#### Situation room

### \*\* CURRENT EVENTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS \*\*

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

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

# Relations between Belgrade and Pristina:

- (1 March) Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti claimed that Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić's statement that he will oppose Kosovo's membership in the United Nations (UN) represents a "clear violation of one of the points of the European proposal".
- (2 March) According to the High Representative of the European Union (EU) Josep Borell, the next meeting between Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti, which will take place on 18 March in Ohrid, will feature discussions on the implementation of Community of Serbian Municipalities (CSM) and the annex for the implementation of the European proposal.
- (2 March) Opposition members in the Kosovo Assembly accused Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti of accepting an agreement with Serbia in Brussels, which, in their opinion, was harmful to Kosovo. He is accused of having accepted a proposal that enables the formation of the CSM, but does not guarantee mutual recognition.
- (4 March) The proposed Franco-German plan for the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia will not implement any form of an entity such as "Republic of Srpska in Kosovo", said the German ambassador in Pristina, Joern Rohde. He says that the main goal of the agreement is to bring both sides one step closer to the ultimate goal, mutual recognition.
- (5 March) "I am against Kosovo membership in the UN and I will never recognize Kosovo's independence," Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić stated during a session on Kosovo in the Serbian Assembly, which triggered many reactions, as the normalisation agreement clearly states that Serbia will not oppose Kosovo's membership in the UN.
- (6 March) Dutch MEP Thijs Reuten, from the group of Socialist and Democrats, called on the European Commission to explain "its odd policy" towards Serbia and Vučić, who, according to him, is using the EU as an ATM cash machine, and after that refuses to sign an agreement with Kosovo under the auspices of the EU. Reuten states that on 28 February, European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Oliver Varhelyi presented a package of financial support to Serbia in the amount of €2.2 billion, including €600 million in grants, which is the largest EU grant to Serbia so far. On the same evening, the President of Serbia said on national television that he did not want to sign the EU proposal on the path to normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia, which was supposed to have been agreed the day before, while the Prime Minister of Kosovo was ready to sign the proposal at the meeting.
- **(6 March)** Journalist and director of the magazine *Vreme*, Stevan Ristić, estimated that Vučić is procrastinating and buying time in the negotiations with Kosovo, as he is waiting for a favourable outcome of events in Ukraine and the return of Donald Trump to the White House. A possible referendum or early elections, which he often mentions, would buy him another six months. He estimated that the current situation on the way to the EU suits this government very well "that funds are drawn, but nothing is done in return."



- (9 March) The EU's special representative for dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, Miroslav Lajčak, began a two-day visit to Kosovo. He met the president and prime minister as well as the opposition in preparation for the top-level meeting between Kosovo and Serbia on 18 March in Ohrid, North Macedonia. After the meeting, the Prime Minister of Kosovo stated again that he is ready to sign the agreement.
- (10 March) During the meeting with the EU's special envoy for the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, Miroslav Lajčak the president of the opposition Democratic Party of Kosovo, Memli Krasniqi, said that the European proposal on the normalisation of relations is a temporary solution that creates a new "status quo" and does not end the frozen conflict with Serbia.
- (15 February) Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced that he had a "difficult but substantial" conversation during the meeting with EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajčak in Belgrade.

