



**Hermes Institute of
International Affairs,
Security & Geoeconomy**

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

“SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE AT A GLANCE” is a weekly review of the most significant current political, economic, energy, defense, and security news of Southeastern Europe. It covers 14 countries; Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey. However Greece enjoys its own weekly review for a more detailed presentation of its current affairs (GREECE AT A GLANCE).

This ambitious newsletter aspires to become an informative “tool” for anyone who is interested in the region and wishes to have knowledge of the non-stop current developments and challenges. “HERMES” Institute is not a news agency and it is not one of its ambitions to become one but it is strongly believed that today’s events provide the necessary material to understand the future and to analyze situations that may affect in peace, stability, and growth of the region.

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ALBANIA: April 10th, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Matthew Palmer kicked off his visit to Tirana on Monday with a long meeting with Prime Minister Edi Rama, during a time of unprecedented political crisis, when the opposition has withdrawn from Parliament by resigning its mandates and chosen to protest to demand the departure of Rama and the establishment of a caretaker Government to prepare the country for early elections. Palmer's meeting with Rama lasted about 90 minutes and it was Rama who later briefed on the topics of conversation through a social media post. *"Excellent bilateral relations, Albania's European integration, Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and political situation in the country, in a fruitful conversation that found us in full agreement with Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Palmer,"* wrote Rama listing the issue of domestic political developments at the end of the list of topics discussed with the US official, thus rejecting rumors that the purpose of the visit was an attempt to resolve the political crisis. During an interview for the media on Tuesday, however, Palmer spoke about the deadlock, saying it encourages the opposition to seek ways to re-engage in the political process and participate in the upcoming local elections as the only solution to the deadlock. *"Albania has a Government elected according to the rules, is a US partner with whom we work well and closely. Government institutions are functional, legitimate, Albania has no problem in making decisions, approving laws, and I trust that this Government will lead the country towards a European future, will be able to continue to act in the fight against organized crime and corruption, implementation of the judicial reform, completion of the vetting that is important to give Albanians trust in the*

administration of justice," Palmer said. Basha, on his side, described his meeting with Palmer on social media as an open and constructive conversation on the situation; the lack of the constitutional and high Courts, impunity, crime, corruption, and political crisis. *"Joint commitment to democracy, rule of law and good governance as the only path to stability and Albania in the EU,"* Basha wrote. Meanwhile, Monika Kryemadhi leader of Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim - LSI) briefly said that she is not authorized to speak on the conversation they had with Palmer. *"Palmer expressed his own options from his point of view. We expressed our options from our point of view. Of course, they are in agreement with the US State Department's report on combating corruption, seizing the state, all other problems, but it is very important to continue with the final settlement and end the Albanian transition. Albania belongs to the EU,"* Kryemadhi said. (www.tiranatimes.com)

- April 10th, close to 10 million euro were allegedly stolen during an armed robbery on Tuesday at the National "Mother Teresa" Airport (Rinas), in the outskirts of Tirana. It was reported the robbers had silicon masks on that made their face identification impossible and wore military uniforms, while bearing Kalashnikov automatic rifles, guns and hand grenades. On their way out of the airport, after the robbery alarm had been rung, the robbers also encountered a Rapid Intervention Force patrol car, engaging in a shootout that left one of the robbers dead, while the others managed to escape. While multiple units have been put in pursuit of the robbers, it is reported four banning orders have so far been issued, while at least forty people have been accompanied for interrogation. Meanwhile, in the

aftermath of the robbery, the issue of airport security has come under fire by all political actors in the country, while the Government blamed the Chinese company running the airport for the robbery. This is the third robbery taking place at Rinas or in its proximity. On Wednesday, the identity of the robber who ended up dead after the shootout was revealed as being Admir Murataj, a high-risk individual who is also believed to have been the brain behind the most recent Rinas robbery. Murataj was also allegedly being sought by the Greek justice for escaping the Greek Trikala prison six years ago (2013), where he was sentenced for carrying another armed robbery. Grenades and guns were found in Murataj's body on Tuesday. An operation has been ongoing since the day of the heist, while Police has reported the robbers have been identified. Minister of Interior Sander Lleshaj said in a press conference that took place 24 hours after the robbery that the Chinese company in charge of Rinas security neglected its contract and failed to ensure a proper security system. Further on, Lleshaj said that all measures to be taken by the State Police following this event will make sure to guarantee national security, as well as the safety of life and property. According to Lleshaj, the troubled relationship with the Chinese company running Rinas began after the 2016 robbery. Through a social media post, Prime Minister Edi Rama said *"the Chinese company which bought the airport from the previous one failed to guarantee security. The Albanian state will accept no justification from the company and will take control of the external perimeter and internal security."* However, the Chinese company also reacted to the accusations, calling them *"inaccurate"* and a *"misinformation of the public and blame, as a recurring scenario, for a heavy accusation that cannot stand on the shoulders of a*

foreign concessionaire without sidelining Concession Contract requirements that Tirana International Airport needs meet daily with regard to airport security." Following the polemics, it was reported on Wednesday that army forces will be engaged from now on to ensure the airport is secure, while the Police role and responsibilities will be increased. In an official statement released by the Presidency, President Ilir Meta said Rinas security was also the subject of talks of the National Security Council one year ago. *"Based on the preliminary reports followed by the responsible institutions, I have raised in particular the concern about the lack of clear responsibilities on security at Mother Teresa Airport and the lack of access and coordination for the proper intervention of the State Police in case of,"* stressed Meta. For the Albanian opposition, the airport robbery is a clear indicator that *"the state has fallen."* *"When in Rinas, which is supposed to be the area with the highest security in the country, an armed robbery is carried out on an international line plane in the middle of the day, everyone understands at what level is the police and at what level is the order and public security,"* the Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë - PD) leader Lulzim Basha said, who in the evening called the deployment of military armed forces in the airport's vicinity *"unconstitutional and illegal."* (www.tiranatimes.com)

- April 13th, thousands of protesters rallied in downtown Tirana calling on the ruling Socialist Government to resign and hold early elections. The protests, which saw participants and police clash in front of the Parliament, were the latest demonstrations organized by the political opposition during the past two months. Protesters showed up in the late afternoon on Tirana's main

boulevard carrying posters, chanting “*Parliament of crime!*” and throwing flares, firecrackers and smoke bombs at Police. They also torched a parked car. Police responded with tear gas and water cannons after some protesters tried to storm the Parliament building. Many demonstrators stayed on the steps of the building shouting slogans against the ruling Prime Minister, Edi Rama. The Interior Ministry said that five Police Officers had been injured in the confrontations. The center-right Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë - PD) which organized the rallies, said 15 protesters were affected by the tear gas. PD leader Lulzim Basha joined the protest of the opposition in front of the Prime Minister’s Office. In his speech in front of the protesters, Basha said that the opposition is closer than ever to the unification of Albanians, and more determined than ever against crime and corruption. The PD leader accused the Prime Minister Edi Rama of having connections with crime and of demolishing the property of Albanian people. “*This man will enter the country’s history as the Prime Minister who destroyed the homes of Albanians. He will be remembered as the Prime Minister captured by organized crime, and who governs in favor of criminals. But our people is no longer afraid, and we are all determined to make him go away,*” Basha said. Albanian opposition parties are protesting in Tirana, since February, asking the Government for early elections and a resignation of Rama. Rama, reacted on social media after today’s protest writing that this is a day when everyone should be supportive with the Police. “*Solidarity to any Police Officer who must face the physical confrontation of a desperate political force, which has no direction and no future,*” Rama wrote. (www.top-channel.tv, www.dw.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Albania has entered in a period of political turmoil and fragile political stability not only because opposition organizes huge protests against the Government, but mainly because opposition MPs decided to abandon Parliament and resign. Such an action is blocking Parliament’s works undermining Albania’s reforms (economic, justice etc). Such decision was strongly criticized by the international community namely the EU (and U.S) putting at risk the opening of accession negotiations in June 2019. The Prime Minister, Edi Rama urged opposition to return in the Parliament starting a constructive dialogue but PD and LSI leaders, Basha and Kryemadhi respectively pushing for the Government’s topple and snap elections. Governmental institutions and media close to the Government strongly highlight that political destabilization is in favor of Russian influence in the country underlying that Rama and his Government are the only credible stakeholders which could guarantee the firm western orientation of the country. It is not normal for a stable country seeking to enter the European club to face such situation of political abnormality. Opposition MPs’ resignation aiming at forcing the Government in collapse is not a reasonable political strategy for a functional and stable democracy. At the moment, the Government seeks to maintain Parliament fully functional, while opposition accuses Rama for buying its MPs to refuse resignation. In the meanwhile, several political executives of PD and LSI “disobeyed” their leaderships and accepted to replace the vacant seats in the Parliament invalidating partially their boycottage plans. Further polarization of political atmosphere in Albania by the opposition could not be excluded. Opposition

PD and LSI did not submit their candidates within the deadline (March 18th, 2019), while PD leader Basha stated that his party plans to boycott the local election scheduled for June 30th, 2019. The Government is accused of having links with organized crime and current situation raises questions over the power of “Albanian mafia” in the country and its influence in state’s politics. Undoubtedly, corruption and organized crime remains the most significant state’s problem undermining its strategic goal of opening accession negotiations with the EU. The EU closely monitors progress of reforms especially in justice sector. Commissioner Hanh urged the EU leaders to start accession negotiations with Albania (and North Macedonia) underlying that other forces namely Russia, China, Turkey, and Arab countries may increase influence in the region. The final decision for opening Albania’s accession negotiations in June 2019 is up to the EU Heads of Governments. One should underline that unofficial concerns have already been raised regarding this date due to current political instability. Failure of opening accession talks with the EU it will further destabilize the country toppling the Government. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a “mother nation.” Albania maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and F.Y.R.O.M. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on promoting Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access. Possible border changes may engage Albania in dangerous situations taking into consideration that it has the role of “protector” of Albanians in the region.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

