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Albanian justice used a document with inaccurate information to justify remanding in custody Beleri, BIRN reported, citing a court hearing. [page 2](#)



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BY GABY HINSLIFF

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RICKI MINIC - ONLY FT. DUSSE, ELI WAYNE, CHRIS BROWN

Concerns over SP's Move to Extend Control

The chair of European Affairs Committee, DP MP Tabaku has accused the Socialist majority of seeking to control the independent institutions through the establishment of two working groups



Chair of European Affairs Committee, DP MP Jorida Tabaku

TIRANA - The chairperson of the Parliamentary Committee on European Affairs and of the National Council of European

Integration, DP's Jorida Tabaku, has voiced concern over the establishment of two working groups by the Socialist majority allegedly aiming to control the independent institutions, and called this move "a clear attempt to distort an institutional democ-

cracy into one-party state power." According to Tabaku, the government should undertake real reforms to strengthen the rule of law and to advance the integration process, instead of creating party structures with a supposedly parliamentary

façade as a blow to parliamentary democracy. She accused the ruling majority of seeking to overlap the functions that belong to the parliamentary committees and the National Council of European Integration by inventing working groups in order to engage in the oversight of justice institutions.

"The establishment of working groups by a party to carry out the work of parliamentary committees and the National Integration Council is a clear attempt to distort an institutional democracy into a party state power. The setting up of groups through an internal decision of the majority supposedly to check the efficiency of the implementation of conditions and criteria

for the integration process is a façade to eventually supervise and control SPAK," she claimed.

According to the DP MP, the majority's move comes while SPAK is continuing to investigate the 430-million-euro incinerator affair.

Tabaku went on to stress that the unilateral actions of the Socialist majority are a clear attempt to nullify all efforts for deep reform in the justice system. "In a really anti-constitutional and anti-Albanian attempt to dismantle a laborious reform by supposedly using legal mechanisms - not to strengthen the role of the Assembly - but to destroy parliamentary democracy and build the people's socialist democracy," she underlined.

BIRN: INACCURATE INFORMATION

False Document Reportedly Used to Jail Beleri

TIRANA - Albanian courts and prosecutors used a document with inaccurate information to justify remanding in custody Fredi Beleri, mayor-elect of Himara in southern Albania, after his arrest for alleged vote buying, BIRN reported, citing a court hearing.

Beleri has been kept in prison while on trial, charged with attempting to buy four votes in exchange for cash. The decision to keep him behind bars also made it impossible for him to take his oath as mayor. The prosecutor in Vlora sought his pretrial detention and the court agreed, arguing that he had a prior criminal offence in his certificate, which justified pretrial detention. Reportedly, the data obtained from Thursday's session in the Special Prosecutor's Office showed that the saga of his detention was initially based on a certificate containing false data.

Authorities seem at a loss to explain why the system of



Himara mayor-elect Fredi Beleri at a court hearing

issuing these certificates worked this way, said BIRN. Following the defense's complaint, prosecutors opened an investigation into Ledion Jonuzaj, an IT expert who retrieved Beleri's certificate, which showed he was inaccurately labelled as a convicted felon. Jonuzaj, however, told the court that he just did a search of Beleri's name in the system

provided by the Ministry of Justice and printed the results. As he was placed under investigation, prosecutors ordered him to rerun the search and again print the certificate, which this time showed Beleri as "not convicted".

Aurel Zarka, Vlora's Chief Prosecutor, told BIRN they were unable to change the data provided by the system.

Beleri's lawyer said the inaccurate certificate was based on the fact that Beleri was convicted years ago for inciting ethnic hate. However, as a long time has passed since the conviction, he is legally considered rehabilitated. The defense presented the use by the authorities of a certificate with inaccurate information as yet another indication of

20 Judicial Officers Graduate from ICITAP Course

TIRANA - The US Department of Justice, International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program (ICITAP) in Tirana partnered with the Albanian Security Academy and State Police to mark the graduation of the first Level One Crime Investigation Course (CIC) group on Friday, the US Embassy announced. The graduates included 20 Judicial Police Officers from 12 judicial districts across Albania. The Level One course is a project designed to develop a range of investigation skills based on standards approved by the General Prosecution Office for Judicial Police Officers that are engaged in the investigation of the most frequently reported crimes. This is the first in a series of such criminal investigation courses planned for 2024, as part of a major program to certify several hundred Judicial Police Officers. Since 2005, ICITAP has maintained a long-standing partnership with the Security Academy contributing to the training and professional development of the Albanian State Police.

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Electoral Reform Committee Switches to Zoom

The committee resorted to a virtual meeting on Friday, after a group of Democrat MPs once again hindered the proceedings. The work calendar was approved, whereas protesting MPs sought re-composition



Electoral Reform Committee co-chairs, Damian Gjinkuri and Enkelejd Alibeaj

TIRANA - The Special Committee on Electoral Reform resorted to a zoom meeting on Friday, after a group of Democrat MPs once again hindered the proceedings by taking the seats of the committee members as a sign of protest against the body's composition.

During the online meeting, which was attended by representatives of the Socialist Par-

ty and some members of the opposition, the work calendar for the following months was approved.

According to the socialist co-chairman, Damian Gjinkuri, the calendar of works addresses the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations and the topics included leave room for cooperation between political parties, while consultations with all actors, political par-

ties and interest groups are foreseen.

Meanwhile, the Democrat co-chairman of the committee, Enkelejd Alibeaj, asked the Speaker of Parliament to enable the in-person meetings. "It will always be a systematic and insistent request that the Speaker guarantees the functioning of the reform committee. We always adhere to the regulation that commit-

tee meetings should be held physically so that everyone has the opportunity to discuss. This reform should enjoy public legitimacy," he said.

The discontented part of the opposition, through a letter signed by 47 MPs, sought to change the composition of the committee and the replacement of co-chair Alibeaj with Oerd Bylykbashi. The latter claimed that the current

opposition representation is "Rama's crutch".

"Albania does not need a one-sided politics that relies on crutches," he told media, accusing the SP of not seeking "an electoral reform with a bipartisan committee that works on the basis of consensus".

In a press statement after the committee's meeting, the Socialist co-chair Damian Gjinkuri called on the opposition not to hinder the work on electoral reform. "It is the will of the majority that all parties, all sides of the opposition continue with concrete proposals and discuss concrete problems with ODIHR experts. Concerns must be addressed on time," he said.

Regarding the request for changing the electoral reform body's composition by opposition MPs supporting former PM Sali Berisha, Gjinkuri said that the SP cannot become the judge of who has the right of representation. He stressed that time shouldn't be wasted and that discussions should start on a consensual product.

Basha: Parliamentary Action Reduced to Noise

TIRANA - The Democratic Party chairman Lulzim Basha commented on the developments regarding the work on electoral reform, saying that the in-person meeting of the committee was made impossible by "the theater directed by Edi Rama".

In a press conference on Friday, he said that the debate this week was about the ousting of co-chair Enkelejd Alibeaj and his replacement with Oerd Bylykbashi, which according to him is not in the interest of the public.

"My call to anyone who isn't playing tricks is to give up alibis and become part of the committee's work. Our priorities: open lists, whoever gets the most votes becomes an MP; voting equality, Albania to become an electoral area like Kosovo, like the Netherlands; electronic voting and counting, which was tested in the three previous elections, it worked and avoided days and weeks of fatigue and inevitable clashes between the camps; the dias-



DP chairman Lulzim Basha

pora vote," he stated.

The DP chair expressed strong disapproval of his Democrat colleagues' action in Parliament. "Citizens expect the opposition to be serious in its proposals and not quarrelsome over petty personal interests. By reducing parliamentary activity to a noise, hundreds of Albanian families were harmed on Thursday. This is the miserable result of the non-opposition, of whistles,

of the failed action that empowers Rama and harms the interests of the citizens," he noted.

Moreover, Basha expressed the DP's unequivocal support for SPAK, which he said is being targeted by the government due to its anti-corruption investigations. According to him, the government has not denied its attempts to control SPAK. "Everything must be done to strengthen democracy

and the rule of law. SPAK, the only functioning link, is attacked by the government. The government hasn't denied information about the attempt to control SPAK. If the government, under the anxiety of what it has started, which is the legal accountability of high government officials, intends to respond by pressuring SPAK, then it will face the strongest opposition of the Democratic Party and our allies," said Basha.

Lawmakers to Be Excluded from Amnesty; DP MP

TIRANA - Democratic Party MP, Ervin Saliانji, filed an amendment for the criminal amnesty, requesting that this law does not benefit the MPs or former lawmakers who have unresolved legal issues.

According to him, this proposal came after a misunderstanding with the amendment filed by the opposition MP Ferdinand Xhaferaj, who proposed amnesty for all persons who have sentences of less than 2 years and are awaiting a final decision from the Court of Appeal, including Saliانji himself as one of the beneficiaries. "Amnesty pursues goals related to humanity. Despite this goal, I want this right to be excluded for MPs and former MPs. I do not compromise with any of the causes denounced by the opposition, with any drug or political mafia. We are not inclined to accept the amnesty of the oligarchs," he said in a press statement.

