
EU Foreign Policy Overview

March 2017



EU Foreign Policy
Research Group

Dear Readers,

The month of March was a very dynamic period in most regions in the world. However, the attention of the EU focused mostly on the Western Balkans, as EU leaders are increasingly concerned about growing tensions and rising Russian influence in the region.

The highlight of the month was a visit of Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, to the six Western Balkans countries. Although difficult at some points (e.g. when a group of Serbian members of parliament protested against growing ties with the EU during Mogherini's speech – cover photo), the visit confirmed the EU's commitment to the Western Balkans and the vision of the Union active in its neighbourhood.

At the same time, relations with another EU neighbour deteriorated. Turkey entered into a dispute with a number of EU member states over the ban on campaigning in relation to the upcoming constitutional referendum. The clash escalated quickly with Turkish authorities suggesting the possibility to conduct another referendum, this time asking its population if the close relationship with the EU should be continued.

These examples demonstrate that the EU finds itself in challenging times, not only because of internal issues (such as the triggering of Article 50 and the Brexit negotiations) but also in global dimension. Now, the role of HR/VP Federica Mogherini is to ensure that the EU is active and visible in its neighbourhood and beyond, challenging the critics and demonstrating that it is capable of facing and overcoming external threats.

Kinga Jaromin
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Balázs Kele

In the Democratic Republic of Congo tensions are still high as President Kabila remains in power, despite his term officially ending in December 2016. Moreover, the Kasai region of the country has been relatively unstable since last year, when security forces killed a local leader. Recently, a police convoy was attacked and 40 police officers were decapitated. Also, in the same region two UN investigators and assisting staff were kidnapped and killed this month. The intentions and identity of the attackers remain unclear. These tensions are not a good omen for the upcoming presidential elections, which should be held this year though the exact date is still unconfirmed.

The food insecurity in East Africa is rising. South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya are facing a severe food crisis. As Ethiopia and Kenya are relatively stable, they are capable of dealing with this problem more effectively. However, Somalia and South Sudan are in deep political crisis and the lack of stability may worsen the consequences of the food shortages.

South Sudan is strongly divided ethnically, mainly between the groups of Dinkas and Nuers. Due to continuous civil wars, the country has suffered from poverty, which is an important factor contributing to the current food insecurity. Moreover, South Sudan is on the edge of the Sahel region, where desertification due to climate change and over-grazing is a looming problem. The price of food doubled in recent years and crop yields are dwindling. According to some interpretations, the Indian Ocean Dipole is responsible for the series of droughts, which will be a common phenomenon in the future, contributing to growing insecurity in the region. The UN started providing food aid to the country, however, as looting attacks become increasingly common and security forces are unable to stop them, the UN staff faces increasing danger when carrying out their duties.

Somalia, which has faced several famines, is also in a difficult situation as the country is far from unified. Different constellations of political groups, clans and radicals have been fighting for the influence, while central power is almost not existing. In March, ten people died in a car explosion in Mogadishu. The target of the detonation was a busy security checkpoint but the presidential palace is also close to the place of the incident. The action was carried out by a jihadist terrorist organisation, al-Shabaab. Recently al-Shabaab, linked to al-Qaeda, has been losing the ground. However, the terrorist group is still a potent threat by being well-entrenched in the Somali society, particularly in the countryside, where people's prospects tend to be hopeless.

The march of the armyworms, which endangered crop yields in Zimbabwe in February, moved forward and currently it is a huge threat to Ugandan farmers. According to the Agriculture Minister of Uganda, Vincent Sempijja, the pests destroyed more than 40% of the maize crops.

Also, tensions in Mali remain high as Tuareg factions try to boycott the peace conference of the country. Tuareg and al-Qaeda linked terrorist factions fight against each other, while the central government tries to strengthen its position in Northern Mali. The EU provides several aid programs to this country within the frame of its Sahel strategy. The Sahel region is particularly important for the EU. In 2015, during the Valletta Summit in Malta, foreign ministers of the EU member states decided to create the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa which received €2.3 billion. €530 million was already spent on the Sahel region alone, which emphasises its importance for the EU.

