



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

“SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE AT A GLANCE” (ISSN: 2654-0304) 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, Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, 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: March 2nd, Albanian President Ilir Meta made his opening speech at a rally against the socialist majority, saying he kneels only before the country's flag and its people. He launched attacks on the majority in power and the international representatives calling them “*putschists*” that seek to destroy the Constitution's sovereignty. *“This should be well heard by local ‘putschists’ and some international mafia organizations seeking to destroy your sovereignty and Constitution. Article two of the Constitution that you voted in the referendum on November 22nd, 1998 says that sovereignty in the republic of Albania belongs only to the people,”* stated Meta among other things. Meta signed a decree against the law that stripped him of the power to swear in the new constitutional Judges, and warned about signing the decree for dissolving the Parliament. He said he would do so but at a later date. (www.top-channel.tv)

- March 2nd, European Commission reaffirmed today its positive recommendation to open EU accession talks with Albania. The Commission has drafted an interim report, which is expected to serve as a new basis for the evaluation of member states, which likely will be discussed at a European Council meeting later this month, where the new methodology introduced last month will be approved. *“In light of the significant progress achieved, and the fulfillment of the conditions unanimously agreed by the Council, in June 2018, the Commission recommended in its 2019 Enlargement Package that the Council open accession negotiations with Albania. Overall Albania has increased its efforts and has had tangible and sustainable results in the key areas identified in the June 2018 Council Conclusions.*

Consequently, the basis of the Commission's recommendation for 2019 to open accession negotiations with Albania stands,” the report states. (www.top-channel.tv)

- March 5th, a day after the European Commission backed the opening of accession negotiations between the EU and Albania, President Ilir Meta has sent a strong letter of concern to the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, heralding a deepening of the political crisis in the country. The President's letter seen by Top Channel, begins with the belief that the Commission's recommendation will be supported by member states, even though he disagrees with the findings of the European Commission. *“I cannot hide my regret about photographing the facts regarding the establishing the Albanian Constitutional Court. There is without doubt a dispute over the procedure for appointing Constitutional Judges, but this comes from a distorted interpretation by the ruling majority with the aim of capturing the country's Constitutional Court and adding this Sui Generis crisis to Albania,”* the letter states. (www.top-channel.tv)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Albanian political, institutional and constitutional crisis continues raising concerns over state's capacities. President, Ilir Meta has become a harsh critic of the Edi Rama's Government. He did not hesitate to send a letter to the EU Commissioner for the Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi claiming that the country does not actually deserve a positive recommendation for opening the accession negotiations with the EU. Moreover, the President organized a public protest against the Government where he

delivered the opening speech. It is rather strange and awkward to see the President of a republic to act as the leader of opposition. Although the President has limited powers, it is the state's symbol of unity and democracy. It seems that Meta has undertaken the role of opposition leader. On the other hand, Rama and his Government have a significant responsibility that the country is still without an independent and functional justice system and is incompetent to provide the basic constitutional rights to its citizens. They are not able to address the state's top Courts, the Constitutional and High Court. Apart from that there are serious concerns over judicial independence in the country since the "vetting process" has become more or less a measure of pressure against judges. Corruption, smuggling (weapons, drugs, people etc), money laundering and link between organized crime and politics are dominating in the country and the state's authorities are not very keen on fighting them. Albania seeks to get a positive recommendation in 2020 (March or May 2020) and the messages from Brussels are positive so far. However, it should work intensively to restore a transparent and credible justice system, to establish rule of law and to strengthen fight against corruption and organized crime.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

March 4th, Bosnia has the right to defend and protect itself and if other countries deploy Armies to their borders, there is no reason why Bosnia would not do the same, Defense Minister Fahrudin Radoncic said Wednesday, following Croatia's announcement that they might deploy the Army to control the migrant situation. "If other countries deploy their Armies along the

borders, I see no serious reason why Bosnia would not do the same. We can use the Army for logistics needs but the key is that the Presidency adopts a united decision that Bosnia should deploy its Armed Forces in a worst-case scenario," Radoncic said. Bosnia's Presidency consists of three members, coming from the three constituent peoples – Bosniaks (Muslim Bosnians), Serbs and Croats. The Serb Presidency member Milorad Dodik's position on this issue was that Bosnia's Armed Forces cannot be deployed to the border, but Radoncic sees things differently "In the end, we might be forced to do this. I think we have a legitimate right to use all our potentials in defending our way of life, our sovereignty and our citizens." Radoncic reiterated that Bosnia does not have the capacity to accommodate 10,000 migrants daily, the number estimated by international experts following the Turkish announcement that they would open their borders and let migrants continue their journey towards the EU. Radoncic concluded that Bosnia is barely coping with the migrants already staying in the country. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 4th, although Russia used to support constructive efforts in the Balkans, now it has the goal to destabilize the region and use it strategically as a bargaining chip in international relations, the main Bosniak (Muslim Bosnian) party in the country said following a statement by Russia's Foreign Affairs Ministry which expressed support on Wednesday for removing foreign Judges from Bosnia's Constitutional Court. MPs from the strongest Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat parties in the country have on recently submitted a proposal for a law that would remove foreign Judges from the country's Constitutional Court. According to Bosnian Serb

leader Milorad Dodik, the adoption of the law is a condition for ending the latest political crisis that emerged in Bosnia following a Constitutional Court ruling. According to Russia's Foreign Affairs Ministry, Bosnia's peoples should resolve their issues on their own without any foreign interference. The proposed changes of the Constitutional Court are *"fully in accordance with the Dayton Agreement,"* the Ministry said. *"We count on all leading political forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina to contribute to this legislative initiative which is focused on strengthening the integrity and the democratic potential of Bosnia and Herzegovina,"* it said. The Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA) criticized Russia for, *"on the one hand, declaring that they are opposed to foreign interference in Bosnia's internal issues, while at the same time they took a stance on ongoing issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, continuously supporting anti-Dayton (Agreement) requests and ultimatums coming from the RS entity."* Such a stance has been an obstacle to finding a compromise in Bosnia as it encourages Milorad Dodik to continue his activities, the party said. *"The Russian Federation has for decades constructively contributed through the Security Council and the Peace Implementation Council, supporting the establishment and the work of the Hague tribunal and the use of the Bonn powers, but that policy has obviously changed and now its goal is to destabilize Bosnia and the region in order to make trades in geopolitical relations,"* it said. *"Considering that Russia's interference is open and direct, this represents a clear message to our partners, most of all to Washington but also to Brussels, that they must not allow Moscow to damage the strategic interests of the region - stability and progress toward NATO and the EU -*

through local anti-European and anti-NATO political parties," the party concluded. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 5th, Bosnian Minister of Security, Fahrudin Radoncic spoke about the redeployment of local Police forces, the need for the EU to respond vigorously, and about the need for payments from municipalities to recruit missing Border Police officers. Radoncic pointed out that all should be honest with citizens saying that earlier, they have not passed any new laws, they have not employed any Border Police officers, and 1,200 are missing. *"There are no new people in the Border Police, in the Foreign Service, in the Intelligence Service; this sector has been completely neglected. As a society, we have dealt with humanitarian aspects in such a way that the international community has not been held accountable to BiH to financially assist our most vulnerable cantons such as the Una-Sana Canton. We are now in the situation of saving what can be saved,"* Radoncic said to BHT, Avaz news portal reports. A total of 30,000 migrants entered Bosnia-Herzegovina last year, a huge increase over 2017, when that number was 750, the UN Refugee Agency stated. About 7,000 asylum seekers, migrants and refugees remain in BiH. Radoncic told Euronews *"the EU has to understand in order to protect their own security they need to turn Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro and the whole region into an impenetrable barrier for migrants."* Dutch MEP Tineke Strik says that the focus on external border control means that member states *"tend to look away and deny this is taking place."* *"We really lack a sufficient system of reception and protection and we really lack responsibility-sharing,"* she added. Just last week, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that

