Situation room

** CURRENT EVENTS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS **

Period under review: from 15 March 2023 to 31 March 2023.

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

Relations between Belgrade and Pristina:

- (15 March) The Ambassador of Germany in Kosovo, Jörn Rohde, said that he is sure that Kosovo will be recognized by those countries of the European Union (EU) that have not yet recognized it, in case of positive results in the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia.
- (18 March) Head of EU diplomacy, Joseph Borell, said after the meeting in Ohrid that Belgrade and Pristina agreed on the implementation of the EU agreement on the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. He added that Kosovo immediately agreed to start negotiations on the formation of a community of Serbian municipalities (ZSO).
- (19 March) Despite the fact that European leaders said that both sides have promised to fulfill all points of the agreement, Serbian President Aleksandar Vućić stated at a press conference the day after that he does not intend to implement all points of the agreement.
- (19 March) The former president of Serbia and SDS leader Boris Tadić said that the agreement on the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo cannot even be signed, because it is actually accepted as a platform for negotiations. He has claimed that Vučić, by saying that he will not sign it, is essentially deceiving the nation.
- (20 March) Serbian President Vučić stated that his position on the normalization of relations with Kosovo has not changed and repeated that Belgrade will not implement parts of the agreement related to Kosovo's membership in the United Nations (UN).
- (20 March) Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti stated that the international community should condemn Serbia for running away from signing the European proposal for the normalization of relations and the annex for its implementation. He also expects the international community to condemn statements made by Serbian president Vučić, regarding Kosovo's UN membership.
- (21 March) Activists of the Social Democratic Party of Kosovo (PSD) threw a milk shake and a cake at Besnik Bisljimi, the deputy prime minister and head of Pristina's negotiating team in the negotiations with Belgrade, at the entrance to the Kosovo government building in Pristina. They are accusing him of accepting to the creation of the ZSO too easily.
- (22 March) Kosovo Prime Minister Aljbin Kurti clarified that self-governance is not self- administration or autonomy, and that the agreement says self-governance of the Serbian community, but not municipalities with a Serbian majority.
- (25 March) Torches were thrown in front of the Kosovo Government building in Pristina during a protest against the formation of ZSO. Representatives of the (PSD), who organized the protest, accuse Prime Minister Albin Kurti of drastically changing his attitude towards the possible formation of the ZSO and are demanding early elections.
- (26 March) During Albina Kurti's visit to Tirana, Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama expressed his support for the formation of the ZSO in Kosovo.
- (29 March) After two passenger cars with Kosovo license plates (RKS) were lit on fire a few days earlier in Zubin Potok in the north of Kosovo, three more caught fire tonight two in the northern part of Mitrovica and one in Zvečan. All car owners were of Serbian nationality. The Chief of Staff of the President of Kosovo, Bljerim Velja, says that three cars were burned only because they had RKS license plates and that the illegal structures of Serbia are continuing an orchestrated campaign of intimidation of Serbs in the north of Kosovo.



Montenegro:

- (15 March) The police in Cetinje filed criminal charges against eight people who were involved in the attack on presidential candidate Jakov Milatović when he tried to enter the premises where the election rally was held.
- (16 March) Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović dissolved the Montenegrin Assembly three days before the presidential elections. According to the constitution, the date of early parliamentary elections should have been announced on Friday, 17 March.
- (19 March) Results of the first round of the presidential elections: candidate of the Democratic Party of Socialists Milo Đukanović (35.3%), leader of the Movement Europe Now Jakov Milatović (28.9%), Andrija Mandić Democratic Front (19%) and Aleksa Bečić, leader of Democratic Montenegro (11.3%).
- (19 March) Reactions of the candidates after the announcement of the election results. Jakov Milatović "We will send Đukanović into retirement"; Milo Đukanović "This was exactly what we planned"; Andrija Mandić "Everyone, every last one of our voters should vote for Milatović, we will take down Đukanović"; and Aleksa Bečić "I give my support to Milatović".
- (19 March) The head of Serbian diplomacy, Ivica Dačić, congratulated Andrija Mandić on the results of the first round of presidential elections in Montenegro, even though Mandić did not qualify for the second round. "Serbs will be a decisive factor in the second round of elections," he declared.
- (21 March) Ivana Stradner, scientific associate of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracy in Washington, believes that Russia, together with its partners from Serbia, will continue information operations through controlled media in order to influence the elections in Montenegro. She assessed that the support for Milatović from the side of Mandič (DF), a pro-Russian and pro-Serbian politician who advocates for Montenegro's exit from NATO, is controversial.
- (21 March) Danilo Kalezić, an associate at the University of Montenegro, said that when it comes to candidate Milatović, he is exclusively the reserve candidate of Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić. He describes him as a candidate who was politically created in the laboratory of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the intelligence services of Russia and Serbia, and who is a trap for the Montenegrins voters who believe that his youth and Western European education guarantee progressiveness.
- (23 March) Vojislav Šešelj, the president of the Serbian Radical Party and a convicted war criminal, said: "Now the most important thing is that we from Serbia verbally support that everyone votes for Milatović in the presidential elections, in order to solve the Đukanović problem, so that the parliamentary elections can be held in a normal atmosphere as well as a fair population census".
- (27 March) A football match between the national teams of Montenegro and Serbia took place in Podgorica. The match was declared an event of increased security risk. During the match, Serbian fans burned a NATO flag, displayed a banner with the letter Z, a symbol of Russian aggression against Ukraine, which read " in Prizren [a town in Kosovo] by the end of the year" and chanted the name of Ratko Mladić, a convicted war criminal.
- (27 March) The presidential election campaign is also characterized by the fight for the votes of the diaspora, as well as attempts to hinder their arrival in Montenegro. Some Montenegrin citizens who live abroad and have the right to vote announced their participation in the elections, which triggered a reaction from Milatović's supporters because of the belief that the diaspora is in favor of Đukanović. Thus, warnings and even threats to members of the Montenegrin diaspora, especially Bosniaks and Albanians living in Western Europe, could be seen on social networks.

- (30 March) Boban Batrićević, a Montenegrin historian and professor at the Faculty of Montenegrin Language and Literature, says that if the candidate Jakov Milatović wins the second round of the presidential elections on Sunday, it will mean that Montenegro will probably never free itself from the influence of Belgrade and will become a mere satellite Serbia.
- (2 April) Following the run-off presidential election, with more than 90% of the votes tallied, Jakov Milatović has been projected as the winner. Official results are expected in a few days.

Serbia:

- (15 March) A statement made by the high representative of the EU for common foreign policy and security, Josep Borrell, reported that all the countries of the Western Balkans, except Serbia, have complied with the EU sanctions against Belarus.
- (15 March) The Ambassador of Russia to Serbia, Aleksandar Bocan Harchenko, announced that his country positively assesses the attitude of representatives of the Serbian leadership, who distanced themselves from the anti-Russian calls of the Serbian Minister of Economy, Radet Basta, for Belgrade to join the sanctions against Russia. The Minister replied on Instagram with the question "why did Russia vote for the introduction of sanctions against Serbia in 1992?".
- (21 March) Raft owners who protested in front of Belgrade Mayor Aleksandar Šapić's house on Thursday, against new moves to remove floating bars, launched criminal charges against dozens of masked individuals who prevented them from gathering. They say that they registered the protest and got guarantees from the police that they would protect them, after which a group of 50 masked hooligans came to the location and interrupted the protest with threats, as police fled the scene when they arrived.
- (22 March) The member of the Serbian National Assembly, Đorđe Miketić, joined the protest of citizens who are preventing the demolition of the embankment to prevent floods, which the municipality is alleged to be doing in defiance of the legislation. He told NI that there were "some guys in black who threatened the crowd". This is the second protest in one week in Belgrade where masked men dressed in black appeared and prevented the protest and threatened the participants.
- (23 March) The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić, said that the action of the US embassy represents an "open and gross interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state", after the US embassy held a conversation with the two prosecutors, who were dismissed following the discovery of corruption in the state-owned company.
- (26 March) The Serbian Army will soon form a new battalion-sized special elite unit, which will operate under the name "Eagles", writes the *Balkan Security Network portal*