Finally, in March 2017, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini travelled to Ethiopia to meet with the new chairperson of the African Union, Moussa Faki Mahamat. Mogherini underlined the importance of common work between the EU and the AU in the field of development, migration, climate change, security and peace. Moussa Faki assumed office on 14 March and his first visitors were Federica Mogherini along with Commissioner Neven Mimica, who is responsible for the international cooperation and development.

Australia and Oceania



**Jakob
McKernan**

In the month that the United Kingdom triggered Article 50, Greece showed signs of lurching towards another potential debt crisis and the number of refugees attempting to reach Europe spiked, the Pacific region was the source of more optimistic news. Not only has the EU made significant progress on its prospective trade deals with New Zealand and Australia over the last month, but it also demonstrated that it remains a global leader in development aid, particularly in regard to climate adaptation and mitigation.

On 7 March, Commissioner for Trade, Cecilia Malmström, and New Zealand's Minister of Trade Todd McClay met in Brussels to mark the end of scoping talks. With the scoping round concluded, the European Commission will now ask member states for a negotiating mandate based on specific objectives. The chorus of approval that welcomed the conclusion of preparatory talks demonstrates the appetite for trade liberalisation in New Zealand. Moreover, the Government's announcement of its ambitious Trade 2030 agenda - which seeks to target tariff and non-tariff barriers for 90% of NZ exports - will only serve to reassure the EU that NZ will remain a reliable partner in an era of rising protectionism and anti-free trade rhetoric.

While progress has also been made on the other side of the Tasman Sea, several technical problems have meant that developments have not been as smooth in relation to the EU – Australian FTA. Speaking at a meeting of Commonwealth Trade Ministers, Australian Minister for Trade Steven Ciobo lamented the EU's slow 'internal processes' (Jones, 2017). However, Minister Ciobo did indicate that the Australian government accepts that the EU is a large grouping that faces challenges in terms of reaching consensus and that if 'Europeans need a bit more time [he] is more than happy to give it to them' (Jones, 2017). He went on to predict that full negotiations would begin 'around the middle to end of this year' (Jones, 2017). Although agricultural sensitivities are likely to be the most contentious issues in potential negotiations, areas such as public procurement and intellectual property (Geographical Indicators in particular) are also likely to be problematic.

Over the last month, the EU has also sought to re-affirm its strong relationship with the 15 Island nations that make up the rest of the region. At the beginning of March, EU Ambassador to the Pacific, Andrew Jacobs, travelled to Palau where discussions on EU – Palau cooperation, regional economic integration and sustainable development were held.

The following day, the EU, in partnership with Germany, announced measures to fund a climate adaptation project and sustainable energy project in Kiribati. A meeting of various EU Heads of Delegation in Suva at the end of the month further underlined the EU's commitment to assist in the tackling of climate change. The Heads of Mission were joined by Stefano Manservigi, the Director General of Devco, the European Union's development arm.

A Trump-led United States and a United Kingdom focused on dealing with the Brexit fallout will be playing a less active role on the global stage. Guided by the motto that 'one should not let a crisis go to waste', the EU should recommit itself to exercising effective soft-power. Whether it be in the area of international trade or in tackling climate change, the Pacific region offers ample opportunity to pursue this goal.

At a time of increasing uncertainty around international funding for the climate adaptation and mitigation efforts, the EU has an opportunity to cement its position as a global leader in tackling climate change. Similarly, as a wave of protectionist measures spread across the developing world the EU can use the opportunity to fill the vacuum and strengthen its status as a trade superpower. Accordingly, while the Brexit process will of course constitute a priority for the Union over the coming months and years, the EU should not lose sight of its challenges and more importantly, opportunities, further from home.

