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Author "BRANISLAV STANICEK"

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Creation date: 06-09-2020
Turkey: Remodelling the eastern Mediterranean: Conflicting exploration of natural gas reserves

Publication type Briefing
Date 04-09-2020
Author BRANISLAV STANICEK
Policy area Foreign Affairs

Summary Since the discovery of offshore natural gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean in the early 2000s, Turkey has challenged its neighbours with regard to international law and the delimitation of their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), and destabilised the whole region through its illegal drilling and military interventions. Ankara has used military force and intimidation, including repeated violations of the territorial waters and airspaces of neighbouring countries. Ankara has also used bilateral deals, such as its November 2019 memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), which purports to determine new maritime boundaries. The Turkey-Libya MoU effectively drew a dividing line between the eastern and western parts of the Mediterranean, threatening maritime security, natural gas exploration and new infrastructures such as the EastMed pipeline. Turkey's behaviour, beyond its geo-economic interests, reflects a more ambitious geopolitical 'neo-Ottoman' agenda intent on remodelling the whole region by spreading the country's influence from northern Iraq and Syria to Libya and leaving behind the Kemalist tradition of secularism and regional neutrality. Tensions in the Aegean Sea and the eastern Mediterranean have not been conducive to good neighbourly relations. The international community has strongly condemned Turkey's behaviour. Taking into account Turkey's poor track record in upholding human rights and the rule of law, the European Union has suspended accession negotiations and all pre-accession funds under the planned new multiannual financial framework for 2021 to 2027. The European Parliament has condemned Turkey's illegal drilling activities as well as its military interventions in the region.

Hagia Sophia: Turkey's secularism under threat

Publication type At a Glance
Date 24-07-2020
Author BRANISLAV STANICEK
Policy area Foreign Affairs

Summary Turkey's decision to convert Hagia Sophia in Istanbul into a mosque, announced on 10 July 2020, created a wave of protest from international and EU authorities, who fear for religious freedom and the republican secular tradition in Turkey. The Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union (EU) condemned this decision at its meeting of 13 July 2020, alongside international organisations including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), raising concerns that the decision would 'fuel mistrust, promote renewed divisions between religious communities and undermine efforts at dialogue and cooperation'. While Turkey is still an EU candidate country, several recent initiatives, ranging from military interventions in Syria and military assistance to Libya in breach of the arms embargo, to illegal gas drilling and repeated threats to EU Member States in the eastern Mediterranean, undermine the country's path towards EU membership and open the door to possible sanctions.

Macro-financial assistance to enlargement and neighbourhood partners in the coronavirus crisis

Publication type At a Glance
Date 11-05-2020
Author BRANISLAV STANICEK
Policy area Foreign Affairs | Coronavirus

Summary On 22 April 2020, the European Commission submitted a proposal for a decision for macro-financial assistance (MFA) to support ten enlargement and neighbourhood partner countries in their efforts to mitigate the economic and social consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, for a total amount of €3 billion. The Parliament is expected to vote on its position on the legislative proposal during the May plenary session.
**Libya: Geopolitics of protracted civil war in the western Mediterranean**

**Publication type** Briefing  
**Date** 27-04-2020  
**Author** BRANISLAV STANICEK  
**Policy area** Foreign Affairs  

**Summary** Libya's third civil war in a decade began when Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) launched an offensive on Tripoli in April 2019. Fayez al-Sarraj, leader of the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) turned to Turkey for military help in an effort to remain in power. Libya has been divided since 2014 into rival military and political camps, based respectively in the capital Tripoli and in the east. The renewed armed conflict risks not only dismantling the fragile modus vivendi of these two administrations but also enhancing the interference of regional players that are using this conflict for their own geostrategic interests. A growing number of countries and international organisations, among the latter the United Nations and the European Union, have intervened ever more decisively in the conflict. Taking into account that warring Libyan factions, broadly aligned with either the GNA or the LNA, are vying for foreign support and arms supplies, the critical point for a peaceful solution is to enforce the UN arms embargo. To this end, following the January 2020 Berlin conference on Libya, the EU launched, on 31 March 2020, a new common security and defence policy mission: Operation EU Active Surveillance (Operation Irini), that has as its goal the implementation of the arms embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council. The European Union remains a supporter of the UN-led efforts to bring about a lasting solution to the political and security crisis in the country. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Libya hosts around 45 000 refugees and asylum-seekers from troubled areas in the region. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Libyans have been internally displaced due to ongoing military conflicts. Following the 90 % decrease in the number of Libyan migrants heading for Europe in recent years, compared to the peak in 2014-2016, the main efforts of the international community are focused on securing a ceasefire and bringing about a lasting political solution to the internal conflict, while honouring the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement.