Bosnia and Herzegovina:

- (15 March) Osman Mehmedagić, former director of the Intelligence and Security Agency (OSA) of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), was listed on a sanctions list by USA. He is accused of abusing the state telecommunications company in favor of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), which is chaired by Bakir Izetbegović. Edin Gačanin was also sanctioned, on the grounds that he was one of the world's largest drug dealers, and Dragan Stanković, who, as director of the Administration for Geodetic and Property Legal Affairs of the Republika Srpska BiH entity, is alleged to have undermined the constitutional order of BiH.
- **(6 March)** The President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, said: "In the case of Sarajevo's encroachment on the property of the RS, we will make a decision on secession."



- (19 March) Masked hooligans attacked members of the LGBT community in Banja Luka. They reported that the police practically handed them over to the hooligans, as they forced them to leave the building in which they has gathered, and then left the scene, only to have a group of 40 masked hooligans arrive a few minutes later and beat them. The police watched the incident from a distance without reacting.
- (21 March) Representatives of police agencies in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) signed a decree in Sarajevo on Tuesday that defines the establishment of a functional joint contact point with EUROPOL, the EU Agency for cooperation in the field of law enforcement.
- **(23 March)** Peter Szijjarto, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs said during his visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina in an interview for *RTRS* "Dodik is my friend and whoever sanctions him humiliates the people of Republika Srpska".
- (23 March) The Government of Republika Srpska has suspended cooperation with the embassies of the United States of America and the United Kingdom in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The American Embassy announced that the President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik has taken another step on the dangerous path of isolation and authoritarian rule.
- (25 March) Croatian President Zoran Milanović visited Derventa, a town in the north of BiH, where 24,000 Croats lived before the war. Today, only 2,000 remain. His awarding of the 103rd Brigade of the Croatian Defense Council (HVO) provoked harsh reactions from the opposition in the Republika Srpska, which even accused Milorad Dodik of humiliating and shaming the community. He reacted only mildly on Twitter, where he gave a provocative reaction to Milanović, but from a certain point of view even with a slightly conciliatory ending.
- (29 March) US Secretary of State Antony Blinken commented on Twitter the adoption of several laws in the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska and the statement of the president of the entity Milorad Dodik, comparing him to Putin.

Croatia:

- (16 March) The Committee on Defense of the Croatian Parliament gave a positive opinion for the procurement of SPIKE anti-armor water missiles, Patria armored combat vehicles, RIB boats for maritime operations, modernization of the radar system and upgrading of the combat communication system of the Croatian Air Force (HRZ). Investments will amount to more than EUR 200 million.
- (16 March) Croatian president Zoran Milanović hosted a visit from Željka Cvijanović, the presiding member of the BiH presidency from the Bosnian entity Republika Srpska. Both pointed out the importance of the implementation of the Dayton Agreement, expressed their agreement regarding the European vision of BiH, and at the same time emphasized that the country should not forcefully join NATO. Milanović also invited Denis Bečirović to Zagreb, but not did not invite Željko Komšić, whom he claims is not even a representative of Croats in BiH. Cvijanović also met with Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.
- (21 March) At the court in Osijek, the former head of the Yugoslav military counter-intelligence service (KOS), Aleksandar Vasiljević, who was also involved in the suppression of Slovenian independence, was sentenced to 20 years in prison *in absentia*. He is convicted of war crimes against Croatian civilians and prisoners of war in camps in Serbia and Croatia. The judgment is not yet final.

North Macedonia:



- (25 March) According to a new law, associations and institutions may not use names or programmes related to the approval of fascism, Nazism, genocide or other forms of intolerance and hatred. The association of Bulgarians "Ivan Mihajlov" in Bitola was deleted from the central registry of North Macedonia because it did not propose a name change within the legal deadline. Such a decision is also expected for the other association of Bulgarians in the country, "Tsar Boris the Third" in Ohrid.
- **(29 March)** The government of North Macedonia has announced that it has made a decision to donate 12 MI-24 combat helicopters to Ukraine.

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