China and East Asia



**Evelyn
Shi**

Events in March have exemplified that the global order cannot function efficiently without sufficient support from powerful states. The actual challenge now with President Trump's isolationist 'America First' policy and President Xi Jinping's pro-globalisation approach is that the established power (USA) still enjoys superiority but refuses to assume the related responsibility, while the rising power (China) is eager to play a greater role but still lacks sufficient capability and confidence. The state visits from Japan and then Germany to the US have amplified this notion, since both representatives were eager to appeal to President Trump rather than to criticise him for his policies proposals.

However, right after the rather unbalanced state visits, Merkel and Abe appeared together, praising the strong bonds between the two countries and calling for the world to resist protectionist impulses. This event could have not only been addressed to the US, but also to China, which has been making a big effort to praise globalisation. And yet, the first partner Merkel contacted after her state visit to the US was Japan, China's earliest competitor. This course means that the Western World is still discontented with China's dumping strategies, and will probably not change its attitude until China does. Japan's Deputy Minister Akama's visit to Taiwan does not improve Japan's relationship with China either, as it is the highest official visit since Japan broke the ties with Taipeh in 1972, in respect to the One-China-Policy.

Meanwhile, the annual joint exercise of the US military with Japanese and South Korean fighter jets took place. Ultimately, that strengthens their alliance and also increases the risk of a military confrontation, as both China and North Korea see their security threatened. Furthermore, the Chinese government does not approve South Korea hosting the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system (THAAD) because additionally to the trilateral military alliance, the radar of this system could also reach deeply into Chinese territory. This opinion was strongly emphasised by the response of economic sanctions, as all package tours to South Korea were banned and Korean retail stores across China were closed. This announcement shook South Korea's economy, which relies heavily on customers from China since they make up 47% of all tourist entries.

Moreover, the now official removal of President Park Geun-hye due to the corruption scandal further complicates the economic situation in South Korea.

During her four-year-long rule, the economy slowed down, exports shrank for two straight years and are not likely to improve in the event of worsening relations with the biggest trading partner, China. New elections will be held within 60 days, on or before 9 May 2017, and polls are indicating the ruling party will win again.

Meanwhile, as reasonable as the fear about China and North Korea is, it is questionable if the alliance of these two countries can last. Earlier this month, China stated its worry about North Korea firing missiles into the Japanese sea. Beijing suspended all coal imports from its neighbour already in February, while Pyongyang responded by accusing Beijing of 'dancing to the tune of the US' (Adlakha, 2017). Not only the North Korea's discomfort against China is on the rise, but also a lot of Chinese citizens are calling to abandon North Korea. On the contrary, China is North Korea's only defence treaty ally in the world and Beijing must immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal to defend Pyongyang if attacked, according to the 1961 treaty.

Whether China continues its alliance with North Korea might also influence China's status in the world. Whereas some people believe that North Korea is helping China when dealing with the worldwide 'Anti-China-feeling' by being one of its most valuable strategic assets, the alliance with autocratic countries like North Korea might send a wrong message to the rest of the world. At the same time, China has risen as a global power by cooperating with all countries that could be economically beneficial, regardless of their domestic policies. In fact, President Xi Jinping has lately welcomed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Beijing, where he supported Israel's two-state-solution, and Netanyahu respected China's One-China-Policy in return. At the same time, the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang met with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia to further strengthen their relationship. The hospitality China displays towards Middle East countries could help China with its Belt and Road Initiative, planned to be expanded to European countries as well.

It is also worth noting that with Theresa May officially triggering Article 50, it does not seem unlikely that Sino-UK cooperation will continue. The UK is still China's second largest trading partner among EU members, and has always sought Chinese investment in fields such as nuclear power and high speed railways. China in return has looked to the UK for help in developing its financial market and facilitating the process of the Yuan's internationalisation, and London has already become a main hub for the offshore trading of the Chinese currency. If the UK is willing to cooperate with China, why isn't the rest of Europe?