migrants and refugees arriving in the bloc “irregularly” may legally be expelled. The case brought before the court involved Spain sending back migrants to Morocco. Human rights group Amnesty International wrote in social media that it is a “very disappointing judgment.” Despite the overall decrease of refugee and migrant flows towards Europe in 2019, since September there has been a notable spike on both the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes, with an average monthly rate of 8,500 and 1,600 respectively (compared to less than 1,800 and 200 respectively during the first quarter of the year). Secondary moves in the Western Balkans also continued, leading to worsened humanitarian situations in Serbia, Montenegro, and particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina where reception capacity and protection services remain limited. As of December, some 45,650 children on the move (including 12,800 unaccompanied or separated from their families) are present in Greece, Italy, Bulgaria and the Western Balkans. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although all the three political entities in Bosnia have downsized political tension, the current political and institutional crisis in Bosnia continues. Republica Srpska (RS) officials continue to abstain from state institutions and bodies blocking decision-making and function of the state. Tension may be escalated anytime. SDA, the main Bosnian Muslim party said that Russia is directly involved in the country's internal affairs claiming that Russian position is in line with RS's one. As long as Bosnia is not a full member of the Euro-Atlantic structures, namely the EU and NATO, Russia will try to exercise influence

promoting its strategic interests in the region. In general, current crisis confirms that the Dayton peace agreement is a problematic one and it is time to be amended. One could claim that “Bosnia is a captured state due to Dayton peace agreement.” It should be underlined that Serbia and Croatia play a crucial role in current crisis enjoying the power of influencing situation. Taking this into consideration, situation is sensitive threatening not only Bosnia's peace and stability but of the whole region. Political instability, poor economic performances, entities' rivalries, and problematic framework of state's structure (due to Dayton Accord) have left Bosnia far behind other Western Balkan countries towards the EU. Furthermore, nationalistic rhetoric and actions from the three entities creates certain conditions of mutual mistrust and work as a factor of potential destabilization. Neighboring Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs, while Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran maintain a permanent presence through financial donations and investments.



BULGARIA: March 3rd, in a televised address, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey can no longer cope with the new wave of refugees. In search of a solution to the migration crisis for Bulgaria and the EU tonight, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and Erdogan met at a working dinner in Ankara on March 2nd, 2020 BNT reported. Prior to his leaving to Ankara to meet the Turkish President, Borissov announced that he had spoken with a number of European leaders. He stressed that the key to the talks was the need for a pan-European response and a balanced solution

between solidarity and responsibility. He told journalists that he wishes to continue the good and friendly neighborly relations with Turkey and that his talks with Erdogan will focus on the opportunities for overcoming the tension caused by the increased migrant flow from Turkey to the EU in the last days and the measures for deescalating tension in Syria. Borissov proposed that centers be set up outside of the EU to immediately accommodate the migrants. The expenses will be covered by the EU, he specified. During the meeting with the Turkish President, Borissov also talk about the good bilateral relations and the opportunities to deepen them. (www.novinite.com)

- March 3rd, Russia's GAZPROM and Bulgaria's BULGARGAZ, the sole public supplier of natural gas for Bulgaria, have agreed on a 40% reduction in the price of natural gas imported to Bulgaria in terms of its long-term contract with the Russian gas supplier, a news conference at the Cabinet office in Sofia was told. The price reduction is backdated to August 2019, BULGARGAZ Executive Director Nikolai Pavlov said. Initial estimates are that reduction means that BULGARGAZ will return 150 million leva with VAT to its customers for the period August 5th, 2019 to February 29th, 2020, Pavlov said. The refunds will take place after the Energy and Water Regulatory Commission approves the new lower prices. The reimbursements would be made within a month after the regulator's decision, Pavlov said. The current gas import contract with GAZPROM is valid until 2022. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- March 4th, Bulgaria's National Assembly rejected a motion by the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska

Partiya - BSP), against the EU's economic sanctions on Russia and Moscow's reciprocal sanctions. The BSP, backed by the pro-Russia Ataka (Attack) party, mustered 82 votes, while the motion was defeated by 111 votes against or abstentions. The BSP argued that sanctions – imposed after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea – had proven ineffective and had not contributed to resolving the conflict. The sanctions were useless as they were circumvented by major Western countries and their companies, according to the BSP. Gemma Grozdanova, a Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Grazhdani za evropejsko razvitie na Bŭlgariya – GERB) MP party and Head of the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Policy, said that sanctions were a mechanism for regulating the crisis in Ukraine, and it was necessary to implement them. The GERB Parliamentary Group's opposition to the motion did not mean that it opposed the necessity of dialogue with Russia, Grozdanova said. The GERB group also argued that it was dialogue with Russia that had resulted in the 40% reduction in the price of natural gas, in the deal between GAZPROM and BULGARGAZ announced on March 3rd, 2020. Approval of such a motion would intrude on the constitutional prerogative of the Government in foreign policy, according to GERB, which also dismissed the motion as linked to internal issues in the BSP ahead of that party's forthcoming leadership election. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ████ :

Bulgaria enjoys political stability despite political struggle between the President, Rumens Radev and the Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov. Migration crisis due to uncontrolled refugee and migrant flows from Turkey is closely monitored by

Bulgarian authorities but currently there is no pressure in Bulgarian borders since flows are directed towards Greek borders. Although Bulgaria is a full member of the Euro-Atlantic structures (EU and NATO member) with clear pro-western orientation, there is a considerable number of citizens (and political forces) in the country which holds a positive stance towards Russia. Besides, Bulgaria is fully dependant on the energy sector by Russia. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles for the country's development and should be addressed decisively. The country pays special attention to energy security developing several projects. Modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc). However, military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards.



CROATIA: March 3rd, a ceremony was held at the Ministry of Defense today to transfer duties to the new Armed Forces Chief of General Staff. Vice Admiral Robert Hranj assumed duties, taking over from General Mirko Sundov. The flag of the Armed Forces General Staff was symbolically handed to Hranj by President Zoran Milanovic. *“It is our goal to develop a better, more equipped and more modern Armed Forces, depending on how much resources and time we have. By decision of the Minister I will remain in the Inter-agency Committee for the purchase of a combat aircraft. Firstly, I need to only continue where my predecessors left off, we will need to complete the Long term Development Plan,”* Hranj said. Armed

Forces Supreme Commander, Milanovic, said that he has known Hranj for years. *“I know your work capacity, what your capacity for learning is. I will not say what you have learned, you learn your whole life, but now you are commanding and this is the duty with the most responsibility you have had until now. This is a point where prudence, the ability to judge and composure are more important,”* said Milanovic.



The President Zoran Milanovic hands to Vice Admiral Robert Hranj the flag of the Armed Forces General Staff

(Photo source: www.morh.hr)

Sundov, who was seen off with applause, said he will be retiring but will not remain inactive. *“I will give lectures for cadets, I will write expert papers and hopefully books. I would like to only point out our best project in these four years of my mandate and that is concentrating on people, their respect and regulating their material rights, as well as better living and working conditions. Robert I wish you much success, be the best Chief of General Staff,”* Sundov said. The mandate of the Chief of General Staff lasts four years and Hranj has announced certain personnel changes, first in the Land Forces and the General Staff, adding that he will equally develop all branches of the Armed Forces. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- March 3rd, the Croatian Army is ready if needed to assist Police at the border in the event that the number of migrants increases. Plans and instructions exist and around 2,500 soldiers stand ready. The military would not only assist in prevention of illegal border crossing but firstly in logistic support, transport, food and shelter. However, certain concrete documents should be adopted regarding the possible engagement of the Armed Forces. *“Five years ago we had a big migrant wave. That will most likely not happen again, but if something similar happens we will have to - me, the Government, the Prime Minister and all those that lead the country and all those that assist - sit down as soon as possible and agree to what we will do in a situation that we cannot clearly foresee. When we have already changed the law on the engagement of the Croatian military, and the possibility for the Croatian military to assist the Police in border security, we must clearly adopt a decision on what the rules of engagement are for the Armed Forces. That can only be done through united and rational policy and political parties,”* President Zoran Milanovic said. *“I have already instructed the Chief of General Staff to prepare all the needed plans and we are ready. We have experience from the Homeland War when the Military and Police were together. Clearly, we were never in this position to secure the border together. There are many rules and procedures, but if needed, I believe that with one discussion, one communication, all of that can be done,”* Minister of Defense Damir Krsticevic said. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- March 4th, Croatia is ready to send an additional Police ship with eight crew members, along with the one which is already on patrol in the Aegean