**Briefing** EN

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**A new approach to EU enlargement**

**Publication type** Briefing  
**Date** 11-03-2020  
**Author** BRANISLAV STANICEK  
**Policy area** Foreign Affairs  

**Summary** The Thessaloniki Summit (2003) opened the door to a European future for the Western Balkans. However, since then progress towards EU membership has been slow. The countries of the region have struggled to implement economic and political reforms, and the rule of law remains particularly problematic. The 2018 Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans gave new impetus to the enlargement policy, offering the six countries of the region a 'credible strategy' through enhanced EU engagement and indicating 2025 as a possible accession date. In June 2019, and again in October 2019, the Council postponed the decision to open negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, despite the positive recommendation from the European Commission and the agreement of the European Parliament. By delaying this decision, the European Union was sending an ambiguous message to the region, reducing its credibility and potentially fuelling nationalistic rhetoric, whilst opening the door to the influence of third-country powers, in particular China and Russia. These problems have sparked a debate which has led to a fundamental re-think of the EU's enlargement policy. In February 2020, European Enlargement Commissioner, Olivier Várhelyi, announced a revised methodology. The new approach aims to strengthen the process. It improves tools to push reforms forward, notably in the areas of the rule of law and the economy. It makes the accession negotiations more credible, more predictable, more dynamic and guided by a stronger political steer. The candidate countries need to deliver on the reforms they promised and the EU needs to deliver when they do so. The criteria will be made clearer and more concise on what is required. Dynamism also means that related issues will be negotiated together in clusters. This can speed up the process. However, if there is backtracking, the process can go backwards with chapters reopened and the level of negotiations scaled back. The Commission's new proposals also envisage further integration of Western Balkan countries into EU policies, programmes and markets, which would deliver some of the benefits of EU membership even before accession. These proposed changes, together with the updated report of the Commission on Albania and North Macedonia pave the way for a decision of the Council, on opening accession negotiations with these two countries, before the EU-Western Balkans summit, to be held in May 2020 in Zagreb, Croatia.

**Briefing** EN
EU-Turkey relations in light of the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis

Publication type: Briefing
Date: 09-03-2020
Author: BRANISLAV STANICEK
Policy area: Foreign Affairs

Summary: Approximately 3.6 million refugees have entered Turkey since the beginning of the civil war in Syria in 2011, the highest number in the region. Despite on-going international and European Union financial and humanitarian support, this ever-increasing refugee presence has resulted in heightened social tensions in Turkey. In the 2019 local elections, the loss of the Istanbul mayoralty by the governing Justice and Development (AK) party was perceived as a major setback for the ‘imperial presidency’ of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Istanbul's new mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu (Republican People's Party, CHP), played a leading role in nurturing aversion for Syrian refugees, stating that Turkey was managing the refugees badly and that ‘people are unhappy’. Some Turkish politicians also regard refugees as a security threat – a trend that has grown since September 2019 when the Turkish military began Operation Peace Spring in north-east Syria, with the aim of containing the Kurds and creating a 'safe zone' to which Syrian refugees could return. The Turkish military operation in Syria, as well as the Turkish incursion into Libya, and other geostrategic issues, such as gas drilling disputes with Cyprus, have led relations between the EU and Turkey, already tainted by the drop in democratic standards since the failed military coup in 2016, to deteriorate further. Repeated threats by Erdoğan that Turkey would 'open the gates' and let the refugees enter the EU materialised on 28 February 2020, when Turkey opened its borders with Greece, setting the scene for a new refugee crisis. A swift European response, with the presence of the presidents of the main EU institutions in Greece on 3 March 2020, demonstrated the unity and will to face this critical situation together. Past experience, in particular the 2015 refugee crisis, has however highlighted the weaknesses in the internal and external dimensions of the EU's migration policy. The current crisis is both a stress-test and an opportunity for the EU to clarify its own strategic position in order to develop a new consolidated geopolitical blueprint for the whole Mediterranean and Middle East that would not only tackle the ambition and behaviour of regional powers such as Turkey, but also place the EU on an equal footing with other global powers active in the region.