Middle East and North Africa



**Stefan
Pfalzer**

Italy hosted a migration summit on 20 March 2017, bringing representatives from Libya, Algeria and Tunisia as well as from Germany, France, Austria, Malta, Slovenia, Switzerland and the EU Commissioner for Migration to the negotiation table. Italy's Interior Minister Minniti proposed the creation of a permanent contact group between European and North African countries in order to address migration issues. As the UN-backed Libyan Prime Minister Al-Sarraj demanded money and equipment to sufficiently contain migrant flows to Southern Europe, Minniti made clear that there was commitment to invest and provide the necessary material. Minniti also stated that there would be refugee camps in Libya overseen by the internationally-recognised Libyan government and the UN (Scherer 2017; Deutsche Welle 2017).

Regarding this summit, it is well-worth looking at who was not present at the migration summit in Rome: Greece on the European side and Egypt and Morocco on the North African side of the Mediterranean. Excluding Greece from the summit can be justified by comparing the numbers of sea arrivals in Italy and Greece in 2017 so far. While Athens has counted 3,783 arrivals, Rome has dealt with 21,903 arrivals. Roughly 40% of migrants who have arrived in Greece this year are Syrians, accounting for the largest group. The percentages are more fragmented when it comes to sea arrivals on the Italian shores: 14,9% are from Guinea, 13,8% from Nigeria, 12,4% from Bangladesh and 10,2% from Gambia while smaller percentages of African countries make up the remaining half.

Taking these statistics into account, it stands to reason that the EU wants North African countries to form a southern wall against immigration from mostly Central and Western Africa. In light of this, it seems strange to exclude Morocco, mostly housing African migrants, and Egypt whose government claims to house around five million refugees and migrants (including 500,000 Syrians and around 3 million Sudanese) (Brookings 2016). If the EU wants to incentivise North African defence efforts, it will have to include all countries located in the region. The reason why it has not done so is probably because of the fact that Algeria has been in territorial disputes with Morocco ever since both countries gained independence and because Egypt actively backs the Libyan National Army led by Khalifa Haftar who, in turn, does not acknowledge the government of Prime Minister Al-Sarraj.

Moreover, the EU and the international community face more adverse conditions in their struggle to include all powers involved in the Libyan conflict in a political solution, after Russia has reportedly deployed Special Forces in Western Egypt as well as military contractors near Benghazi in an effort to support their ally Haftar. The Russian entry into the conflict in Libya could be interpreted in various ways: Russia could be trying to fight the Islamic State in another area of conflict. It could be also an opposition to the Western coalition that leads the rebuilding of Libya after a NATO intervention in 2011, aimed at ending the civil war and resulting in the death of the long-term dictator Qaddafi. However, Russia's deployment could just be a display of strength after already assuming a leading role in the Syrian Civil War.

Whatever the motive of Russia's involvement may be, the EU will now face a more complex situation in North Africa, as the region might well return to a logic that resembles the one of the Cold War.

In an effort to strengthen ties with another neighbour in the south - Algeria - the EU has signed a document adopting priorities of their partnership, including cooperation concerning market access, energy and environment, security, border control and human trafficking. The partnership is a part of EU's Neighbourhood Policy and aims at expanding the market for European producers as well as building up partners to control migration across the Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, the EU adopted a joint communication for Syria - a strategy which aims at strengthening its role in the Syrian crisis and which develops an agenda for a peaceful future for Syria. The outlined strategy stresses the need for an end of the war and political transition, an inclusive political system and national reconciliation. In regard to reconstruction efforts, the EU considers lifting restrictive measures and resuming cooperation with the Syrian Government as well as extensive plans for funding the economic and political reconstruction.

It represents a step towards a multilateral resolution of the Syrian crisis beyond an eventual end of violence. However, it remains unclear how to reconcile a political transition in Syria with the need to cooperate with the Syrian government.

Russia and Eastern Europe



Kinga Jaromin

The first half of the month brought some hope for EU – Russia relations, as Gazprom demonstrated readiness to comply with EU rules in order to end a five-year anti-trust case. The investigation concerns the issue of overpricing gas products for some EU members, which is a powerful political tool in the hands of the Kremlin.