ECB Maintains High Key Interest Rate

Financial markets are expecting a rate cut from 4% as early as April, but ECB President Lagarde said she and other bank officials agreed it was "premature to discuss rate cuts"



ECB President Christine Lagarde

TIRANA - The European Central Bank (ECB) left its key interest rate untouched at a record high on Thursday, keeping credit expensive for businesses and consumers as it tries to make sure inflation is firmly under control before cutting borrowing costs - a move that is expected later this year.

The question is, how much later? Financial markets are expecting a rate cut from 4% as early as April, but ECB President Christine Lagarde said she and other bank officials agreed it was "premature to discuss rate cuts".

At a news conference, she reiterated her stance that the

bank would make decisions based on the latest figures about the economy's health rather than offering a longer-term timetable for rate moves. She said inflation has declined - reaching 2.9% in December after peaking at 10.6% in October 2022 - and it was expected to keep easing this year en route to the bank's goal of 2%.

Lagarde cautioned, how-

ever, that disruption from the Israel-Hamas war, including related attacks on ships in the Red Sea by Yemen's Houthi rebels, could disrupt that progress.

Risks for higher inflation "include the heightened geopolitical tensions, especially in the Middle East, which could push energy prices and freight costs higher in the near term and hamper

global trade," she said.

With inflation falling in major economies, financial markets are frothing in hopes of cheaper credit that would boost business activity and stock prices. Stock investors saw their holdings, such as those in US retirement accounts, soar in the last weeks of 2023 as the US Federal Reserve and ECB indicated that a rapid series

of rate hikes was ending.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said officials discussed prospects for rate cuts at the bank's December meeting, and the US central bank has indicated that it would cut its key interest rate three times this year. The S&P 500, a broad measure of US large company shares, has hit record highs this week, and European indexes also have risen.

The global stock rally faces questions about whether gains can continue. Rate cuts make riskier investments like stocks more attractive than safer bets like money market accounts and certificates of deposit.

They also stimulate business activity and thus prospects for share prices to go higher. Like the ECB, Norway's central bank kept rates steady Thursday.

The same day, the central bank in Turkey, which is suffering from out-of-control inflation of nearly 65%, raised its key rate to 45%, expected to be the last increase for some time. Europe has seen inflation drop rapidly, with the ECB raising its key rate from negative levels - which made it cheap to borrow money to buy a house or invest in a business - to a record-high 4% in a little over a year.

BALLUKU: 32 THOUSAND RESIDENTS TO BENEFIT

Laç Water Supply Network near Completion

TIRANA - The works for the construction of the new water supply network in the town of Laç have entered the final phase. Currently, the works are focused on the construction of the external and internal network, where up to now nearly 87% of the works have been completed, while the work on the installation of meters, as well as the application of the SCADA system, is ongoing.

32 thousand residents benefit from this investment, which provides a solution to

a long-standing problem in this area. The works for the construction of the water supply system of Laç have been divided into four phases. In the first three phases, it became possible to open wells, rehabilitate the pumping station, lay the main line, and build water storage tanks and the distribution line. Work is currently underway on the fourth and final phase.

The Deputy Prime Minister, at the same time the Minister of Infrastructure and Energy, Belinda Balluku, accompa-

nied by the head of water company AKUK, Klevis Jahaj, the mayor of Kurbin, Majlinda Cara, and the SP MP Shpresa Marnoj closely monitored the works carried out, while the entire project is expected to be completed in April this year.

For Deputy PM Balluku, the automation of processes is another very important element, in addition to new investments that affect the increase in the quality of services to citizens. Through automation, the possibilities of real-time monitoring and



Deputy PM Belinda Balluku (c) during the inspection of the Laç water supply network

intervention for any malfunction that may occur are increased. Balluku further focused on the reform un-

dertaken in the water supply and sewerage sector, a reform which in its first year has given the first positive results.

EXCHANGE RATES	BANK OF ALBANIA		AK-INVEST		ILIRIA'98	
			BUY	SELL	BUY	SELL
	USD	95.37	USD 94.91	95.90	USD 94.90	95.90
	EUR	103.86	EUR 103.61	104.20	EUR 103.50	104.20
	CHF	109.89	CHF 107.63	110.96	CHF 109.90	110.00
	GBP	121.14	GBP 119.31	122.36	GBP 120.30	121.40

Trade Surplus with Region, Except for Serbia

According to INSTAT data, Albania exported Lek 76.4 billion of goods to the region and imported Lek 52 billion



Albania-Kosovo border crossing in Morina

TIRANA - During the last year, Albania showed a surplus in the trade of goods with neighboring countries of the Western Balkans.

According to INSTAT data, Albania exported Lek 76.4 billion of goods to the region and imported Lek 52 billion. Exports to the region were 1.4 times higher than imports.

According to the data, Albania had a trade surplus with Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, while it had a trade deficit with Serbia.

The highest value of Albanian exports within the region

was realized with Kosovo. In 2023, Lek 41 billion of goods were exported and Lek 11 billion were imported from Kosovo. Albanian exports to Kosovo were 3 times higher than imports. Kosovo is Albania's main partner in the region, with over 40% of regional trade. Trade with Kosovo has multiplied in the last decade. During 2023, over Lek 52 billion of goods were exchanged, or 300%

more than in the same period of 2010. Albania's second trading partner in the region is Serbia, with which in 2023 26% of the regional trade volume was carried out.

Due to the decrease in prices in 2023, trade-in value with Serbia contracted, but the trade deficit continued to be high. Lek 24 billion of goods were imported from Serbia last year and about Lek 10 billion were exported. Im-

ports from Serbia are 2.4 times higher than Albania's exports there. Imports from this country are mainly dominated by wheat and livestock products, while Albania's exports to Serbia are mainly represented by agricultural products and vegetables.

From 2010 to 2023, imports from Serbia increased by 104%, while Albanian exports to Serbia for the same period expanded by 500%. For the

same period, the trade deficit has widened not in favor of Albania, by about 40%.

2023 marked the second consecutive year of surplus also with North Macedonia. The data show that exports to the neighboring country were Lek 16 billion, while imports were Lek 14.1 billion. In the many-year history of trade, Albania, for the first time in 2022, entered a trade surplus with North Macedonia, which has continued in 2023. Macedonia is the third trade partner after Kosovo and Serbia. Albanian exports to North Macedonia are dominated by construction materials, oil, and vegetables. Imports are mainly represented by construction materials, processed foods, chemical and plastic products, as well as minerals.

Albania also had a surplus with Montenegro, where Albanian exports reached Lek 9.6 billion and were 4 times higher than imports from this country. Trade with the region accounted for only 10% of the volume of trade abroad in 2023.

KESH Director Ergys Verdho Resigns

TIRANA - The director of the Albanian Electricity Corporation (KESH), Ergys Verdho, has resigned. The news has been unofficially confirmed by KESH sources, economic magazine Monitor reported.

Resignation is due to leaving for another position. At the moment there is no new name, as the direction of the corporation is currently being done by the Ministry of Energy.

Ergys Verdho came to the head of KESH in June 2021, replacing Benet Beci in this position, who resigned due to political commitments.

Earlier, Verdho held the position of director of the Albanian Road Authority. In 2022, KESH's revenues increased by 256%, to Lek 35.6 billion, according to still unaudited data reported by KESH itself. However, the increase in energy prices in 2022 had a severe effect on the finances of KESH, which



KESH head Ergys Verdho

ended the year with a loss of Lek 26.7 billion, from the profit of Lek 3.5 billion in the previous year.

In January 2022, the public energy producer, the State Electricity Corporation (KESH), was charged with the obligation to provide all the necessary energy to universal customers, a role previously held by the Electricity Distribution Operator.

Until the end of 2021, KESH played in the Albanian electric energy system only the role of energy producer, a production which it offered to the public company FSHU (Universal Service Provider, part of OSHHE Group), as far as KESH could produce the latter he needed, not being exposed to the increase in energy prices in the stock market.

In 2022, the biggest challenge faced by KESH was the high prices of electricity in the regional market and beyond, and the need to provide electricity within the framework of the public service obligation in terms of energy optimization (generation/ import) and maintaining the current levels of the electricity price for household consumers.

Euro 5.5 mln to Improve e-Albania Services

TIRANA - Albania's information technology agency, AKSHI, said on Friday it has opened tender procedures for a project worth an estimated Lek 578 million (Dollar 6 million/Euro 5.5 million) to improve the electronic government services platform, e-Albania. Prospective bidders should be able to integrate an electronic signature system into the public administration module within nine months and then provide maintenance for two years, tender documents show. Offers can be submitted until February 26. E-Albania is a new multi-functional governmental portal. This portal is oriented toward users' needs, providing updated and easily accessible information for them. The portal serves as a single point of contact for e-government services offered to citizens, businesses, and public employees.

The SPAK Era Could Prove Irreversible...

Before the creation of SPAK, foreign anti-crime agencies, especially the Italian DIA (Direzione Investigativa Anti-mafia), didn't communicate too much with the Albanian prosecutors.

This was due to leaks or even fails in investigations of mafia groups which operated within the country or abroad.

