



Briefing

Political Trends & Dynamics in Southeast Europe

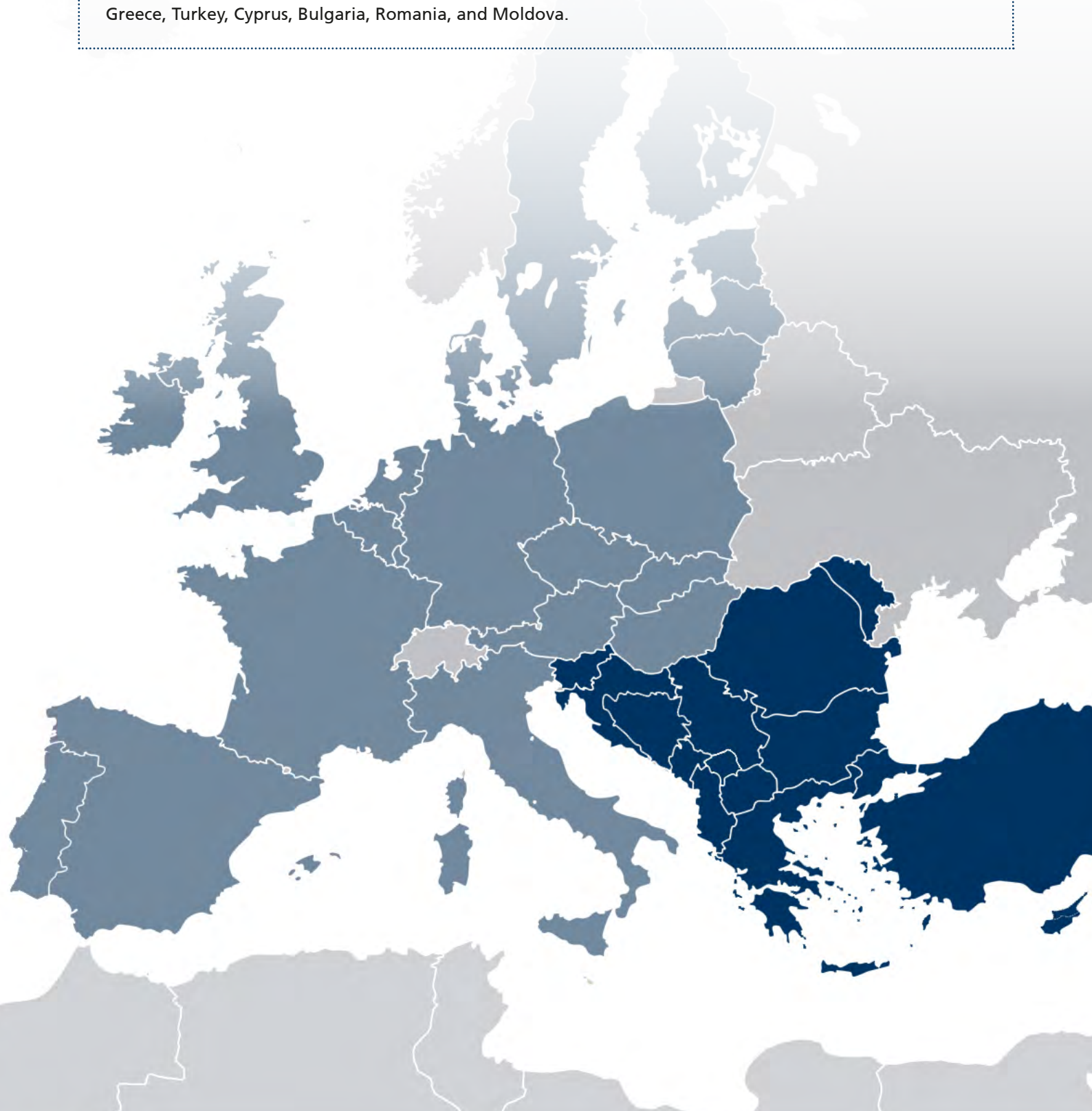
Civic Mobilizations

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Peace and stability initiatives represent a decades-long cornerstone of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's work in southeastern Europe. Recent events have only reaffirmed the centrality of Southeast European stability within the broader continental security paradigm. Both democratization and socio-economic justice are intrinsic aspects of a larger progressive peace policy in the region, but so too are consistent threat assessments and efforts to prevent conflict before it erupts. Dialogue SOE aims to broaden the discourse on peace and stability in southeastern Europe and to counter the securitization of prevalent narratives by providing regular analysis that involves a comprehensive understanding of human security, including structural sources of conflict. The briefings cover fourteen countries in southeastern Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries and Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.



Editorial

Alida Vračić, Jasmin Mujanović and Felix Henkel

A crisis of democratic legitimacy has been building up in Southeast Europe for years, despite the best efforts of democracy promoters from within and beyond the region. Led by the EU, the international community prescribed a model of democratic and economic transition in the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars that they hoped would make the region both prosperous and stable. While significant progress has been achieved, informed observers understand also that Balkan leaders often pay mere lip service to reform while actual democratic development is backsliding.

The thorough disenchantment of citizens with their political representatives, which has traditionally led to political apathy, has begun to manifest in widespread protests, which have roiled the region from Maribor to Istanbul. Examples such as the Bosnian plenums of 2014 are attempts by citizens to articulate genuine democratic agency within a political framework in which they have been marginalized despite the nominal existence of multiparty elections. This holds for many countries in the region, where we have seen mass mobilizations of citizens for a variety of demands; from the environmental protests in Romania, the workers protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the protests against the privatization of public spaces in Croatia (2010–2011), to the ongoing *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* movement in Serbia.