April 9th, Bosnia and Herzegovina will be suspended from the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly until the end of 2019 because it has not appointed its new representatives to that body six months after general elections in the country, the Head of the Council of Europe Office in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Drahoslav Stefanek said. Bosnia and Herzegovina will not be able to participate in the work of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly until the end of the year. That means that it will not be able to participate in making one of the most important decisions this year, on the appointment of the new Council of Europe Secretary-General, the Head of the Council of Europe Office in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Stefanek, said. Stefanek added that Bosnia and Herzegovina representatives would not participate in three sessions of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly or in the work of its committees. Under the Council of Europe rules, member-countries must appoint their new delegations to the Parliamentary Assembly within six months at the latest from the day of elections, otherwise they are temporarily suspended. Bosnia and Herzegovina's delegation in the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly has ten members. (www.ba.nlinfo.com)

- April 9th, the main Bosniak (Muslim Bosnian) party in the country is blocking the forming of the Government after the October 2018 election to protect the illegal production of arms in factories it controls, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, who now chairs Bosnia’s tripartite Presidency, said. Bosnia’s state-level Government has not been formed for more than six months after the election, mostly because the Bosniak member of

the tripartite Presidency from the Party for Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA) said it refuses to greenlight the proposed Prime Minister (in Bosnia is called the Chairman of the Council of Ministers) because candidate is opposed to the country's path towards NATO membership. Bosnia has previously pursued NATO membership but in recent years the Serb politicians have changed their mind and the next candidate for the Prime Minister comes from Dodik's party which vigorously rejects membership in the Alliance. Dodik has frequently accused the SDA of blocking the formation of the Government but he keeps claiming they are doing it for a variety of reasons other than the NATO issue. He claimed the party is controlling the illegal production of weapons and that he told the Serbian President about it. *"I informed Mr. [Serbian President] Vucic about this,"* Dodik said. He said SDA met in Mostar for second time in the last three months and that all local leaders of that party were participating in those meetings along with representatives of the intelligence service and the party's commission of security. He alleged that lists are made of all Bosniak men capable of joining the military and that those are being profiled in the sense of where they did during the war. Those who have attended military training are being taken into consideration of how they can be prepared for some eventualities, he said. Dodik noted that arms and ammunition factories in the Federation (FBiH), the semi-autonomous entity within the country mostly shared between Bosniaks and Croats, are *"directly under the control"* of the SDA and that they have *"increased their uncontrolled production."* He reminded of a spat between Serb and SDA officials a year ago when Bosniak leader and SDA Head Bakir Izetbegovic attended a ceremony marking the 26th anniversary of the

establishment of the Bosnian Army which fought against the country's Serb and Croat forces during the 1992-95 war and no longer exists. Izetbegovic said at the time that Bosnia will not waste its money on buying rocket systems and fighter planes but rather rely on its own armed industry which will produce for export but also for *"just in case, God forbid."* The statement was labelled by Dodik as *"warmongering."* *"It is impossible for anything in the arms industry to be produced apart from what was ordered by Bosnia's Armed Forces or defined in a particular agreement which needs to be presented to the Government for approval,"* Dodik said. He said that Bosniaks *"talk about how Serbia is ready for military engagement in a part of Kosovo because their goal is to incite tensions among people here. Now their plan can be seen clearly. They want to keep the Serbs that suit them in the Council of Ministers so that their arms factories are permitted to work and their intelligence agency can continue to follow and control officials from the RS and Serbia without interference."* adding that it is *"something we will have to resolve quickly."* Dodik said that the international community has destroyed all arms factories in the RS and left six such factories in FBiH. *"Now we see that there is an illegal plan to produce arms and ammunition in factories, we are receiving information about this. We are asking for that information to be checked, whether it is true or not,"* he said, adding that he would *"love for it to be untrue."* (www.ba.n1info.com)

- April 10th, leaders of the main Bosniak and Bosnian Croat parties in the country met and discussed a number of *"hot topics,"* ranging from forming the country's Government after the 2018 General Election, ideas about the establishment of a third semi-autonomous entity for Croats and

Bosnia's NATO path. Leader of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH), Dragan Covic, said that he and the leader of the Party for Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA), Bakir Izetbegovic, had an "unusually honest" conversation and that they found that there are certain "unnecessary misunderstandings" between them. He said they spoke about recent statements by some Bosnian Croat politicians who said that, due to the current situation in the country, they are considering the idea of reviving Herzeg-Bosna. Reviving the parastate would imply the establishment of a third semi-autonomous entity in Bosnia, only for Bosnian Croats. Izetbegovic said he is "satisfied" with what Covic told him. "The HDZ responded that they do not intend to create any third entity and that only bad policies by Bosniaks could make them go down that path," he said. Another issue discussed was Bosnia's path towards NATO membership - a sensitive topic in the country. Bosnian Serb politicians tend to follow Serbia's policies on such matters while Bosnian Croats follow Croatia's stance. Serbia has declared military neutrality while Croatia is a member. That creates splits in Bosnia where Bosniaks press for membership, Serbs are against it, and Bosnia's Croats have started avoiding the subject; as Covic's party has joined an alliance with the party of Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrataor - SNSD). Covic said that, when it comes to his party and Bosnian Croat parties in general, Bosnia's relationship towards NATO is a "vital priority and questioning it in any way is not fair, we know how much we worked on it," he said. "But when we have friends who do not see it as their priority,

then we will not mention it," he added, referring to Dodik. The two leaders agreed that Bosnia should form a Government as swiftly as possible and they said at the press conference that they discussed the distribution of positions in the body. (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political instability and uncertainty continues in Bosnia because it has not formed a Government since October 7th, 2018 general elections. It seems that the three main parties representing the three constituent entities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats); HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) have reached an agreement to cooperate in forming a Government trying to bypass their different views on main issues. Bosnia's accession process towards NATO is the main disputable issue; Bosnian Serbs insist that the country should remain neutral staying out of NATO, Bosniaks remain committed to NATO accession as a precondition for supporting a Government, while Bosnian Croats appears neutral on the issue wishing to overcome the deadlock. Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust. Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs destabilizing the state. It is more than impressive that Bosnian Serbs and Croats came very close aiming at achieving their special goals. Of course, both entities (Croats and Serbs) take in advantage "Dayton Peace Agreement" weaknesses and malfunctions. Russia pays special attention in Serbia and Bosnia in order to maintain its influence in the region. Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and

Montenegro have already entered NATO, while North Macedonia would join the Alliance on June 2019. These two countries (Serbia and Bosnia) are the only “vehicles” for Russia to maintain a narrow influence in Southeastern Europe. Apart from external influence and intervention the country has to confront several internal “threats” which undermine its sovereignty, cohesion, and viability. Election of ultra nationalist pro-Russian Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia’s EU and NATO (mostly) integration. Dodik is a person who does not actually believe in B&H viability and is expected to promote (actually, he has already started) his own political agenda. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey approach the country mainly through “investments” and/or funding ethnic or religious groups according to their interests.



BULGARIA: April 9th, Bulgaria has postponed a visit by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu that had been planned for April 9th, 2019 Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ekaterina Zaharieva said in a television interview. The visit has been postponed as a diplomatic signal after Cavusoglu caused upset in Bulgaria by saying that Turkey had intervened in the amendments to the Religious Denominations Act. Tabled by Prime Minister Boiko Borissov’s Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Граждани за европейско развитие на България – GERB) party and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Dvizhenie za Prava i Svobodi - DPS), the amendments provide for the postponement of the debts to the state owed by faith groups. The office of the Chief Mufti, spiritual leader of Bulgaria’s Muslim minority, is the main

beneficiary because it is the largest debtor by far, reportedly owing about four million euro. The statement by the Turkish Foreign Minister was made on the eve of local elections in his country. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- April 9th, “Bulgaria has chosen the way for rapid fulfillment of the criteria and accession to the euro area as soon as possible,” Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva said at a discussion on Bulgaria’s accession to the euro area. The discussion is part of the fourth meeting of the Bulgarian Business Leaders Forum with Ambassadors and representatives of diplomatic missions in Bulgaria. Minister Zaharieva pointed out that the Government’s plans in this direction are being implemented at the foreseen pace and awaits a response from the EC to the so-called “Euro-zone waiting room” (ERM-II) at the end of July. She thanked the Bulgarian business for the support and for the desire to join the eurozone more quickly, and adopt the euro. (www.novinite.com)

- April 11th, Lockheed Martin will open a base for maintenance, partial and complete renovation (MRO facility) in Bulgaria, said Jim Robinson, International Business Development for the F-16 in the US company. This means that Bulgarian aircraft can be maintained in Bulgaria by local engineers and technicians throughout the duration of their 12,000 hours of flight hours. The company discusses a number of other possibilities for partnership with the Bulgarian industry and the possible participation of the local academic institutions in research and development programs, it became clear from his words. “A lot of false information has emerged, often from people who have not participated directly in the talks, about our ability to deliver the new F-16

Block 70 within the timeframe that meets the needs of the Bulgarian Air Force,” said Robinson. The aircrafts for Bahrain, Slovakia, and Bulgaria will be among the first to be built in the new facility in Greenville. “Assuming that the contract is signed this summer, we plan to start training the Bulgarian pilots and ground staff in the US no later than 2021 and deliver the first Bulgarian F-16 before 2023,” he added. The choice of F-16 Block 72 from Morocco and another operator in the Asia region will accelerate plans to start production of new fighter jets that are important for Bulgaria and deliver the first airplane at the end of 2022. In a statement made just two weeks before the cut-off ceremony for the opening of Lockheed Martin's new F-16 production line in Greenville, South Carolina, Robinson said that while the recent orders increase the company's load, the new plant is now available to lift its production capacity to meet customer needs. In addition to the new F-16 fighters for Europe, the Greek Air Force announced plans to modernize 85 aircraft from its F-16 fleet to the Viper standard. This standard is similar to the new block 70/72, but without the benefits of 12,000 flight hours. Poland, the first Central and Eastern European country to elect the F-16, is also considering modernizing its current fleet. Romania looks at the possibility of acquiring more aircraft, and Croatia re-evaluates the needs of its air defense. (www.novinite.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although the Government claims that there is no parliamentary crisis and possibility of snap elections, BSP absence from parliamentary sessions it is not a good sign of democratic function and the Government always has a responsibility about it. However, one should

claim that Bulgarian politics follows the Balkan trend (Albania, Montenegro, Serbia etc) of leaving the Parliament; a strong sign of democratic and parliamentary immaturity. It is assessed that Bulgaria has not entered yet in political instability but it could be evolved into a potential major crisis. On the other hand, the junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots remains the vulnerable and unpredictable piece of the inter-governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus, Bulgaria has entered in a period of rather stable political situation. The President Radev grabs every opportunity to criticize the Government (and the Prime Minister Borissov) highlighting his different political affiliation (Radev is backed by the opposition Socialists). Opposition BSP tries to push further Borisov and his Government by strengthening its rhetoric and having tabled three motions of no confidence so far. The country strengthened its efforts towards entering the Eurozone achieving a positive decision of the Eurogroup. However, the EC made clear that Bulgaria could not enter the Eurozone before 2022. Fitch upgraded Bulgarian economy from stable to positive; a good sign of economic function. Apart from that the European Parliament adopted a resolution for the accession of Bulgaria (and Romania) in Schengen Zone. However, it is questioned if the European Council will receive a unanimous final decision for Bulgaria under the current migration pressure. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles and should be addressed decisively. Although modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc) military operational capability of the state is questioned

especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards. Security situation stable; no major threats.