Sea, as well as Border Police staff to the Greek border, Croatian Interior Minister Davor Bozinovic said on Wednesday in Brussels. Bozinovic made the statement before the extraordinary meeting of EU member states' home affairs Ministers, which was convened because of the crisis at the Greek -Turkish border caused by Turkey's decision to open the borders to migrants. Before the ministerial meeting, the European Commission presented an action plan of measures the Union and its member states should implement in order to help Greece. In the action plan, the Commission calls on member states to allocate funds necessary for launching two operations of fast border intervention by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) at the land and sea border between Greece and Turkey. Bozinovic said that cooperation with Western Balkan countries would also be talked about at the meeting. *“Those are the countries which could be affected if the crisis escalates. We must not forget them, they are on the route, and if we help them, we are actually helping ourselves as well,”* Bozinovic said. (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Croatia enjoys political stability in a difficult period due to coronavirus expansion and the threat of new migrant flows. Croatian authorities are thinking of the Armed Forces engagement in the border control if migrant flows are increased. It is a sensitive issue which needs special institutional provisions to become legal. However, it is assessed that Croatia is not under imminent increase of migrant waves. Croatia currently holding the EU Presidency expressed its solidarity for Greece in securing the European

borders. Moreover, it is ready to send a patrol ship in the Aegean Sea to assist in the border control. Croatia – Slovenia border dispute remains active and it should be noticed that Croatia needs Slovenia's support regarding its accession in the Schengen Zone and OECD. Under these circumstances, Croatia is forced to start thinking of dialogue and compromise since its stance has repercussions in state's national interests. Croatia implements a hard-line foreign policy with its neighboring countries maintaining open disputes with Bosnia, Slovenia, and Serbia. Top officials do not hesitate to openly interfere in Bosnian domestic affairs in the name of Bosnian Croats. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Currently, the Ministry of Defense has restarted its efforts for acquiring 12 modern fighter jets since Croatia is a NATO member without operational Air Force.



CYPRUS: March 3rd, President Nicos Anastasiades said the flow of migrants from Turkey was very concerning and suggested it could be a deliberate attempt to alter the demographic character of Cyprus. The comment came just before the Interior Minister Nicos Nouris revealed that over the past three days over 220 irregular migrants arrived in Cyprus, excluding the 101 that arrived on Tuesday afternoon off Cape Greco. Nouris said around 150 of the newly arrived migrants applied on Tuesday morning for asylum. But he said Cyprus has reached its limits in terms of economic migrants, and their vast number was taking away much needed resources from refugees from war-torn countries who have arrived on the island.

Anastasiades made his comment about Turkey after a lengthy conversation with Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and following a meeting he chaired with Nouris and other Ministers on the crisis. Earlier in the day, the Government Spokesman Kyriakos Kousios told reporters that there were 100 people waiting along the Green Line to seek asylum but did not pinpoint where along the 180km ceasefire line. Anastasiades, asked whether he suspected an organized effort by Turkey to send migrants to Cyprus, said “*With all that is going on in Greece and what we have seen until now – with Cyprus as the highest per capita country for asylum seekers – it is definitely worrying.*” “*We acknowledge the human suffering,*” he added. “*But at the same time, we must also take measures against efforts to alter the demographic character of our country,*” he said. Nouris underlined that while Cyprus, with a population of only 850,000, can withstand a certain number of immigrants, and does so, there is only a certain number that it can accommodate, and those limits had been reached. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 5th, political leaders called on Thursday for tougher action against Turkey's moves to reopen Varosha, with Democratic Party (Δημοκρατικό Κόμμα - DIKO) bringing back the late Tassos Papadopoulos' proposal for the recognition and opening of the town's port in exchange for Turkey returning the fenced-off town. President Nicos Anastasiades briefed the National Council on the Government's moves in response to Turkey's actions as regards Varosha. After the meeting, political leaders said though they agreed with the Government's actions so far, more was necessary. Democratic Rally (Δημοκρατικός Συναγερμός - DISY) leader

Averof Neophytou echoed the Government position that Turkey's illegal activities aimed at the settlement of Varosha, ought to be dealt "*with all the political weapons in our possession.*" He warned that if Turkey brings in settlers to Varosha, almost all hope for territorial adjustments as part of a solution will vanish. Main opposition Progressive Party of Working People (Ανορθωτικό Κόμμα Εργαζόμενου Λαού - AKEL) leader, Andros Kyprianou, said that Turkey's actions were unacceptable and in violation of the 1979 agreement between the then leaders Spyros Kyprianou and Rauf Denkash and the UN resolutions. "*The aim of these actions is to further deepen the faits accomplis and to serve their purpose which is permanent partition of the island.*" Kyprianou said everyone must act and call on the international community to intervene to stop the Turkish aggression. He added that the best way to tackle this was to resume substantive negotiations focused on reaching a solution as soon as possible. Diko's Nicolas Papadopoulos said though he agrees with the Government's actions that include letters to UN member states, he found they were not satisfactory enough to counter Turkish plans. He said that his party has brought back his father's, the late President Tassos Papadopoulos, proposal for the opening of the Famagusta port under EU supervision in exchange for the return of Varosha to its legal residents. "*We believe that this is the right moment to bring back this proposal which had also been adopted by the EU itself,*" Papadopoulos said. In the meantime, Turkish Cypriot "*foreign minister*" Kudrer Ozersay said on Thursday, that if he elected as the next leader, he would pave the way at an international level for opening up Varosha. His statements follow those of "*prime minister*" Ersin Tatar who said

earlier in the week that they had spoken to some Greek Cypriot owners of hotels in Varosha. He added that they would deal with the issue of properties in Varosha through the Immovable Properties Commission (IPC). The representative of displaced owners of hotels in Varosha, Stelios Mandrites, said however, that as far as he was aware, hoteliers had not been approached recently by the Turkish Cypriot side. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 6th, a UNFICYP statement on the closure of four crossings was an unfortunate intervention, President Nicos Anastasiades said on Friday. "*I would not want to comment on the unfortunate interventions of the peacekeeping force, which is called on to perform a different role in its mission,*" Anastasiades told reporters at the presidential palace. "*Its mission is for peace to prevail, something it has successfully achieved to date. I think interventions concerning the policies of a sovereign country, the Republic of Cyprus, which is a recognized state of the United Nations and the European Union are unfortunate,*" he stressed. A UN source told the Cyprus News Agency that UN Secretary-General's Special Representative in Cyprus, Elizabeth Spehar, has asked to meet with Anastasiades, to discuss the crossings. Spehar has already met with Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci on the matter. The UN source told CNA that according to the practice followed when Spehar meets one of the leaders then she meets with the other one as well. On Thursday, UNFICYP said it was concerned over the "*ongoing disruption caused to people on both sides*" by the Government's decision to shut four crossings for nine days so that more effective checks for the coronavirus were enforced. Opening them is subject to review. "*While the UN*

supports all effective measures to address any potential public health emergency, it is imperative for the two sides to coordinate closely in order to provide a comprehensive response,” UNFICYP said. In this respect, the role of the bicomunal technical committee on health was critical and “should be utilized to the fullest,” it added. The Government announced on Thursday the crossings of Ledra street, Astromeritis, Lefka and Dherynia would remain closed until Monday. Anastasiades said there was cooperation between the two communities but the responsibility for any decisions belonged to the Government of the recognized republic. The British Bases said Friday they had no plans to close the crossing points within their jurisdiction. A British High Commission Spokesperson told CNA that the bases administration is liaising with the two sides to limit the threat of COVID-19. “There are currently no plans to close the crossing points at Pergamos and Strovilia,” he said. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The closing of certain crossings between the occupied north and the Cypriot republic due to coronavirus has become a major issue in the island. The UN intervention has provoked the harsh reaction of Cypriot administration. Increased waves of migrants raise concerns in Cyprus with the President Nikos Anastasiades to imply that there is an organized plan from Turkey to send migrants in Cyprus. Although Turkish provocations continue in Cyprus by research vessels which operate within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) violating Cypriot sovereign rights, the Government seeks to change the agenda of current politics. Violation of Cypriot

sovereign rights by Turkish research vessels has become “normality” and nobody speaks about it; it is a routine. Cypriot administration lacking of military force is unable to forbid hostile actions in its waters so far. The Turkish goal is to deter international energy giants from investing in Cypriot fields and starting research activities. End of March or beginning of April the ENI – TOTAL consortium schedules a drill in block 6 and this will be a strong test for Cypriot energy plans. Turkey is determined to establish its presence in the region and especially within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claiming the Turkish Cypriot community rights. It maintains a significant military force on the island (Army Corps seize) and it reinforce it with modern systems such as UAVs. As long as tension remains in eastern Mediterranean, there is always a high risk of an armed “hot” incident or a conflict. It is certain that Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. 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: March 3rd, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said on Tuesday a migrant crisis on its borders with Turkey was an “asymmetrical threat” to the borders of the EU, noting that Greece and the EU will not be blackmailed. “This is no longer a refugee problem. This is a blatant attempt by Turkey to use desperate people to promote its geopolitical agenda and to divert attention from the horrible situation in Syria,” he told journalists at a joint

