have executive powers. He insisted that before the establishment of this Community, "the illegal structures of Serbia in the north must be locked down and their illegal weapons handed over". He reminded that the ZSO is part of the final agreement and will be enforced only after mutual recognition.
- **(2 February)** After a heated debate in the Serbian Parliament during which Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić presented the current situation related to the negotiations within the framework of the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, a group of opposition MP's demanding Vučić's resignation blocked the work of the parliament. The events almost escalated to a physical incident.
- **(5 February)** The President of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani, stated in an interview with the Croatian *Jutranji list* that "it is dangerous to have a neighbour like Serbia", explaining further that NATO and their own forces will prevent the scenarios of the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić. In addition, Osmani rejected any possibility of partitioning the country.
- **(6 February)** Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti said on Monday, after a meeting with the European Union's special representative for the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, Miroslav Lajčak, that Kosovo accepts the EU's proposal for the normalisation of relations with Serbia. He wrote on Twitter that this proposal is a good basis for further discussions.
- **(6 February)** Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić met with the EU's special envoy for dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, Miroslav Lajčak, with whom he said he had an open and friendly conversation.
- **(6 February)** Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić addressed the citizens of Serbia on his Instagram profile and said "Mutual recognition?! Keep dreaming!". He also accused Rada Trajković, an adviser to Nenad Rašić, the Serbian minister in the Kosovo government, of being a western agent.
- **(7 February)** Some political representatives of Albanians and Bosniaks living in Serbia demanded that the same rights should be accorded to their communities in Serbia, as they apply to Serbs in the north of Kosovo.
- **(9 February)** President Aleksandar Vučić stated that until the ZSO is established, he can go to Brussels only as a tourist.
- **(9 February)** Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti posted on Facebook a list of eleven municipalities in Serbia governed by non-Serbian mayors, asking why Belgrade does not allow them to form "a uninational association, while demanding that it must be formed in Kosovo."
- **(11 February)** The founder of the Forum for Ethnic Relations, Dušan Janjić, commented that Russian Ambassador to Serbia Aleksandar Bocan-Harčenko, by declaring that Belgrade's position will influence Russia's position regarding Kosovo's membership in the United Nations, actually handed Serbia a hot potato. This message is different from the

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previous one stated by Sergey Lavrov and Vladimir Putin before the war in Ukraine, when they said that they would follow the position of Belgrade, but not in regards to Kosovo's status at the UN. Janjić estimates that the ambassador has transferred all responsibility for decisions to Vučić and the current government.

- **(11 February)** Related to the ambassador's statements that the final status of Kosovo will be defined "in other geopolitical conditions" after the end of the "conflict with the West on the territory of Ukraine", the former deputy chairman of the Serbian Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, Vesna Marković, estimated that Russia thus sent a clear message that it will continue using the open issues in the Balkans to achieve its goals related to the war in Ukraine.
- **(14 February)** During the session of the Kosovo Assembly Prime Minister Albin Kurti stated that he accepted the French-German proposal, because otherwise Kosovo would have entered into a confrontation with its allies.
- **(15 February)** The Serbian police arrested the leader of the far-right organization "Narodna patrola" Damjan Knežević and two other members of this organisation, who organised a protest rally in Belgrade on Wednesday, 15 February, during which they demanded that the authorities in Belgrade withdraw from negotiations with Kosovo. Members of the police prevented them from entering the building of the Serbian Presidency during the protest.

Serbia:

- **(3 February)** A Kremlin spokesman commented on Vučić's announcement that Serbia may have to impose sanctions against Russia, saying that Moscow understands the pressure of the West on Serbia and that it hopes for further improvement in relations between the two countries.
- **(3 February)** In an interview with *NI*, SSP Vice-President and head of the "United" parliamentary group, Marinika Tepić, stated that for a full ten years they have not known what Vučić is negotiating about and that this policy has clearly collapsed.
- **(4 February)** Dozens of supporters of the neo-Nazi group "Zentropa Serbia" gathered in the centre of Belgrade on the anniversary of the death of Milan Nedić, the prime minister of the quisling government during the Nazi occupation in the World War. II. Several non-governmental organisations warned that such marches take place without adequate reactions from the authorities.
- **(6 February)** The media in the country published some speculations that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić is considering early elections.
- **(9 February)** The European Parliament's rapporteur for Serbia, Vladimir Bilčik, presented the draft report for Serbia before the EP's external committee. Despite the fact that he highlighted progress in some areas, other members of the European Parliament voiced many criticisms of Serbia. Viola von Cramon, a reporter for the Green group, pointed out the most criticism. She emphasized the lack of real dialogue between the government and the opposition and problematised the tabloids that run dirty campaigns and are close to the ruling parties. She added that disinformation campaigns and the presence of *Russia Today* and *Sputnik* media in Belgrade are particularly worrying. "It is one thing not to impose sanctions on Russia, but it is quite another to allow the presence of platforms that spread the propaganda of Russian President Vladimir Putin from all the way from Zagreb to Skopje," von Cramon said.

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- **(13 February)** 19-year-old Russian citizen Ilya Zernov was attacked while trying to erase the inscription "Death to Ukraine" under the painting of the Wagner group in Belgrade.
- **(13 February)** A group of 12 Partizan FC fans were detained by Moldavian police at the airport in Chisinau, after which they were served with a decision banning them from entering Moldova. That decision was made shortly after Moldovan President Maja Sandu accused Russia of planning a violent overthrow of the country's leadership and of intending to use Serbian citizens for that purpose.
- **(14 February)** Russian President Vladimir Putin sent a letter to his Serbian colleague Aleksandar Vučić, in which he said that Russia appreciates Serbia's balanced foreign policy and supports its efforts to protect its territorial integrity.