During the first "tenure" of SPAK, when it was headed by Arben Kraja, this institution had to go through a difficult tests with some of the most important judicial polices of Europe. Naturally, the level of communication with the DIA grew. Almost all the operations launched by the Italians or even the prosecutions of Spain, Germany or the Netherlands were a success. The leaks of information were zero. Therefore, in public statements, more than once the heads of the Italian DIA or the anti-mafia prosecutions of Bari, or other cities, complemented the work of SPAK.

Italian journalists who dealt in stories of Albanian drug trafficking now didn't have to go on hypothesis coming from Albanian shows. Some groups of reporters from the most prestigious media across the sea, but also from other European countries, now received the statements directly from the prosecutors' offices, alongside additional information, which would be used for trafficking documentaries.

This marked a positive grade for Albania in the European Commission report. For the first



Head of SPAK, Altin Dumani

Without dealing the biggest files on their desk, SPAK cannot change the course of justice in Albania, claims Ylli Pata

time, SPAK is considered a partner by all European agencies in the fight against organized crime. This was an important test, which SPAK passed, and now, the investigation of criminal groups has taken an irreversible course.

Meanwhile, the other part of the SPAK prosecutors' test is the overthrow of the 30-year impunity of the political class. The prosecutors have launched a large group of files, at first carrying out sensational operations and arrests in the ranks of the majority, to then come to the case of the Partizani club.

Now SPAK is facing vicious attacks, and they will only grow,

as their goal is only to stop or at least slow down the process.

However, public expectations towards SPAK are high. As per the polls, the current of SPAK, AltinDumani and the institutions he leads are quite popular among the public.

However, this popularity or this expectation is because people expect a real blow to that political dome that was considered untouchable up until now.

So far, we have seen more of a high-level investigative tact, using a sort of criminal policy scale. In fact, people are waiting for something completely different: the investigation of all the terrible cases the country

has suffered from.

There is no point in listing the files of January 21, Gerdec, or even others that revolve around privatizations, concessions that led the enrichment of many who had clientelistic ties to the political leaders.

"Political balance" never stops attacks from the parties affected by the SPAK investigation. In Italy, Di Pietro or other "Mani Pulite" prosecutors were attacked all the time, even by Silvio Berlusconi's government, just so they would let go of those hot files.

Yet, they continued the work, until they launched operations and took to court some of the biggest files that the public was waiting for. Then with their exit, the process became irreversible, and today all prosecutors' offices have turned the investigations against high officials into a norm.

In Romania, senior politicians succeeded in dismissing the head of the anti-corruption prosecution, Laura Covesi, but could not stop the ongoing investigation. The large files that the current chief anti-corruption prosecutor of the EU had opened, made the process irreversible.

Even in Albania, if the prosecutors do not go through the biggest and hottest files of high-level corruption, such as the sequestration of assets created through corruption; villas, apartments, bank accounts etc. this process will simply stay put and never get on the road.

A Union without Principles or Common Interests

Given that several MPs of Re-establishment have come together, mainly MPs who support Berisha and MPs who are considered supporters of Gazment Bardhi, some start uttering the term union.

Yet, a real unification would be one between Basha and Berisha, marking the union of the right wing and its votes.

In this sense, the "union" that some are promoting is nothing more than a union of some people for their personal interests and not a political one. However, even in this type of forced union, it seems clear that all those MP

According to Ervis Iljazaj, there is nothing wrong with having different opinions within a political formation, but not on essential issues!

who today consider themselves united, don't even have the same principles, stands or even principles.

For example, many MPs who have joined Sali Berisha publicly state that they do not want to go to war with America or attack SPAK. They have made this clear in their public interviews but also in private meetings. While Sali Berisha himself and his supporters consider the new body of justice as a criminal organization, and have been going against the US and its institutions for a long time now.

Usually when you join a political formation you do it because you share the same stands, the same principles and the same visions. This isn't the case within the Re-establishment. How can you be part of a political formation where some call SPAK a criminal organization and others do not want to fight against it?

Furthermore, the groups don't even have the same interests.

Many of them want to inherit the electorate of Sali Berisha, because they think that his political time is over. Some others think that Berisha should continue to

lead the opposition as he is its eternal leader...

This was clearly seen yesterday at the meeting of their parliamentary group. In that meeting, there were different visions for the opposition action, for the stands towards the issue of Sali Berisha, for the leadership of Re-establishment and many essential issues. There is nothing wrong with having different opinions within a political formation, but not on essential issues of principles and visions. If these are different, then it makes no sense to stay within a political party.

The Track Record of the Last 10 Years...

If you look at what the PM has to present for the last 10 years, at first glance it's a success story, incomparable to any other government. "Only forward" presses on the idea that nothing can stop this progress.

Now we need to put these marketing toys in front of the track record. Yet, we have to go beyond the "numbers of the votes".

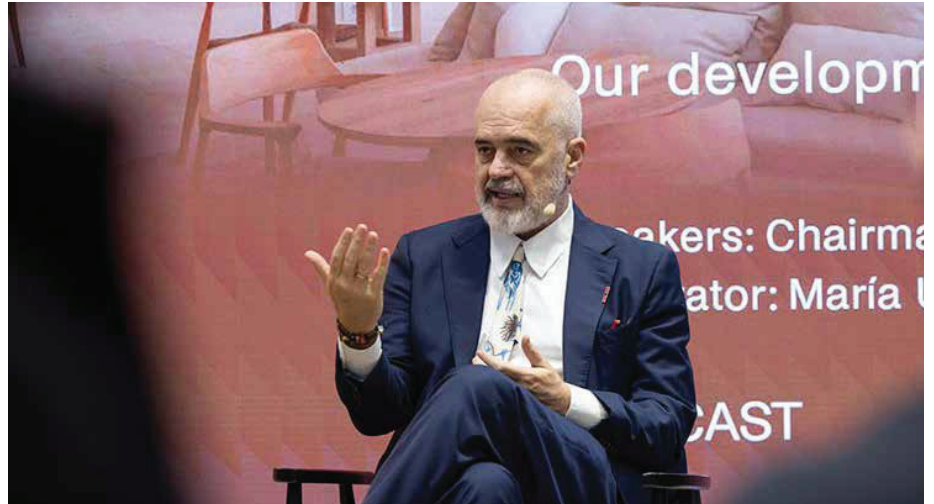
Indeed when it comes to the track record, the government does hold some records, however many are negative. Let's not look at the aspect of democracy because democracy is a great achievement of the past even in the West, which is now under attack. In Albania, democracy is basically subverted by the lack of a real opposition. This is definitely not Edi Rama's responsibility, however, it does take a toll out of its record.

But Edi Rama is definitely responsible for the "centralization" of the SP, which has turned into a grouping of money worshipers. This also reflects in the way of governing.

Many can compare this stagnation with that of the Labour Party between 1985 and 1990, as it had lost the sense of initiative, yet kept surviving through the forgotten spirits in the political necropolis of that Albania.

In terms of the political track record, this government cannot be compared to those before it. Because the main acts for

As a self-proclaimed architect, Rama manifests the paradox of someone who strives for monumentality, but hasn't managed to mark his "era" with something "historic", says Skerdilajd Zaimi



Prime Minister Edi Rama

the country - NATO, visa liberalization, SAA, membership in the Council of Europe, the war in Kosovo and the visit of the highest level US official to Tirana (President Bush) - happened earlier. Mr. Rama undoubtedly has the highest access that any Albanian government may have ever had in Western offices (his merits and not Albania's success) but there is not a direct ratio between the opportunities he created for himself and the eventual benefits for the country. Simply put, Rama is looking for an international career.

Economically, this government has created wealth for a

certain caste, not the public. As a self-proclaimed architect Mr. Rama manifests the paradox of someone who strives for monumentality, but has not managed to mark his "era" with something that stands the test of time. His main work revolves around the towers of Tirana - but these are not public good - the reconstruction of the Pyramid, but this is a theft of the intellectual property of the Dictatorship as is the comic process of bringing other objects of the past to life.

Even for the digitization process he boasts about started during the time of the last government.

As for the market, the gov't

hasn't done a single act in favor of real competition and that it even represents and protects large economic groups.

From the social side, the government of Mr. Rama is responsible - among others, of course - for a transformation: the demographic one. Albania is smaller and weaker than before.

Something isn't working. Something is sabotaging either Albania or our perception of seeing its blossoming...

Now, Mr. Rama can speak of his track record all his wants, and of course, he will speak only of success, yet the only success he has achieved is related to the greatness of his scandals.

On the Distance between SPAK and the Gov't

The fact that SPAK is perceived as a sworn enemy suggests that a significant, independent institution is keeping the government in check, Mero Baze comments

The Head of SPAK, Altin Dushmani, recently engaged in a discussion with Socialist MP Eduard Shalsi regarding information about potential government initiatives aimed at defending its members from SPAK investigations. Both parties present themselves as allies, and the debate appears somewhat unnatural. SPAK isn't accusing the government of hindering investigations, and the government isn't suggesting it wants to limit SPAK's jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the ongoing discussion has led many to believe there might be an actual power struggle between SPAK and the government.