press conference with European Council President Charles Michel, European Commission Head Ursula von der Leyen and European Parliament Head David Sassoli, with whom he toured the Greek - Turkish border earlier in the day. Mitsotakis said the people who tried to enter Greece in the past few days did not come from the war-torn Syrian province of Idlib, but had been living safely in Turkey for a long period of time. *“Europe will not be blackmailed by Turkey over the refugee issue. We stand ready to support Turkey in dealing with its refugee problem and find a solution to the Syria conundrum but not under these circumstances. My duty is to protect the sovereignty of my country,”* he said. *“Unfortunately, Turkey has turned into an official migrant trafficker,”* he continued in comments made in Greek, citing official statements by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and videos on social media showing Turkish officials offering free rides to the Greek border. Mitsotakis reiterated that Greece will protect its border, which is also the external border of the EU, adding that Athens expects “tangible solidarity” from the EU. *“But let's be honest. The EU has not been up to the task of dealing with the migration crisis. I hope this crisis will serve as a wakeup call for everyone,”* he said, noting he hoped the current crisis would serve as a wakeup call for Europe to assume its responsibilities. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 5th, Greece will transfer migrants who arrived on its territory illegally after March 1st, 2020 to the northern city of Serres and plans to deport back to their own countries, Greek Migration Minister Notis Mitarakis said late on Wednesday. Thousands of migrants have made for Greece since Ankara said on February 28th,

2020 that it would let migrants cross its borders into Europe, despite a commitment to hold them in its territory under a 2016 deal with the EU. Hundreds have made it into Greece, many by sea to Lesbos and other Greek islands. Ankara and Athens are accusing each other of using excessive force at its shared borders, where migrants have clashed with security forces in recent days. *“Our aim is to return them to their countries,”* Mitarakis told the state-run Athens News Agency. He also said migrants who entered the country prior to January 1st, 2019 and living on the islands would be transferred to the mainland in the coming days. Greece announced on March 1st, 2020 that it would not accept any new asylum applications for a month following the build-up of migrants at the border. This has triggered criticism from human rights agencies. Turkey accused Greek forces of shooting dead one migrant and wounding five others, a charge strongly denied by Greece, which said Turkish Police were using tear gas to help the migrants illegally cross onto its territory. Turkey’s change in policy came after 33 Turkish soldiers were killed by Russian-backed Syrian Government forces in an air strike in Syria. *“Situation is calm today. Yesterday we stopped a group of 150 migrants. We will be here as long as is needed,”* a Police official told Reuters. No dinghies were sighted in the choppy seas off the Greek island of Lesbos on Thursday following several days of arrivals of migrants. Lesbos already hosts more than 20,000 asylum seekers, many of them living in filthy conditions in overcrowded camps. Greece and the EU accuse Turkey of deliberately goading the migrants to cross the border as a way of pressuring Brussels into offering more money or supporting Ankara’s geopolitical aims in the Syrian conflict. Turkey, which already hosts 3.6

million Syrian refugees and faces another influx from an upsurge in fighting in northwest Syria, says it cannot take in any more and complains that EU aid falls well short of what is needed for the refugees. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 6th, in the third day of transgressions in the Aegean, a pair of Turkish F-16 fighter jets on Friday entered Athens' Flight Information Region (FIR) without submitting a flight plan, the Hellenic National Defense General Staff (GEETHA) said. The aircraft flew over the islets of Oinousses in the eastern Aegean, at 22,000 feet at 12.12 p.m. and then, 8 minutes later, the same pair of jets flew over Panaghia at the same altitude. In all cases, the Turkish military aircraft were recognized and intercepted by Greek fighter planes in accordance with the international rules of engagement, GEETHA said. (www.ekathimerini.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Tension in northern Greece's land border with Turkey has dramatically increased due to uncontrolled refugee and migrant flows from Turkey. Situation is very dangerous and could easily be escalated into more serious incidents. It is assessed that Turkey backs migrant flows aiming to push the EU for more funds. Greek Government has reacted efficiently in both operational and diplomatic field. In the operational field, the Police assisted by the Army achieved to block any further move of migrants to Greek territory. Turkish Police and Army forces are engaged in current situation increasing the possibility of an accidental or pre-planned "hot" incident. On the diplomatic field, Greece achieved to confirm that Greek borders are European borders enjoying full support by European states.

Additionally, Turkey insists on provoking the Greek forces in the Aegean Sea, both in the air and in the sea. Turkish fighter jets keep on violating Greek airspace and flying low over Greek islets, while Turkish coastguard vessels harass Greek Coast Guard boats. Greece is implementing a strategy of military deterrence and intensive diplomatic action against Turkish behavior. However, there is always a significant possibility of an armed incident which could be escalated into a crisis. Greece enjoys political stability which is a major asset for a country which faces several security challenges. Under the current situation in Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea Greece is obliged to strengthen and modernize its Armed Forces operational capability.



KOSOVO: March 2nd, after a 10-hour debate, Kosovo's Parliament ended the Monday's session without any decision or resolution on Prime Minister Albin Kurti's announcement about the start of lifting the 100% import duties on goods from Serbia and Bosnia, the Beta news agency reported. The urgent session was called by the opposition, which wanted the taxes to remain. The debate was marked by differing views on the issue among both the ruling coalition and opposition. Kurti's party remained committed to a partial withdrawing of the tariff said to start on March 15th, 2020 further depending on Serbia's decision to stop its anti-recognition campaign and remove some trade barriers. The complete lifting is scheduled for April 1st, 2020 if Serbia complies. Earlier on Monday, Kurti wrote to the US President Donald Trump, reiterating he would gradually lift the taxes despite Washington's clear message they should be completely eliminated.

Kurtis' coalition partner, the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK), is in favor of removing all taxes at once and even warned last week it might leave the Government, while former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj's Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës - AAK) is against even the partial lifting. They said tariffs were planned to be revoked after Serbia recognized Kosovo's independence. Daut Haradinaj, the leader of AAK's Deputy Group, said "it is clear that no resolution can be passed." "This Government has no serious intention to introduce the reciprocity principle with Serbia," he added. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 3rd, Kosovo President Hashim Thaci in a Tweet has thanked US President Donald Trump for supporting Kosovo - Serbia dialogue. President Thaci also said that the engagement of Ambassador Richard Grenell and National Security Advisor Robert O' Brien, would bring mutual recognition of countries. "Thank you again to Donald Trump for the support to the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. The direct US engagement through Robert O' Brien and Richard Grenell has brought a new dynamic to the process and we look forward to its conclusion with mutual recognition soon," Thaci wrote on social media. Thaci met on Monday in White House with his Serbian counterpart Aleksandar Vucic in a meeting hosted by the US President Trump's envoy on dialogue, Richard Grenell. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 4th, Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti said his Cabinet's program was based on establishing the rule of law and economic development, and thanked the EU for support it, as he put it, "has always given to Kosovo," the

Beta news agency reported. In a letter to the President of the European Commission (EC) Ursula von der Leyen and the EU High Commissioner of Foreign and Security Policy Joshep Borell, Kurti said Kosovo's Government was committed to solving "the remaining questions" in relations with Serbia. "We are still convinced that must be done within the dialogue which would end in mutual recognition. We believe that this is an important step for Kosovo's integration into the international community and a historic agreement for creating lasting peace, stability and security in the Balkans," Kurti wrote. He reiterated he would start lifting the 100% of import duties on goods from Serbia and Bosnia as of March 15th, 2020 as a sign of goodwill, providing that Belgrade answer with reciprocity and remove trade obstacles and stop its anti-recognition campaign. "The Government I lead has the Constitutional mandate, political will and legal obligation and exclusive responsibility to take over the process (the dialogue with Belgrade on the normalization of relations) and represent Kosovo at the highest diplomatic level," Kurti added. Two days ago, Kurti sent a similar letter to the US President Donald Trump, reiterating he would start partial removal of the taxes despite Washington warning it wanted all lifted at once. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

An underground struggle for power between the President, Hashim Thaci and Prime Minister, Albin Kurti is underway undermining Kosovo's interests. Thaci implements his own external policy regarding the Kosovo – Serbia relations, while Kurti seeks to gain control of the process. The latter claims that the constitutional order

should be restored and the legitimate Government should negotiate with Serbia. On the other hand, Thaci refuses to give up his power and influence in Kosovo issues and to be restricted only in his presidential duties. However, he has powerful allies; the US administration promotes Thaci's role in the whole process isolating the "radical" Kurti. The "duel" between the two men could become harder undermining even Kosovo political stability. However, expectations for a spectacular progress on Kosovo – Serbia dialogue should not be expected. Serbia is entering in pre-electoral campaign and elections are scheduled for April, 26th, 2020. Fight against corruption, organized crime, money laundering and trafficking, establishment of rule of law, accountable and transparent state institutions, and functional public administration are the main challenges for Kosovo towards its European path.