CROATIA: April 9th, after Slovenian Prime Minister Marjan Sarec expressed concern over Croatian behavior, because the Croatian Security Intelligence Agency allegedly eavesdropped the former Slovenian arbiter in the border arbitration process, Jernej Sekolec and Slovenian official Simona Drenik in order to discredit the arbitration process, the story further escalated on Monday when POP-TV claimed that a Croatian Government intermediary, Ivan Tolj, the Head of Styria in Croatia, attempted to halt the broadcast of a report on wiretapping. Because of this the Party of Social Democrats, one of the members of the governing coalition, requested an urgent session of the Slovenian National Security Council, which Sarec called. *“We decisively and in entirety reject all allegations on any attempts by the Croatian Government to influence the Slovenian media,”* said the Croatian Government on the issue. *“As we have previously stated, the Security Intelligence Agency does not comment media speculations, but we inform you that articles published by 24ur regarding the Security intelligence Agency are false and tendentious constructions. It is a continuation of a media campaign by certain media in Bosnia and Herzegovina that were intended to compromise the Security Intelligence Agency in the Republic of Croatia with false accusations of recruiting Salafists for weapons smuggling in Bosnia and Herzegovina and illegal actions by the Security Intelligence Agency against a neighboring country,”* said the response by the Security intelligence Agency. The general consensus among Croatian politicians is that the accusations

are a result of Slovenia not being able to accept that they contaminated the border arbitration process with Croatia and it fell through as a result. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- April 13th, the eighth summit of 16 Central and Eastern European countries and China, which will from now on be known as the 17+1 initiative after it has been joined by Greece, ended in Dubrovnik on Friday with the adoption of guidelines. The guidelines were agreed by all Prime Ministers except Latvia's, who could not attend because of a political crisis at home. In the 14-page document the participating states pledged to support the development of a sustainable global economy and multilateral trade system based on the rules of the World Trade Organization. They expressed their commitment to combating corruption, promoting economic globalization, helping achieve the UN goals of sustainable development by 2030 and encouraging the full implementation of the Paris agreement on climate change. The members of the initiative also undertook to create a level playing field for foreign companies operating in their respective states, based on mutual respect and fair competition. The document calls for more effective policies to facilitate the access of companies from Central and Eastern Europe to China and build a more balanced partnership. The participating countries took note of the Three Seas Initiative and expressed their readiness to cooperate with it to improve transport connections between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black seas. It was agreed that the fifth meeting of the initiative's Transport Ministers would take place in Croatia next year. The participating countries unanimously accepted Greece as a member and invited other countries and institutions to join as observers. (www.n1info.com)



“17+1” summit in Dubrovnik, Croatia

(Photo source: www.vlada.gov.hr)

- April 14th, the Civic Liberal Alliance (Građansko-Liberalni Savez – GLAS) President Anka Mrak-Taritas said “*it is necessary to deal with the past so that we can have a future*,” while Croatian Peasant Party (Hrvatska Seljačka Stranka - HSS) leader Kreso Beljak called out the Government, saying it “*tolerates flirting with fascism*.” Both opposition officials supported Ognjen Kraus, President of the Coordinating Committee of Jewish Communities in Croatia, who said on Friday that historical revisionism in Croatia was continuing and that, because of the inaction of state institutions, the extreme right was becoming increasingly aggressive, calling on the Government to stop that and respect Croatian laws. Speaking in Rijeka, Mrak-Taritas said “*the Prime Minister wants to favor everyone*” and that it was “*unacceptable*” to have two commemorations for the victims of the WWII Jasenovac concentration camp. There will be two commemorations as long as the Government does not ban the Ustasha salute “*For the homeland ready*,” she added. She said President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic visited the Jasenovac Memorial Site alone on Saturday “*because she evidently does not want to go with either (side) because she wants the votes of both*.” Beljak said today’s state commemoration for the Jasenovac victims was “*ridiculous when open*

flirting with fascism is tolerated more and more every day.” The Government is doing nothing, and it is sad that minorities, people who were killed in WWII, have to ask the Government to respect Croatian laws, he added. Mrak-Taritas and Beljak were in Rijeka to present their Amsterdam Coalition’s platform for the European Parliament elections, which highlights tolerance, freedom, equality, EU enlargement and Croatia’s joining the euro area. (www.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Croatia follows a tough regional policy with neighboring countries. It is openly intervene in Bosnia’s internal affairs, while it maintains open disputes with Slovenia, Serbia, and Bosnia. It is estimated Croatia tries to establish a leading role in Western Balkans not only as an EU and NATO member state but also as a rising “local” (Western Balkans) power. One should take into consideration that Croatia shows its military strength and capabilities quite often not only in international, but also in national level sending strong messages to neighboring countries. Apart from that, Croatia pays special attention in energy strategy and security announcing ambitious projects. The state enjoys political stability. Concerns have been raised over media freedom in Croatia and one should focus on the Government’s action on this matter. Border dispute on Piran Bay remains active and Slovenia’s initiative to file a lawsuit against Croatia adds a new chapter between the two countries conflict. The state accelerates its efforts towards accession in Schengen zone, while the EC sends good news regarding Croatia’s fiscal policy. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces’ modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO

standards. Failure to complete successfully the purchase of a modern fighter jet maintains a long period of an ineffective and weak Croatian Air Force.



CYPRUS: April 11th, Cyprus and Lebanon agreed to start negotiations on the exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves straddling the median line between their respective Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), it was announced. A statement said Foreign Minister Nicos Christodoulides and Energy Minister Yiorgos Lakkotrypis, held talks in Beirut with Lebanon's Foreign and Energy Ministers, Gebran Bassil and Nada Boustani, respectively. Among others, the four Ministers discussed issues concerning cooperation between Cyprus and Lebanon in the energy and energy security sectors in the broader region of the Eastern Mediterranean. Speaking after the meeting, Christodoulides said they reviewed bilateral relations and looked into ways to broaden and deepen them further and had an in-depth, results-oriented discussion on energy matters. The Cypriot Foreign Minister also reaffirmed support of the sovereign right to explore and exploit their natural resources, located in the respective maritime areas, in line with international law and in particular the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, to which both countries are signatories. Cyprus respects and supports the sovereign rights and the jurisdiction of all countries in the region, including Lebanon, within their maritime zones, on the basis of international law, he added. Christodoulides said they agreed on the need to use the momentum following energy developments in the region as a catalyst to enhance bilateral cooperation further. In this respect, he said, they agreed to immediately start

talks to conclude a bilateral framework agreement regarding the development of hydrocarbon reserves extending in both sides of the median line between their respective EEZs. According to the Minister, such an agreement would send a strong message of cooperation between the two countries and provide companies wishing to invest in the exploration of hydrocarbons in the area with the necessary legal security. The two countries signed an EEZ delineation agreement in 2007 but Lebanon has yet to ratify it. Christodoulides said the two sides agreed to start discussions to conclude an agreement for the protection of underwater cultural heritage from illegal excavations, within their jurisdiction. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- April 14th, the U.S Democratic Senator Robert Menendez that introduced a bill in the Senate that covers concerns of Cyprus has said "*We made it clear that we will no longer accept Turkey's aggression in the Eastern Mediterranean region.*" Speaking to Phileleftheros, Menendez, of New Jersey, who heads the Democratic Group in the powerful International Relations Committee, underlined his interest and support for Cyprus. He also stressed that the Americans "*have to do more – we need to increase the support that will allow Greece to fulfill its commitments under NATO*" and to lift the arms embargo against the Republic of Cyprus. In 1987 the U.S placed restrictions on the transfer of arms and defensive material to Cyprus in an attempt to encourage reunification efforts and to avoid an arms race on the island. Menendez and Republican Florida Senator Marco Rubio submitted the bill aimed at lifting the embargo on the sale of arms to Cyprus, U.S security relations with Cyprus and Greece, and enhancing energy security in the region this week. Menendez is expected to arrive on the island on

April, 15th, 2019 and although his visit is private, he is expected to meet President Nicos Anastasiades and Foreign Minister Nicos Christodoulides on April 16th, 2019. A diplomatic source told the Cyprus News Agency that Menendez's meeting with the President will discuss the issue of the lifting of the arms embargo, the Cyprus issue and Cyprus-U.S relations. "*Menendez is definitely very important for Cyprus*," the source said. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- April 14th, how cooperation between Cyprus, Greece, and Jordan has matured to such an extent that the three countries need to think about how to more forcefully promote it was highlighted by President Nicos Anastasiades after a trilateral meeting between the three countries. He was in Amman where the meeting was headed by himself, the Prime Minister of Greece Alexis Tsipras, and the King of Jordan Abdullah II. He added that the decision to establish a permanent secretariat in Nicosia for trilateral affairs will be honored to ensure their momentum. King Abdullah referred to the common challenges the three countries face in addition to their joint wish to collaborate in various areas, including those of security and energy. Tsipras said the three countries share the belief that it is important to develop peace and stability in the region. Anastasiades said the signing of a trilateral memorandum in the field of investment and the hosting on Sunday of the first Tripartite Business Forum are important developments and underline the potential to work together in the areas of trade, investment and tourism. He said all three countries were committed to finding political solutions in accordance with international law and with full respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of states, as well as

