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The Letter in PDF format

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The Western Balkans: between Stabilisation and Integration in the European Union

Author: Pierre Mirel



Accession by the Western Balkans to the European Union is one of the priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council that has just started. Pierre Mirel recalls the vital conditions required for regional stabilisation and integration into the European Union.

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Front page! :

2018, the return of Europe?



Jean-Dominique Giuliani notes that the international and internal context is more favourable than ever before for the revival of the European project... [Read more](#)

Commission :

More flexibility in terms of VAT rates



On 18th January the European Commission put forward new rules to allow Member States greater flexibility to set VAT rates and to create a better quality tax environment to help SMEs prosper... [Read more](#)

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Stimulate the European aspect of education



On 17th January the European Commission adopted new measures on education and life-long training, in line with the Göteborg Summit of November 2017. Initiatives aim to improve European citizens' competence and digital skills, as well as to promote common values and knowledge by pupils of the functioning of the European Union... [Read more](#)

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Plastic Waste: European strategy to protect the planet



The first European strategy regarding plastic waste adopted on 16th January by the European Commission is part of the transition framework towards a circular economy. It will help "prevent the presence of plastic in our water and food and in our bodies...".. [Read more](#)

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Parliament :

Speech by the Irish Prime Minister



Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar spoke to the European Parliament on 17th January. He presented his vision of the future of Europe to MEPs in which he called for greater democracy in the Union notably via transnational voting lists as well as the completion of Economic and Customs Union... [Read more](#)

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Ban on electric fishing



On 16th January MEPs voted to ban the use of electricity during fishing at European level. It means that measures can be taken that are adapted to regional needs of each maritime area... [Read more](#)

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Further energy goals



MEPs established ambitious goals for the cleaner and more efficient use of energy on 17th January. The Union might commit to increase its energy efficiency by 35% by 2030 so that renewable energy sources represent 35% of the total consumption and ban palm oil in biofuels as of 2021. Discussions are to commence with the Council... [Read more](#)

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A special committee on pesticides



On 18th January the leaders of the political groups of the European Parliament gave the greenlight for the introduction of a special committee responsible for assessing the procedure for the authorisation of pesticides in the Union. Its 30 members appointed for 9 months will assess the potential failures and conflicts of interest, notably regarding the dangers of glyphosate. The decision will be officially taken during the plenary session in February... [Read more](#)

New resolution regarding international disputes in terms of divorce



On 18th January MEPs looked into the issue of children's rights during international disputes in terms of divorce. The resolution adopted notably aims to harmonise European legislation in response to the increase in international divorces and transborder kidnappings in the Union... [Read more](#)

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Council :

Eurogroup Conclusions: Greece is on the right path



On 22nd January, for the first Eurogroup Meeting under the presidency of Mario Centeno the Council welcomed the progress made by Greece in terms of reforms undertaken. Regarding the reform of the euro zone, the Eurogroup has indicated that it support the project for banking union and the revision of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM)...

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Bulgarian Presidency presented its priorities to the European Parliament

Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov presented the priorities of the



Bulgarian Presidency of the Council at the European Parliament. Amongst these feature the European prospects of the countries of the Western Balkans, migration, the fight to counter corruption, environmental protection, the rule of law and social justice. Discussions also explored the issue of the EU's multi-annual budget... [Read more](#)

Diplomacy :

Japanese Prime Minister in Europe to counter China



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was visiting Europe from 12th to 17th January in Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania. Shinzo Abe's visit came at a time when Tokyo is trying to cooperate with European countries and to counter China... [Read more](#)

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The 14th meeting of Ministers of the 5+5 Dialogue on the Western Mediterranean



French Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian co-chaired the 14th meeting of Ministers of the 5 +5 Dialogue on the Western Mediterranean with his Algerian counterpart, Abdelkader Messahel. They worked on answers to be given to development problems (economic, social and sustainable), migration and youth, not forgetting the challenges given the situation in Libya... [Read more](#)