MOLDOVA: March 3rd, President Igor Dodon came up with a message dedicated to March 2nd (commemoration of the fighters who died in the Transnistria War). He wrote on a social network that most veterans showed wisdom and compassion and commemorated with dignity that tragic year – 1992. On the other hand, the Head of state finds, with regret, that some political forces have turned this day into one of “blood, hatred and division.” “This is not the first time that some politicians have manipulated the needs and annoyances of veterans, to violently clash with different camps, to commit actions against the social order, against the state and citizens,” Dodon said. Commenting on the March 2nd, 2020 protest, the President also said that any event must be free and democratic. He also said that there are many signs that clearly indicate that

some political groups are behind the rally. “There is information that the protesters were brought by district buses, and their leaders were sponsored in a style so known in the past, and in the crowd there were faces used in the past by Plahotniuc to take action against the opposition parties, that is why the slogans were mainly political or geopolitical, unrelated to the real needs of veterans,” Dodon said. The President called citizens to be “sober, more balanced in words and deeds and to do good things for one another.” (www.moldpres.md)

- March 3rd, after removal of the Russian ammunition remaining in the Transnistrian region of Moldova, the Russian military contingent must leave the Transnistrian soil as well, maintains Moldova President Igor Dodon. On Monday, Dodon took part in the solemn ceremony of laying flowers at a memorial to the victims of the 1992 armed conflict on the Dniester and said to journalists afterwards that yet since the Soviet times, there have existed huge military warehouses with Russian ammunition and weaponry in Transnistria, and about a thousand Russian servicemen are continuing to guard them. Dodon particularly stressed that this is indeed not a military base. “In 2019, our Russian partners put forth an initiative on disposal or evacuation of the ammunition. Right after the completion of the removal of the arsenals, the Russian troops will also have to leave the eastern bank of the Dniester River [Transnistria]. So, let's wait and see what will happen to the current international peacekeeping mission, functioning there under the OSCE auspices, and how stability will be guaranteed upon the achieving of a political solution of the Transnistrian dispute,” the President said. Dodon called the Transnistrian

conflict “*a tragic page in the history of modern Moldova*” and said his task is to achieve decisions, primarily political ones, to turn this page. “*For this, it is necessary to achieve a national consensus. I guess we will achieve it one day in the future. We are working to reach such solution,*” Dodon said. (www.infotag.md)

- March 5th, MPs of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) and Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) today afternoon convened at the first round of negotiations on the creation of a majority coalition in the Parliament. Representatives of the two parties noted that discussions would continue in the next week-end too. “*We have not discussed sharing of positions, but only subjects which might stay at the basis of the negotiations. We spoke about the PSRM-ACUM agreement; it is substantive and shows practically all the current needs of Moldova. If the agreement is signed, it will contain all provisions signed by the ACUM Bloc and so we see no problem if ACUM backs the agreement,*” a PSRM MP, Vlad Batrincea, said. Democrat lawmaker Dumitru Diacov said that his party had come to negotiations with a project for a European Moldova, which is a political commitment of PDM. Diacov stressed that the way the Democrats got involved in the coalition would be discussed based on this project. “*We can assume responsibilities for the carrying out of this project for Moldova,*” Diacov noted. On March 4th, 2020 PSRM informed that it had ruled to initiate talks with PDM for the creation of a governance coalition. The Democrats soon accepted the invitation, stressing that they would put certain conditions. The Head of state, Igor

Dodon welcomed the decision to start negotiations for the creation of a parliamentary majority. (www.moldpres.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The country enjoys relative political stability since the President Igor Dodon achieved to establish his own Government putting aside the pro-western ACUM bloc. Ruling PSRM seeks to strengthen its power by establishing a majority coalition together with PDM. However, this is a problematic step, taking into consideration that PDM has been identified with corruption and “oligarchization” of the country. Its former leader, Vladimir Plahotniuc is still a fugitive and he is wanted on an international arrest warrant. The EU and the US have not expressed their opinion yet. It seems that PDM is a “hostage” of PSRM servicing Dodon’s political plans. The country definitely follows a pro-Russian orientation, although it declares that it seeks to join the EU. Due to its strategic geographic position, Moldova has become a field of rivalry between Russia and the US and NATO. The country lacks economic growth, while corruption is in high rates. Russia maintains troops in Transnistria which are considered by pro-western forces as violating Moldovan sovereignty. The frozen conflict of Transnistria is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: March 4th, commenting on the attitude of the international community concerning current events in Montenegro after the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Srdan Darmanovic said that Podgorica

was holding consultations with NATO allies and EU partners regarding the matter. *“They think this is Montenegro’s internal issue and that there was no need for their involvement that would be sort of arbitration. Of course, every piece of advice we got was useful and benevolent and we chose address the issue through dialogue,”* Darmanovic said to MINA agency. He said that “our NATO allies” had also recognized meddling into Montenegro’s internal affairs. Darmanovic touched on the statements made recently by State Department that the propaganda war had been coordinated from Moscow. *“The unprecedented propaganda against us was launched from Belgrade,”* Darmanovic said. According to him, Russia does not need to be more visible this time, although it has certain interests in the region. *“Some neighbors do that with more energy than usual, and Russia can watch calmly its main partners doing that job. I believe we are strong enough to overcome it,”* Darmanovic said. Commenting on the statements made by the Church Hierarchy that *“Russia created Montenegro,”* Darmanovic said it was quite ridiculous. Montenegro, he added, was created by its citizens. Montenegro is based on western and European values and value system of the Atlantic community. Darmanovic thinks that the problem of the Serbian Orthodox Church is not the Law, but Montenegro’s orientation, its course and its politics. *“The problem is what we want to be. If the vision advocated by the Serbian Orthodox Church won, Montenegro would maybe remain independent, but it would become a Serbian country,”* Darmanovic said. Asked if it was true that the EU could be a mediator in relation to the Law, Darmanovic said there was no need for that. *“Our institutions can resolve any problem, related to any law. If anybody has problem with any law,*

the Constitutional Court is the right address,” Darmanovic said. Commenting on some media’s reports stating that Serbia was considering the possibility to quit representing Montenegro in the countries where Podgorica has not got its Embassies, Darmanovic said *“it does not seem true.”* (www.cdm.me)

- March 5th, Montenegro’s Prime Minister, Dusko Markovic, has formed a team of experts for negotiations with the Metropolitan and dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church over the Law on Freedom of Religion. He also called Metropolitan Amfilohije for expert-level talks. *“During the talks, the Government will be represented by Mr Zoran Pazin, Vice-President of the Government; Mr Nebojsa Vucinic, Professor at the Faculty of Law; Ms Aneta Spaic, Dean of the Faculty of Law; Mr Dragoljub Bulatovic, Chief of the Cabinet of the President of the Government; Mr Nikola Martinovic, lawyer, and Mr Srdan Spaic, lawyer. As we understood, you agree that the first meeting should be held on Wednesday, 11 March, at 10 o’clock in Vila Gorica, Podgorica. We officially confirm that,”* Markovic’s letter said. The Government has confirmed preparedness to resume dialogue on the Law on Freedom of Religion. (www.cdm.me)