The government faces an unprecedented challenge due to SPAK's actions. Unlike any

other time in Albania's history, various senior government officials, including deputy prime ministers, ministers, members of parliament, and mayors, are under investigation or legal proceedings. This has, in many ways, caused discomfort for the government. Despite the justice system reform, which established institutions like SPAK, being a government initiative, it has not spared them.

Despite the government having valid reasons to be upset, this situation is not necessarily negative for SPAK or the Albanian citizens. In fact, it is not even bad news for the government. The fact that SPAK is perceived as a sworn enemy suggests that a significant, independent institution is keeping the government

in check. This reflects a normal democratic country adhering to Western values.

On the other hand, SPAK's assumptions that the government might take legal initiatives against them hint at political dissatisfaction and nothing more. The legal framework governing SPAK's work has received strong monitoring from the US and EU and is a commitment to Albania's integration into the European Union. Any attempt to backtrack on this would be strongly rejected by Western allies.

Politically, SPAK has lost support from Sali Berisha's opposition faction and that of Ilir Meta. However, this is due to their conflicts of interest with the justice system, not SPAK's work. Despite being the primary target

of investigations, the government refrains from commenting or criticizing SPAK.

As a special anti-corruption structure, SPAK has been impacting Albania's political class from both ends of the spectrum without showing signs of political protagonism or misuse. The government's concern about this justice institution is positive news for SPAK and the government itself. It would have been troubling if prosecutors had taken political stances, targeting the opposition, as was common during Sali Berisha's time in power. In fact, former prosecutors, now serving as Berisha's lawyers, are no longer part of the system, thanks to SPAK and the justice system reform.

A Breakthrough Year for the South Caucasus

Three decades of conflict, ethnic cleansing, and border disputes are over for Armenia and Azerbaijan, as 2024 will be a breakthrough year for Armenia's relations with both its Turkish and Azerbaijani neighbours. It's been a long time coming.



European Council President Charles Michel meets Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan in Brussels, Belgium on May 22, 2022

completed the process of re-taking its territory when it removed Armenian control over Karabakh in a one-day war.

These two short wars returned Armenia and Azerbaijan to the common boundary that had existed within the Soviet Union from 1922-1988; that is up to the launch of the First Karabakh War. With the signing of a peace treaty this former Soviet boundary will become the international border between two independent states. Armenia and Azerbaijan would then open full diplomatic relations.

Unfortunately, the conflict in Georgia remains frozen. After Russia invaded Georgia in the summer of 2008, the Kremlin recognised the so-called 'independence' of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia's invasion and blatant violation of Georgian sovereignty was undertaken by President Dmitri Medvedev whom Western governments wrongly dubbed a 'liberal'.

Medvedev was never was a liberal. As the deputy head of Russia's Security Council he is one of the most hawkish of Russian leaders in his vitriolic demands for aggressive military action in the Kremlin's war against Ukraine and use of nuclear weapons against Western

countries and NATO.

BRINGING AN END TO RUSSIA'S 'PEACEKEEPING' MISSIONS

Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1992 at the end of the First Karabakh War. Negotiations towards what has been called the 'normalisation' of relations between Turkey and Armenia have been taking place for the past decade. But these could only hope to have a breakthrough after a peace treaty will be signed between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The opening of the border between Turkey and Armenia would be followed by the establishment of full diplomatic relations.

As the Washington think tank Brookings Institution wrote, "For Turkey and Armenia, normalisation and reconciliation can be seen as two sides of the same coin." Reconciliation primarily refers to the Armenian genocide committed in 1915 by the Ottoman Empire, eight years before the founding of the modern Turkish nation-state. The coming to power of Nikol Pashinyan in the 2018 popular Armenian revolution removed the pro-Russian 'Karabakh clan' and made normalisation and reconciliation with Turkey more likely.

Next year, 2025, will be the last year of Russia's so-called 'peacekeeping' pres-

ence in the Karabakh region. Since the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, Russia has used its 'peacekeeping' forces to maintain a permanent sphere of influence over Eurasia. The Kremlin manufactured frozen conflicts in Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan and never had an interest in resolving them because Russian 'peacekeepers' would then be longer required.

Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan signed a ceasefire agreement at the end of the Second Karabakh War in November 2020 which introduced Russian 'peacekeepers' for a five-year period. Russia's so-called 'peacekeepers' were criticised by both Yerevan and Baku for their passivity and they became redundant after Azerbaijan's liberation of Karabakh. In November of next year, Azerbaijan and Armenia will not renew the five-year mandate and Russian 'peacekeepers' will be forced to withdraw, the first example of a Russian pull-out in Eurasia.

THE BENEFITS OF PEACE

A new era of peaceful relations with Armenia's bigger neighbours, Azerbaijan and Turkey, will bring important benefits. Peace will provide Armenia with the ability to manoeuvre from a pro-Russian to a more balanced,

multi-vector foreign and security policy. Increased trade and energy ties with its neighbours will vastly improve Armenia's economic prospects and encourage many of the over two million migrants in Russia to return home.

A breakthrough in peace in the South Caucasus, coupled with a potential Russian military defeat in Ukraine, would provide pro-Western Pashinyan with the ability to re-orientate Armenia away from Russia and Eurasia to Europe.

Armenia could begin the process of 'Armexit' of its membership from the Eurasian Economic Union and re-join the path, dropped a decade ago, of signing an Association Agreement with the EU. Further down the road, Armenia could join Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova in receiving candidate EU candidate status.

Peaceful relations between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey are good for Western strategic interests, the EU, and US, and bad for Russia and Iran who have promoted instability. Peace in the South Caucasus stands in sharp contrast to the growing conflagration in the Middle East. / **Emerging Europe**

*National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy

BY TARAS KUZIO*

From 1988 to 1992, Armenia and Azerbaijan were embroiled in the bloodiest conflict among the fifteen Soviet republics. Armenia, with Soviet and Russian military assistance, defeated Azerbaijan and occupied a fifth of its territory. Armenian nationalists declared this territory to be 'reunited' in perpetuity in their dream of a greater Armenia (miatsum).

Three decades of UN resolutions, mediation by the OSCE Minsk Group and involvement of the US, France and Russia failed to achieve any change in this situation and breakthrough to peace. This frozen conflict was only unfrozen in 2020 when Azerbaijan won a 44-day war and re-took most of its occupied territory.

Last year, Azerbaijan

5 Hospitals Receive Managerial Autonomy Card

Hospitals receiving these card had to prepare clear development goals, detailed working plans, clear management strategies of human resources, and protocols, Minister Kociu said



Albania aims at having 17 hospital centers with managerial autonomy by 2027, according to Minister Kociu

TIRANA - Four hospitals across the country have received the Managerial Autonomy Card following the Memorial Regional Hospital of Fier. Minister of Health and Social Protection Albania Kociu handed this card on Friday to the University Med-

ical Center Mother Teresa in Tirana, the Regional Hospital of Durres, the Regional Hospital of Shkoder, the Regional Hospital of Lezha and the Regional Hospital of Vlora. In her speech, Kociu declared that after 10 years of relentless transformation in hospital

structures, authorities have set ambitious targets such as autonomy which brings the European management model to Albanian medical centers.

She continued that by receiving the Managerial Autonomy Card, these hospital

centers will have higher standards of services for their citizens, and better conditions while the medical professionals working there will benefit from higher salaries. She also revealed that the Ministry's goal is for Albania to have 17 hospital centers with manage-

rial autonomy by 2027.

"Hospitals receiving these hard had to prepare clear development goals, detailed working plan, clear management strategy of human resources, protocols, guidelines, performance indicators, etc. Autonomy will increase meritocracy by creating more opportunities for doctors. Additional financial benefits arising from hospital autonomy will go hand in hand and will not overlap with our program for the further increase of salaries," the Health Minister said, reiterating the Ministry's objective to increase the salaries of doctors and nurses, following the pay rise offered to specialty doctors in 2023. PM Edi Rama attended Friday's event declaring that investments in the medical service will enable it to be part of Albania's tourism industry. "Considering this experience, further investments, and the private sector, we are going to be able to include the medical center in our tourism offer," Rama emphasized.

Students Discuss Data Protection

TIRANA - January 28 marks International Data Privacy Day. On this occasion, the Information and Data Protection Commissioner (IDP) in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Sport, the General Directorate of Pre-University Education, and other bodies falling under its dependence organized awareness-raising activities in general high schools across the country. In more detail, such activities were organized at 'Ismail Qemal' high school in Tirana, 'Hydajet Lezha' high school in Lezha, 'Dhaskal Todri'

high school in Elbasan, and 'Naim Frasheri' high school in Durres. These meetings were part of the activities held in the framework of Personal Data Protection Week.

Students, teachers, and parents attended these meetings which focused on extending knowledge on the safe use of digital environment and technology for effective data and privacy protection. Meetings were organized in a free-format dialogue structure with IDP presenting its functions, people's rights, and how can students exercise them. They



Privacy experts and high students discussed data protection and privacy

also advised students on their appropriate behavior regarding data usage. IDP representatives noted that the legal, responsible, and transparent methods of data processing which follow high standards have an impact on the sustainable

economic development of the country. According to IDP, such activities serve the major objective of educating the young generation and stimulating them to be educated in this field in this field as future experts.

