

## The Experts' Corner 2019

"2019 will be a waiting year for Southeastern Europe. The only tangible success is the ratification of the Prespa Agreement which would unlock one key dispute in the region and open the door for NATO membership and EU accession talks to North Macedonia. Other than that, there are few breakthroughs to be expected. The Serbia-Kosovo dialogue is unlikely to lead to results with the current EU Commission having only a few months left and the two sides being far apart in terms of content and rhetoric. Neither government has prepared their electorate to make a compromise. At best the EU will be giving the start to accession talks to North Macedonia and Albania, but I expect a further worsening of the regional state of democracy, in particular in Serbia. With a weak EU, concerned with EP elections and a new commission, the impetus for changes will have to be regional. Recent protests in Bosnia and Serbia signal that there is wide-spread dissatisfaction among the population with the status quo, but opposition parties have been unable and inept to build on this. It will depend on social movements to organize and parties to articulate plausible alternatives whether 2019 will be about stagnation or change."

*Florian Bieber*

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"On January 21 of this year, China announced that its gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 6.6 percent in 2018. It's a bit of a mystery how China is able to compile its GDP statistics so quickly. It probably helps that the director of the National Bureau of Statistics, Ning Jizhe, is also the Vice Chairman responsible for economic planning at the National Development and Reform Commission. Yes, that's right: the person who is responsible for setting China's economic goals is also the person responsible for measuring performance. That's China.

In reality, China's economic boom ended in early 2016. The Chinese economy has been propped up for the last three years by a massive expansion of credit, but now that balloon is reaching its bursting point. All indications are that China is now in recession -- all indications, that is, except those published by the National Bureau of Statistics.

No one really believes that the Chinese economy is booming, and whatever extravagant numbers the Chinese economy may have posted in the past, 6.6 percent would still mean booming growth. In 2019, it will become so obvious to everyone that China's economy has stalled that even the Chinese government will have to come clean and reckon with reality. Some lies are just too big to pull off -- even for China."

*Salvatore Babones*

*Associate Professor at the University of Sydney*

*Author of The New Authoritarianism: Trump, Populism, and the Tyranny of Experts.*

"Developments in South East Europe in 2019 will be strongly influenced by the main trends in the new year's world politics, security, and economics that will be projected to the region. The great power

competition (first and foremost between US, China, EU and Russia) will intensify, which is why political and economic tensions will continue to escalate not only worldwide but in every region affecting individual states. This can be explained by the conflicting nature of populist nationalism that is gaining momentum in different regions and states, great powers included. Not only globalization, multilateralism and liberalism will be challenged by populist nationalism but also governments and institutions.

On the economic front, the regional states will show a substantial slowdown next year driven not only by consequences of the world trade wars but also by the poor performance of the Turkish economy. Deep divides between the north and the south within European Union will create obstacles for structural reforms in the region. Russia's troubled relations with European Union and the US/NATO will increase tensions and rivalry in South East Europe, which is fraught with domestic polarization of the regional states."

*Nadezhda Arbatova*

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"The year 2019 was advertised worldwide as yet another year of "economic blows". These will particularly hit countries with high public debt, and in the Balkans they will increase the risks of political, social, ethnic and religious conflicts and economic and security instability. These internal resistance to the present state of affairs will not desist. Adding the unresolved conflicts between individual states and the deep EU crisis to the pot, one of the rare common values shared by the EU and the Balkans could be "balkanization".

In this context, particularly important are the issues related to Macedonia and Serbia-Kosovo. These are potential hotbeds of conflict and challenges for cooperation. The Prespa Agreement should serve as a role model to all Balkan leaders, because it demonstrates that statesmanship and personal courage can solve a complicated dispute, such as the one between Macedonia and Greece. This will not, however, speed up or add to finding a solution to the dispute between Belgrade and Pristina because these are two completely different issues, both historically and in terms of the international law.

By their very nature, the states and societies of the region lack sufficient capacity to prevent, but also to complete their own collapse, either through armed (interethnic) conflicts or social revolts. For them, the de-stabilization of a wider area is vital. The leaders and citizens of the region will have to listen to voices from the EU and NATO, but also from Central Asia and the Middle East. The bad news are those announcing the intent of the big players (primarily US and Russia) to "transfer" the temporary "localize" their disputes in the Balkans.

Having this as well as the past of this region in mind, it is certain that 2019 will froth with economic and political crises and security uncertainties. Good news about peace agreements and strengthening of cooperation would come as a blessing!"

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