All of these protests can be viewed as opening up spaces of dissent for citizens keen to reclaim their elite-captured states. Granted, these protests are not uniform and tend to be reactive as well as localized in nature, and have often fallen short on concrete policy demands. Moreover, mass mobilizations are by no means a tactic employed strictly by progressive actors. Still, these movements have made an impact and hint to a possible shift in the political landscape of the region, one in which civil society imposes (rather than pleads for) its demands. This growing sense of transnational activism could “unbound” civil society, allowing it to genuinely overtake the sundry plans and agendas devised in Brussels and other European capitals, often with little input from local civil society or citizens. We have asked representatives from some of these movements, as well as observers of the situation more generally, to evaluate and put the phenomenon into perspective.

Publisher's Note

We are pleased to introduce the new format of *Political Trends and Dynamics* with this sixth issue. Our aim is to make the brief more discursive, showcasing different perspectives on a featured topic and within a broadly thematic approach. We continue to provide timely analysis of the most important regional trends and dynamics, stressing especially those social developments with disruptive potential. Through this, we hope to contribute to the still emerging debate on both regional and transnational developments. Finally, we are also fortunate to be able to announce a partnership with BIRN Consultancy, who will from now on be contributing to the “[Political Trends and Dynamics Overview](#)” section with their distinguished investigative expertise.

Mobilization in Southeast Europe: The Era of Contestation

Filip Balunović and Ivan Stefanovski

The evening of January 31st 2017 saw hundreds of thousand Romanians pour onto Victoria's Square for a week of demonstrations. Long simmering discontent over widespread cronyism escalated with the government's decision to decriminalize corruption. Civic force, reborn on the streets of Bucharest, mobilized the people to demand transparent government and social justice. Solidarity movements popped up across the region. Civil society actors, activists and individuals in Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania flocked to social networks to express unity with Romanian citizens and to call for more vigorous civic actions in their own countries. Opposition leaders in some Western Balkans countries sent strong political messages to ruling parties that have similarly upended corruption legislation. In Bosnia, the international community made public statements suggesting that the country would profit from large scale protest, even going so far as asking, rhetorically, when it would happen. In truth, it is already happening. But it does not stop there. Just like in Romania, the challenge ahead is the creation of a critical mass of citizens putting pressure onto their respective governments to work effectively toward long-term democratic goals. After two decades of uncontested rule by the post-socialist elites, social movements in Southeastern Europe have begun to question the economic and social consequences of that form of transition. The durable status quo in most countries has spawned various grassroots movements which have been able to impact the political discourse by flagging issues such as the lack of tangible political participation, ethno-nationalism, corruption, commodification of education, high unemployment rates, and general social and economic deprivation. So, does the political apathy that has defined the region for so long now belong to the past?

A common element of protest across the region is that it is the economically and socially deprived who create new foundations for democratic control. This paves the way for new forms of promoting democracy, socio-economic well-being, rule of law, and the protection of human rights. The cases described in this article offer an introspective into the re-emerging, energized civic culture in the region, which may lead the way for an entirely different form of transition: one from below.

Protests in Romania. Beta News Agency.



Blockade

In mid-April 2009, the students of the Philosophy Faculty at the University of Zagreb occupied their university. Triggered specifically by the Croatian government's plans to end free university education, the protestors' agenda nevertheless went beyond the question of tuition fees. Students across the country gathered to protest the Bologna education reforms, as well as the idea of neoliberalism, interference of the state apparatus, and the prevalent process of the commodification of knowledge. Organized in plenums, the occupations soon spread to other cities in Croatia, including Zadar, Rijeka, Split, and Osijek. The backlash against the government's decision led to the shutdown of formal programming for weeks, with protesters organizing an ad hoc program of lectures, plenums, and other activities, exercising novel and innovative ways of being publicly active. The greatest success of this movement was changing the discourse of anti-government critique and drawing links between education and democracy and participation more broadly.

Don't Drown Belgrade

One of the most consistent, long-lasting (and still on-going) protest movements in the region is situated in the capital of Serbia, Belgrade. The movement gathered around opposition to a massive construction project called "Belgrade on the Waterfront" that has yet to receive official approval. The planned development was agreed to without a tender process or transparency, and would displace a historic and burgeoning creative district in the city. The movement responded with the slogan "Don't Drown Belgrade", and organized protests, beginning in the spring of 2016, which have attracted tens of thousands of people to the streets. The movement opposes the logic of the pure profit-seeking of the corrupt political elite, looting the city in dubious plans with shady investors and illegal demolitions. In their quest for more transparent and legal ways for developing urban areas of the city, the protests announced that further steps will include acting in the electoral sphere.

"Death to Nationalism"

The most unexpected protests occurred in February 2014 in Bosnia. The country, which has suffered from decades-long economic, social, and political deprivation, rallied behind a workers protest beginning in Tuzla, a city whose industry had been decimated due to privatization. Protests then spread to the capital and several other cities, mainly in the Federation entity where four cantonal ministers were forced to resign. The protests focused on the link between ethnonationalist political elites, corruption, and economic deprivation – "Death to nationalism" was scrawled on Tuzla's cantonal government building, which was later burned. Citizen plenums, non-formal institutions of direct democracy, were organized, though they eventually lost steam. However, the plenums arguably acted as a reference for future actions. Recently, in Jajce, high school students opposed to the segregationist policy of the cantonal government which wanted to separate the students into different schools in accordance to their ethnic belonging.

Democratic Deficit

In 2012, a series of protests transformed political dynamics in Slovenia, the only EU member state among the former Yugoslav republics at the time. The protests started in response to the soaring economic crisis, but were not restricted to the economy. Suffering from a case of democratic deficit, the Slovenian political elite was largely unpopular. The protestors took to the streets in the city of Maribor in November 2012, launching the process of creation of a more effective social movement, which led to the creation of a new political party (the United Left). This new political force in both institutional and non-institutional forms went outside mainstream demands for solving the issues of social injustice and suspension of austerity measures within the existing political framework. Instead, the new movement has started seeking democratization of the society, while heading beyond the usual transitional paradigm. The demands didn't go into direction of "more European values," but quite the opposite: the party found that the solutions for the democratic deficits and political corruption were rather to be found outside the capitalist system.