good neighborly relations. He also pointed out that the three countries share the common position that tackling the effects of the refugee crisis and migration flows requires solidarity and shared responsibility. He said Cyprus would work within the EU to make sure that Jordan is supported economically and politically to meet the challenges of the refugee crisis. Energy issues, regional developments, investments, EU-Jordan relations, and tourism were among the issues discussed. Cyprus and Jordan signed a Memorandum of Understanding in the area of Research, innovation and Technology and an Agreement on Cooperation in Fighting Terrorism, Organised Crime, Illicit Trafficking of Drugs, Psychotropic Substances and their Precursors, Illegal Migration, and Other Criminal Offences. The first Trilateral Summit among Cyprus, Greece and Jordan took place in Nicosia, in January 2018. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Cyprus works systematically in order to become a major part of the East Mediterranean energy hub. Cyprus is favored not only by its natural gas deposits, but also by its strategic position in the "heart" of East Mediterranean Sea and of course of being an EU member state. The strategy of multilateral cooperation seems to be fruitful. At the moment, Cyprus is engaged in three different trilateral formations which also include strong features of strategic cooperation and alliance; Cyprus – Egypt – Greece, Cyprus – Israel – Greece, and Cyprus – Jordan – Greece. The last two are highly improved due to the US engagement. At the moment Cyprus is promoting a fourth model of cooperation between Cyprus, Greece, and Lebanon. Cyprus seeks to negotiate and reach agreements with its neighboring

countries regarding their EEZ expanding cooperation, and maritime and energy security. Turkey is isolated from the energy game and it is a good question how it will react since it is certain that it will not accept “fait accompli” in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. It is assessed that Turkish provocative actions may be intensified either by Turkish gas and oil drills within the Cypriot EEZ, or by military actions. It is a fact that Cyprus has a significant deficit of military power which is (externally) balanced by regional cooperation. Furthermore Cyprus improved its bilateral relations with the U.S, strengthened its defense cooperation with France, UK, and lately develops its defense and security relations with Germany. The US administration appears ready to abolish the arms embargo against Cyprus allowing it to improve its military capabilities. Conduct of aeronautical exercises in cooperation with other countries (Israel, Egypt etc) sends various messages of defense capability, readiness, and determination. Although the UN Secretary General appears optimistic for a new round of talks between the two communities, it is assessed that talks could not be resumed earlier than summer 2019. President Anastasiades promotes the scenario of a “bizonal, bicomunal decentralized federation”; an idea which is in principle accepted by the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and enjoys support from the U.S. However, there are a lot of disputed issues in which both parts should compromise; the most important is considered the decision-making process. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



GREECE: April 13th, delegations from the Greek and Turkish Foreign Ministries met in Athens for the first time in 18 months as part of the effort by the two countries to keep lines of communication open and to de-escalate tensions. In a brief statement issued on Friday, the Greek Foreign Ministry said the two sides, led respectively by the Foreign Ministry’s General Secretary Dimitris Paraskevopoulos and Turkey’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sedat Onal, assessed the current situation in the Aegean and the international dimension of the Cyprus problem and discussed ways to improve bilateral relations. As expected, the possibility of reviving the confidence building measures agreed in 1988 by the respective Foreign Ministers at the time, Karolos Papoulias and Mesut Yilmaz, was not discussed as the matter falls under the purview of the countries’ Defense Ministries. A planned meeting between military delegations of both countries has yet to be convened and a date has yet to be set. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and his Albanian counterpart Edi Rama discussed bilateral relations on the sidelines of the 16+1 summit in Dubrovnik in Croatia between 16 European countries and China on Friday. Tsipras reportedly stressed the need for Albania to show respect for the rights of its Greek minority to secure its accession to the European Union. Diplomatic sources said the EU’s stance on the issue regarding property rights of ethnic Greeks in Albania was also touched upon. The meeting between the two men took place a few weeks after Rama submitted an amendment to a law on tourism development of Albania’s coasts which implied that properties of Greeks in the coastal area of Himara would be seized. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 13th, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras pledged to fight the “*extreme right and neoliberal ideology*,” represented by opposition New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία – ND) and its leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis, through the creation of a “*progressive alliance*” of center-left forces. Speaking at the first meeting of the so-called Electoral Committee, tasked with bringing about an alliance to tackle the rising tide of nationalism and neoliberalism, Tsipras said the movement “*welcomes all progressive citizens*.” He insisted that the alliance is not tailored just to elections this year, but to the future as well. “*We are in the right. But we are faced with a toxic coalition that wants to return to power and take the country back to the past*,” he said. Tsipras dismissed recent criticism by Mitsotakis that Coalition of Radical Left’s (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – SYRIZA) policies have destroyed Greece’s middle class, saying that previous Governments of ND and socialist Hellenic Socialist Movement (Πανελλήνιο Σοσιαλιστικό Κίνημα – PASOK) had crushed Greek society with cuts and taxes to the tune of 65 billion euro. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 13th, hundreds of aircraft take-offs in and dozens of battle simulations were included in the 12-day “Iniohos – 19” multinational exercise, which ended at the Andravida air-base in the Peloponnese on Friday. According to a statement issued by the Greek Air Force, participants were involved in attacking ground targets, countering enemy air defenses and in search-and-rescue operations in a combat environment. Pilots from Greece, the United States, Israel, Italy and the United Arab Emirates performed a total of 863 flights across the range of the Athens Flight Information Region (FIR). Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Canada, Croatia, and Romania

had observer role. An impressive feature of the exercise was the participation of the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II fighter jet known also as Joint Strike Fighter of the 13th Squadron (Gruppo), Italian Air Force. “Iniohos – 19” exercise was the first time that F-35 aircrafts were based on an airport of a country that is not part of the Joint Strike Fighter consortium. (www.ekathimerini.gr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political situation in the country is rapidly evolving and it is assessed that early parliamentary elections will be held on May 2019 (although the Prime Minister Tsipras insists that his Government will complete its mandate by October 2019). The country has entered in pre-electoral period due to EU elections scheduled for May 26th, 2019 and local elections scheduled also for May 26th, 2019 and June 2nd, 2019 (second round). A long pre-electoral period first of all may polarize society with unpredictable results and secondly it hurts national economy. The Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras focuses on approaching the center-left voters and weakening KINAL (former PASOK). In this context, SYRIZA inaugurated alignment with DIMAR, a wing of KINAL so far. Moreover, the ruling SYRIZA intensifies its efforts to gain the electoral body by announcing social care measures. Political turmoil emerged in a period where Greece faces several diplomatic, security, and economic challenges. Internal terrorism is considered as a major unresolved problem of national security undermining stability of the state. Although Greek Defense Minister announced mutual efforts with his Turkish counterpart for confidence-building measures the latter insists on a provocative rhetoric undermining de-escalation efforts

between the two countries. Turkish fighter jets keep violating Greek airspace and NAVTEXs reserves part of Greek continental shelf and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone. Security situation is of significant risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident.



KOSOVO: April 8th, Vetevendosje (Self-determination) MP, Arberie Nagavci said the party is preparing for protests against current Government and announced filing of a no confidence motion in Ramush Haradinaj's Cabinet. *"We will use all possible means against current Government. Politically-affiliated employments, nepotism, corruption, and continuous scandals of Government should be stopped. It is obvious the Government is not intending to stop wrongdoings,"* Nagavci said in an interview with T7 tv channel. She said that the Vetevendosje has already started campaigning Kosovo municipalities in preparation for a protest against Government. Nagavci also said that the Vetevendosje will initiate a no confidence motion in Haradinaj's Government. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- April 10th, Kosovo President Hashim Thaci and Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj are expected to meet their Serbian counterparts Aleksandar Vucic and Ana Brnabic, respectively, in Berlin on April 29th, 2019 at the invitation of France and Germany. Germany and France have decided to gather the Western Balkan leaders in a meeting in Berlin on that day. Thaci's Office has confirmed the invitation, which will be attended also by the EU Foreign Policy Chief, Federica Mogherini, and President of the European Commission, Jean Claude Juncker. During the meeting among other topics it will be discussed the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue which is facilitated by Mogherini.

According to the list of invitees, the hosts have decided to invite two leaders only from Kosovo and Serbia, whereas other countries will be represented by only one leader each. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- April 10th, Serbian List (Srpska Lista) has decided to take part in the mayoral elections in four Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo set to take place on May 19th, 2019. The decision was taken after representatives of this political entity met Serbia's top officials in Belgrade. Serbian List Head, Goran Rakic, addressing media after meeting Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic, said that they have decided to take part in elections in order to prevent Albanians or as he said *"Serbian puppets"* take the power in the north of Kosovo. He said that this decision has been taken after meeting Serbian President adding that they will not allow Albanians to take not a 0.1% of the control in northern part of Kosovo. *"We will not allow Pristina, or someone from international community to take our position. We have decided to participate in elections, so the Albanians would not be able to take the local Government in the North,"* Rakic said. The Mayors of Mitrovica North, Leposavic, Zubin Potok and Zvecan offered their resignations in protest over the Kosovo Government's decision to impose 100% tariffs on Serbian goods last November. Following their resignation Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci has ordered four Serb-dominated municipalities to hold new mayoral elections on May 19th, 2019. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Haradinaj's decision to impose 100% tax on Serbian and Bosnian products provoked major

problems in Kosovo affecting Governments stability. The international community namely the EU and the U.S put a lot of pressure on the Government to suspend taxes. The UN Secretary General confirmed that tax is the major problem regarding dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. A joint French – German initiative for restarting the dialogue is underway seeking to bring Kosovo and Serbia leaders on April 29th, 2019 at the same table for talks. Although Kosovo still enjoys the EU and U.S support none could avoid recognizing that the state acts beyond European standards violating international agreements such as CEFTA. On the other hand dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has reached a deadlock trapping mostly Pristina in an endless conflict. Only through normalization of relations with Serbia it will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. However, the state's authorities show a tendency of escalating tension with Serbia undermining a peaceful resolution of the case. By imposing 100% tariff on Serbian (and Bosnian products), establishing Kosovo army, executing Special Forces operation in northern Kosovo, arresting Serbs, and requesting special court for Serbs it is created a climate which does not facilitate dialogue and the establishment of confidence between the two parties. Thaci changed his position claiming that he is not in favor of border correction. It is estimated that internal politics affect political leaders' stance in Kosovo – Serbia issue. The question of border exchange or simply change continues to divide Kosovo political forces and population. It seems that the U.S (and the EU) has a leading role in the background pushing for the idea of territorial change (or exchange). The Western Balkan protests "wave" may hit Kosovo door too as Vetevendosje prepares

demonstrations against the Government. Mayoral elections in the North (of Serbian majority) scheduled for May 19th, 2019 offer fertile soil for provocations or violent incidents. Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish in the country rule of law and modern functional administration. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard. Establishment of Kosovo Army is also a factor of destabilization since there is always a possibility of Police or military engagement with Serbian forces. Kosovo seeks KSF to be operating all over the country pushing NATO towards such direction. The presence of Kosovo Army in the north it is assessed of high security risk which may lead in armed violence. One should take into consideration that the Serb President has already ordered all defense and security stakeholders to take all necessary measures for protecting Serbian population in Kosovo.