- March 6th, Democratic Front (Demokratski Front - DF) MPs left the joint session of Parliamentary Committees on Security and Defense and Human Rights and Freedoms because they could not ask questions other than the authorities’ handling of investigations into threats and violence against journalists. The consultative hearing of the Prosecution and Police leaders Ivica Stankovic and Veselin Veljovic is underway at the session. DF MP Predrag Bulatovic said that the topic of attack on

journalists cannot be viewed regardless the whole state context. *“What we heard from the Commission is that starting with Stankovic, the Prosecution, through Veljovic and his management, these people should resign,”* Bulatovic said. He said that if one can arrest MPs of the strongest opposition alliance, then he/she could arrest journalists too. Security Committee Chairman Branko Cavor said DF MPs were acting on the brink of an incident, leaving sessions and threatening. *“You will have the opportunity to show how much citizens trust in your story at the parliamentary elections. You are persistently off topic,”* Cavor said. At the beginning of the session, Stankovic said that the attack on media freedom is an attack on democracy, as a constitutional attribute of the state of Montenegro which based upon the rule of law. He recalled that he repeatedly pointed to the need for effective and efficient implementation of measures and actions in cases of attacks on journalists and media property. (www.rtcg.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Controversial law on religious freedom continues to be a source of political tension in Montenegro. The Government tries to de-escalate situation by establishing a team of experts for dialogue with the Church. The Government claims that tension is the result of external activity namely Serbia and Russia which seek to destabilize the country. On the other hand, opposition accuses the President, Milo Djukanovic and the Prime Minister, Dusko Markovic of authoritarian behavior claiming that religious law should be withdrawn in order to restore political stability in the country. Djukanovic considers the Church as a threat against the state’s national identity and

independence acting as the “long hand” of Serbia. It is true that Serbia interferes in the Montenegrin politics using the Serbian population in Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church influence. It is assessed that Serbia has never gave up the idea that Montenegro is the “natural extension of Serbia” and its (smooth) independence is nothing more than an abnormality. Besides, Serbia enjoys support in Montenegro by a strong pro-Serbian opposition. In this context, the Serbian factor could be under certain conditions to act destabilizing. Corruption, smuggling (especially cigarettes) and money laundering are dominated in the country setting significant obstacles and risks for every investor. Such situation has strongly affected progress of accession negotiations with the EU. Montenegro needs more concrete reforms in the field of justice, rule of law, fight against corruption, money laundering, and organized crime, public administration transparency and accountability in order to become a stable and attractive investment environment. The coming elections in the country should be seen as a democratic stress test. The country focuses on strengthening its Armed Forces by purchasing modern equipment.



NORTH MACEDONIA: March 3rd, during today’s session, the North Macedonia’s Government discussed the report by the Steering Committee for Coordination and Management of the Crisis Management System regarding situation with the migrant crisis, informs the Government press service. The Government has adopted many decisions that start from the fact that North Macedonia already has an established system for managing the migrant

crisis which is ready for use, and a part of the system is constantly communicating with North Macedonia's partners in NATO and the EU including the region's countries. The Government has decided to request and accept the already offered technical assistance on part of the International organization for migrations, UNDP, UNHCR, the European Commission and other funds, including the Ministries of Interior and Defense. (www.meta.mk)

- March 3rd, French Ambassador to North Macedonia Christian Thimonier discussed the growing number of corruption cases, and referred to the practice as the cancer of the country. In an interview with the "Macedonian Radio," the Ambassador said that corruption is eating away at the economic prosperity and the rule of law. "Anybody who was caught in a certain kind of a corruption scandal, who is responsible or who closes the eyes to allow corruption should be asked why he is doing so. And the citizens need to ask themselves. The citizens should vote and in light of all these affairs, the citizens can be at two minds – a healthy approach would be to vote and respond for the future of the country, and the other, negative approach would be to fall into apathy, to say that 'they are all the same' and that responding is pointless. This closes the circle and people are pushed to leave the country," Thimonier said. He called for fair and transparent elections and asked that the issue of corruption is kept high in the public awareness. "The development of a modern European society is under threat," the Ambassador warned. (www.meta.mk)

- March 7th, Minister of Interior Nake Culev said Saturday the southern border would be fully closed for the purpose of preventing a new

migrant wave. "[North] Macedonia is in constant communication with FRONTEX and our EU partners. [North] Macedonia will definitely close the border. We have the capacity to deal as with the previous migrant crisis and now we are much better prepared, and we have partner Police in joint patrols on the southern border where we currently have 131 Policemen from 8 countries," Culev said. (www.republika.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political situation is calm so far although it is expected a polarization of the atmosphere during the pre-electoral campaign. Nationalistic rhetoric is expected to dominate during the parties' rallies. At the moment, North Macedonia has political uncertainty and next day of election it needs a strong Government to proceed with necessary reforms and securing opening of accession negotiations with the EU within 2020. The country should focus on reforms regarding justice, rule of law, fight against corruption and money laundering, public administration, and respect of human rights in order to accelerate its European integration process.



ROMANIA: March 2nd, National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal - PNL) leader Ludovic Orban said on Monday that the Liberals will discuss with political parties, with the exception of the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) to try to form a majority. "We will discuss with the political groups, with the parliamentary groups to try to form a majority. (...) We are still subject to certain political agreements that we have signed with the political groups and the parliamentary groups that we abided by and still do," said

Orban, noting that talks will not be held with the PSD. He showed that the only political agreement that was not observed was the one with the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România - UDMR), related to the fact that the law on the election of Mayors in two rounds was adopted by the Government assuming responsibility. *“With every opportunity we can express ourselves and we can participate in a decision to rule the election of Mayors in two rounds, we will use it and we will endorse the election of Mayors in two rounds,”* Orban said. Asked if there is a possibility for a future Liberal Government to come up with an emergency ordinance on the election of Mayors in two rounds, he replied *“And with others,”* without specifying exactly what normative acts these would be. Orban said that the Liberals want to have a timetable in Parliament as soon as possible for the investiture of the Citu Government, so that the hearings of the candidates for the position of Minister to take place on Tuesday and Wednesday, and the vote on investiture on Thursday or Monday. PNL’s negotiations with the parliamentary parties would take place on Monday and Tuesday, according to Liberal sources. (www.nineoclock.ro)

- March 2nd, the Sorina Pinte, former Minister of Health in the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) cabinet of Viorica Dancila, was arrested on Saturday, February 29th, 2020 on bribery charges. Pinte, who is currently general manager of the county emergency hospital in Baia Mare (north-western Romania), was held by the Prosecutors of the National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) after she was reportedly caught in the act taking a bribe in her office, Hotnews.ro reported. The Bucharest Court

then approved a 30-day arrest warrant on her name. According to a press release issued by the DNA, the former Minister received about 35,000 euro from the representative of a private company, representing 7% of the value of a procurement contract signed in 2019. The Prosecutors said she received the money in two tranches, between December 2019 and February 28th, 2020 through an intermediary. The former Minister’s lawyers claim that she did not know what was in the bag that she received in her office on Friday, suggesting a *“political setup,”* according to Digi24.ro. Meanwhile, Pinte's son, Ionuț Pinte, posted a testimony on social media on Saturday saying he met with the whistleblower from his mother's bribery case who allegedly told him he had given more money to (PSD) Senator Liviu Marian Pop for them to reach the former Minister. Pop denied any involvement. Pinte recently announced that she wanted to run for Mayor of Baia Mare. (www.romania-insider.com)

- March 3rd, the Ministers picked to be part of the Florin Citu Government will be heard for three days, starting on Tuesday, by the joint parliamentary committees. The plenary meeting of the two Chambers is set to convene to vote for the new Cabinet at a date to be established in the beginning of next week. Parliamentary sources have said that March 9th, 2020 might be the date for the joint plenary meeting. Last Friday, Prime Minister-designate Florin Citu submitted to Parliament the list of Ministers of his Cabinet and the governing program. The only change in the composition of the Citu Government against the previous one, that led by Ludovic Orban, is the proposal of Lucian Heius for the Finance Ministry. According to the regulations of the joint sessions of Parliament, each candidate for the

position of Minister is to be heard at a joint meeting by the standing committees of the two chambers operating in the field of the future Minister. After the hearings, the committees will draw up a joint, reasoned advisory opinion. The governing program and the Government list of Ministers are to be debated by the Deputies' Chamber and the Senate in a joint meeting. Parliament grants the Government confidence, with the vote of the majority of Deputies and Senators. The voting will be secret, with balls, Agerpres informs. (www.nineoclock.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political instability and uncertainty continue in Romania due to strategies and tactics of the parties in the struggle for power. PNL seeks to call for early parliamentary elections, while PSD works on delaying snap elections. Due to these tactics the country does not have a strong Government to forward the necessary reforms regarding fight against corruption and modernizing public administration. President, Klaus Iohannis gave a new mandate to the Finance Minister, Florin Citu since proposal of former Prime Minister, Ludovik Orban to form a new Government was rejected by the Constitutional Court. The plan of Iohannis and PNL to call for early elections is very close to be implemented. However, there is still the question if the country deserves such a long political instability for Iohannis political games. The country enjoys advanced upgrade in US and NATO strategic plans due to its geographical position located close to Russia. Consequently, Russia reacts in this close military cooperation between the two countries and the Alliance perceiving it as a threat against its national

security. Romania keeps strengthening its Armed Forces seeking to achieve NATO standards.