“For a Common Macedonia”

Macedonia’s protests began in 2014. The “Students’ Plenum”, “Professors’ Plenum” and “High Schools Plenum” set the stage for a series of marches against amendments to taxation legislation, which eventually pushed the government to reconsider its policy actions. The peak of the contentious year 2015 was reached in mid-May when the public witnessed the creation of a platform named “Citizens for Macedonia,” organized to challenge the autocratic regime of former PM Nikola Gruevski. The platform incorporated peculiar civil society-political party dynamics. The results were cemented in the “Przhino” political agreement which foresaw the demise of PM Gruevski, the establishment of the Special Prosecutors Office, as well as numerous other legal and political adjustments leading towards the democratization of Macedonian society. Following the presidential mass pardoning of discredited politicians indicted by the Special Prosecutor, the Macedonian streets welcomed the “Colorful Revolution” which symbolized the continuous struggle for democracy and rule of law. By throwing paint at the various monuments scattered throughout the center of Skopje, incarnations of the widespread corruption, poverty, megalomania, and attempts for redefinition of the country’s identity, the protestors managed to contribute to cornering President Ivanov into revoking the pardon acts. After the recent elections, the new parliamentary majority of the opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), and several Albanian parties, faces great challenges and obstructions by the former PM and his partners, flinging citizens into renewed ethnic tensions. However, despite attempts to mobilize along ethnic cleavages, Macedonia’s protests movements can convincingly be labeled as positive with several tangible political outcomes.

A Taste of Victory

Albania has experienced multiple mobilizations since the 2011 anti-governmental protests ended in violence. In 2013, only several months after assuming office, Albania’s newly elected PM Edi Rama faced a mobilization of citizens across the country, opposing rumors that the US was to destroy Syrian chemical weapons on Albanian soil. Activists, students, and environmentalist organized via social networks demanding the PM turn down the deal, which he did after days of protests. 2014 saw huge protests against high taxes, energy prices, and rampant unemployment. The end of 2015 was no less contentious for Albanian society. Albanian academia raised its voice against a new Law on Higher Education and thereby continuing the “For the University” movement. Students and professors engaged in open assemblies, sit-ins, and rallies. The beginning of 2017 set the stage for the forthcoming elections, producing more anti-governmental protests led by the opposition, which warned that the June 2017 elections must be free and fair.

Conclusion

With the current protests across Southeastern Europe, it is worth considering whether the region is at a transformational moment and if these actions will have broader implications for the region’s democratic development. Citizens are reclaiming political agency, and through boycotts, demonstrations, and protests, have become increasingly self-aware of their sovereign rights. However, one should not be naïve. Actors from across the political spectrum have learned to use protests as a vehicle to push their agendas. Attempts to delegitimize protests on the part of incumbent governments are also common. It falls on progressive political actors to engage with and listen to those protesting injustice, corruption, and disenfranchisement. In a democracy, after all, all state power emanates from its citizens.

Political Trends and Dynamics Overview

The aim of this section is to broaden the discourse on peace and stability in Southeast Europe and to provide analysis that involves a comprehensive understanding of human security, including structural sources of conflict. The briefings cover fourteen countries in Southeastern Europe: the seven post-Yugoslav countries and Albania, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova.

Regional Developments

Consumed with its own problems, for many years the EU has appeared anything but closely engaged with Southeast Europe. Indeed, many in the region were resigned to this state of affairs, happy that the EU had, at the very least, left the door of accession to the Union open, even if it seemed in no rush to welcome new members to the club. It was therefore somewhat of a welcome surprise for the pro-European segments of the public and political elites of the Balkans to find the region once again in the focus of Brussels in early March.

Mogherini and the President of the Serbian Parliament Maja Gojković. BETA New Agency.



The beam of attention from Brussels began with a tour of the six Western Balkan EU hopefuls by **Federica Mogherini**, the EU High Representative for foreign affairs. Mogherini began her tour in **Montenegro** on March 2nd, which, she made clear, was a consequence of the country's progress and status as the frontrunner in the Western Balkan EU accession regatta. While there, the EU High Representative sent a clear signal to the Montenegrin opposition parties and government that it was down to them to resolve the ongoing political standoff in the country. In doing so, Mogherini clearly rebuffed opposition calls for EU mediation.

Mogherini's visit to **Macedonia** on the same day was much less cordial. Here the EU has been embroiled in an effort to defuse an on-going political crisis for over a year. On December 11th, Macedonia held a parliamentary election, after months of EU efforts to facilitate its holding in a free and fair environment. Yet the election's unclear outcome seems to be pushing the country into an even deeper crisis, with President Gorge Ivanov currently refusing to hand the mandate for forming the next government to the opposition SDSM party, following the failure of his own VMRO-DPMNE party to do so. Mogherini appealed on Ivanov to hand the mandate to form the new government to SDSM leader Zoran Zaev yet her appeal seems to have fallen on deaf ears so far. In fact, the VMRO-DPMNE is now calling for fresh elections altogether.

By contrast, Mogherini's visit to **Serbia's** capital Belgrade was a much more pleasant affair, even if she was booed by far-right MPs while addressing the country's parliament. Overall, the High Representative congratulated the government of Aleksandar Vucic on Serbia's reform progress and constructive approach to various regional problems. As in Montenegro, in **Albania** Mogherini was also confronted by the spectre of the main opposition Democratic Party boycotting parliament, this time as part of its demands for a technocratic government to be established in order to create conditions for free and fair parliamentary elections in June. A consequence of this boycott was that judicial reforms, crucial for the opening of EU accession negotiations, were blocked in parliament. Again, Mogherini sent a clear signal that nothing could be achieved by boycotting the work of state institutions.

In Prishtina, Mogherini delivered a clear message to **Kosovo's** parliament that it needed to ratify a border demarcation agreement with Montenegro – long opposed by the opposition – in order to move ahead with EU visa liberalization. Final-

ly, the tour came to an end with a visit to Bosnia's capital Sarajevo where she commended Bosnian leaders on their country's "impressive" progress on its EU accession path over the last two years. This statement was criticized and even met by sarcasm from local observers.