However, other events of this month were not as positive. The final result of the world-wide journalist investigation on 'Russian Laundromat', a money laundering scheme running from 2011 to 2014, revealed that \$20.8 billion from 19 Russian banks was laundered with the assistance of European banks, including such giants such as HSBC, Royal Bank of Scotland or Lloyds.

Meanwhile in Russia, lawyer and political activist Alexey Navalny and revealed the outcome of the investigation about Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, accusing him of running his own corruption scheme through a group of foundations registered to his former classmates. In a Youtube video, which went viral reaching more than 16 million views, Navalny concluded that the corruption scheme in this complexity is possible only because it is a part of the bigger system, endorsed by President Putin. Finally, he called for Russia-wide protests against Medvedev and corruption.

The protests took place on Sunday, 26 March and their scale was surprising for many. Thousands of people in dozens of cities went out to the streets, following Navalny's call. Many participants were arrested, including the organiser who was sentenced to 15 days in prison. The authorities deemed the protests as illegal and accused Navalny of inciting unrest as part of his campaign before the 2018 presidential elections. Nevertheless, the protests are seen as a major success of Navalny, which makes him now a strong opposition leader who will be more difficult for authorities to dismiss.

President Putin commented that such events are „a tool of the Arab Spring” and may „plunge a country into a chaos” bringing up the comparison with the situation in Ukraine (Moscow Times, 2017a). This is a common narrative for the Russian president who sees spontaneous social movements as a threat to his power. In this particular example it may be the case. March protests were not only significant in a scale but also in the characteristics, engaging the provinces which have never been particularly politically active as well as young people who seem to be immune to the mainstream propaganda messages.

The Russian youth who are not convinced by Putin's promise of stability are well-informed, choosing the social media instead of newspapers and TV as a source of information. Therefore, they are more difficult to control. However, it is unlikely that Putin will not attempt to do that by focusing on the initiatives and developing youth policies to ensure that the root of rebellion is neutralised. Indeed, such an initiative has been already proclaimed.

Unfortunately for Putin, the youth are not the only group which should cause concern, as smaller and less publicised protests have been organised in Russia over the last month, including by drivers and residents of Tatarstan after the licences of three local banks were revoked and clients lost access to their savings. It seems like finally, real-life problems (including the worsening economy) diffuse the state propaganda of success.

The protesters in Russia might have been emboldened by their neighbours, Belarusians, who continued rallies against the worsening economic situation throughout all of March, despite the fact that the collection of the so-called social parasite tax which incited the unrest, was suspended. The culmination of the protests took place only a day before Navalny's anti-corruption rally in Russia, when Belarusian opposition celebrated the Freedom Day. Many activists and journalists were detained to which the EU reacted by issuing a statement on the same day, calling for the release of arrested persons and ensuring the freedom of association. President Lukashenka accused 'foreign agents' of preparing a revolution pointing to Poland and Lithuania. Other than that, his relations with Russia remain tense and Lukashenka seeks improvements in the economic situation by enhancing cooperation with other possible partners, like Iran.

At the same time in Ukraine, on 15 March, the Council of National Security and Defence of Ukraine with the support of President Petro Poroshenko, decided to introduce a blockade on cargo rail and road communication with the territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions that are not controlled by Kyiv. The decision followed an illegal commercial blockade introduced by political activists and war veterans in December 2016, and the decision of the separatists to confiscate the companies in the region and re-orientate the trade on Russia. In addition to the official blockade, five Russian banks were subjected to sanctions.

In the Republic of Moldova, the tensions between the authorities of the country and of separatist region of Transnistria remain high. The most recent issue concerns the plan of joint controls carried out by Moldovans and Ukrainians along the common border. A case of checkpoint at Cuciurgan-Pervomaiskoe stirs up a growing disagreement of the Transnistrian authorities as it is located on the main road between Tiraspol to Odessa, Ukraine, a prominent smuggling route and important source of revenue for the region.