# Serbia:

- (2 March) Several hundred people gathered at a protest in front of the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Public Prosecutor's Office of the Republic in support of two prosecutors of the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office in Belgrade, Bojana Savović and Jasmina Paunović. They were dismissed shortly after they announced a discovery of fraud and corruption in the largest state-owned company, "Elektroprivreda" Srbije.
- (6 March) On 27 February, the Russian portal *Mash* published a video showing 3,500 Serbian Grad rockets in a weapons depot in Bratislava, Slovakia, which triggered harsh reactions from the Kremlin. According to *Mash*, these weapons were intended for Ukraine. These are not the first allegations that weapons produced in Serbia ended up in Ukraine. A similar case allegedly occurred in March 2023, when photos appeared on social networks and in some Russian media purportedly showing weapons produced in Serbia being used in Ukraine. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić said that not a single piece of Serbian weapons, tools or ammunition had been sold to either Russia or Ukraine.
- **(5 March)** The mayor of Novi Sad, Milan Đurić, condemned the hostile graffiti in Kisač, which was directed against members of the Slovak national community. Kisača is a town in the north of Serbia with a population of around five thousand, more than 80% of whom are members of the Slovak minority.
- (6 March) The Council of the Court of Appeal in Belgrade began a five-day main hearing, after which it will issue a final verdict in the proceedings for the murder of journalist Slavko Ćuruvija, the former owner of the newspapers *Dnevni telegraf* and *Europljanin*. He was murdered in 1999. A special court twice found four former members of the State Security Service guilty of the crime of aggravated murder and incitement to murder.
- (6 March) The leader of the Sandžak Democratic Action Party (SDA) Sulejman Ugljanin sent a new appeal to the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, to start the process of resolving the status of the Bosniaks of Sandžak and the Albanians of the Preševo Valley.
- (8 March) Serbian President Aleksandar Vućić announced the creation of a new political movement "People's Movement for the State". Political scientist Boban Stojanović said that the announcement of the establishment of the "People's Movement for the State" represents another manipulation by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, with which



he tries to present himself as the sole protector of Serbia and Kosovo, which would protect him from the declining support on the right-wing pole, as indicated by the latest opinion polls.

- (9 March) According to *Radio Free Europe*, the former head of the Serbian gendarmerie and retired general Bratislav Dikić was appointed to the management of the Serbian public company "Srbijašume". In 2016, he was among the 16 individuals arrested in Montenegro who were suspected of planning a coup d'état and terrorist actions across the country on the day of the Montenegrin parliamentary elections.
- (9 March) Many amendments were submitted to the European Parliament's report on Serbia on the road to the EU, drawn up by the rapporteur for Serbia, Vladimir Bilčik. The document expresses concern over the appointment of Aleksandar Vulin as director of the Security Intelligence Agency (BIA). He is known for his anti-European and pro-Russian rhetoric. The MEPs who submitted the amendments cited the fact that Vulin shared information about the activities of the Russian opposition in exile with the Russian authorities as particularly worrying.
- (12 March) Commemorations took place in the country on the 20th anniversary of the murder of former Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić. Đinđić was killed in the courtyard of the government building on 12 March, 2003 in Belgrade, and members of the Special Operations Unit were convicted of the assassination, which was carried out with a sniper shot in front of the government building.
- (13 March) A months-long investigation by *Radio Free Europe* revealed that a number of Russian diplomats expelled from the EU for espionage are now accredited in Serbia, including two with ties to Russian intelligence services.
- (13 March) The Minister of Economy in the Serbian Government, Rade Basta, requested that the Serbian Government urgently declare its position regarding the introduction of sanctions against the Russian Federation due to its aggression against Ukraine.
- (14 March) The Chief of the General Staff of the Serbian Army, General Milan Mojsilović, visited Paris, where he talked with the Chief of the General Staff of the French Armed Forces, General Thierry Burkhard, about the security situation in the world and the region, and the cooperation between the Serbian and French armies.

### **Montenegro:**

- (1 March) US special envoy for the Western Balkans, Gabriel Escobar, said that he expects Russia to try to interfere in the presidential election campaign in Montenegro through the usual channels of media disinformation.
- (3 March) One person died and several others were injured in a bomb explosion, which a 40-year-old man activated at the entrance to the court building in Podgorica. According to unofficial information, it was supposed to be a suicide. The court subsequently announced that he had no scheduled trial or that he had been summoned to court in any other capacity.
- (9 March) Today, the first session of the Montenegrin Constitutional Court took place in Podgorica after the February unblocking and the election of three judges that ensured a quorum. In the coming period, this highest court in the country is expected to decide on another 3,500 appeals that have been pending since September due to the blockade.
- (10 March) Jakov Milatović, the presidential candidate of the "Europe Now" Movement, barely made it to his convention at the Sports Center in Cetinje with the help of security guards and the police, because a group of citizens

protested in front of him. While Milatović was pushing through the police barricade with the security guards, the crowd rushed forward and tried to assault him. Protesters have been harassing him because of his statement from 5 September 5, 2021, during the incidents surrounding the enthronement of the patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Cetinje, he declared "So what if ten Montenegrins die because of this?".