Foreign Affairs Council Meeting



During the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on 22nd January a new strategy for Iraq was adopted with the aim of protecting ethnic diversity and the establishment of a stable government. Moreover an association agreement with Chile aiming to modernise the one in force was published in order to deepen EU-Chile relations... [Read more](#)

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Court of Justice :

New regulations on GMOs



The European Court of Justice gave its conclusions of its report on GMOs on 18th January. According to Advocate General Bobek, the organisms produced by mutagenesis are in principle exempt of the obligations provided by the directive on GMOs. This will lead to greater freedom for the Member States regarding the measures taken to regulate these organisms... [Read more](#)

Germany :

Decline in number of asylum seekers



German Home Affairs Minister Thomas de Maizière presented the statistical results of asylum requests in 2017 on 16th January. The number of requests has declined: in 2017, 222,683 refugees asked for asylum in Germany which represents a 70.1% decline in comparison with 2016 (745,545 requests)... [Read more](#)

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The SPD votes for negotiations with the CDU-CSU



During the SPD Congress on 21st January 362 delegates voted for coalition negotiations, 279 voted against and one person abstained. With 56% of the vote in support the SPD therefore enters into coalition negotiations with the CDU-CSU... [Read more](#)

Austria :

Meeting between heads of German and Austrian government



On 17th January Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz was hosted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. They discussed asylum policy as well as European issues... [Read more](#)

Spain :

Roger Torrent elected leader of the Catalan regional parliament



The Catalan Parliament sat for the first time on 17th January in spite of the absence of Carles Puigdemont, the former head of the secessionist government. After two rounds, MPs elected Roger Torrent, a left-wing secessionist as leader of Parliament... [Read more](#)

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Greece :

Adoption of new reforms



Greek MPs adopted reforms demanded by the country's creditors on 15th January, notably a restriction of the right to strike, despite demonstrations that caused major traffic jams in Athens. The project was adopted by 154 votes against 141 and 5 abstentions... [Read more](#)

Poland :

Visit by the new Foreign Affairs Minister to Berlin



Polish Foreign Affairs Minister Jacek Czaputowicz travelled to Germany on 17th January to meet his counterpart Sigmar Gabriel. They discussed the rule of law, the future of Europe and recalled the importance of the Germano-Polish relationship... [Read more](#)

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Czech Republic :

Andrej Babiš loses Parliament confidence vote and his immunity



Andrej Babiš's minority government in the Czech Republic lost the confidence of the Members of Parliament on 16th January. 117 of the 200 MPs present voted against and five abstained which will force the government to resign. Andrej Babiš officially resigned on 17th January. Moreover members of the House lifted his parliamentary immunity on 19th January following his indictment for the embezzlement of European funds, 111 votes against 69... [Read more](#)

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Romania :

The prevention of corruption has progressed little



In a report published on 18th January, the anti-corruption body of the Council of Europe (GRECO) concluded that Romania had made very little progress in terms of implementing its recommendations aiming to prevent and combat corruption involving MPs, judges and prosecutors. GRECO stresses that Romania had only fully complied with two of the 13 recommendations featuring in a global assessment report published in 2016. Seven recommendations have not been implemented and four have only been so in part... [Read more](#)

Viorica Dancila appointed Prime Minister



Romanian President, Klaus Iohannis, gave a speech on 17th January in which he appointed Viorica Dancila (PSD) as Prime Minister. She will be taking over from Mihai Tudose - PSD - qui resigned on 15th January because of differences within the majority party. For the first time in the country's history a woman is to lead government... [Read more](#)

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UK :

35th Franco-British Summit



French President Emmanuel Macron met with British Prime Minister Theresa May at Sandhurst on 18th January for the 35th Franco-British Summit. This celebration of the "entente cordiale" concluded with the signature of a new agreement - to complement the Touquet Agreements of 2004 - on the control of immigration. The UK has therefore committed to contributing an additional 50.5 million € for the control of the border in Calais. Moreover the British army will provide - in terms of defence - logistic support to the Barkhane operation in the Sahel... [Read more](#)

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House of Common approves the withdrawal bill from the EU