Students Asked to Be Consulted for Law Affecting Them

TIRANA - The Constitutional Court decided on Thursday to partially repeal the law 'On the special treatment of medical students'. According to this judicial body, the law cannot force medical students for five years after the end of their studies, noting that they cannot work for more than half of the years of their study. It also ordered the government to review the law and address the legal gaps within three months. Students released a statement on Friday declaring that they agree with the Constitutional Court and they are ready to stage protests if they see that their rights are violated. "Constitutional Court asked the government what we had been asking from them for quite some time, to be listed and consulted. At the moment, it would be fair for all stakeholders to be listed to. This had been a difficult situation, however, the battle is not over yet. We are waiting for the full reasoning of the decision before we decide on how are going to act," said a student.

"Amendments Needed for More Child Protection"

TIRANA - Following news of the sexual exploitation of a minor by 42-year-old physician Dervish Hasi, People's Advocate released a statement recommending amendments to the Family and Criminal Codes eliminating all exemptions that would allow child marriages or abuse with mi-

nors. The physician, who allegedly sexually abused a now 16-year-old girl for 2 years, claimed that she was one of his 3 wives and had married her.

According to Ombudsman, it is necessary for Albania to fully harmonize its domestic legislation with the UN Convention on

the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

People's Advocate also pointed out the legal obligation of the Albanian state and its institutions to guarantee a safe environment for the education

of children on their rights, whilst also appealing to authorities for a thorough investigation of the case as well as proper punishment for the perpetrators. They have concluded that a nationwide campaign must be held across the country so the rights of children are protected even more.

Fortress Europe



The Spanish EU Council Presidency chose a fortress, the famous Alhambra in Granada, as the venue for the European Political Community summit on 5 October

The best way to secure our Union's security is by fast-tracking EU enlargement. But most EU capitals remain sceptical and point to the need for internal reform before such a step...

BY GEORGI GOTEV

Fortress Europe (German: Festung Europa) was a military propaganda term used by both sides during World War II, which referred to the areas of continental Europe occupied by Nazi Germany, as opposed to the United Kingdom across the Channel.

At that time, another related saying was "Fortress Europe has no roof". It came from British propaganda leaflets that dropped over the German territory, claiming that the Royal Air Force was stronger than the German and Italian air forces.

More recently, the term 'Fortress Europe' was used in the context of the migration crisis of 2015 and the possible responses, especially the tightening of borders across the bloc.

And even more recently, after Russia started its war of aggression against Ukraine, 'Fortress Europe' helped describe the EU's push to become a more dominant player in the fields of defence and security.

Europe's history is preserved mainly in the remains of various churches and fortresses.

The Spanish EU Council Presidency chose a fortress, the famous Alhambra in Granada, as the venue for the European Political Community summit on 5 October.

Many fortresses and medieval fences have disappeared, and the stones helped build other constructions. In modern times, some fences were replaced by roads. The Small Ring of Brussels (French: Petite Ceinture, Dutch: Kleine Ring) was built at the site of the former medieval fence.

In many ways, Europe has had hesitations about whether it should be a fortress or a crossroads. The Middle Ages were the summum of fortification, Renaissance was the apotheosis of enlightenment.

Until 1990, I lived under a fortified system where common mortals could not cross the Iron Curtain. Many who

tried to cross illegally were killed by border guards.

People on the good side of the Iron Curtain probably didn't feel that way because they could travel freely, but they hardly wanted to cross into Communist countries, though they easily granted visas to Westerners (some of whom naively admired communism, simply because they had no clue).

When Eastern Europe joined the EU in the two waves of 2004 and 2007, I thought we would live in a Renaissance-type historic phase to last for generations.

Thirty years later, we speak of fortresses again, and our societies are divided between those who want to model them as such and those who still resist the push.

When it comes to migration, political parties such as the extreme right, but also the centre-right, favour the fortress model. In terms of countries, this ideology is best embodied by Viktor Orban in Hungary.

To this, the left - including what the right-wing camp terms 'Islam-leftism' (which some say is embodied in France by Jean-Luc Mélenchon's party La France Insoumise) - and the greens, cry foul and denounce an abandonment of European values.

When it comes to defence, there is a division along oth-

er lines. Federalist-minded people favour European defence, a European army, and Europe as a geopolitical actor.

But several Eastern European countries frown at the idea, because they prioritise the trans-Atlantic bond and the NATO framework, seeing this as the best shield against Russia.

And the countries that don't want to put additional money in the EU budget certainly don't help the creation of a geopolitical Europe. It is clear that the "fortress" camp has wind in its sails ahead of the European elections in June, at least regarding migration.

But the same camp is hesitant when it comes to securing Europe's external borders. We have already argued that Europe is a continent without clear borders on its Eastern side, faced with Vladimir Putin's Russia, which defines itself as an empire with no borders.

The best way to secure our Union's security is by fast-tracking EU enlargement. But most EU capitals remain sceptical and point to the need for internal reform before such a step.

These internal divisions are likely to be smoothed if Donald Trump returns to the White House, which is an increasingly likely option. In the meantime, the fortress mentality will be making its way into Europe. / **Euractiv**

Greek Farmers Join EU Peers' Protests

ATHENS - Farmers in Greece's northern prefectures of Kozani, Kastoria, and Grevena, have staged protests and drove tractors in convoys towards towns to highlight problems in their sector that they say "threaten the sustainability of agricultural and livestock production."

Issues related to the implementation of the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) are at the center of the farmers' concerns.

In Kozani, farmers held a meeting with the local mayor and regional government, blocking access to the latter's office for the duration of the meeting. The protests are the latest in a series of farmer mobilizations across the country.

Earlier this week, farmers in Central Greece's Larissa and Karditsa protested government inaction over the reimbursement for crops, livestock and farming equipment lost in September's Storm Daniel.

Farmers across the European Union have taken to the streets over a plethora of issues in recent weeks. France has witnessed two weeks of protests in rural regions while other European countries including Germany and Poland have also seen demonstrations by farmers angry over eroding living standards.

French farmers blocked one of the main motorways linking Paris with the northern city of Lille and Belgium on Friday, causing lengthy traffic jams as part of nationwide protests over low food prices and excessive bureaucracy.

Unions have called for the roadblocks in and around Paris to increase pressure on Prime Minister Gabriel Attal's government, which the farmers accuse of not doing enough to help them.

Scrambling to ease tensions, the finance and farm ministers discussed with food industry officials on Friday fair prices for produce - a 'number one priority' for farmers who say they are suffering from the government's drive to lower consumer prices.

"Potential of Tensions in Kosovo, Bosnia"

In meeting with Montenegrin PM, NATO chief said that situation in the region remains fragile, and the violence that broke out in Kosovo was unacceptable

BRUSSELS - NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Friday in Brussels that NATO believes that the security situation in the Western Balkans is still very fragile with potential for tensions

in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. After meeting Montenegrin Prime Minister Milojko Spajic, Stoltenberg said NATO is ready to carry out its mandate in Kosovo to guarantee stability, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Western Balkans, the strengthening of NATO, and preparations for the upcoming summit in Washington were the main topics of discussion at the meeting. "The situation in the region of the Western Balkans remains fragile. The violence that broke out in Kosovo was unacceptable. This made NATO immediately deploy some 1.000 additional troops to Kosovo," Stoltenberg said.

The NATO chief outlined

the importance of supporting the EU-facilitated dialogue for the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia.

"The EU-facilitated dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade is the only way forward to find a long-term solution," he said. Stoltenberg said that next week the North Atlantic Council, the highest political body of the alliance, will visit Bosnia and Herzegovina to show their unreserved support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He also thanked Montenegro for their contribution to NATO's peacekeeping mission in Kosovo and for their constructive role in peace and stability in the Balkans. Spajic said that for Mon-



NATO Sec Gen Jens Stoltenberg (R) in joint press conference with Montenegrin PM Spajic

tenegro, stability in Kosovo has special importance and that if needed Montenegro is ready to increase the number of its troops in KFOR. He said

that Montenegro remains a faithful member of the Alliance and is committed to advancing in the process of EU integration.

Xhaferi Receives Caretaker Gov't Mandate

SKOPJE - At a ceremony Friday, President Stevo Pendarovski presented Talat Xhaferi with the mandate for the creation of a caretaker government that will lead the country until the election of a new government after the general elections. After receiving the mandate, Xhaferi promised that, in accordance with the laws and Constitution, he will lead the negotiations for the creation of the transitional government in line with the political needs and the situation in the country. "With pleasure and full responsibility I accept the mandate presented by the President, and with a promise, that in accordance with the laws and Constitution, the composition of the government and the negotiations over the composition of the government will be led in line



Talat Xhaferi receiving the PM mandate by President Stevo Pendarovski (R)

with the political needs and the situation in the country," said Xhaferi. He added that he hopes he will be able to create an appropriate government composition with the appropriate tasks, duties

and responsibilities to the citizens. Earlier on Friday, at its 139th session, the Parliament confirmed the resignations of Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski and Parliament Speaker Talat

Xhaferi, and elected SDSM's Jovan Mitreski as Xhaferi's successor by 64 'yes' and 40 'no' votes. Parliament is expected to vote for the caretaker government at a session on Sunday, January 28.