What was behind this spurt of attention from **Brussels**? The tone of Mogherini's visit itself, as well as official messages emanating from Brussels thereafter, suggest that EU leaders are focused on the region not so much because of any expectation that it will soon be ready to join the EU, but rather because of **geopolitical** and **security concerns**. Following Mogherini's return to Brussels and a meeting of EU foreign ministers, there were clear references both to the **internal threats** facing the region – primarily in the form of growing ethno-nationalist tensions and unresolved statehood issues – and **external threats** – specifically the risk of the region becoming a "chessboard" in a great powers struggle amidst increasing Russian engagement that seeks to exploit these internal problems faced by the region for its own ends.

EU leaders appear to have clearly identified that a proverbial "perfect storm" is brewing in the region as well as that "something must be done". Exactly what they will do and with what intensity they will prove willing to re-engage remains to be seen. Pledges from EU leaders on March 9th that the European perspective of the region had their "unequivocal" support were met with warnings from pro-EU voices in the region that EU re-engagement needed to go much further than just warm rhetoric.

An EU summit dedicated to the Western Balkans is scheduled for 12th July in **Trieste**. What rabbits

EU leaders will pull out of their hats at this summit remains to be seen, but the symbolism of the fact that the summit is to be held in the city immortalised, among others, by Winston Churchill in his speech regarding the Iron Curtain in 1946, precisely at a time when the EU is worried about growing Russian influence in its Balkan backyard, was hard to miss.

Enlargement

Away from the excitement of high politics, at an institutional level the EU accession processes of the respective regional states moved at varying speeds. **Serbia** made some important progress, with the opening of negotiating Chapter 20 (Enterprise and Industrial Policy) and Chapter 26 (Education and Culture), the latter of which was promptly closed as well. Results of regular public opinion surveys carried out by the Serbian government's European Integration Office, released in February, showed a moderate rise in support for the country's EU membership, with 47 per cent of those surveyed expressing support for membership, up from 41 per cent in a survey six months earlier.

In February, **Bosnia** marked a year since submitting its formal application for EU membership. Yet not a lot of progress had been made in the time since and the country's accession process seemed once again hostage to domestic political intrigues. Having received a questionnaire from the European Commission with 9,000 questions, the answers to which will allow the Commission to develop its Opinion on Bosnia's membership application, Republika Srpska officials refused to provide their input for answering the questionnaire over disagreements regarding the internal coordination mechanisms for EU accession. As a result, Bosnia's chances of securing formal candidate status in 2017 appear slim.

Electoral Tensions

Recent electoral cycles in the region have been accompanied with a marked rise in tensions between ruling and opposition parties, both in the run-up and in the aftermath of elections. Given their increased potential to generate tensions, we consider how the approach of elections, as well as their aftermath, is affecting different countries in the region.

Janković supporters submit signatures for Serbian presidential bid. BETA News Agency.



Pre-Election Tensions

Albania's Parliamentary elections – set for June 18th – may still be far away, but the atmosphere is already becoming heated. On February 18th, the opposition Democratic Party began a boycott of parliament together with an on-going protest camp in front of the PM's office, demanding the resignation of the current government and formation of a technocratic one to supervise the election. In doing so, the Albanian opposition clearly seemed to be employing a tactic used – with varying success – by opposition parties in Macedonia and Montenegro during 2016, with the goal of attracting international mediation to resolve the problem. Despite a clear call from the EU's High Representative Federica Mogherini to return to parliament, the opposition boycott and protest continue. Given Albania's history of disputed and tense elections, this development was a dangerous omen regarding the climate in which the parliamentary elections will be held.

With Serbia's presidential election campaign in full swing, opposition candidates were busy campaigning, but accusations from their side that the elections are being held in conditions that are neither free nor fair are at a record high, with the opposition (as well as many analysts) speculating that the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of Aleksandar Vucic could be planning to commit electoral fraud on election day. Meanwhile, Vucic and his SNS, as well as analysts close to them, have responded with accusations that the opposition is preparing the ground for mass protests after the elections, aimed at creating chaos and destabilizing the country in the event of Vucic's victory. All of this created a situation where, in the event of a close result, the stage was set for an ugly confrontation between the ruling SNS and its opponents. Ultimately, however, such a scenario was avoided thanks to the fact that Vucic won a resounding 55 per cent of votes cast according to preliminary results.

A tense and strange electoral contest in the **Montenegrin** town of Niksic came to an end on 12th March. Due to the fact that only the two ruling parties at the national level – the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) and the tiny Social Democrats (SD) – were running, some local observers referred to this as a one-party election. On the final day for submitting party lists for the ballot in Niksic, Montenegro's Special Prosecutor had requested that the immunity of two op-

position leaders and MPs – Andrija Mandic and Milan Knezevic of the Democratic Front (DF) – be lifted, so that they could be arrested and questioned over their supposed involvement October's suspected Russian-backed coup. In response, opposition parties called for a boycott of the election, which was held in a tense atmosphere. With voters under pressure from the DPS to turn out and the opposition pressuring them to stay at home, there were fears of violent incidents on Election Day. Interestingly, a record 11 per cent of ballots cast were spoiled by voters, suggesting that many of those who gave in to pressure from the DPS to vote decided to express their opposition to the ruling party by spoiling their ballots.