MOLDOVA: April 8th, Moldova President Igor Dodon and MP Zinaida Greceanii, Chairperson of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM), have spoken out for the development of a strategic partnership with the Russian Federation. They wrote about this on their Facebook pages on the occasion of the 27th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Moldova and Russia. "Our fraternal peoples have passed through many ordeals; we have had a common history, common problems, but also common victories. This year, we will celebrate the 75th anniversary of Moldova's liberation from the Nazis. And next year, together with Russia and other former Soviet republics we will mark the 75th anniversary of our common Victory in the

Great Patriotic War,” Igor Dodon wrote. Furthermore the President stated *“Today the Republic of Moldova is seeking to restore its strategic partnership with the Russian Federation.”* In her turn, Zinaida Greceanii expressed confidence that the relations between the two countries will be only strengthening – on the diplomatic level as well as on the level of economic, public and cultural ties. Dodon and Greceanii paid a 2 day working visit to Moscow. From the very beginning, the visit was kept in a strict secrecy; it was not reported by either the presidential press service or by the PSRM’s press service. Contrary to his habit, the President did not present details of the visit in the social networks. The Moldovan mass media wrote last week that the President and the PSRM Chairperson flew to Moscow to hold consultations on the formation of a governing coalition in Moldova. (www.infotag.md)

- April 10th, after declaring previously that no official invitation was received from the ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] block as a response to last ACUM invitation on social media, the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) took the lead again by officially inviting ACUM to discuss the formation of a parliamentary majority and the establishment of a new functional Government. According to the declarations of Ion Ceban made during a press conference, the socialists appointed a meeting with the members of ACUM bloc on April 11th, 2019 in the Moldovan Parliament. ACUM commented the PSRM invitation by highlighting the importance of discussions on the

legislative initiatives regarding the de-oligarchization of the state and declaring that no ruling coalition with the PSRM is needed. *“These discussions with the PSRM are possible on the transparent parliamentary platform, and there is a strong public commitment from the PSRM to dismantle the current mafia regime,”* mentioned the ACUM representatives, according to TV8. At the same time, ACUM repeatedly demanded the resumption of the Parliament’s sitting and the return to the legal and constitutional framework by sending an official note to Eduard Smirnov, the PSRM member *“who has been authorized to chair the deliberate interruption of Parliament’s sitting, for an indefinite period.”* Igor Dodon claimed that if no law is adopted in the newly-formed legislature by mid-June, and the Parliament Speaker is not elected, then at the end of the three months period he will be able to dissolve the Parliament. *“I cannot say that everything is lost, but I think that the probability of snap elections is not less than 60%. This is based on statements made by political parties so far,”* the Head of state said. On the other hand, one of the leaders of ACUM bloc, Andrei Nastase, declared in a social media post that the Socialists deliberately launched such negotiating conditions, which cannot be accepted even by the Democrats. *“Dodon will provoke snap elections based on the mixed voting system with the support of the Democrats ...,”* Nastase said. Political experts consider that no coalition between the PSRM and ACUM is possible anymore. (www.moldova.org)

- April 13th, the report on global economic outlook “World Economic Outlook” shows that the Moldovan economy will grow more slowly than the previous forecast when the fund expected an increase of 3.8%. According to the latest report

of the Fund, the annual inflation rate will be 3.3% and the current account deficit of Moldova will represent 7.7% of the GDP in 2019. The IMF expects the Moldovan economy to grow by 3.8% in 2020, and the same economic growth is projected by 2024. According to the economist Viorel Garbu, taking into consideration the annual economic growth in the last 20 years (4%), Moldova needs 14 years to reach the average level of development of economies in transition. (www.moldova.org)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT

Political deadlock continues in Moldova after parties failed to form a ruling majority so far. Although snap elections are ahead it is assessed that a coalition of PSRM and PDM has a lot of possibilities to be established. President Dodon benefits from political gap promoting a closer relation between his country and Russia. Moldova is between the Euro-Atlantic structures on the one hand and the Russian influence on the other. Political situation in the country is alarming and the EU has hardened its policy towards Moldova pushing for more reforms which will strengthen state's transparency, accountability, and democratic values. The current Government has walked into dangerous paths which support corruption and organized crime and deep and determined justice reforms are needed. The U.S, EU and IMF express their major concerns. The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Moldova; First of all Russia maintains military forces in Transnistrian ground and secondly it shares common borders with Ukraine which cannot go unnoticed by international stakeholders. The "Transnistria case" is always a "running sore" for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: April 10th,

Citizens' movement "Resist 97000" announced that there will be no protest in Podgorica on Saturday, and that they received assurances from the Head of the European Union (EU) delegation to Montenegro Aivo Orav that they will soon be invited to visit Brussels. As they said from the Movement after a meeting with the Head of the EU Delegation to Montenegro, there will be no mass protest in Podgorica this Saturday, but actions of civil disobedience will be organized on an almost daily base. "We have given solid evidence that this Government cannot be replaced through elections organized by this Government," said one of the leaders of the Movement "Resist 97000" Dzermal Perovic. According to Perovic, the Head of the EU Delegation to Montenegro was in particular interested in the situation surrounding the unification of the opposition and its cooperation with the Movement. "We are promised that the report from this meeting will be delivered to many addresses in Brussels, to twenty something people and to the highest level. I am coming out of the meeting with the conviction that we will soon receive an invitation to visit Brussels," Perovic said. Perovic has announced that actions of the Movement "Resist" will be organized almost every day, not only in Podgorica, but also in others cities. (www.rtcg.me)

- April 10th, NATO will donate to Montenegro a 3D radar system that will be installed on Bjelasica, it was said to Pobjeda from the headquarters of the Alliance. The Defense Ministry earlier sent request to NATO for giving away the radar whose value is about 20 million euro. "We can confirm the granting of the radar system to the Montenegrin authorities. This

important step is another powerful effort to ensure the defense and protection of the airspace of the country, together with the air police force of the allied airplanes from Greece and Italy,” said the Alliance official to Pobjeda. (www.rtcg.me)

- April 11th, NATO aircraft forces conducted their first intervention in Montenegrin airspace, intercepting a civilian aircraft flying in from Croatia, the Alliance announced. The NATO combat aircraft intercepted the civilian plane which had lost communication with air traffic control. A press release sent to the media in Podgorica said that the civilian aircraft was intercepted by two Italian Eurofighter jets flying out of the Gioia del Colle air base outside the port of Bari.



Italian Eurofighter jet escorting the civilian airliner

(Photo source: www.nato.int)

The intercept was ordered by the NATO Combined Air Operations Centre in Torrejon, Spain. “Two Eurofighter aircrafts which was on readiness to protect NATO airspace over Italy, Albania, and Montenegro under the auspices of the Alliance successfully intercepted the aircraft only a few minutes later,” the press release said and added that the loss of communication was a misunderstanding between civilian air traffic

control and the airliner crew. The airliner resumed contact with civilian air traffic controllers and continued to the Egyptian resort of Hurghada, the Alliance said. (www.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Massive protests against the President and high officials disturbed a period of “euphoria”, emerging state’s problems such as corruption, media freedom, and nepotism. Protest movement and opposition parties reached an agreement to join forces for toppling the Government ensuring fair and free elections. Of course, under these circumstances polarization of political situation could not be excluded undermining the EU process of the country. The EP assessment was positive praising the state’s efforts to implement major reforms, but on the other hand it underlined the problems of the rule of law, media freedom, corruption, money laundering, and organized crime. However, the EP stated that Montenegro under certain conditions may be able to access the EU by 2025. It is assessed that the EU and U.S strongly supports the President Djukanovic and the Montenegrin Government despite corruption accusations as being the only loyal partner committed to the Western orientation of the state. In other words the west is closing its eyes in lack of democratic values and rule of law due to geopolitical interests namely Russian influence. The Government promotes state’s political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. Although the Government takes concrete measures against corruption, organized crime, and money laundering it is assessed that a lot should be done to reach such a level of economic activity; mainly in the field of public administration, public sector corruption, and

money laundering. Imprisonment of opposition MPs is a worrying and alarming sign regarding rule of law and democratic values in the country. Montenegro shows activity within NATO trying to prove that it is an equal partner of the alliance with military capacity according to NATO standards. Moreover, it tries to modernize and strengthen its operational capabilities and in this context it raised its defense budget aiming at purchasing new assets such as armored vehicles. Establishment of a credible and effective system of Armed Forces reservists will strengthen defense capabilities of its Armed Forces.