Finally, it is worth noting that Moldova came into the spotlight in the 'Russian Laundromat' scheme as the investigators proved the crucial role of corrupted Moldovan judges in the scam.

Turkey and Caucasus



**Federico
Salvati**

We open this month with the diplomatic crisis that broke out between Turkey and the EU. The Turkish constitutional referendum is inciting instability in the relations between Ankara and some EU member states.

The crisis has been triggered by Turkish efforts to hold political rallies in European national territories and subsequent travel restrictions placed by European authorities on Turkish officials seeking to promote the “Yes” vote among Turkish citizens living abroad. It is worth noting that similar foreign campaigning is illegal under Turkish law.

These events provoked a disproportionate reaction of Erdoğan and the Turkish establishment in general, stirring up a heated dispute between Turkish authorities and a number of European leaders. Erdoğan claimed that the countries which imposed the travel bans are ruled by Nazi-fascist regimes, eventually comparing Chancellor Merkel to Hitler. On 13 March, the government decided to ban the Dutch Ambassador from entering the country, imposing light economic sanctions on Dutch economic imports. Although the crisis has involved mostly Germany, the Netherlands and Austria, its echo was heard all across the 'old continent'.

It is important to note that the reason for the European restrictions on the Turkish referendum campaign stem from the controversial character of the Turkish constitutional reform itself (see February overview). Therefore, the situation is paradoxical. Turkey, which appeals to the principles of political freedoms defended by the EU, enters a brawl with the Union's members in order to campaign for a referendum that, as commentators all across the world agree, would seriously curtail the checks and balances equilibrium inside the Turkish system.

Despite a tone down of the general rhetoric in the last days, it seems that the crisis will bring about heavy consequences in the bilateral relations between Turkey and the EU. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu warned on Wednesday, 22 March, that the government is reconsidering both the 2013 deal that sees Turkey take back migrants who travel illegally to the EU and the 2016 refugee deal under which it prevents refugees from leaving its shores and crossing to Greece. Moreover, Ankara again voiced its claim calling for the extradition of political and military personalities from EU countries, alleged to have been involved in the coup attempt of last year.

Further escalation is likely as President Erdoğan announced the possibility of holding a national referendum on whether to pursue the goal of European Union membership or not. The possible repercussions of a Turkish withdrawal from the EU membership negotiations could be severe. Ankara is already viewed as the major obstacle for NATO and the EU on the way to further integration and this image has been strongly confirmed this month, when Turkey opposed the implementation of a security project that saw Austria as the main beneficiary. Similar steps have potential to impair NATO internal relations. Furthermore, an increased distance between Turkey and the EU will probably result in closer Moscow – Ankara relations in order for the Turkish government to seek more control on the regional theatre.

Meanwhile in the Caucasus, Armenia was preparing for a new round of parliamentary elections. These were to be the first elections after the constitutional referendum that took place in 2015. The referendum transformed the republic from a semi-presidential system to a parliamentary system. Many have criticised the reform because it formally allows president Sargsyan to stay in power after his second and last constitutionally allowed term.

Once again, President Sargsyan's Republican Party and the Tsarukyan Block were the main parties contending for power in the Armenian political scene. Gagik Tsarukyan is one of the main oligarchs in Armenia with many personal ties in any given business and political environment. Open Democracy defined him in the following way: 'He's one of the richest men in Armenia, and isn't shy about flaunting it with his gaudy mansions and a gold-plated phone' (Sanamyan, 2017). As a US state Department cable, made available by WikiLeaks, quipped, he 'has a personal style which would make Donald Trump look like an ascetic' (Sanamyan, 2017). Even before the elections, it was clear that Armenia is unlikely to witness any real change on the country's political scene. The only consistent swing that could have taken place with the victory of Tsarukyan could be an eventual closure of the new diplomatic relation between Yerevan and Brussels. Naira Zograbyan, the head of the "Prosperous Armenia" faction and a candidate from the "Tsarukyan" bloc, stated openly that Armenia should maintain its relations with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and with Russia as the priority of the national international strategy. However, the President Sargsyan's Republican Party turned out to be victorious, therefore we can expect the continuation of current political direction.