Montenegro:

- **(1 February)** The Network for the Affirmation of the Non-Governmental Sector (MANS) announced they intend to file a criminal complaint against the director of the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption (ASK), on suspicion that she illegally obtained an official vehicle and assigned it to herself for almost a month of use. The car, with which she has been said to have travelled hundreds of kilometres during non-working hours, was supposed to have its license plates changed so that it would not be conspicuous.
- **(6 February)** According to the new agreement between Montenegro and the EU on operational activities, Frontex will extend its competence in border protection against migration to the borders with Albania, Kosovo, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- **(7 February)** Although it was announced that at least seven candidates would participate in the presidential elections in Montenegro scheduled for 19 March, only the leader of the pro-Russian Democratic Front (DF), Andrija Mandić, filed a formal candidacy.
- **(7 February)** The Constitutional Committee of the Montenegrin Parliament supplemented the list of four candidates for judges of the Constitutional Court, which it will propose to the Parliament for a vote. This will be the sixth attempt to elect the missing judges of the Constitutional Court, which has been blocked since September last year.
- **(9 February)** Abazović's technical government adopted an additional amendment to the Act on Confiscation of Assets Obtained by Crime that allows confiscation of property without prior accusation of a crime and without a judgment confirming that the property was acquired illegally. The European Commission (EC) has expressed its concern over the possible adoption of the proposed amendments, which do not take into account their previous recommendations, EC spokeswoman Ana Pisonero stated.

Bosnia and Herzegovina:

- **(February 2)** Members of the BiH presidency made a visit to the Pentagon. The US has expressed support for the strengthening of the BiH armed forces. The last time all three members of the Presidency visited Washington was in 2005.

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- **(7 February)** Russian Ambassador to BiH Igor Kalabuhov announced on Tuesday that Moscow will "proportionately react" to BiH's possible membership in NATO. In a post on the Russian embassy's Facebook page, Kalabuhov asserted that Russia does not pose a threat to BiH now, but added that this could change depending on future developments.
- **(7 February)** On Tuesday, the Special Department for War Crimes of the High Court in Belgrade convicted four former members of the Army of the Republic of Srpska (VRS) for war crimes committed against civilians of non-Serb nationality, mostly Bosniaks, in Štrpci in 1993. The four members of the VRS were accused of participating in the kidnapping and murder of 20 passengers from a train traveling between Belgrade and Bar. The victims were robbed, killed, and their bodies were thrown into the Drina river.
- **(9 February)** On Wednesday, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik publicly insulted the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt, whom he once again described as a "fake" and an "illegal" official.
- **(12 February)** On the morning of 12 February, Sarajevo was the city with the most polluted air in the world, with a pollution index of 199, according to data from the *AirVisual* website.
- **(15 February)** At the end of the two-day meeting of the defence ministers of the NATO member states, the Secretary General of the alliance, Jens Stoltenberg, announced that the member states will increase their support to BiH.

Croatia:

- **(6 February)** The Deputy Director of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) David Cohen and his colleagues visited the Security Intelligence Agency (SOA) in Zagreb on Monday. The topics of the conversation were bilateral cooperation between the two agencies and the current security situation in Europe.
- **(15 February)** Croatian MEP Tomislav Sokol (EPP/HDZ) posed two questions to Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi at the session of the European Parliament on Tuesday – what does the EU intend to do to prevent “the spread of the hegemonic concept of the Serbian world in Montenegro” and what mechanisms does the EU have at its disposal in order to force Serbia to introduce sanctions against Russia. Varhelyi answered his questions and sat with the microphone still on and said in Hungarian, “how many idiots are still here”, which provoked reactions from other MEPs. Members of the political group of European socialists and democrats, pointed out that Varhelyi repeatedly belittled attacks of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's on democracy and even expressed the suspicion that he personally helped Milorad Dodik's separatist efforts. Tomislav Sokol stated for *Jutranji list* that Varhelyi leads an unbiased policy against Serbia and Vučić.

North Macedonia:

- **(4 February)** Strict police protocols, a four-hour traffic jam at the border with Bulgaria, where Bulgarian citizens were waiting to enter, a tense atmosphere, and the arrest of three Bulgarian citizens are just some of the events that marked the celebration of the 151st anniversary of the birth of Goca Delčev, a historical figure claimed by both North Macedonia and Bulgaria.

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- **(9 February)** Eight years after the then-opposition member of Social Democrat party, later Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev published recordings of illegal wiretapping of the conversations of almost 26,000 citizens, the scandal has not seen a courtroom epilogue, and the promised justice reforms have not implemented, *Al Jazeera Balkans* reports.

Albania:

- **(11 February)** Several thousand protesters gathered in Tirana, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Edi Rama, accusing him of corruption and the spread of poverty in Albania. Protesters threw smoke bombs, Molotov cocktails and coloured balloons at the government building, which was guarded by strong police forces. The opposition claims that Rama used a former FBI official to finance "political lobbying" against Berisha in order to weaken the opposition. Charles McGonigal was a former high-ranking FBI official, who was arrested in the US in January for having connections with foreign actors. It is written in the indictment that he did not report the \$225,000 in cash that he received from a former agent of the Albanian secret service, and that he "maintained regular contact with the Albanian prime minister", who denies all the accusations.

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