SERBIA: March 2nd, the Head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Mission Jan Kees Martijn said on Monday that Serbia required improvements in many areas if it were to progress further, the Beta news agency reported. In his address to the participants of the Kopaonik (the mountain between Serbia and Kosovo) Business Forum, dubbed Serbia's Davos, Martjin said IMF would continue to support Serbia's Government in its reforms leading to stronger and sustainable growth. He praised measures that kept low inflation in Serbia, the reduction of unemployment, fiscal discipline and lower public debt. But, Martjin recommended Serbia's authorities to work on higher growth rate since the country's GDP per capita was lower than in the comparable countries in Central and Eastern Europe. According to him, it is necessary to reduce the current 25% of grey economy's participation in the GDP, to improve tax collection, but also to enable easier access to finances to business people to reach sustainable growth. He added that a transparent system of wages and clear rules of employment in the public sector were also needed, as well as incentive measures to slow down the departure of young people from the country. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 5th, the US Embassy to Serbia reiterated on Thursday Washington was "worried about Belgrade purchases of the Russian military equipment and call on the authorities to stop with translocations with Moscow which could lead to sanctions," Radio Free Europe (RFE) reported. "We call on all our allies and partners to give up transactions with Russia which pose a risk of

implementing sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA),” the Embassy told RFE. The Embassy said that the US and Russia “have very different views of the Western Balkans future. Washington strongly supports Serbia's European path and its declared goal of the European Union membership. Moscow, on the other hand, is active against the Western integration of the region and attempts to prevent the solution to ethnic tensions, marginalize the US and EU influence and slows down or prevents the Western Balkans to follow its independent orientation.” Serbia's President, Aleksandar Vucic confirmed on Wednesday that the complete Russian-made anti-aircraft defense system Pantsir arrived in Serbia, RFE said. It added that *“the new purchase of the weapons and military equipment from Russia caused concern in Brussels and Washington”* and that Peter Stano, a Spokesperson for Joseph Borrell, the EU High Commissioner for Foreign and Security, said on February 25th, 2020 that Serbia had to adjust its foreign policy to that of the bloc. Matthew Palmer, the State Department Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, was the first official to mention the possibility of the US sanctions in November last year. Next month, Vucic said Serbia would stop buying weapons, but recently announced a new purchase of Israel-made arms, adding that would not be *“a small order.”* RFE reminds that Belgrade still expects the delivery of the Moscow donation of T-72 tanks and some armored BRDM-2 vehicles, as well four Russian-made MiG-29 fighter aircraft from Belarus which are being repaired in Baranovichi. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 7th, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said on Saturday Serbia will wait for Pristina to

abolish the tariffs on Serbian goods, adding that Serbia will not thank them for that. He also announced he would have a meeting in Berlin in the next seven to eight days and that talks on Kosovo would not be easy. *“We will not thank them when they abolish the tariffs but will tell them how much unlawful damage they have done to us, what they have done against our country and our people, and we will continue to work to try to make this damage incomparably less in the future,”* Vucic told the reporters in the village of Mala Remeta near Fruska Gora. He stated that it did not even cross his mind to thank *“the ones who ruined our economy.”* Vucic quoted Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti as saying that *“a signature under something obtained by threats and coercion cannot be valid and legitimate,”* stating that it is *“the only thing that he agrees with him.”* Vucic stated that he was *“very pleased”* by this sentence, adding that he would quote it *“wherever he went”* and would *“ask”* everyone to appreciate Kurti's arguments, because, *“anything that was obtained through force and aggression in Kosovo cannot be legitimate.”* the Serbian President said the US' position was very rational and principled when it comes to abolishing Pristina's tariffs. Talking about indications that the US could somehow sanction further arms imports from Russia, Vucic said that Serbia has the *“need to protect its borders and territories,”* that co-operation with official Washington is currently good and open and that he does not expect any punitive measures. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Parliamentary and local elections were called for April 26th, 2020. It is expected a polarized pre-

electoral period with opposition seeking to boycott the elections. Serbia needs political stability since it has a lot of diplomatic, security and economic challenges ahead. Kosovo new Government has a lot of internal problems to resolve before becomes ready for dialogue with Serbia. However, the new Prime Minister, Albin Kurti announced a partial lifting of 100% taxes on Serbian goods which a good step for Serbia to come back to dialogue. Nevertheless, no progress is expected until the Serbian elections in late April. Montenegro – Serbia relations are in low level lately due to the Montenegrin law on religious freedom which is considered by Belgrade as a direct attack on Serbian Orthodox Church and consequently on Serbian population in Montenegro. Serbia is considered by Montenegro as a direct threat of destabilizing the country. Finally, Serbia is engaged with one way or another to the latest crisis in Bosnia where Bosnian Serbs claim that secession may become a possible choice for the entity. The country has developed very close relations with Russia, especially in the field of defense. Russia keeps supplying Serbia with weapons, while both countries conduct common military exercises. Serbia is trying to balance between the west, namely the EU and the US on one side and Russia on the other implementing the doctrine of “neutrality.” However, the latest Serbian arms purchases from Russia met the strong reaction of the US (and the EU) which did not hesitate to threaten Serbia with sanctions. The EU has raised serious concerns over Serbia’s effectiveness on independence and accountability of the judiciary, freedom of expression, prevention of corruption and the fight against organized crime. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its Armed Forces declaring

towards all sides that they are the power of the state. It implements an ambitious armament program mainly supported by Russia.



SLOVENIA: March 3rd, the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska Demokratska Stranka - SDS) leader Janez Jansa was elected Prime Minister-designate, receiving the mandate to form his third Government. Having forged a centre-right coalition with three more parties after Marjan Sarec resigned as Prime Minister, Jansa won 52 votes in the 90-member legislature. The priorities listed by Jansa in his address include cutting red tape, launching a fund in which state assets would be pooled to help finance public pensions, liberalization of the economy and more competition in education and healthcare. The debate in Parliament saw the members of the new coalition pledging to work for the entire society and rejecting criticism about the prospects of the new Government being too far to the right. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Manfred Weber, chair of the European People's Party (EPP) group in the European Parliament, were among the first foreign politicians to congratulate Jansa. (www.sta.si)

the top bodies of the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska Demokratska Stranka - SDS), the Modern Center Party (Stranka Modernega Centra - SMC), New Slovenia – Christian Democrats (Nova Slovenija – Krščanski Demokrati - NSi) and Democratic Party of

Pensioners of Slovenia (Demokratična Stranka Upokojencev Slovenije - DeSUS) confirmed entry in a coalition led by SDS Head Janez Jansa. The SDS's proposal to appoint Jansa as the Prime Minister was submitted to President Borut Pahor, who makes the formal nomination. Outgoing Prime Minister Marjan Šarec said he was not surprised at the prospect of a new Jansa Government, which he saw from the start as one of the possible outcomes of his resignation. (www.sta.si)

- March 5th, Igor Zorcic, former Deputy Group leader of the Modern Center Party (Stranka Modernega Centra - SMC), was elected parliamentary Speaker by secret ballot in a 48:29 vote. He will succeed Social Democrats (Socialni Demokrati - SD) leader Dejan Zidan, who stepped down as soon as Janez Jansa was elected Prime Minister, to become the 14th Speaker of the National Assembly. Zorcic pledged to build parliamentary democracy in the next two years in cooperation with all MPs. (www.sta.si)

- March 8th, the Croatian authorities have initiated a total of 913 proceedings against Slovenian fishermen for fishing in what Croatia claims is its part of the Piran Bay, while Slovenia has paid 190,954 euro for legal assistance to the fishermen so far, shows a report discussed by the Government at Friday's correspondence session. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

SDS achieved to form a majority coalition with SMC, NSi, and DeSUS ending the political deadlock after Marjan Šarec resignation as the Prime Minister. The Slovenian Assembly has a new Speaker and political stability returns to

Slovenia which has to address major challenges such as migration, social care, and defense capabilities. On Slovenia – Croatia dispute the latter has started on calling for dialogue but it is doubtful what Slovenia will finally decide to do. Besides, Slovenia could push Croatia on this case taking into consideration that Croatia needs Slovenia's support to enter the Schengen zone and OECD. The issue of illegal migrants entering Slovenia mainly from Croatia is high in the agenda lately. 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 White Book on Defense presented a rather ambitious program of improving operational capabilities of the Armed Forces. It foresees an 8,000-strong professional military force and a 2000-strong standing reserve by 2035, up from 6,400 and 700, respectively. Slovenia's defense budget will finally reach 2% of GDP (a NATO requirement) by 2035.