It is worth noting that elections did not escape controversies. The European Union, the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom said in a joint statement that they are concerned about the allegations of voter intimidation and attempts to buy votes.

United States of America



Jakub Zientala

The values of the liberal democracy are usually associated with the Western World. Traditionally, the President of the United States is called the leader of the Free World. However, in the case of Donald J. Trump this position was put to the test because of his unusual rhetoric and policy making style. He seems excessively occupied with creating his own media personality, at the expense of his presidential duties. In this regard, Mr Trump when assuming the office, promised to create a 'legislative wave'. However, most of the legislative efforts of the current resident of the White House are limited to issuing executive orders and waging war on the mainstream media, which he refers to as 'fake news'.

With this policy making style, which focuses on bypassing the Congress, Mr Trump has suffered setbacks in many areas. Moreover, because of his attitude of neglect of foreign policy, the relationship between the US and the EU has suffered serious decline after the period of uncertainty in the first two months of Mr Trump's first term. The new White House administration stands in direct contradiction to what previous administration did: cutting foreign and humanitarian aid funds, as well as slowly removing itself from the fight against climate change. Current relationship between the US and Europe can be characterised by the recent statement of HR/VP Mogherini:

'We have entered in a different phase of the relation of Europe and the United States, that's quite clear' (Stinson, 2017). However, at least for the time being, the trade relations between the USA and EU remain unchanged and despite Mr Trump's criticism of trade agreements, the US has not formally withdrawn from TTIP negotiations.

Two days after Mr Trump gave his first speech to both houses of Congress, the European Parliament issued a recommendation to halt visa-free travel to the EU for American citizens. The motion arose from the fact that citizens of five EU member states (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Poland and Romania) are still required to obtain the visas while travelling across the Atlantic. According to the issued recommendation, the European Commission has two months to reintroduce the visa traffic for US citizens. This new friction could have serious repercussions in diplomatic relations between the two global powers. It is unclear if the European Commission will take this step, taking into consideration possible losses of the tourism industry.

The comments on the American side were very diplomatic and brought no definite answer as the Department of State said it remains open for the dialogue with the European Union. The visa regime, if introduced, would remain in place as long as USA still require visa from the citizens of the five member states. The diplomats of both sides are set to meet in early June to discuss the matter.

In March, the first meeting between President Trump and Chancellor Merkel and representatives of the German industry were held. During the meeting, leaders discussed issues of NATO funding and the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Among the subjects discussed off the official records, were pledged commitments of the leaders of German industry to invest in the American car-manufacturing. The \$54 billion trade surplus of Germany in trade with US seemed to be a source of the friction between the American representatives and their European counterparts. This summit can be summarised as a damage control meeting that attempted to straighten up the issues that arose already in the first few months of Mr Trump's presidency.

However, a few days later, the European Commission's President Jean-Claude Juncker marked the European Union's 60th anniversary with a warning about Trump's 'annoying' support for nationalist movements, which shows 'he does not understand anything about Europe' (Financial Times, 2017). On another diplomatic front, the Palestinian peace process, Israel has defied Mr Trump's appeals over building new settlement on the West Bank of the Jordan River and has announced new settlement plans for the next 20 years.

At home, President Trump has suffered a series of major setbacks. His first sponsored bill that was meant to replace the Affordable Care Act did not pass the house and has been pulled from the floor in the last minute. House Speaker Paul Ryan told journalists after cancelling the vote: 'All of us, myself included, will need time to reflect on how we got to this moment, what we could have done, and do it better' (Atlantic, 2017). It remains unclear if or when Mr Trump and House GOP will attempt to repeal Obamacare again.