Post-Election Tensions

Macedonia's political crisis only seemed to deepen in the aftermath of the December 11th Parliamentary elections. With VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski having failed to assemble a ruling majority 20 days after President Gjorge Ivanov handed him a mandate to do so on January 9th, the opposition SDSM, a closer runner-up in the parliamentary elections, began negotiations for forming a government with ethnic Albanian parties. On 25th February, the SDSM announced that it had secured the support of the ethnic Albanian parties and that it was nominating its leader, Zoran Zaev, to be the next PM. Yet on March 1st, President Gjorge Ivanov announced that he could not hand the mandate to form the government to Zaev, claiming that he could use it to "destroy the country," due to the SDSM's supposed acceptance of ethnic Albanian demands to make Albanian an official language throughout the country. Zaev and the

Anti-Zaev protests in Macedonia. EPA Georgi Licovski



SDSM claimed that Ivanov had, in effect, staged a coup. Meanwhile, groups thought to be close to the VMRO-DPMNE began organizing protests against an SDSM-led government. While the SDSM and ethnic Albanian parties mulled the possibility of voting in a new government with Zaev as PM despite Ivanov's obstruction, the ruling VMRO-DPMNE began pushing for another parliamentary election. Meanwhile, with no functioning parliament, Macedonia risks being left without local governments as well – the mandates of mayors and local councils expire on May 22nd and with parliament unable to set the date of local elections, municipal governments could face deadlock after this date.

In **Bulgaria's** Parliamentary elections, the ruling centre-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) led by Boiko Borisov came first in the elections, winning 32.65 per cent of votes and increasing its seat share by 11 seats to a total of 95. The Bulgarian Socialist Party came second with 27.2 per cent of votes and 80 seats, doubling the number of its representatives in the new Parliament. Borisov is likely to return as PM, but his choice of coalition partners is unappealing. He will likely have to bring the nationalist United Patriots coalition (9.07 per cent of votes and 27 seats) into his government.

In **Serbia**, Aleksandar Vucic's crushing first round win at the country's recent presidential polls appears to have both cemented the former prime minister's hold on the country but also precipitated large-scale dissatisfaction and civil society mobilization with the result. Large scale, student-led protests in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Cacak, and numerous other Serbian cities continued for days after the election under the slogan of "no to dictatorship." The mobilizations are in

marked contrast to the rhetoric from Brussels and other elites in the region, who have all welcomed Vucic's win as a sign of continued stability in the Western Balkans.

Contested States

The fragility and contested nature of many states in Southeast Europe once again came into focus over the last few months.

The **Macedonian** power struggle between the former ruling VMRO-DPMNE and opposition SDSM took on a new and clearly ethnic dimension with the insertion of ethnic Albanian demands into the equation. In particular, the condition laid down in the joint platform of the ethnic Albanian parties demanding that Albanian be made an official language across Macedonia, rather than those parts of the country where Albanians exceed 20 per cent of the population as is the case now, reawakened disputes about the character of the Macedonian state. More importantly, the SDSM's apparent acceptance of this demand was used by the VMRO-DPMNE to whip up nationalist sentiments among ethnic Macedonians and drive a wide wedge between these two ethnic groups in an effort to keep the SDSM out of power.

In **Bosnia**, as has become the established practice, March 1st was celebrated in the Federation entity as Bosnia's Independence Day, while in the Republika Srpska entity, whose assembly recently challenged the constitutionality of the holiday, it was largely ignored. Yet a much more dangerous crisis engulfed Bosnia over the decision by the Bosniak member of the country's tripartite presidency, Bakir Izetbegović, to lodge an appeal with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against the Court's 2007 decision to clear Serbia of direct responsibility for genocide during the country's war. The Bosnian Serb member of the presidency, Mladen Ivanić, claimed that the move was unconstitutional, arguing that Bosnia's presidency needed to give approval for such a decision. With the appeal lodged on February 23rd, in the days that followed Bosnian Serbs threatened to boycott all state institutions and the country was on the brink of a dangerous crisis. The crisis was brought to an abrupt end on March 9th when the ICJ rejected the appeal. Yet the entire episode helped fuel divisive narratives within the

Anti-Vučić protests in Belgrade. BIRN



country – while many Bosniaks once again felt victimized and denied justice, for the majority of Bosnian Serbs the crisis helped to reinforce a stereotype of Bosnia as a country dominated by Bosniaks within which their interests could not be safeguarded.

Bilateral Relations

Aside from the crisis which it generated within Bosnia, the attempt by Bosnian presidency member Bakir Izetbegovic to appeal the ICJ's 2007 verdict in Bosnia's suit against Serbia brought about a sharp deterioration in bilateral relations between **Serbia** and **Bosnia**. Serbia's PM Aleksandar Vucic claimed that the move had set back relations between Bosnia and Serbia by 25 years, adding that he could not allow anyone to "humiliate" Serbia. These comments were made after a meeting between the leaderships of Serbia and the Bosnian Serbs, allowing the two sides to demonstrate unity and coordination yet again. To these and other statements from the Serbian side, Izetbegović responded that the crisis between states had been generated by those who had committed aggression and genocide and then denied these acts.

Efforts to normalize relations between **Kosovo** and **Serbia** reached a new low on March 9th when Kosovo's parliament passed a resolution suspending all dialogue with Serbia until the release of Kosovo politician and Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) veteran Ramush Haradinaj, who was arrested in France in January on a Serbian Interpol warrant. In reality, the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina was already stalled. An episode in January when Serbia attempted to send a train painted in the colours of the Serbian flag and messages such as "Kosovo is Serbia" had already soured relations, as had a wall erected in North Mitrovica, close to the bridge which divides the town, in late 2016, which was finally removed in February 2017. Meanwhile, failure by Pristina to deliver on the formation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities in Kosovo, agreed as part of the 2013 Brussels Agreement, generated growing frustration in Belgrade. The dialogue will almost certainly remain suspended until the conclusion of presidential elections in Serbia, but even then it will likely be hard for the EU to restore momentum to negotiations between the two sides. EU mediation efforts are likely to be further hampered by tensions with-

Romanian protests. Beta News Agency.



in Kosovo which are likely to be generated in the first half of 2017, when the Special Court for War Crimes in Kosovo is expected to begin issuing indictments.

Societal Tensions

Across Southeastern Europe, societal tensions continued to brew with varying degrees of intensity. We examine some of the issues that have either caused a visible burst of built up tensions, as was the case in Romania, or have the potential to generate discontent or disturbances at a later stage, but which could have been easily overlooked.