TURKEY: March 5th, two Turkish journalists have been sentenced to nine years in prison over a report covering the funeral of a Turkish intelligence officer reportedly killed in Libya, according to local media. News Director Baris Terkoglu and reporter Hulya Kilinc were detained earlier this week after a video was published on the OdaTV website claiming to show the officer's burial, the Hurriyet Daily News reported on Thursday. Last year Ankara and Tripoli signed a military cooperation deal,

and Turkey has since sent troops and allied Syrian fighters to Libya. According to state news agency Anadolu, an Istanbul Court formally arrested the two journalists on suspicion of disclosing the identity of an intelligence agency official. The Turkish news website published the officer's first name and the initial of his last name, the Committee to Protect Journalists said. It also reported his burial took place in Turkey's western province of Manisa. Responding to criticism, OdaTV told local media the officer's name had already been revealed by an opposition lawmaker. In an interview with CNN Turk, Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soyulu condemned the news report, saying, *"There is such a thing as state secrets, national security secrets."* Terkoglu served a 19-month prison sentence between 2011 and 2012 after being accused of taking part in a plot to topple the Government. Last month, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said two Turkish troops were killed in Libya, where Ankara backs the United Nations-recognized Government in the North African state's conflict. Turkey provides military support to the Government of National Accord (GNA), which is based in the capital, Tripoli. Since April, the city has been under an assault by forces loyal to renegade military commander Khalifa Haftar, who is aligned with a rival administration based in the country's east. Ankara says its military personnel is there to support the GNA, but denies they are engaged in active fighting. Turkey ranked 157th out of 180 countries in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders. The Turkish Union of Journalists said 135 members of news outlets are currently jailed in Turkey. (www.aljazeera.com)

- March 6th, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin have announced a military ceasefire in Idlib, after a meeting in Moscow that lasted six hours. Idlib, the last rebel stronghold in Syria, has witnessed increased violence and bloodshed since last December, the start of a Russia-backed Syrian offensive to regain control over the region. *"At 00.01 tonight, as in, from midnight, the ceasefire will be put in place,"* Erdogan told reporters on Thursday in the Russian capital. Erdogan added that Turkey, which has sent thousands of troops into Idlib to repel the Syrian Army, would not *"remain silent"* if Syrian Government forces continued attacks and warned that Ankara would retaliate with full force. Putin said Russia did not always agree with its Turkish partners but hoped the deal will serve as a *"good basis for ending the fighting in the Idlib de-escalation zone, put an end to [the] suffering of [the] civilian population and contain a growing humanitarian crisis."* Even as the ceasefire came into effect, Turkey's state-owned Anadolu news agency reported early on Friday that Turkish forces killed 21 Syrian troops and destroyed two artillery pieces and two missile launchers, in retaliation of the killing of two Turkish soldiers in Idlib earlier on Thursday. Turkey and Russia on Thursday also agreed to establish a secure corridor along a key east-west highway in Syria's Idlib and hold joint patrols on it as of March 15th, 2020. In a joint statement read out by the Turkish and Russian Foreign Ministers, the two sides said the secure corridor would stretch 6 km to the north and 6 km to the south of the M4 highway. They said their Defense Ministers would agree on the parameters of the corridor within a week. Until the latest crisis, Putin and Erdogan had managed to coordinate their interests in Syria even though Moscow

backed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while Ankara supported the opposition forces. Earlier on Thursday, al-Assad accused Turkey's President of “*supporting terrorists.*” Al Jazeera's Hashem Ahelbarra, reporting from Hatay on the Turkish-Syrian border, said Erdogan managed to get some “*huge concessions*” in the talks with Putin. “*I think this is going to be seen as a massive victory for Erdogan,*” Ahelbarra said. They got the ceasefire plus the safe corridors and also resettlement of the civilians back into their areas. “*Erdogan will not have to be concerned about his soldiers. Also, Turkey has been very concerned about a protracted conflict in Idlib that would pave the way for four million civilians to cross into Turkey. I think now those are some of the people that will be able to go back to their villages,*” Ahelbarra said. Despite Thursday's breakthrough, hopes for peace among some Syrians remain low. (www.aljazeera.com)

- March 7th, Turkey will prevent irregular migrants from trying to cross the Aegean Sea, the Coast Guard Command said Friday, citing safety concerns. “*While the principle of non-interference is applied to all migrants seeking to leave Turkey, it does not include sea crossings due to the life-threatening danger they pose,*” the Coast Guard said in a statement. The Coast Guard will be blocking migrants at sea, while Gendarmerie and Police will work on the shore, the statement added. The Coast Guard also slammed their Greek counterparts for leaving migrants at sea helpless by pushing them back into Turkish waters, damaging their boat engines and sinking rubber dinghies. “*Greece continues to violate human rights and international law with its attitude toward migrants trying to cross the Aegean Sea,*” it said. A total of 3,425 migrants

were rescued by the Turkish Coast Guard in the Aegean in 2019, while since the beginning of 2020 more than 1,700 migrants were saved. As a country that shares maritime and land borders with Bulgaria and Greece, Turkey has been a key transit point for irregular migrants aiming to cross into Europe to start new lives. Either fleeing poverty or prevailing conflicts, thousands arrive in Turkey every year to take their chance at illegally crossing into Europe. Illegal migrants take the Aegean, Mediterranean and the Black Sea routes to access European countries. The Aegean is the most popular route, as it is dotted with Greek islands in close proximity to Turkish shores. Before their travel to Turkey's Aegean shores, migrants typically enter Turkey from the country's southern or eastern borders. Thousands of refugees and other migrants have been trying to get into Greece through the country's eastern land and sea borders over the past week after Turkey declared its previously-guarded borders with Europe would be opened. Many have been camping out near the border on the Turkish side, hoping to cross despite Greek insistence that its border is closed. Greece has been widely criticized for using force, including water cannons and tear gas, to repel incoming migrants. (www.dailysabah.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

The agreed ceasefire between Turkey and Syria after a meeting of Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin de-escalate situation in Syria; at least temporarily. Turkey is satisfied with the agreement since it secures its military presence in the Syrian ground and ensures that Syrian refugees will be relocated back in the region. Although Russia is the absolute dominant in the

Syrian “playground”, Turkey achieved to stabilize situation and to support its interests. Tension in Greek – Turkish land borders continues with daily clashes between Greek security forces and illegal migrants, while Turkish security forces are engaged directly or indirectly. However, Turkey announced that it will not allow migrants to enter Greece by sea claiming safety reasons. The continuous military campaigns in several fronts have a direct impact in the already “wounded” economy. Due to the latest situation in Idlib, Turkish Lira faces pressure and it has weakened while inflation is rising. In general, Turkey exercises a multilateral, multifaceted, dynamic external policy ensuring its national interests. Enjoying a pivotal geographic location is engaged in several regional challenges. Despite that, enjoys special relationship with great powers such as the US and Russia. Erdogan made clear publically that “Turkish security is beyond its borders.” This statement summarizes the security doctrine of Turkey; Turkey will be engaged in regional challenges, conflicts and cooperation to ensure its security. Turkish engagement in Syria, Libya, Cyprus, Somalia is explained by this doctrine. The country combines both diplomatic means and “hard” power aiming to achieve its goals. It has conducted hydrocarbon drills in Mediterranean Sea within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and presents its aeronautical power against Greece and Cyprus questioning their sovereign rights. In the east Mediterranean front, Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in the region and is expected to react violently if balance of power is jeopardized. It is assessed that Turkey’s relations with the US will never reach a “zero point” since Turkey is an integral and critical part of the western security architecture. The country


continues to face several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs, Mayors, journalists and thousands of citizens 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. Turkey develops an ambitious armament project aiming at becoming self-sufficient in defense sector; if it succeeds it will set the base to become a regional military super power. Without any question, Turkey has the characteristics of a regional superpower and it tries to act like one.

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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. Low tension incidents.
-  Imminent major incidents regarding stability and security. Violent incidents or armed violence in specific regions. Ongoing tension or crisis. High security risk.
-  Evolving or ongoing crisis including major armed violence or violent/armed conflict. Civil, inter-state or non –state actors war.