NORTH MACEDONIA: April 10th, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights has pressed charges against the Head of the Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia, Suleiman Rexepi, at the Ministry of Interior for spreading hate speech. According to the Helsinki Committee, during the ceremony of placing the foundation for the new mosque in the village Arnakija, the Reis-ul-ulema Rexepi addressed the attendees with words that incited hatred, division, intolerance, and mocking of the Macedonian nation, and with it he has done the acts that were described in Articles 319 and 179 of the Criminal Code. *“You can see what sort of wild animal nation we live with because they do not have an identity and they never will have. Regardless that we always want to help them. You cannot help senseless people nor will they come to their senses. The Lazec location, some have heard of it and some have not, is a multi-ethnic village with Muslims, Orthodox Christians, there are Macedonians who I do not know how they call themselves, there are Albanians. There are two churches, but there is no mosque. They have caused hundreds of obstructions and they still*

have not come to their senses. I pray to God not to take my soul until I place the foundations of this mosque,” Rexepi said. The Government condemns every hate speech on the territory of North Macedonia regardless whether it was expressed on social media, at the stands, at congresses, at press conferences, the Government’s Spokesperson Mile Boshnjakovski said. (www.meta.mk)

- April 11th, Erwan Fouere, the former EU Ambassador to Skopje, said he is disappointed by European Commission’s (EC) compromises with the countries opposing the enlargement and warned that negotiations with North Macedonia represent a test of EU’s credibility, MIA reported from Brussels. Fouere believes the statement by Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn over *“the preparatory stage of negotiations”* is an unwelcome compromise with these countries, the same as the delay of the progress reports. *“It is disappointing that the EC has not observed the timeframes for the progress reports, which were supposed to be released this week. I believe this is a strategic mistake. The more you compromise the more you create ambiguity and play the game of those who oppose further enlargement,”* Fouere said. He expressed hope that the decision over the start of accession negotiations would be made this June. Fouere believes that the Special Prosecutor’s Office should continue to operate and voiced concern over the possible limitations in its work as a result of the compromises with the opposition. He said that even if there is no date for the start of accession negotiations in June, the Government and all major stakeholders should not give up on the reform efforts and no one should use that for political purposes. *“The country’s biggest weakness in the past was the lack of political consensus, especially in the field*

of foreign affairs. The incumbent authorities have demonstrated the importance of political consensus. I would understand the disappointment in the country if there was no decision in June, but this should not be interpreted as justification for delay of reforms,” Fouere underlined. (www.meta.mk, www.mia.mk)

- April 12th, World Bank’s Board of Directors will soon be adopting the Framework for Partnership 2019-2023 with which North Macedonia will be approved 420 million dollars, the Ministry of Finance announced. These are planned for projects in the areas of infrastructure, improvement of the business climate and investments in human capital. “We expect that in the next month, the World Bank will approve the strategy for cooperating with our country in the forthcoming period for which 420 million dollars will be provided for financing the building of local roads but also for finding ways for investments in the improvement of the human capital in our country. That will help to improve the citizens’ living standard,” the Minister of Finance, Dragan Tevdovski after the meeting with the World Bank’s Director for Western Balkans Linda Van Gelder, as part of the Spring Meetings with IMF and the World Bank. These projects also include the project for facilitation of trade and transport in the Western Balkans in the amount of 26 million euro. Also, this includes the project for building and rehabilitation of local roads in the amount of 70 million euro. The strategy encompasses the project for reforms in the agriculture for the development of distributive centers including projects for support of reforms in the areas of education and health and the projects for pension reforms. (www.meta.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Ratification of NATO accession protocol by the member states proceeds rapidly. However, there is concern for Turkey’s ratification due to the fact that it tried to connect the North Macedonia accession process to NATO with its demands over FETO persecution. Zaev and his Government focus on domestic affairs trying to benefit by the successful name agreement. Presidential candidates intensify their pre-electoral campaign strengthening their rhetoric. VMRO-DPMNE focuses on the recent name deal with Greece calling it unacceptable and shameful for the country. Polarization of state’s political life including low scale violent incidents could not be excluded during the pre-electoral campaign especially if VMRO-DPMNE realizes that it is not going to elect its own President. In case VMRO-DPMNE presidential candidate (Siljanovska) wins the elections Zaev will call for early parliamentary elections. The EU did not hesitate to send the message that coming presidential elections would be a stress test for state’s opening of accession negotiations. Zaev hopes that it will this June (2019) strengthening his political power. The fact is the country is more stable and more coherent watching its future in a more optimistic way. One could claim that North Macedonia is a country in “identity transition”; name deal with Greece oblige it to change institutional documents, while the law on the use of languages also obliges the state’s institutions to implement changes that are brand new for public services. Too many changes in too little time. The country should focus on its economy and major administrative reforms aiming at reaching the EU standards. The U.S and EU enjoy their success since F.Y.R.O.M moves in their paths far from Russia’s influence. Needless

to say that in a period where border questions are raised again in the Balkans F.Y.R.O.M achieved to strengthen its political stability and growth prospects.



ROMANIA: April 8th, activation of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (EU) is an option in case the Romanian Government passes the emergency ordinances the Justice Ministry drafted and submitted to the Magistrates Body CSM for review, EU Commissioner for Justice Vera Jourova hinted in Bucharest amid tense situation related to the rule of law in Romania. The European Commission (EC) has not yet discussed the activation of Article 7 in the case of Romania, but the way forward depends on what will happen in the following days, Jourova said on April 4th, 2019 in Bucharest, where she attended the “*European Day of Competition and Consumers*” conference, local Agerpres reported. Jourova was asked by the media what measures the European Commission would take if Romania's Government adopted the emergency ordinances amending the justice laws and criminal codes. “*I will not speculate on this issue. [...] To us, these two ordinances are steps in a very wrong direction, and we are waiting for reactions from the Government, hoping that the Government will get back on the normal path that was so positive and successful in the past ten years. I will not speculate about the next steps, but there will be a reaction,*” Jourova said. (www.romania-insider.com)

- April 11th, Romania's High Court (ICCJ) upheld the appeal of President Klaus Iohannis and definitively rejected the request of the Defense Ministry to suspend the decree renewing the mandate of the Chief of Defense Staff, General Nicolae Ciuca, Hotnews.ro reported.

Initially, on January 31st, 2019 the Bucharest Court of Appeal accepted the Defense Ministry's request and suspended the decree signed by Iohannis. The President appealed the decision at the Supreme Court and finally won the trial with the Defense Ministry. On December 28th, 2018 President Klaus Iohannis announced that he signed the decree extending the mandate of General Nicolae Ciuca as Head of the Defense Staff. At that time, Iohannis said that the proposal made by the Defense Minister Gabriel Les for appointing General Dumitru Scarlat as head of the Defense Staff was not approved. (www.romania-insider.com)

- April 12th, The United States will temporarily deploy a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to the Deveselu base in Romania this summer, when the Aegis Ashore Ballistic Missile Defense system will undergo a long-planned update. “*The THAAD unit will be under NATO operational control and the full political control of the North Atlantic Council. It will only remain operational until the Aegis Ashore Romania system is back online. The update and deployment are expected to last several weeks,*” NATO said in a press release. NATO also said that the update scheduled to take place this summer will not provide any offensive capability to the Aegis Ashore missile defense system at Deveselu. “*In accordance with NATO's Ballistic Missile Defense system, the THAAD unit will be focused on potential threats from outside the Euro-Atlantic area. Aegis Ashore Romania is purely a defensive system,*” the same press release reads. The Aegis Ashore system in Romania is a component of the NATO missile defense system, under the operational control of Allied military authorities. According to the Romanian Ministry of Defense, the THAAD defensive system that

will be temporarily deployed to Romania will have the same goal as the Aegis Ashore system, i.e. to defend NATO's population, forces and territory in Europe against ballistic missile threats originating from outside the Euro-Atlantic space. (www.romania-insider.com)



THAAD launcher launches a missile
(Photo source: www.lockheedmartin.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political struggle between the President Klaus Iohannis and Government has been transformed into an “open battle” leading the political functionality in a deadlock. Iohannis announced a referendum on justice issue together with the European elections on May 26th, 2019. It is another initiative which pushes further the Government over its decisions on manipulating justice system. Iohannis strongly opposes in Government's plans to intervene in judicial system while there are specific signs that the Government works towards controlling state's justice. Under these circumstances, it is assessed that political climate will be fully polarized affecting Romania's political stability. Romania took over the Presidency of the Council of EU

facing criticism and non-confidence by the EU member states' high officials. The state looks divided in major institutional issues such as national defense, justice, and security. In this context, one should add the direct European Parliament warning for activating article 7 of the EU Treaty (suspending certain rights of an EU member state when a country is considered at risk of breaching the EU's core values). The state faces political abnormality in many levels which at the moment could be resolved only by early parliamentary elections. The Prime Minister's announcement of transferring Romanian Embassy in Israel from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem harmed the state's relations with Arab world increasing security risk in the country. It should be noticed that foreign policy is a very complex field with sensitive balances. In this context, it is assessed that Dancila's announcement was on wrong time and without further analysis. In other words it is not very clear how such an initiative (transfer of the Embassy) could benefit the state's interests. Romania according to NATO strategic and operational planning has become an advanced base close to Russia. Its strategic importance and role has been upgraded and high level NATO exercises take place in its territory. Consequently, Russia reacts mainly against the NATO military base in Deveselu where anti-missile defense systems have been deployed. Temporarily deployment of THAAD system, a modern high-capability system, may raise tension in the region.



SERBIA: April 9th, Serbia's top military officials met in Belgrade for a session of the Collegium of the Minister of Defense and the Chief of the General Staff. According to announcements before the meeting, they discussed security situation in the country and its

surroundings. The Serbian Army will not allow any attempt at a coup and warned that anyone announcing and demanding a coup should be held responsible in line with the law, a statement issued after the meeting said. *“The Serbian Army’s message to everyone, in the country and abroad, is that it is not and will not be the means for overthrowing the legal and legitimate authorities in the Republic of Serbia and for violently destroying the constitutional order,”* the statement said. It added that the Army is equipped and ready to carry out every order of its Supreme Commander (Serbia’s President) and to preserve peace and stability. The statement further points out that the security challenges caused by Pristina’s taxes on goods from central Serbia, *“and the formation of a paramilitary force”* in Kosovo and Metohija have resulted in the Serbian Army closely monitoring any developments that may cause unrest among the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija, and once again reminded KFOR and the international community as a whole that they are in above all responsible for peace and security of everyone who lives in Kosovo. The Ministry of Defense and the Army of Serbia assessed that the material status of their members has been improved, and they thanked the Supreme Commander for the persistent and dedicated work to further improve the material position of all members of the Army and the Ministry, as well as to accelerate the modernization and strengthening of the Serbian Army. (www.b92.net)