On 17th January the House of Common adopted the draft bill on the withdrawal from the EU, a vital text to complete the country's exit of the Union. The text was approved 324 votes in support, 295 against

and will be examined by the House of Lords as of 30th January... [Read more](#)

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Macedonia :

NATO's Secretary General visits Skopje to encourage continued reform



During a visit to Skopje on 18th January, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed the efforts made toward long term political stability in Macedonia. He stressed that the Alliance supported the democratic reforms engaged by the country and its work in support of NATO membership... [Read more](#)

Eurostat :

Annual inflation rates down



According to Eurostat on 17th January the EU's annual inflation rate lay at 1.7% in December 2017, against 1.8% in November and that of the euro zone lay at 1.4% in December 2017 against 1.5% in November... [Read more](#)

International goods trade surplus



On 15th January Eurostat published export figures of goods from the EU and from the euro zone for November 2017. Hence the euro zone recorded a surplus of 26.3 billion € in its international goods trade with the rest of the world and 8 billion € for the EU... [Read more](#)

Studies/Reports :

Banking Union: the first assessment of the action plan aiming to reduce non-performing loans



The European Commission delivered its first interim report on the action plan aiming to reduce non-performing loans - (NPL). It highlighted the continued improvement of the NPL ratios and the next steps that aim to reduce the use of these loans to an even greater degree... [Read more](#)

The role of trade reports in human rights



The report published on 19th January by the European Commission and the European External Action Service shows that trade agreements foster human rights, encourage good governance and strengthen the principles of sustainable development... [Read more](#)

The British business leaders want to keep customs union with the EU post-Brexit



The CBI, Carolyn Fairbairn advocated on 22nd January for the upkeep of a customs union with the EU after the Brexit, which in her opinion would be the best solution for British businesses... [Read more](#)

Developing European apprentice mobility



On 19th January MEP Jean Arthuis (ALDE, FR) handed in his report on the means to develop European apprentice mobility to the French Minister for Employment, Muriel Pénicaud, who was tasked to look into this last July. The report makes 16 proposals... [Read more](#)

French and German economists report on euro zone reform



"How to reconcile risk sharing and market discipline? - a constructive proposal to reform the euro zone" - is the title of the report published on 17th January and written by both French and German economists. They put forward six reforms, that aim to strengthen the political and financial stability of monetary union and to increase the euro zone's economic prosperity... [Read more](#)

Culture :

Rembrandt at the Condé



From 27th January to 3rd June the Condé Museum in Chantilly is showing the work of Rembrandt. 21 etchings will be on show alongside some drawings. This is an exceptional event because these works have never been shown to the public before... [Read more](#)

Surva, the international festival in Pernik, Bulgaria



From 26th to 28th January the 25th Masquerade Festival of Pernik (near Sofia) is taking place - it is a Bulgarian tradition in honour of the god Dionysos. According to legend the wild dancing in the streets of Pernik drives out the bad spirits. It is the biggest cultural event in the region... [Read more](#)

The sublime landscape of Georges Michel



The Custodia Foundation is running an exhibition from 27th January to 29th April on the landscapes of Georges Michel (1763-1843) deemed to be the forerunner of open air painting. Having travelled around the Ile de France, he painted the outskirts of the capital by immortalising rural landscapes which disappeared gradually in the second half of the 19th century... [Read more](#)

Capella Cracoviensis Concerts in Krakow



Until 13th February the Symphonic Orchestra Capella Cracoviensis is playing in the old town of Krakow. Concerts are given in historic buildings notably churches... [Read more](#)

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Jan
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Brussels
"Foreign Affairs" Council
Brussels
Eurogroup

23
Jan
23rd January
Brussels
"Economic and Financial Affairs" Council

25
Jan
25th January
Frankfurt/Main
ECB Council of Governors

26
Jan
26th and 27th January
Czech Republic
Presidential election (2nd round)

28
Jan
28th January
Cyprus
Presidential election (1st round)
Finland
Presidential Election (1st round)

29th January

29
Jan

Brussels
"Agriculture and Fisheries" Council
"General Affairs" Council

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