Across Southeastern Europe, political corruption has created a huge pool of pent up frustration. Just how much frustration there is became apparent in **Romania**, where a move by the newly elected government to decriminalize certain forms of abuse of office and pardon some convicted politicians by decree brought Romanians out onto the streets in the tens of thousands. Indeed, the new Romanian government missed a clear warning from demonstrators even before the controversial decrees were adopted – an estimated 50,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Bucharest alone on January 29th. With the decrees adopted on January 31st, daily protests exploded, peaking at weekends. On February 5th, an estimated 600,000 people took to the streets across Romania. A few days later, the government backed down and repealed the

controversial decrees, but despite this periodic protests continued for some weeks afterwards. Mass protests could yet return, should the government try to find new ways to undermine efforts to battle corruption in Romania.

A variety of smaller protests were visible across the region in February and March. In the **Montenegrin** capital Podgorica, mothers organized periodic protests in February and March against a government decision to reduce state aid to mothers with three or more children. On February 16th the protests even turned violent, as 2,500 gathered women tried to break through police barriers and enter Parliament. Meanwhile, in **Belgrade** several thousand demonstrators protested outside the city hall building to express their continued opposition to the controversial Belgrade Waterfront real estate development project. Protests over ad-hoc or ongoing issues can be expected to pick up across the region with the arrival of spring and as the weather improves.

Numerous problems across the region carry the potential to generate pent up tensions and spark future problems. Low incomes and poor job prospects are forcing thousands of people across the region, both in the countries inside the EU and those who are still candidates, to seek a better future by emigrating to more de-

veloped parts of Europe. While such emigration in many ways prevents a buildup of socio-economic tensions in the region, it also creates potential stored up problems which affect those left behind. Thus, during the first few months of the year, media across the region carried reports about the **exodus of doctors and medical staff**, with the potential to seriously undermine the already unsatisfactory quality of public health care available to citizens across the region. Meanwhile, during the winter months several Balkan cities were among the worst affected by **air pollution** in Europe, including Skopje and Tetovo in Macedonia and Tuzla in Bosnia. Growing awareness – and frustration – with such problems represents a realistic protest trigger for the future.

Montenegro's imminent accession to NATO, expected in 2017, also carries the potential to spark protests and unrest in the country, where opponents of this move continue to demand a referendum on the issue, while public opinion remains evenly divided on whether the country should join or not. In **Croatia**, the country's Second World War past continues to generate friction in the present. At the end of February, a small far-right party organized a march in Zagreb, wearing black uniforms and carrying symbols resembling those used by Croatia's fascist Ustasha movement during the Second World War. The marchers carried the flag of the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) as well as, bizarrely, a US flag, claiming that their march was also meant to show support for President Donald Trump. This was just one incident which illustrated the increasingly public expressions of sympathy for the Second World War Ustasha movement, which the current centre-right Croatian government has struggled to address. At the beginning of March, the Croatian government adopted a decision to establish the Council for Dealing with the Consequences of the Rule of Non-Democratic Regimes, which was eventually to provide guidance on how to deal with the country's past. Many observers were sceptical that this approach would yield any results, arguing that it was actually an attempt by the government to avoid dealing with the ghosts of the past.

Montenegrin mothers' protest. Anadolu New Agency.



Opinion

Jasmin Mujanović

Two events not covered in this edition's "Political Trends and Dynamics Overview" typify the structural problems faced by Southeastern Europe. In Turkey, President Erdogan is seeking to radically expand his constitutional powers following last year's coup attempt and in Sarajevo, the Western Balkans Prime Minister' Summit came and went with little in the way of concrete outcomes. The shared theme here is a simple one: democratic norms are unravelling and institutional responses, at both the regional and EU level, are lacking.

All the trappings of parliamentary democracy remain visible in Southeast Europe but, functionally, political discourse is beset by partisan brinkmanship and an ever accelerating drift towards overt illiberalism and authoritarianism. Behind the veneer of referendums and judicial appeals is a culture of zero-sum confrontation, wherein cynical and provincial elites abandon all sense of collective good for personal power. In such an environment the very idea of elections ceases to lose its point. After all, if neither governments nor opposition parties accept their results, and they are conducted in a context of fear and coercion, what possible legitimacy can such polls have?

The EU's existing flyover approach is incapable of addressing this crisis of governance. And by insisting that the only major concern in the region is the (credible) Russian threat, Brussels leaves unaddressed why Moscow is finding so many cleavages to exploit in the region in the first place. In this respect, the Sarajevo summit was a missed opportunity of the highest order.

Instead of showing genuine concern and leadership, especially in the wake of the Trump administration's terrifying first few weeks and the ongoing chaos of the Brexit fiasco, Commissioner Johannes Hahn and the rest of his team presided over a drab affair with few (if any) results. The much touted regional common market, to take but one example, is unlikely to manifest any time soon. Besides, it remains unclear what economic muscle a common market in a region with an average unemployment rate of 20 per cent or more could muster. Even if he was primarily playing

to his domestic audience, it is no wonder (then still) PM Vucic called the whole meeting essentially pointless.

Meanwhile, Turkey's referendum seems like bad news for the region regardless of its outcome. If the president is successful in expanding his constitutional power, it inches Turkey that much closer to outright autocracy. If the Erdogan option is defeated, it is nevertheless likely that the government will continue to crack down on civil society, free media, academics, and the opposition albeit with renewed, embarrassed vigour. Few in Brussels appear willing to fully articulate, however, what it means for Southeastern Europe and the Western Balkans, in particular, that the region is increasingly sandwiched between Turkish and Russian authoritarianism, as the U.S. checks out completely from global leadership, and the EU lists indecisively. For all the protest notes and warnings, genuine reflection, policy, and strategy remain absent, even as observers and analysts plead for intervention and reaction.