Religion and the EU's external policies: Increasing engagement

Publication type: In-Depth Analysis
Date: 12-02-2020
Author: Enrico D'AMBROGIO | Gisela GRIEGER | Naja BENTZEN | Ionel ZAMFIR | Martin RUSSELL | Philippe PERCHOC | Beatrix IMMENKAMP | BRANISLAV STANICEK
Policy area: Foreign Affairs

Summary: Religion has been emerging as a new dimension in the EU's external policies. This paper provides an overview of the principles, institutional set-up and policies underpinning the EU’s approach to religious issues in third countries. Nine case studies meanwhile serve to illustrate the important role played by religion in the foreign policies of a number of different countries worldwide.

Situation of migrants in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Publication type: Briefing
Date: 14-11-2019
Author: BRANISLAV STANICEK
Policy area: Area of Freedom, Security and Justice | Foreign Affairs
Keyword: aid to refugees | migration control | EU migration policy | migrant | right of asylum | migratory movement | refugee | Bosnia and Herzegovina

Summary: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has become a transit route for migrants heading towards western Europe since early 2018. Around 8 000 migrants are currently present in the country, mainly originating from southern Asia and the Middle East. Reception capacities were expanded in 2018, using EU funds, but remain insufficient. In 2019, BiH has been unable to establish additional locations for temporary reception centres, despite EU funds being available. Access to asylum in BiH is also effectively being denied to migrants that seek to claim it. Recently, local authorities in the Una-Sana Canton (BiHac), which have been shouldering most of the burden of migration management, have resorted to action such as restricting movement and forcibly transferring migrants to the Vučjak site, which is unsuitable for human occupation on account of severe health and safety risks for its residents. The government of Croatia has meanwhile been accused by some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations of pushing migrants back into BiH, in violation of international norms on non-refoulement. Croatia has committed to investigate allegations of mistreatment of migrants and refugees at its external borders. The lack of appropriate policy responses in BiH has led to a humanitarian crisis in the Una-Sana Canton. In the absence of timely and serious preparation, and without better internal coordination among state-level and local authorities, BiH may face an even stronger humanitarian emergency this upcoming winter.

Briefing EN

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**Hearings of the Commissioners-designate: Olivér Várhelyi - Neighbourhood and Enlargement**

**Publication type** Briefing  
**Date** 11-11-2019  
**Author** BRANISLAV STANICEK

**Policy area** European neighbourhood policy | enlargement of the Union | European Commissioner | public hearing | appointment of members  
**Keyword** This briefing is one in a set looking at the Commissioners-designate and their portfolios as put forward by Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen. Each candidate faces a three-hour public hearing, organised by one or more parliamentary committees. After that process, those committees will judge the candidates’ suitability for the role based on ‘their general competence, European commitment and personal independence’, as well as their ‘knowledge of their prospective portfolio and their communication skills’. At the end of the hearings process, Parliament votes on the proposed Commission as a bloc, and under the Treaties may only reject the entire College of Commissioners, rather than individual candidates. The Briefing provides an overview of key issues in the portfolio areas, as well as Parliament’s activity in the last term in that field. It also includes a brief introduction to the candidate.

**Briefing EN**

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**Turkey's military operation in Syria and its impact on relations with the EU**

**Publication type** At a Glance  
**Date** 11-11-2019  
**Author** BRANISLAV STANICEK  
**Policy area** Foreign Affairs  
**Keyword** military intervention | Syria | Turkey | association agreement (EU) | accession to the European Union