Kosovo Shuts down Parallel Institutions

PRISTINA - The Minister of Local Government Administration in Kosovo, Elbert Krasniqi, has announced that in the village of Vranisht in Dragash authorities have shut down four "parallel municipalities". He emphasized that these illegal offices issued documents for the municipalities of Prizren, Suhareka, Rahovec, and Dragash.

In Vranisht, Minister Krasniqi was with the Minister of the Interior, Xhehel Svecja. "The Republic of Kosovo is a unitary state and as such, will not allow any unconstitutional parallelism," said Krasniqi.

Meanwhile, Minister Svecja said that crime will be fought in every corner of Kosovo, and according to him, there is no place for

Serbia in Kosovo, except for its embassy in Pristina. "Just as we promised, criminality, illegality, and any violation of the law will be fought in every corner of Kosovo. In Kosovo has its own legitimate bodies that will serve all citizens without distinction. There is no place for Serbia except for its embassy in Pristina," emphasized Svecja.

In an earlier action, Koso-

vo authorities took down billboards with images of Serbian politicians, erected in Zvecan. The billboards included a collage of images of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, former Office for Kosovo chief turned Ambassador Marko Djuric, tennis player Novak Djokovic and Russian President Vladimir Putin with the words "honorary citizens of Zvecan".

EP Resolution on Serbian Elections Will Be Harsh

BELGRADE - Members of the European Parliament (EP) will most probably vote on a resolution on the Serbian December 17 elections at a plenary session on February 7, while a source in Brussels told Demostat it is expected that the document will be "unfavorable for the Serbian government."

"The resolution on Serbia will be harsh, this time we are going all the way," the Demostat research and publishing center was told. The source said the Serbian students of the Borba (Struggle) movement who visited Brussels this week "left an excellent impression" on members of the European Union (EU) institutions they spoke with.

"They gave concrete examples of violations of the electoral process, and of police brutality at the protests held after the elections," it added.

Prior to the adoption of a resolution, the international election observation mission (OSCE/ODIHR) will publish its final report on the Serbian elections. According to the observers' preliminary findings, though technically well-administered, the December 17 elections were held in unjust conditions.

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Taking Peace for Granted..

Britain has taken peace for granted. But a belligerent Putin could change all that. A senior general has warned Britons to prepare to take up arms against Russia. He's not alone in raising the alarm



UK Army chief Gen Sir Patrick Sanders with King Charles III

BY GABY HINSLIFF*

How long could you survive without your mobile phone? Not just for idle scrolling to fill a boring commute, but for the life you carry precariously around on it without even thinking. For managing your bank account, navigating an unfamiliar neighbourhood, connecting to the outside world; for a torch in the dark, for checking in with friends, and potentially also in the worst-case scenario for frantically trading information about the safest place to run.

If the old rule of thumb is that any society is only four missed meals from anarchy, then what would be the equivalent in hours of telecommunications blackout caused by a cyber-attack on mobile networks, a sudden catastrophic power outage, or even – given Taiwan is the world's leading supplier of the tiny computer chips on which your smartphone possibly relies – a Chinese invasion of Taiwan? How thin, exactly, is the veneer of a civilised life?

Such questions might sound ridiculously overdramatic. But they are one way of thinking about resilience in the kind of barely imaginable crisis that startled citizens across Europe

are suddenly being asked to prepare for, and not just by stocking up on battery-operated radios and torches. The Swedish government, which is about to join NATO, has just reintroduced a form of national service. Last week, the Dutch head of NATO's military committee, Admiral Rob Bauer, warned of the possibility of a war with Russia within the next 20 years where "it is the whole of society which will get involved whether we like it or not".

Later, Germany's defence minister, Boris Pistorius, suggested it might be sooner: maybe five to eight years. By comparison, this week's call from army chief Gen Sir Patrick Sanders, for "preparatory steps to enable placing our societies on a war footing" sounded positively modest. Although he warned civilians would have to volunteer for the frontline if Russia began invading NATO countries, at least he stopped short of calling for the reintroduction of conscription.

Perhaps some will hear in his words just another attempt to squeeze cash from the Treasury, or even some shadowy deep state plot to rescue flagging western economies with a war. But Sanders is a man with little to lose from speaking candidly, given his term as chief of the general staff is almost up, and the fact that his call to build a significantly bigger regular army clearly irritated Downing

Street is all the more reason to take it seriously. He may be mistaken in raising the alarm about a war that might never happen but if so, he's not alone.

What happened this week looks like a pan-European conversation until now held mainly behind closed doors spilling into the open, with consequences worth exploring not just for defence spending but potentially for everything from the green energy transition to manufacturing, food production and the regulation of social media platforms through which Russia has repeatedly tried to whip up extremist political sentiment and manipulate democratic elections.

But it is also, more broadly, about how Britons see themselves. Sanders has been quietly arguing for months that we are no longer a post-war country – one for which world wars are the stuff of history lessons and nostalgic Hollywood blockbusters – but a prewar one that should be braced for trouble ahead. What is pushing these fears to the fore across Europe now is the prospect of Donald Trump returning to the White House and pulling the plug on US military support for Ukraine, effectively handing victory to Vladimir Putin.

Can't take Sanders seriously? Then listen to former Trump chief strategist Steve

Bannon, telling ITV's Peston show this week that his base "does not want one more penny" going to Kyiv's war effort – no empty threat when Republicans last month blocked President Biden's latest military aid package. Bannon suggested his old boss could cut a deal with Putin in 48 hours, abandoning eastern Ukraine to its grisly fate. And if that happened, no Baltic state could feel safe from Putin's dreams of a resurrected Russian empire.

As the former Downing Street national security adviser Kim Darroch points out, a Putin victory in Ukraine would not necessarily mean tanks rolling immediately into neighbouring NATO countries. But it might start with the systematic destabilisation of countries such as Latvia and Estonia, which have sizeable Russian-minority populations, with Moscow funding and fuelling separatist movements to create a fake pretext for invading and "rescuing" them.

Nobody is really sure whether a politician as chaotic as Donald Trump would stand by the US's commitments to its NATO allies, if a show of force were needed to deter a full invasion, or not. But would you bet lives on him doing the right thing? Or would you plan for a scenario everyone hopes can still be avoided, sending a public message both to Moscow and

to potentially hostile powers from China to Iran that might want to take advantage of a newly fragile world order, that Europe is prepared to stand up for itself with precious little help from across the Atlantic? For anyone used to seeing the US as an aggressive imperial power, forever trying to drag a reluctant Britain into its ill-advised wars, it's a big mental leap to see US withdrawal from the battlefield as anything but a relief. But the chaos and betrayal of the 2021 retreat from Kabul was an early warning sign of the suffering an abruptly retreating superpower can leave in its wake.

Adopting a prewar mindset in this context almost certainly means spending more on defence than a Labour government inheriting crippled public finances would find comfortable. But it also strengthens the case for things Britain frankly should be doing anyway, from putting rocket boosters under the transition to renewable energy – why be any more vulnerable to oil price shocks than necessary? – to cleaning up social media platforms riddled with bad actors and systematic political disinformation. A prewar mindset wouldn't let the British steel industry die, given steel's critical role in defence manufacturing, or indulge the kind of pointless political infighting and kneejerk anti-European sentiment to which this government is prone.

What Sanders describes may seem an implausibly big ask of a squabbling country that currently seems incapable of facing down some light resistance to housebuilding in Surrey, never mind mobilising for war in Europe. But if nothing else, we should take from his words a warning not to get complacent, and the more comforting message that preparing for the worst can be a means of ensuring it doesn't happen. For what might a nation that suddenly sensed danger start to work for, more than anything else? Not war, but the peace we have too long taken for granted.

**Gaby Hinsliff is a Guardian columnist*

ICJ Orders Israel to Prevent Genocide in Gaza

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the fact that the court was willing to discuss the genocide charges was a "mark of shame that will not be erased for generations"



The ICJ panel at The Hague

THE HAGUE - The United Nations' top court on Friday ordered Israel to do all it can to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide in Gaza, but the International Court of Justice panel stopped short of ordering Jerusalem to end the military offensive that has laid waste to the Palestinian enclave. In a ruling that will keep Israel under the legal lens for years to come, the ICJ offered little other comfort to Israeli leaders in a genocide

case brought by South Africa that goes to the core of one of the world's most intractable conflicts. The court's half-dozen orders will be difficult to achieve without some sort of cease-fire or pause in the fighting.

"The court is acutely aware of the extent of the human tragedy that is unfolding in the region and is deeply concerned about the continuing loss of life and human suffering," court President

Joan E. Donoghue said. The ruling amounted to an overwhelming rebuke of Israel's wartime conduct and added to mounting international pressure to halt the nearly 4-month-old offensive, which has killed more than 26,000 Palestinians, decimated vast swaths of Gaza and driven nearly 85% of its 2.3 million people from their homes. Allowing the accusations to stand stung the government of Israel, which was founded

as a Jewish state after the Nazi slaughter of 6 million Jews during World War II.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the fact that the court was willing to discuss the genocide charges was a "mark of shame that will not be erased for generations." He also vowed to press ahead with the war.