Matters are unlikely to improve in the coming weeks. Despite Aleksandar Vucic's crushing victory at Serbia's presidential polls, controversy is likely to persist for weeks. Mr Vucic, after all, is on the march to power and it appears only a matter of time before we have an Erdogan or Gruevski like crisis in Belgrade. Macedonia's political impasse, meantime, remains especially volatile and in urgent need of a credible EU response. Brussels could accomplish a great deal by formally sanctioning President Ivanov and VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski for their anti-constitutional activities but it is unlikely to do so. After all, Brussels refused to follow the Obama administration's lead on sanctioning Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the Banja Luka government's clear violations of the Dayton Peace Accords. There is little reason to believe that Brussels will discover a real sense of agency or urgency as it concerns the Western Balkans any time soon.

The precedent, in other words, has been set. There is hardly anything the EU will not tolerate from Balkan elites. That is dangerous for the

ordinary citizens of Southeastern Europe especially who rely on the EU to hold their leaders to account in a fashion that local civil society has struggled to do. Increasingly, the only avenue for change and redress for citizens appears to be not the ballot box (or Brussels) but the street. While these mobilizations may facilitate change in the long-run, for the time being the atmosphere is such that far from the EU being

the “only game in town,” Brussels (like Washington) is simply no longer a significant political factor. This means then that the region’s emerging political framework is one of confrontation: between illiberal elites and desperate, insurgent masses – with the West almost entirely on the sidelines. In short, the situation in the whole of the region remains volatile and worrisome, with little cause for optimism in the weeks to come.

Guest Commentary

We asked activists in the region the following question:

“Dissatisfaction with the governments in the region is on the rise and more people express their revolt on the streets. Can the protests effectively challenge governments in the region and change the political landscape?”

Niccolo Milanese (European Alternatives)

“Protests are rarely useless. Sometimes they are the tipping point that changes a political regime. Sometimes they keep open possibilities for an alternative to the status quo. Still, we should not be naïve and believe every protest is progressive. Even amongst those which call for change, there are constant risks of nationalism and ‘spectacularism’ – making a show to hide what is really going on rather than reveal and challenge it. Every political action needs to be evaluated critically and from a strategic point of view. Building in mechanisms for self-criticism in political movements is a crucial element, if they are to become effective actors in democracy. If I look at the protests in the Balkans over recent years, I think that they play a crucial role in reclaiming public space from privatization and thereby recovering the possibility of real politics. To be even more effective, they need to recognize that international powers are maintaining the status quo in the Balkans. This power structure needs to be challenged both locally to open small cracks in the system and transnationally by linking up with similar movements across Europe to bring more sweeping change.”

Besjan Pesha (Nisma Thurje, Albania)

“I believe that there is no other way. Most political elites in the region are part of the old establishment and years in power have disconnected them from reality. To remind them what matters to people, issues often must be taken to the streets. Zharreza, a city in the south of Albania, serves as a great example. In 2004, when Patos Marinza (the biggest onshore oilfield in Europe) was given to Bankers Petroleum, a Canadian Company, fracking practice polluted the entire area, leading to devastating earthquakes which destroyed dozens of homes. In only three months, 2,789 earthquakes were registered in the village, without any reaction from the government or the mainstream media. Zharreza

was simply not news. Things changed when the issue was taken to the streets. A series of public actions, including protests, hunger strikes, and a walking march from Zharreza to Tirana (130 km), finally began to have results. Social media attention exploded. The day protesters arrived in Tirana, thousands of people joined. The government accepted all the requests, including full compensation of damages and full environmental rehabilitation. Zharreza became a symbol of the people’s power. I say there is no other way – actions like these make people understand that realities can not only be challenged, but changed.”

Elena B. Stavrevska (Impact Institute for Research, Macedonia)

“The growing tendency for people in the region to take to the streets to express political dissatisfaction through protests can be seen as a sign of democratisation from below. This is particularly important if one takes into consideration that the different forms of citizens’ involvement in policy- and decision-making processes across the region are generally not practiced as regularly and as fervently as foreseen in most of the existing legal frameworks. While protests do not compensate for that, they are a form of expressing a political opinion. How effectively they can challenge governments and affect political dynamics depends on three things: (1) specificity and scale of demands, (2) level of government to which the demands are addressed, and (3) effectiveness of other political actors that support the protesters’ demands. It is, however, often difficult to draw a direct causal link between protests and specific policy changes. Nevertheless, one certain and fundamental way in which protests change the political landscape is by getting people politically activated. This is crucial in a region where during the transition period many felt that they had lost their sense of agency and the ability to affect change and control their own lives.”

Damir Arsenijević (De Montfort University, University of Tuzla)

“The February 2014 protests in Bosnia and Herzegovina ushered in new types of popular action and mobilization. From mere victims expressing grievances, protestors started making decisions that affected the quality of their everyday lives. The struggle of the workers of the DITA chemical factory in Tuzla against the closure of their factory was articulated precisely as a protest for production. This coinage of ‘protest for production’ is and will be the currency of any effective protests that aim to disrupt the current status quo that political elites preserve in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. This system is characterized by the de facto one-party system organized into several long-standing groups that control all assets and call themselves political parties. In the future, protests will be the only means by which this system will be effectively challenged, so that freedom and justice will serve the people and not political parties. Protests have already started changing the political landscape in former Yugoslavia and will continue to do so in the years to come. Protests, however, can be harnessed by political elites in power in order to incite other conflicts. The current political struggle against the far right is the struggle for the protests.”

Victoria Stoiciu (FES Romania)

“At least in Romania’s case, Eurobarometer data indicates a slow increase in the level of trust in the Parliament and in the Government since 2007. Nevertheless, levels of trust in these institutions and in institutionalized politics are still very low. Trust in authoritarian and hierarchical institutions such as the church or army still ranks much higher than Parliament or political parties. The disenchantment with politics comes together with social and economic stagnation: despite macro-economic growth, social mobility in Romania has slowed down. Optimism regarding the future is also decreasing. All of these factors have significantly contributed to the social mobilization of the last years. Protests represent a real challenge for the governments – so far, street demonstrations in Romania since 2012 have succeeded in preventing the privatization of the healthcare system, stopped an ecologically dangerous gold mining project, pushed a government to resign, etc. These are all important achievements and real challenges for mainstream political parties. On the other hand, all the protests have been purely reactive; born in opposition to something, they have yet to come up with their own agenda or vision for the future. Their reactive character limits their capacity to change the political landscape.”