**Summary** ‘Operation Peace Spring’, launched on 9 October 2019, is the third major Turkish military operation on Syrian territory since 2016, following the ‘Euphrates Shield’ (2016-2017) and ‘Olive Branch’ (2018) operations. Though the decision of Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to invade the north-east Syrian region governed by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), may have come as a surprise to some, it is in fact consistent with the rationale of a regime that counts the fight against the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) – considered ‘terrorist’ not only by Turkey, but also by the United States and the EU – among its top security priorities. What is new is not the fight against the PKK, but rather Turkey’s further strategic decoupling from two of its allies, the EU and the United States. This decoupling started in 2016, when the failed military coup in Turkey prompted President Erdoğan to reinforce his ties with Moscow. Since then, he has grown more authoritarian, using anti-Western rhetoric and making foreign policy choices contrary to the interests of the trans-Atlantic alliance. In light of the Trump administration’s withdrawal from Syria, Turkey’s military move might also be perceived as an attempt to fill a power vacuum in the region and jointly consolidate its influence there with its new ally, Russia. Turkey is a long-standing EU partner; however, negotiations on the country’s EU accession have stalled since 2016, after it drifted further away from the EU benchmarks for the rule of law and fundamental rights. In 2019, the European Parliament called upon the Council of the EU and the European Commission to suspend talks on Turkey’s EU accession. Despite positive cooperation on migration and the EU-Turkey agreement, under which a total of €6 billion has been allocated for around 3.6 million Syrian refugees, Turkey’s incursion into north-east Syria could further damage its EU membership perspective and lead to a new wave of internally displaced persons and refugees, as well as to security threats linked to ISIL/Da’esh foreign fighters present in Syria.

**At a Glance EN**

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**North Macedonia: A step closer to EU membership**

**Publication type** At a Glance  
**Date** 17-10-2019  
**Author** BRANISLAV STANICEK  
**External author** Stanícek, Branislav;  
**Policy area** Foreign Affairs  
**Keyword** EU candidate countries | accession to the European Union | North Macedonia

**Summary** On 15 October 2019, the General Affairs Council discussed the issue of enlargement as regards Albania and North Macedonia without reaching unanimity (opposition of one EU Member State) on the decision to open EU accession negotiations with these countries. The Council will return to the issue after the European Council meeting on 17-18 October. In line with the 2018 western Balkans strategy, which aimed to inject new momentum into the enlargement process, Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission President-elect, and Josep Borrell, incoming High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Vice-President-designate of the Commission (HR/VP), have declared the western Balkans to be their priority.

**At a Glance EN**

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**Serbia: sitting on two chairs**

**Publication type** At a Glance  
**Date** 16-10-2019  
**Author** BRANISLAV STANICEK  
**Policy area** Foreign Affairs  
**Keyword** Serbia | Russia | EU candidate countries | stabilisation and association agreement

**Summary** Until recently, Serbia was considered a frontrunner among the western Balkan candidate countries. However, Serbian frustration at slow progress towards EU membership has opened a space for closer links with the Russian Federation and, more recently, China, shedding doubt on Belgrade’s commitment to a European perspective.

**At a Glance EN**
Albania: On the threshold of EU membership

Publication type At a Glance
Date 16-10-2019
Author BRANISLAV STANICEK
External author Stanicék, Branislav
Policy area Foreign Affairs
Keyword accession criteria | Albania | accession negotiations | North Macedonia
Summary The October 2019 European Council meeting will discuss Albania and North Macedonia. The 2018 western Balkans strategy aimed at injecting new momentum for EU enlargement, consequently European Commission President-designate Ursula von der Leyen, and High Representative and Vice-President-designate Josep Borrell, have declared that the EU would prioritise enlargement talks with the western Balkans. In the face of growing frustration and 'enlargement fatigue', a decision to open negotiations would be a strong signal to the region.

Hearings of the Commissioners-designate: Josep Borrell Fontelles – High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy / Vice-President: A Stronger Europe in the World

Publication type Briefing
Date 26-09-2019
Author BRANISLAV STANICEK
Policy area Foreign Affairs | Security and Defence
Keyword European External Action Service | summarising | EP Committee | candidate | European Commissioner | dissemination of EU information | appointment of members | common foreign and security policy | geopolitics | consent procedure | parliamentary procedure | vice-president of an institution
Summary This briefing is one in a set looking at the Commissioners-designate and their portfolios as put forward by Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen. Each candidate faces a three-hour public hearing, organised by one or more parliamentary committees. After that process, those committees will judge the candidates' suitability for the role based on 'their general competence, European commitment and personal independence', as well as their 'knowledge of their prospective portfolio and their communication skills'. At the end of the hearings process, Parliament votes on the proposed Commission as a bloc, and under the Treaties may only reject the entire College of Commissioners, rather than individual candidates. The Briefing provides an overview of key issues in the portfolio areas, as well as Parliament's activity in the last term in that field. It also includes a brief introduction to the candidate.