The power of the ruling was magnified by its timing, coming on the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance

Day. "Those truly needing to stand trial are those that murdered and kidnapped children, women and the elderly," former Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz said, referring to Hamas militants who stormed through Israeli communities on Oct. 7 in the attack that set off the war. The assault killed some 1,200 people and resulted in another 250 being kidnapped. The court also called on Hamas to release the hostages who are still in captivity. Hamas urged the international community to make Israel carry out the court's orders. Many of the measures were approved by an overwhelming majority of the judges. Of the six orders, an Israeli judge voted in favor of two - an order for humanitarian aid and another for the prevention of inflammatory speech. Israeli Judge Aharon Barak said he supported those orders in the hope that they would "help to decrease tensions and discourage damaging rhetoric" while easing the "consequences of the armed conflict for the most vulnerable."

Italy's Mattarella Denounces Antisemitism

ROME - Italy's president on Friday denounced rising antisemitism and delivered a powerful speech in support of the Jewish people as he commemorated a Holocaust Remembrance Day overshadowed by Israel's military campaign in Gaza and a rise in anti-Israel acts in the country.

In a ceremony at the Quirinale Palace attended by the premier and leaders of Italy's Jewish community, President Sergio Mattarella called the Holocaust "the most abominable of crimes" and recalled the complicity of Italians under Fascism in the depor-

tation of Jews.

Also Friday, Rome's police chief ordered pro-Palestinian activists to postpone a rally in the capital that had been scheduled for Saturday, the actual day of Holocaust Remembrance. Israel's Jewish community has complained that such protests have become occasions for the memory of the Holocaust to be co-opted by anti-Israel forces and used against Jews. Palestinian organizers said they would protest nonetheless, saying the potential for conflict with police was a small price to pay given the toll of

Palestinian deaths in Gaza.

Mattarella's tenure as president has been marked by strong affirmations in support of Jews, and he continued that Friday. But Mattarella also expressed anguish for the mounting Palestinian death toll in Gaza as a result of Israel's military campaign and called for fundamental human rights to be respected everywhere.

Antisemitic episodes in Italy hit an unprecedented high last year, with 216 incidents reported in the last three months of 2023 following the Oct. 7 attack, compared to 241



Italian President Sergio Mattarella during his Friday speech

in all of the previous year, the Antisemitism Observatory reported. Overall, 454 incidents

of antisemitism were reported last year, the biggest-ever increase.

Judge Orders US\$ 9.7 Bn in Damages for Dam Collapse

BRASILIA - A Brazilian judge has ruled that mining companies Vale and BHP and their joint venture Samarco must pay 47.6bn reais (USD 9.7 bn) in damages for a 2015 tailings dam burst, accord-

ing to a legal decision seen by Reuters. Vale, a Brazilian company, and BHP, an Australian listed company, said in separate statements they were not informed by the judiciary about the decision. The dam

collapse in the south-eastern city of Mariana caused a giant mudslide that killed 19 people and severely polluted the Rio Doce River, compromising the waterway to its outlet in the Atlantic Ocean. In the de-

cision, federal judge Vinicius Cobucci wrote the amount was fixed, taking as a parameter the value of expenses already acknowledged by the companies in repair and compensation actions. The judge

wrote in the legal document that the money would be put in a state fund and used for projects and initiatives area affected by the dam collapse. The companies can appeal the decision.

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Klopp to Leave Liverpool at End of Season

Klopp was appointed in October 2015 and his contract was due to run until 2026, however, he will step down as Liverpool coach at the end of the season



Klopp's contract run until 2026

LIVERPOOL - Liverpool manager Jurgen Klopp is to step down from the role at the end of the season, saying he is "running out of energy".

Klopp was appointed in October 2015 and his contract was due to run until 2026. He won the Champions League in

2019 before leading Liverpool to their first league title in 30 years in 2019-20. "I told the club already in November,"

said 56-year-old Klopp, who has announced his decision with his side top of the Premier League.

"I can understand that it's a shock for a lot of people in this moment, when you hear it for the first time, but obviously I can explain it - or at least try to explain it. I love absolutely everything about this club. But that I still take this decision shows you that I am convinced it is the one I have to take. It is that I am, how can I say it, running out of energy. I have no problem now, obviously, I knew it already for longer that I will have to announce it at one point, but I am absolutely fine now. I know that I cannot do the job again and again and again and again," he highlighted.

Klopp is the only Liverpool manager to win the league title, European Cup/Champions League, FA Cup and EFL Cup with the Reds.

Albania to Face Sweden in a Friendly

TIRANA- The Albanian Football Association (AFA) released an official statement on Friday announcing that the Albanian National Football team will play a friendly game against Sweden on March 25. The match will be played at the 'Friends Arena' in Stockholm, while the time of the game is yet to be decided. This game will help Albania in the framework of its preparation for the upcoming EURO 2024 in Germany. Coach Sylvinho has asked authorities to arrange strong opponents, so Albania is prepared in the best way possible for this major competition.

According to AFA, it is very possible for Albania to play another friendly match in March, aside from the one against Sweden, while two more friendly matches are ex-



Albania could play a second friendly game in March

pected to be played in June, a few days before the kickoff of EURO 2024.

Sweden failed to qualify for the final phase of this competition as they fin-

ished 3rd in Group F behind Belgium and Austria and ahead of Azerbaijan and Estonia. Albania have faced Sweden five times in their history. Sweden have won

three matches in the framework of World Cup qualifiers and have drawn once. Albania has claimed a 2-1 victory against Sweden in another friendly game.

Albania to Build New Olympic Park

TIRANA - Albania is contemplating building a new Olympic Center. Head of National Olympic Committee of Albania (NOCA) Fidel Ylli gave an interview to Report TV on Friday declaring that this building will cost around EUR 700-800 million. "I cannot tell you a date or a month on when the project

will be initiated. We are in the conception phase. We are working on 3D design and planimetry. We have also found the land and we are going to present it to the government so the few owners are expropriated with a Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM), so land is free for when the investor

comes to spend 700-800 million euros. We are in negotiations for the funds. Several countries have shown interest, so they step in through a private-public-partnership (PPP) contract," said Ylli, adding that this center will be dedicated to all sports and will also serve in the promotion of tourism.

"This Olympic Center will be located near the Tirana International Airport and close to Durres and Tirana. The railway will pass from this area. It will have pools, a palace of sports with a 6,000-seat capacity, a 41,508-seat capacity stadium, and gyms for all sports," Ylli concluded.

Djokovic Ousted from Australian Open by Sinner

MELBOURNE - Novak Djokovic lost at the Australian Open for the first time since 2018 as Italian fourth seed Jannik Sinner reached his first Grand Slam final. Serbia's Djokovic, 36, lost 6-1 6-2 6-7 (6-8) 6-3 as Sinner regrouped from not taking a match point in the tie-break. It ends Djokovic's bid for a record-extending 11th title and a 25th major to put him clear of Margaret Court. Sinner, 22, faces Daniil Medvedev, who recovered from two sets down to beat Alexander Zverev, in Sunday's final. Russian third seed Medvedev, 27, won 5-7 3-6 7-6 (7-4) 7-6 (7-5) 6-3 in a remarkable second semi-final which lasted four hours 18 minutes and finished at 00:06 local time. Sinner's elimination of Djokovic means there will be a new name on the Australian Open men's singles trophy. The Serb had won 33 matches in a row in Melbourne since losing to South Korea's Chung Hyeon in the fourth round six years ago. "It was very, very tough! I felt like [Djokovic] wasn't feeling that great so I kept pushing. I just tried to be ready for the fourth set, which I started off really, really well," said Sinner, who is the first Italian to reach a Melbourne singles final.

New Plan to Protect the Albanian Language

In the recently declared year of Albanian Language, Education Minister urges academicians and scholars to join forces in preserving and promoting Albanian

TIRANA - The Ministry of Education and Sports is preparing an action plan with the Academy of Sciences of Albania in the Year of the Language, with a focus on the preservation and promotion of the Albanian language, starting with the teachers and students of the entire educational system.

This was announced by the Minister Ogerta Manastirliu, in a meeting held at the Academy of Sciences with researchers of the Albanian language from the Institute of Language and Literature and members of the permanent Commission of Linguistics and Literature.

The Minister requested the close cooperation of the Academy with educational institutions, calling for Albanian language researchers to contribute to this joint mission. "A new action plan is needed, which also must envisage a stronger role of teachers in this direction," Manastirliu said, among other things, in the conversation with language academics.

The President of the Academy of Sciences, Skënder Gjinushi, said that this year must be used to establish the best possible institutional cooperation for problems related to our language between the four components: Insti-



Education Minister Manastirliu at the meeting with members of the Academy of Sciences

tutes, the Academy, Higher Schools, and the Ministry to guarantee that the Albanian language to be at the highest standards.