A View from Academia: Protest as a Dead End or a New Beginning of Democratization in Southeast Europe?

Tina Olteanu and Dieter Segert

Political protest has been viewed ambivalently in this region since the end of the Cold War – with the general line of argument that protest might destabilize already fragile states that are trying to build and ultimately consolidate democratic institutions in times of inevitable economic hardship. Protest was more or less discredited as an instrument of the “losers of transition” who could not find their place in the new economy or were still connected to ideas of social cohesion of the former socialist system. Others feared that the socioeconomic hardship might have a destabilizing potential on these transforming countries. In any case, the underlying idea was that it would take a few generations for citizens to adapt to democracy. Until then, civil society organizations were seen as the appropriate link between governments, the state, and citizens. Yet against general expectations, there was no rapid consolidation as expected at the beginning of the 1989.¹

In 1998, Bela Greskovits wondered why so few people took the street to protest the harsh economic results of transformation. He claimed that “the pattern of social response [electoral instability and turnover] to the economic stress is biased towards the use of the democratic procedures for the purpose of protest,”² drawing a clear connection between the missing protest movements and the structure of political parties.

Today, and as the contributions to this issue show, the situation has changed completely. Protest is widespread throughout the region and the topics and grievances brought up during these protest are quite diverse. From the perspective of contentious politics we can see that there is still an ambivalent connotation. Tilly defines contentious politics as “interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else’s interests, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties.”³ Greskovits and Tilly – arguing from different perspectives – conclude that there is an inherent link between governments, political parties, and protest. The missing protests of the 1990s and early 2000s were correlated with a high degree of voter volatility. Recent developments show that expressing discontent via voting no longer seems to be an adequate instrument; instead, people turn to the street. The wave of protest can thus be interpreted as a severe crisis of representative democracy in Southeastern and Central Europe.

This crisis has multiple faces. Voter turnout has dropped tremendously over the last two decades. Low voter turnout and high party fragmentation leads to governing parties that have only a marginal backing in society. Abstaining from the vote could be interpreted as an act of political participation: citizens actively refuse to vote, for they fail to see a real alternative to the established political parties.

Another reason for abstaining is rooted in corrupt political parties. In 2013, Transparency International found that political parties were described as corrupt or extremely corrupt by more than 75 per cent of respondents in Serbia, Bosnia, Bulgaria, and Romania.⁴ The recent protests in Romania stemmed from the issue that ruling parties proposed to water down anti-corruption legislation in cases where the political and administrative elite would have profited the most.

As we have seen, large scale protest might not bring fundamental change within the political sphere. Governments may feel pressured to step down in the wake of protests, but more than once they have been voted back into office in the following elections. Still, deeply rooted dissatisfaction with

1 Dieter Segert, “Von Musterschülern zu Problemkindern? Zwischenbilanz der politischen Transformation,” *APuZ* 47-48, 2015. <<http://www.bpb.de/apuz/215190/zwischenbilanz-der-politischen-transformation>>.

2 Béla Greskovits, *The political economy of protest and patience: East European and Latin American transformations compared* (Central European University Press, 1998), p. 183.

3 Charles Tilly, *Contentious performances* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 5.

4 Transparency International, *Global Corruption Barometer*, 2013. <<http://www.transparency.org/gcb2013/results>>.

their democracies is also evident in the Eurobarometer survey in 2016: while on average 44 per cent of EU citizens are not satisfied with their national democracies, more than 60 per cent of respondents from Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania hold this view. However, numbers between post-socialist countries vary.

In general, protestors are young and well educated,⁵ often not those who are impoverished and have existential grievances, but young people struggling with bleak future prospects, including huge youth unemployment rates. At the same time, these protests are also quite loose-knit: there is hardly any leadership on the street and some reluctance to conquer the political sphere by creating new parties. In this sense these protests are apolitical or even anti-political, for the institutionalized sphere of representative democracy has nothing to offer for these protestors. Whether this will be the end or a new beginning of the democratization of Southeast Europe remains to be seen.

5 See e.g. a recent survey done during the Romanian demonstrations: Centrul de Studii in Idei Politice, "Coruptie si Contestare," 2017. <<https://media.stiripesurse.ro/other/201702/media-148692890940808900.pdf>>.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Southeast Europe

After more than two decades of engagement in southeastern Europe, the FES appreciates that the challenges and problems still facing this region can best be resolved through a shared regional framework. Our commitment to advancing our core interests in democratic consolidation, social and economic justice and peace through regional cooperation, has since 2015 been strengthened by establishing an infrastructure to coordinate the FES' regional work out of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Regional Dialogue Southeast Europe (Dialogue SOE).

Dialogue SOE provides analysis of shared challenges in the region and develops suitable regional programs and activities in close cooperation with the twelve FES country offices across Southeast Europe. Furthermore, we integrate our regional work into joint initiatives with our colleagues in Berlin and Brussels. We aim to inform and be informed by the efforts of both local and international organizations in order to further our work in southeastern Europe as effectively as possible.

Our regional initiatives are advanced through three broad working lines:

- Social Democratic Politics and Values
- Social and Economic Justice
- Progressive Peace Policy

Our website provides information about individual projects within each of these working lines, past events, and future initiatives: <http://www.fes-southeasteurope.org>

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www.fes-southeasteurope.org
Orders/Contact: info@fes-soe.org

Responsible: Felix Henkel, Director, Dialogue Southeast Europe
Project coordinator: Denis Piplaš

Managing Editors: Felix Henkel, Denis Piplaš
Editors: Alida Vračić, Jasmin Mujanović
Editorial Assistant: Tea Hadžiristić
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