- April 12th, *“You have been destroying and undermining for long enough, there has been enough pillaging, it is time for someone to build and work for the future of Serbia,”* President Aleksandar Vucic said during a large rally in Novi Sad late on Thursday, addressing the opposition. He wondered *“why there is so much*

bile and hatred among some people who say they are involved in politics, but who want to take power above all by using violent means.” Vucic pointed out that because of that, *“we have watched them carry gallows, storm (public broadcaster) RTS with chainsaws, and before that assault Pink TV journalists in their workplace - nobody said sorry and then they attacked women in the City Hall who wanted just to get out, threatened to slap them.”* Vucic added that those who advocate coming to power by force are mistaken in one thing *“They thought that when they surround someone they would get scared and move aside.”* *“I have another message for them. I have said it countless times that I will not talk to fascist leader Obradovic and the two thieves, Djilas and Jeremic - but the obligation of everyone else in the Serbian Parliament is to talk to those who are Deputies. It is important that there is dialogue, not violence. Talks, not blackmail, and no chainsaws,”* he said. That is, he stressed, a message of strength, not of weakness. Vucic also pointed out that violence and fascism never have and never will pass in Serbia, and that the rally in Novi Sad - that reports said had gathered around 40,000 people - was *“proof of the citizens’ commitment, of strength, security and responsibility to stand against this pestilence together.”* Vucic also had a message for the international community not to continue to put pressure on Serbia, adding that he would not give up on his position that before the dialogue can continue, Pristina must first revoke the taxes imposed on goods from central Serbia. *“Do not call Serbia, abolish taxes and we will come on our own,”* Vucic said. (www.b92.net)

- April 13th, protesters gathered in Belgrade for what was announced as *“the largest protest since the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) led by*

President Aleksandar Vucic came to power,” with thousands of people coming from across Serbia to join them, N1 reported. The rally named “*All as one – 1 in 5 million*” was announced a month ago after the organizers of four-month-long anti-regime demonstration and Serbia’s opposition gave a month-long deadline to Vucic and Government to step down or face the big protest. On Saturday, the organizers made demands which, if met, would lead to a dialogue with the authorities which protesters said they were ready for. They included the forming of joint regime and opposition commissions for defining fair and free election rules, electing new heads of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) and new technical and editorial teams at state RTS and RTV televisions. At the end of the rally which went on without a single incident, organizers gave a seven-day deadline to the authorities to respond to the demands, or they would continue the protests next Saturday “*with even more people taking part.*” Serbia’s Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic responded to the demands by saying he would not like to offend anyone, but “*these requests are ridiculous.*” Vucic and his coalition parties have been accusing the opposition of an attempt to violently come to power despite that no severe violence happened in four months, except on March 16th, 2019 when the opposition and people stormed the state RTS building demanding a few minute live appearances during the prime time news. The incidents followed the Special Police Unit intervention. The gathering started outside the Parliament building where a big stage was installed which from public figures and opposition leaders addressed the crowd. Inside the building, there were at least a hundred Police Officers as protection, together with some Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka -

SNS) MPs. Following the speeches, the protesters walked through the city’s centre and came back to the stage outside the Parliament where some opposition leaders addressed them. The Head of the nationalist Dveri Movement Bosko Obradovic thanked people for coming and said “*no surrender, all the way to victory. You are normal Serbia, they are abnormal Serbia.*” Serbia’s former Prime Minister Zoran Zivkovic estimated that 35,000 people gathered in Belgrade “*the largest anti-government rally in the capital since October 5th, 2000,*” when hundreds of thousands of protesters turned out, and it resulted in dethroning of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. On Friday, SNS sent its members to take over local institutions in several places across the country, including two opposition-controlled municipalities, over what they said was opposition violence. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Serbia has entered in a period of fragile political stability due to citizens’ reactions against governmental practices regarding human rights, media freedom, and elections transparency. People protest in the streets, while opposition starts to take action. Another huge protest was organized on April 13th, 2019 demanding Vucic resignation and early elections. Opposition harden its action, while ruling SNS and President Vucic dramatize situation by using state officials for guarding municipal buildings. In the meanwhile Serbian military leadership expressed its loyalty to Vucic and its readiness to engage if it is necessary in protection of the legally elected state’s leadership. A provocation or an accident is enough for a violent outbreak in the country. June 2019 is a possible time for early elections, but it would be determined by developments on

Belgrade – Pristina dialogue progress and especially by Kosovo's decision to remove 100% taxes on Serbian products. France – Germany initiative for restarting Serbia – Kosovo dialogue may change internal political agenda. Serbia has followed so far a successful diplomatic strategy regarding Kosovo achieving to be appeared in the international community as a reasonable voice seeking a compromise resolution via dialogue. On the other hand Serbia strengthens its relations with Russia (and China) seeking stronger support regarding Kosovo case. Security situation is complex and uncertain since Serbia apart from political and diplomatic means has engaged its military and security forces. The Armed Forces are in high readiness alert but Vucic tried to de-escalate situation by stating that war is not a possible solution. However, none could predict Serbia's reaction in a possible accidental or pre-planned (provocation included) incident in Northern Kosovo against local Serbs. One should have in mind that top state officials have said in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. Municipal elections in Kosovo Serb dominated north may provoke a violent outbreak engaging Kosovo Police force and KSF with unprecedented repercussions. At the moment, Serbia looks like acting in accordance with the international law aiming at reducing tension in the region. In other words state's leadership is acting in a "reasonable" and "wise" way avoiding mistakes of the past which have isolated Serbia from the international community. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its armed forces.



SLOVENIA: April 9th, reports that Croatia tried to prevent Slovenian media from

reporting on Croatia's intelligence activities in Slovenia prompted strong reactions from senior officials, with Prime Minister Marjan Sarec calling a session of the National Security Council and the Foreign Ministry summoning Croatian Ambassador Boris Grigic for talks. It was POP TV which reported on Monday that the Croatian Government had used an intermediary to try to prevent the private broadcaster's news portal from revealing last week that the Croatian Intelligence Agency SOA was behind the tapping of the phone calls between Slovenia's Judge and Agent regarding the border arbitration in July 2015. The recorded conversations were leaked the same month only to have Croatia declare the border arbitration process "irrevocably compromised." "One of the most influential Croatian media houses and a good friend of numerous Croatian politicians tried to prevent or even bribe a director of a foreign multinational to put pressure on POP TV," POP TV said. The reports prompted Prime Minister Marjan Sarec to call a session of the National Security Council after he had expressed concern over the news, saying that "these are serious accusations, which call for appropriate explanations." The session was called by Sarec and also featured, in addition to key Ministers, President Borut Pahor, Parliamentary Speaker Dejan Zidan, and MP Franc Breznik of the largest opposition party, the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska demokratska stranka - SDS). Also attending were Damir Crncec, the State Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office in charge of national security, and Rajko Kozmelj, the Director of the National Intelligence and Security Agency SOVA. The Government Communication Office said that the Council had condemned any attempts at influencing freedom of the Slovenian media. It said it expected from Croatia to refrain in the

future from acts which were in opposition with the EU values, the rule of law and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Foreign Minister Miro Cerar said that the Ministry had already summoned the Croatian Ambassador to Slovenia Boris Grigic for talks. Cerar will be meeting on Wednesday Slovenian Ambassador to Croatia Smiljana Knez, who has also been summoned to Ljubljana. Cerar said that foreign countries' interference and pressure on the Slovenia media were unacceptable, declaring that Slovenia would be unyielding in defense of the freedom of speech. According to POP TV, the high-ranking media official who had tried to put pressure on the broadcaster was Ivan Tolj, a 51-year-old Franciscan priest, who is a Croatian representative of the Styria Media Group. The General Police Administration meanwhile confirmed for the STA that it is conducting a pre-trial investigation of a suspected criminal act in relation to the wiretapping scandal and the alleged attempts by the Croatian Government to influence the Slovenian media. POP TV said that two of its journalists had been interviewed today by Police Officers. According to the broadcaster, Police is investigating the suspicion of criminal acts of wiretapping of journalists and corruption. SOA denied the reporting by POP TV labeling it as *"untruthful and a tendentious construct,"* and as a continuation of the media campaign in Bosnia-Herzegovina designed to smear SOA and Croatia. The Croatian Government also rejected *"fully and most resolutely"* all reports on attempts on any influence on the Slovenian media. According to unofficial information, the Slovenian Government will continue with all activities aimed at implementing the decision of the border arbitration tribunal *"regardless of the new facts."* (www.sta.si, www.sloveniatimes.com)

- April 11th, Prime Minister Marjan Sarec met his Chinese counterpart Li Keqiang on the sidelines of the summit of the 16 Central and East European countries and China. The talks focused on economic cooperation. According to a press release from the Government Communication Office, Sarec and Li *"noted the traditionally good relations between the two countries, which are being deepened still in many areas."* Sarec also underscored that it is important to further enhance bilateral economic cooperation, and expressed satisfaction at continued increase in bilateral merchandise trade. He was quoted as saying that it was important for Slovenia as an export economy that the "16+1 initiative" opened doors to Slovenian companies. As potential areas of cooperation he listed the automotive industry, pharmaceutical industry, high technologies, civil aviation and science. Sarec also invited his Chinese counterpart to visit Slovenia. The "16+1 initiative" summit came only days after the EU and China adopted a joint statement at a summit in Brussels paving the way to a reciprocity-based partnership. China would like for the "16+1 initiative" to be part of its New Silk Road global infrastructure project. The summit brought together almost 1,000 participants, around a third from China, including nine Slovenian companies, among them the port operator Luka Koper. (www.sta.si, www.sloveniatimes.com)

- April 12th, Brigadier General Miha Skerbinc has filed an objection to his dismissal as the Army's Force Commander over late night shooting at the Pocek training area near to the Postojna city. The Soldiers' Trade Union (SVS), which represents Skerbinc, claimed he acted lawfully demanding an apology from the Defense Minister, Karl Erjavec. SVS sent a letter to the Prime Minister Marjan Sarac demanding the public apology of

Erjavec to the Slovenian Armed Forces personnel and especially to the dismissed Commander of the Army Force “for statements about a possible shooting on Postojna.” “The Slovenian Armed Forces are not aggressive and do not shoot at Slovenian cities,” the President of SVS Guido Novak said adding that “It is unacceptable for the Union of Slovenian Armed Forces that the Defense Minister is wrong regarding the legitimate functioning of the Force Commander ridiculing all members of the Slovenian Armed Forces.” SVS is convinced that removal of Skerbinc is illegal because, according to Novak “there was no legal basis for his replacement.” The Union claimed that the reason for the dismissal of the Slovenian Armed Forces, Force Commander, was a faulty decision. Skerbinc complied with all the regulations and guidelines of the General Staff during the night shooting. (www.sta.si, www.vecer.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. Although the Government is a minority one seeking compromise for survival, Sarec has been proved of being flexible in Slovenia's politics so far achieving to balance adequately between different political trends. Left party is the key factor for Government's stability and viability by supporting it in the Parliament. Without the Left's support the Government would be toppled and early elections should be called. At the moment none of the ruling coalition parties wish snap elections. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc). Tension has been raised again regarding the border dispute with Croatia over Piran Bay due to Croatia's Police violation of Slovenia's territorial waters by boats.