"The announcement of 2024 as the year of the Albanian language is an additional reason to undertake new scientific initiatives, which, from our side, are added to the three major projects in

Albanianology: "The Great Dictionary of Albanian Language", which is in its final year; "History of the Albanians"; submitted for editing; and the "Albanian Encyclopedia" which is already in the working phase. More than 200 researchers are involved in these three projects", said Gjinushi.

Minister Manastirliu in-

ited academics to contribute to the initiatives that the ministry has already taken such as the National Albanian Language Competition in schools, the National Professional Development Program for teachers, as well as in the modernization of the curriculum framework, and the reevaluation of existing programs.

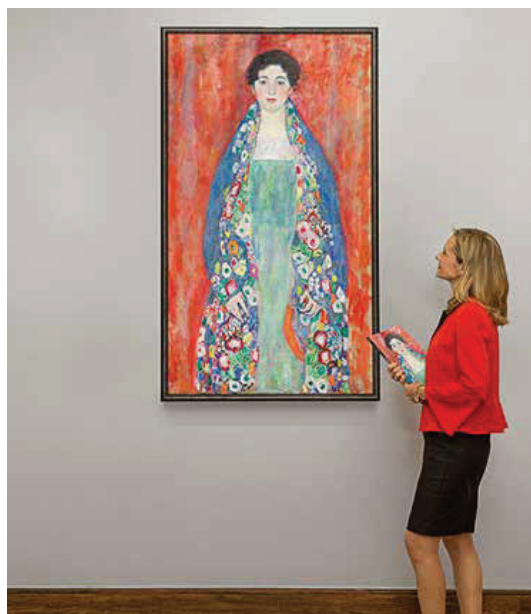
Klimt Portrait Found after Almost 100 Years

VIENNA - A painting by the Austrian artist Gustav Klimt, that was believed lost for 100 years, has been found in Vienna. Portrait of Fraulein Lieser once belonged to a Jewish family in Austria and was last seen in public in 1925. Its fate after that is unclear but the family of the current owners have had the painting since the 1960s.

The im Kinsky auction house estimates the painting's value at more than USD 54 million. It called the rediscovery "a sensation".

"A painting of such rarity, artistic significance and value has not been available on the art market in Central Europe for decades," im Kinsky said in a statement. The portrait will now be put up for auction on 24 April on behalf of the owners, and the legal successors of the Lieser family. This is based on the Washington Principles, an international agreement to return Nazi-looted art to the descendants of the people they were taken from.

Before the auction, the painting will be presented at various international locations including the UK, Swit-



Portrait of Fraulein Lieser was discovered after almost a century

zerland, Germany and Hong Kong, the auction house said. The portrait once belonged to the Lieser family, who were wealthy Jewish industrialists in Vienna. Ernst Ploil, co-Managing Director of Kinsky Auction House, said they had so far found no evidence that the work had

been looted or stolen before or during World War Two.

Klimt's art has fetched huge sums at auction in the past. His Lady with a Fan piece sold for over USD 108 million last June, making it the most valuable work of art ever sold at auction in Europe.

Nat'l Library Commemorates Lasgush Poradeci

TIRANA - On the 125th anniversary of the birth of the poet Lasgush Poradeci, the National Library of Albania and the Austrian Embassy in Tirana held a cultural event dedicated to the extraordinary poet on Friday.

During the event, the special edition of the well-known literary magazine "Lichtungen" of the Land of Styria, dedicated to the poet Poradeci, was presented. In the bilingual (German and Albanian) magazine, Lasgush Poradeci's poems can be read for the first time

in German, alongside texts by contemporary Albanian and Austrian authors. As part of this activity, the exhibition titled "Lasgush Poradeci on the 125th anniversary of his birth" was opened.

The event was also attended by the Austrian Ambassador to Tirana, Christian Steiner, head of the Graz State Library, Katharina Kocher-Lichem, publisher of the magazine "Lichtungen", Andrea Stift-Laube, Albanologist Robert Pichler, as well as translators, publishers, researchers, and students.

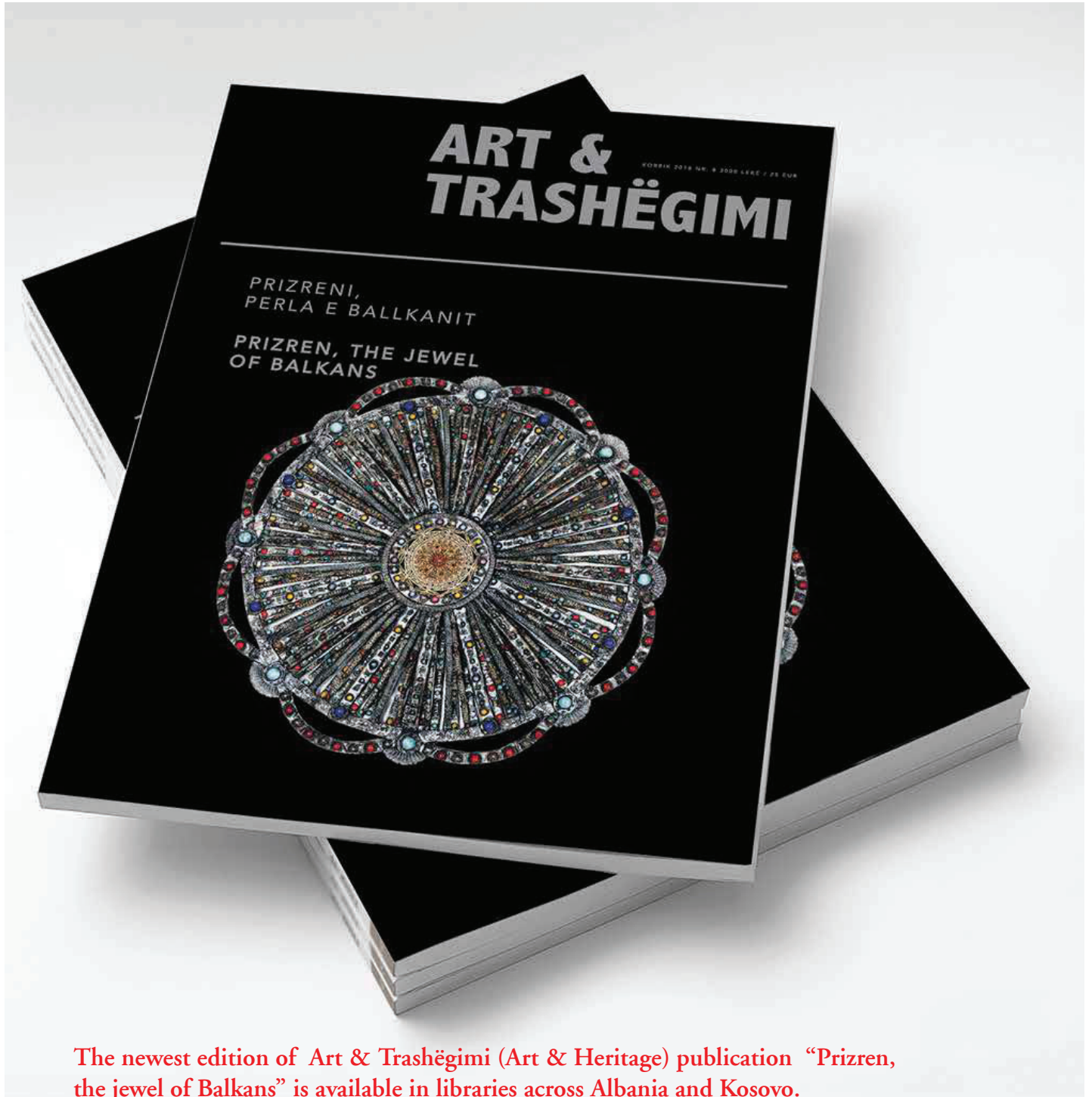
Jon Stewart Back to 'The Daily Show' as Weekly Host

NEWYORK - US Comedian Jon Stewart is rewinding the clock, returning to "The Daily Show" as a weekly host and executive producing through the 2024 U.S. elections cycle.

Comedy Central said this week Stewart will host the topical TV show, the perch he ruled for 16 years starting in 1999, every Monday starting Feb. 12. A rotating lineup of show regulars are on tap for the rest of the week.

"Jon Stewart is the voice of our generation, and we

are honored to have him return to Comedy Central's The Daily Show to help us all make sense of the insanity and division roiling the country as we enter the election season," Chris McCarthy, president and CEO of Showtime/MTV Entertainment Studios, said in a statement. Over the years, "The Daily Show" has skewered the left and right by making the media a character and playing it absolutely straight, no matter how ridiculous.



The newest edition of Art & Trashëgimi (Art & Heritage) publication “Prizren, the jewel of Balkans” is available in libraries across Albania and Kosovo.

Art & Heritage, has drafted a historical and artistic portrait of the city Prizren, the evolution of the city as it passed under the umbrella of various empires, as it became a cultural, economic and diplomatic center.

Prizren is considered as a second Constantinople, where the various religious communities, the minorities, have lived throughout the centuries, despite the bloody wars it has endured.

Art & Heritage is an invitation to understand the play of light and shadow over this open sky museum, where the past belongs to the future.