# **Bosnia and Herzegovina:**

- (1 March) Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) celebrated its Independence Day. Many foreign delegations were present at the commemoration. Member of the presidency Željka Cvijanović from the Republic of Srpska entity was absent due to an official visit to Azerbaijan, but before that she said that 1 March is not her holiday.
- (6 March) The Senate of the University of Sarajevo revoked Sebija Izetbegović's title of Master of Medical Sciences due to irregularities. Sebija Izetbegović is the director of the University Clinical Center in Sarajevo, a professor at the Faculty of Medicine in Sarajevo and the wife of Bakir Izetbegović, the president of the Democratic Action Party (SDA).
- **(8 March)** The Republic of Srpska announced a new law requiring organisations that receive donations from abroad to register as foreign agents.
- (9 March) Unknown perpetrators damaged the cars of "Buk" portal editor Aleksandar Trifunović and "Euroblic" journalist Nikola Morača. The event took place shortly after the appearance of Milorad Dodik, who described critical journalists as "phenomena that lie and deceive". As the investigation continues under the supervision of the prosecutor's office, the mentioned journalists claimed that they feel threatened, especially due to opposition to the journalists and the media community in the attempt by the authorities of the BiH entity Republic of Srpska to adopt a legal basis for the criminalisation of defamation with draconian fines, which could be more than €50 thousand. After the incident, Dodik stated that the journalists had damaged their own vehicles.
- (10 March) Antonio Tajani, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Italy and Alexander Schallenberg, Minister of European and International Affairs of the Republic of Austria, visited BiH and met with BiH Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmedin Konaković. They expressed their support for the activities of High Representative Christian Schmidt and asked the participants to recognise him as a reliable partner.
- (11 March) The chairman of the Bosniak Club in the House of Nations of the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Muamer Zukić (SDA), accused foreign and domestic actors of uniting in the blockade of Bosniaks and announced a "blockade of the blockade of Bosniaks". The "troika" (Narod in Pravda, Social Democratic Party and Our Party) answered that the SDA is blocking the processes and the will of the majority, and that they do not see the SDA in the government.
- (13 March) More than a hundred followers of the *Ravongorski* movement gathered in the monastery of St. Nicholas in Dobrunska Reka on the anniversary of the arrest of the Second World War Chetnik leader, Draža Mihailović. The event took place under the supervision of the Police of the Republika Srpska and EULEX.

# <u>Croatia:</u>



- (1 March) The Croatian Ministry of Defence announced that a Patria armoured combat vehicle was damaged due to carelessness during regular training at the Petrinja barracks. Disciplinary proceedings were initiated against three members of the Croatian armed forces.
- (3 March) Prime Minister Andrej Plenković survived the no-confidence vote requested by the opposition at the initiative of the Homeland Movement (DP). 56 MPs supported the motion of no confidence, 77 were against it, and one abstained.
- **(4 March)** Serbian police arrested three Croats at the Bezdan border crossing for an illegal attempt to smuggle a radioactive object into Croatia. The head of a radioactive lightning rod was found hidden in a spare wheel.
- (7 March) During a meeting in Zagreb, Croatian President Zoran Milanović told Kosovo's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora, Donika Gervalla-Schwartz, that Croatia firmly supports the international recognition of Kosovo's independence and expects it to be recognized by all EU members.
- (10 March) Defence Minister Mario Banožić said on Friday in Vukovar, on the anniversary of the crash of the drone in Zagreb, that all information about the case has been collected, but the resolution of all the details will have to wait until the end of the war in Ukraine.
- (12 March) The Royal Canadian Navy frigate *HMCS Fredericton* entered the port of Split on Sunday. The *Fredericton* will visit Split from 12 16 March, along with other ships of Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2), as part of Operation REASSURANCE, Canada's support for NATO's security and deterrence measures. The remaining four ships will enter the port of Split on Monday, 13 March 13.

## **North Macedonia:**

• (1 March) The first proposal of the Macedonian party "The alternative" after moving to the opposition was the establishment of a Community of Albanian municipalities, modelled after the Community of municipalities with a Serbian majority in Kosovo. Other Albanian parties in the country called the idea frivolous and anti-European. Ilmi Aziri from the Alliance for Albanians says that Alternative's proposal is merely an attempt to score political points and that it would actually mean a step backwards for the rights of Albanians in North Macedonia.

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