During the same week, the FBI confirmed that it took up the investigation on possible ties between members of the Trump administration and Russian spies. Former security adviser Mike Flynn pledged on 30 March to testify in exchange for assured immunity. The matter of alleged links of Russian officials and people close to Mr Trump during the election campaign last year is shrouded with numerous mysteries. In the last days of March, Devin Nunes (Chair of House Intelligence Committee), obtained unauthorised access to intelligence reports which showed that President Trump and his two associates were also investigated in this regard. The matter will be further monitored.

Western Balkans



**Aleksandra
Stankovic**

The Western Balkans region has been high on the EU agenda this month. One of the highlights was the trip of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini to the region that took place at the very beginning of the month and included appointments in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia. The main objective of this visit was to promote the relations between the Western Balkans and the EU and to prove how the Western Balkans countries are moving forward on their reform paths, but also to calm down the recent ethnic and political tensions, which can undermine the European integration process. Mogherini emphasised that the Western Balkans states are an important part of Europe and that they should work towards a reform. She stressed that 'regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations remain essential in this context' (Rudic, 2017).

In the aftermath of the visit, the meeting of the six Prime Ministers of the Western Balkan states took place, where they confirmed the commitment of their countries to the EU accession. The meeting, being a follow-up to the Paris Western Balkans Summit of 4 July 2016, took place in Sarajevo and was attended by representatives of Italy, the European Commission and the European External Action Service. The main purpose of the meeting was to reaffirm the countries' commitments and set out preparations for the next summit hosted by Italy in Trieste on 12 July 2017.

Despite the declarations of cooperation, the EU is concerned about the rising tensions in the region and about a growing Russian influence. These concerns were also a subject of the high level conversations on the EU summit held in Brussels on 9 – 10 March.

One of the examples of such tensions exist is Macedonia where the ethnic crisis, involving Macedonians and the Albanian minority, is deepening. The political division of the country has led to a situation where the government cannot be appointed without the support of the parties representing the Albanian minority (which constitutes a quarter of Macedonia's population). However, the parties demand to proclaim Albanian as a second official language of the country which Macedonians see as a threat to the integrity of the country. The situation has a serious potential to trigger inter-ethnic tensions and to push the country into further instability. After the visit of Mogherini, the European Union's enlargement commissioner, Johannes Hahn, also visited Macedonia to help break this political deadlock and calm down the tensions. However, the situation remains strained.

In the meantime, Serbia was preparing for the presidential elections that were held on 2 April 2017. Consequently, this topic took over the political life in the country. The person leading the race was the current Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic. His influence in Serbia and the support of voters is very high so he was widely expected to win which was confirmed on the day of the elections. He distanced other candidates, winning 55% of votes. The rather predictable, therefore tedious election campaign was brightened up with a very unusual candidate named Ljubisa Preletacevic. He is in fact a fictitious character created by a young man named Luka Maksimovic. His project which started as a parody on a local level escalated, allowing him to stand as the candidate for the presidency after he gained considerable popularity in the country. He even attracted the world's attention and appeared on BBC news live.

Mr Vucic, still in a position of Prime Minister, met in Berlin with Chancellor Angela Merkel. They talked about the current situation in Serbia but also in the region. At the press conference Merkel pointed out that the Prime Minister successfully carried out numerous reforms, which enabled further investments and that he had completed all conditions for the EU negotiation. She also stressed the importance of the Germany – Serbia bond, based on the considerable Serbian population living in Germany and mutual economic ties.

March in the Western Balkans witnessed a number meetings and negotiations in order to contribute to the reform process in the countries of the region and to keep them engaged in the path to the EU membership. It seems that the EU started realising that to preserve the peace in the region, it must take up a more active role. To ensure that the vision of the EU membership is close enough this should not be deemed impossible to fulfil. Creating such an attitude is difficult, considering the fact that the impression of the EU not being able to continue the enlargement process in the near future is widespread. The EU should therefore seek other ways to effectively preserve its influence in the region, especially in the event of growing Russian interest in the Western Balkans.

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