It is assessed that such low level skirmishes will continue without major incidents. Tension has been reinforced by the revealed wiretapping scandal regarding the arbitration process between Croatia – Slovenia. Engagement of Croatian Intelligence Service operating in another country (Slovenia) is a serious accusation undermining their diplomatic relations. Slovenia implies that such actions may affect its decision regarding Croatia's membership candidacy in Schengen Zone. Slovenia, as it is already known, has filed a lawsuit against Croatia over its refusal to implement the border arbitration. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The annual report on the Armed Forces operational readiness released by the Armed Forces Chief of Staff is disappointing since it assessed that the Armed Forces have limited operational capabilities in war time namely they cannot accomplish their mission. The med-term 2018 – 2023 defense program it could improve situation, but under current political situation it is doubtful if it will be implemented to the end. More attention should be paid on navy (or coast patrol) assets given the open dispute with Croatia on Piran Bay and Slovenia's weak surveillance and protection capabilities.



TURKEY: April 9th, the leaders of the U.S Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees warned Turkey that it risked tough sanctions if it pursued plans to purchase Russian S-400 missile defense systems, and they threatened further legislative action. “By the end of the year, Turkey will have either F-35 advanced fighter aircraft on its soil or a Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile defense system. It will not have both,” Republican Senators Jim Risch

and Jim Inhofe, and Democratic Senators Bob Menendez and Jack Reed said in a New York Times opinion column. Risch is chairman of Foreign Relations and Menendez is ranking Democrat. Inhofe chairs Armed Services, where Reed is ranking Democrat. As Committee leaders, the Senators have powers such as placing “holds” on major foreign weapons sales and major roles in writing legislation, which could include punishing Turkey if it goes ahead with the S-400 deal. The Senators said Turkey would be sanctioned, as required under U.S. law, if it goes ahead with the S-400 purchase. *“Sanctions will hit Turkey’s economy hard - rattling international markets, scaring away foreign direct investment and crippling Turkey’s aerospace and defense industry,”* they said. The United States and fellow NATO member Turkey have been at loggerheads over Ankara’s decision to purchase the S-400s, which are not compatible with NATO systems. Washington also says Turkey’s purchase of the S-400s would compromise the security of F-35 fighter jets, which are built by Lockheed Martin Corp and use stealth technology. (www.reuters.com)

- April 10th, the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) seeks to redo the March 31st, 2019 elections in Istanbul after the provisional results saw countless irregularities and possible intentional errors in the counting system. *“We will use our right to extraordinary objection. There are numerous events and situations that could affect the election’s results. We will demand a repeat of the election,”* AKP Deputy Chairman Ali İhsan Yavuz, who is responsible for election affairs, said yesterday in a press briefing. Referring to the decision by the Supreme Election Council (YSK), Yavuz noted that the YSK’s decision is

incomprehensible in light of the documented presence of numerous irregularities and errors. The call to redo the election also received support from the AK Party’s ally in the elections, the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi - MHP). MHP Chairman Devlet Bahçeli noted yesterday that such claims and disorder in Istanbul’s elections should be resolved through democracy. In the upcoming period, after the three-day period, where the political parties can file objections against the decision of the provincial election boards to the YSK, finalized on April 10th, 2019 the Council will have three days to evaluate the objections and decide on April 13th, 2019. Provisional results indicate main opposition Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi - CHP) candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu is leading in the mayoral race in the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality against AKP candidate Binali Yıldırım, who was deemed the favorite by many in the race ahead of the elections, by a small margin of about 22,000 votes. There were 10,570,939 eligible voters in Istanbul, and voter turnout was 83.88%. However, out of nearly 9 million voters, 319,540 votes were labeled invalid, mainly in districts considered AKP strongholds. As a result, the AKP previously applied for the assessment of invalid votes and for the recount of votes in a certain district due to detected discrepancies and irregularities in data registered to the YSK. Following the results, the difference between the two mayoral candidates was reduced from 22,000 to 15,000. Addressing reporters, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu also said that possible evidence of cheating and misconduct has surfaced, referring to the irregularities in the district of Büyükçekmece. He also added that a do-over election in Istanbul is necessary to clear up any suspicions. Commenting on the remarks by AKP officials, İmamoğlu

expressed his faith in the YSK as an authority. He also called for the YSK to finalize its decision by Sunday evening, saying that this long process only harms the Istanbul Municipality. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan raised concerns about “*organized interference*” in the Istanbul elections earlier Monday. “*We, as a political party, have detected organized crime and some organized activities,*” Erdogan told reporters ahead of his departure from Istanbul for Moscow. Yavuz also said that they would file a criminal complaint as part of their legal efforts to address such irregularities in Buyukcekmece. (www.dailysabah.com)

- April 11th, an operation east of the Euphrates is only a matter of time, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan hinted, underlining that the terrorists of the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the People's Protection Units (YPG), will get what they deserve via the offensive. “*We showed those who wanted to bring us to heel using the terror corridor that it is not possible. We will give new messages to those who still insist on the same scenario in a short time,*” Erdogan said, speaking at the opening ceremony of the new building of the Golbası Special Operations Headquarters, which was bombed during the July 15th, 2016 coup attempt that killed 251 people. Erdogan also expressed Turkey's determination about its war on terror, saying “*Those who want to set our nation against each other did everything they can. Even though they plotted a coup attempt, they could not get the result.*” Ankara reiterates that it will not allow PKK-affiliated groups to establish a terrorist corridor on its southern border that could threaten Turkey's border security and peace. Turkey carried out two cross-border operations west of the Euphrates River, Operation “Euphrates Shield” launched in August 2016 and Operation

“Olive Branch” in January 2018, to YPG and DAESH, from its borders. While the country liberated northwestern territories from DAESH, it also prevented the YPG from establishing a de facto autonomous region in Syria connecting the northwestern Afrin canton to the Kobani and Jazeera cantons in the northeast, which Ankara describes as a “*terror corridor*” posing a grave security threat to its national security. This time, Turkey aims to drain the terror swamp near its border, protect Syria's territorial integrity and ensure political stability with a possible operation east of the Euphrates River to eliminate YPG activity. Turkey had long signaled a possible operation in areas held by the YPG east of the Euphrates. However, the Government decided to postpone the operation for a while after U.S. President Donald Trump decided that Washington, the main backer of the YPG, would withdraw its troops from Syria. While Washington continues preparing for withdrawal despite dissident voices, it has been holding talks with Ankara and discussing a plan to form a safe zone. Turkey has stressed that the zone must be free of YPG militants to ensure its border security and enable the return of Syrian refugees. The close U.S. partnership with the YPG since the former Obama administration has always been a sticking point in Washington-Ankara relations. In the meanwhile, Turkey sent more Special Forces units to reinforce its southern provinces near the country's border with Syria. A military convoy carrying commandos and armored personnel arrived in Hatay province as part of Turkey's recent military reinforcements. (www.dailysabah.com, www.yenisafak.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Local elections were held on March 31st, 2019 in Turkey. CHP candidate Imamoglu's victory in Istanbul tends to become a "thorn in the flesh" of AKP and President Erdogan. Being the largest Turkish city and the most significant economic and commercial center has special importance for Erdogan's political reign. That is why AKP insists so much on recounting the votes and pushes for redo of the election. Although AKP is the winner of the local elections in mathematic terms, by losing the three big cities (Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir) one could say that the result has rather a psychological impact to ruling AKP than tangible repercussions. However, it seems that local elections are not the main Erdogan's problem. Deterioration of Turkish – U.S relations is a major concern for Turkey threatening its political and economic stability. Purchase of Russian air-defense system S-400 is unacceptable for the U.S administration threatening directly Turkey with sanctions. Taking into consideration that Turkey is a pivotal country enjoying geopolitical importance and having one of the largest militaries (the 2nd within NATO) it is hard to believe that the U.S seek a full rift with its NATO ally. On the contrary, there are still open official and unofficial channels of communication working on a mutual accept it compromise. The U.S needs Turkey and the opposite. It looks like Erdogan and his rhetoric is the problem and an "orange revolution" or a "Turkish spring" could not be excluded in the future. Economic recession does not help the Turkish President to strengthen his position internally undermining his political power. Turkey is heading in a major economic crisis. It seems that economy is the major Turkish problem which may be emerged as the "Achilles' heel" for Turkish President Erdogan and his political long reign. It cannot be excluded dramatic developments regarding Turkish

economy right after the local elections. Besides Turkish society looks like being fed up with autocratic practices of Erdogan and this was a key point during last local elections. Turkey faces several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs and journalists are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Although Turkey maintains its strategic goal of entering the EU, the EU sends strong messages of suspending the EU – Turkey accession talks. Turkish Armed Forces declares its readiness to intervene militarily in Syria, eastern of Euphrates river but the U.S does not give the "green light" aiming at protecting Syrian Kurds and YPG. Turkey is reinforcing its troops in the Turkish – Syrian borders waiting for the "green light" for establishing a safe zone in Syria but it is doubtful if it will ever get it. There are thoughts of unilateral action within Syria but such a decision may bring Turkish troops against the U.S forces; an unprecedented scenario. The state demonstrates decisively its leading role in the wider region of the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and East Mediterranean implementing its doctrine for a diligent capability development effort to be able to fight two multi-front, inter-state armed conflicts while being able to simultaneously carry on large-scale counterterrorism operations at home and beyond borders. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Regarding Turkish interests in East Mediterranean Sea, Turkey looks like has been isolated from the energy activities in the region. Cyprus, Egypt Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority have established an energy coalition promoting their


interests and isolating Turkey. Turkey has proved so far its decisiveness in protecting its interests and it assessed that it will not give up its role in the “energy game” in Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Turkey is ready to start oil and gas drills within the Cypriot EEZ escalating tension which could not exclude an accidental or pre-planned “hot incident.”


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NOTE

 Stable situation. No security risk

 Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored

 Major concerns over stability and security. significant security risk in specific regions

 Imminent major incidents regarding stability and security. High security risk

 Evolving or ongoing crisis or violent/armed conflict