



**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.

### **“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE**

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**ALBANIA:** December 26<sup>th</sup>, four international media organizations have called on the Albanian Government to drop two draft laws on state regulation and compulsory registration of online media to fight fake news. In a letter sent to Prime Minister Edi Rama and Justice Minister Etila Gjoni, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, the European Federation of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders and PEN International asked them to withdraw the legislation, involve journalists and seek for international assistance to draw up new laws. They said that in democratic countries “*online media are self-regulated.*” In October, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe also expressed concern about a new registration system for media websites in Albania. Albania expects to launch full membership negotiations with European Union next year. (www.nytimes.com)

- December 28<sup>th</sup>, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama was forced to reshuffle his Government in response to the massive student protests that have exposed the scale of popular discontent with his rule. Rama discharged seven of his 14 Ministers after a year of protests against Government policies. Rama summoned the National Assembly of his governing Socialist Party of Albania (Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë - PS) in Tirana and insisted that the changes were “*not the result of failures.*” In a long speech, he blamed a “*weak opposition*” for many problems, which he said had not pushed for change, while the Government became lazy. He also blamed media outlets, which he has called “*garbage bins*” for not seeing the economic success achieved by his Government and blamed his own party officials for creating what he called “*a caste.*” Arben

Ahmetaj, Finance Minister since 2013 was dismissed along with Transport and Infrastructure Minister Damian Gjijnuri – who had lately faced protesters calling him “*a thief*” and demanding his arrest. The replacements are Anila Denaj, currently Director at the Finance Ministry and Belinda Balluku, Director of Albkontroll, a state-owned company responsible for civil airspace. Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati was replaced by Gent Cakaj, who is also a citizen of Kosovo. Education Minister Lindita Nikolla was replaced by Besa Shahini, currently Deputy Minister since 2017. She also comes from Kosovo. The Minister of Agriculture, Niko Peleshi, was replaced by Blendi Cuci, while the Minister of Culture, Eva Kumbaro, was replaced by Eva Margariti. Moreover, Rama said that the Ministry of the Relations with the Parliament will be re-established, and it will be led by Elisa Spiropali. Finally, The Minister of Enterprises Protection, Sonila Qato, will be replaced by Eduard Shalsi. Rama's strong electoral win in 2017 gave him the first clear parliamentary majority that Albania has seen since 2001. But scandals and protests followed. In October 2017, his former Interior Minister, Saimir Tahiri, was accused of international drug trafficking, while in the closing days of that year oil workers marched in Tirana, demanding unpaid salaries. The two main opposition parties promised “*civil disobedience*” in early 2018 but the protests came largely from outside party politics. In March 2018, an angry crowd burned tolls on the highway to Kosovo, while new Interior Minister Fatmir Xhafaj faced questions about his brother's jail sentence in Italy for drug trafficking. This year was capped by a massive student protest and another scandal when a “*ghost*” company named DH Albania won two public work contracts worth 30 million euro using falsified documents. Unchallenged by the

weak opposition, Rama reflected on this difficult year by blaming his own party for losing touch with reality. *“Students don't trust us,”* he said. *“Youngsters are ashamed to say they are part of party youth forums,”* he added, reflecting on the latest student protest that showed not only the difficult economic conditions facing the general population, but also a wide chasm between the party and the younger generation. Opposition Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) leader Lulzim Basha said the changes were merely a facelift. *“The changes show only that the Socialist Party has become a group of people able only to applaud Edi Rama, who takes decisions based only on his interest,”* Basha said. *“A fish rots from the head down,”* he added. (www.balkaninsight.com, top-channel.tv)

- December 28<sup>th</sup>, the President of Albania, Ilir Meta, spoke from Korca about the changes made by Edi Rama to his Government. Meta said that if the policies do not change, the replacement of names will not serve to the economy. *“It is important for me to change the philosophy of the Government. There must be cooperation with the opposition and independent institution, for making better laws and for implementing them. That's how it may benefit to the economy,”* Meta said. (www.top-channel.tv)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Citizens' protests, scandals, and opposition pressure by accusing the Government of having links with organized crime forced Rama to reshuffle his cabinet as a reaction in public discontent. However, it is assessed that collapse of Government is rather unlikely because opposition is still too weak. 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. Albania has The EU closely monitors progress of reforms especially in justice sector. Latest European Parliament assessment on Albania accession negotiations is a rather positive sign underlining concerns over specific issues such as corruption, justice reforms, and implementation of rule of law. The final decision is up to the EU Heads of Governments for opening Albania's accession negotiations in June 2019. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a “mother nation”. One should take into consideration that the new Foreign Minister, Gent Cakaj is a citizen of Kosovo, while the new Education Minister also comes from Kosovo. It is estimated that Albania will fully comply with the EU and U.S “line” for territorial exchanges or border changes between Serbia and Kosovo if it is necessary for a mutual accepted solution. 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. Security situation stable without major incidents or challenges.*



## BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

December 26<sup>th</sup>, the Interior Minister of Republika Srpska (RS), Dragan Lukac, accused opposition

leaders of instigating the violence that broke out in Banja Luka a day earlier when Police detained a father whose quest for justice for his murdered son has turned into an ongoing anti-government protest. Lukac's claims came at a press conference after Police detained a day earlier the father of the killed young man, Davor Dragicevic, the mother, Suzana Radanovic, and several of their supporters and opposition politicians. Footage of the Police operation spread throughout the region causing outrage and prompting criticism from local and international officials, including the EU and the OSCE, over the use of excessive force. Special Police wearing masks and equipped with anti-riot gear also removed an improvised monument that citizens had erected for David Dragicevic, the 21-year-old young man whose family has mobilized thousands in the Serb-dominated semi-autonomous entity to support them in their search for the truth about his controversial killing. Dragicevic was murdered in March and initially, Police said that he had taken drugs and drowned in a nearby river. This explanation sparked public outrage and angered the young man's father who swore he would pursue justice no matter what. Davor Dragicevic believes Police is covering up the murder and protecting some politically connected suspects. Lukac defended the actions saying that some members of the "*Justice for David*" group are known criminals, that Davor Dragicevic is illegally occupying Banja Luka's main square for months and that the Bosnian Serb opposition and Sarajevo are behind all of it. He accused the opposition in RS of abusing the "*Justice for David*" group in a "*morbid way*." "*They steered the group into a political direction*," the Minister claimed. According to Lukac, the "*Justice for David*" group has accused top-ranking officials in RS of complicity in the murder without any

evidence. He also accused the group of provoking the Police, insulting Officers and trying to force its way into the RS presidential building. "*Davor Dragicevic has given himself the right to hand out justice, he gave himself the right to call out anybody*," Lukac said adding that nobody else has done that until now. According to the RS Interior Minister protest on December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2018 over the unsolved murder of David Dragicevic turned violent when opposition politicians arrived at the scene and after Officers were provoked. He also said that Davor Dragicevic's lawyer, Ifet Feraget, was sent from Sarajevo to "*destabilize the RS*." Protests in support for Dragicevic were held in Belgrade and Sarajevo as well. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- December 27<sup>th</sup>, the Croat member of Bosnia's tripartite Presidency, Zeljko Komsic said that he would only support nomination of a new Council of Ministers (CoM) Chairman who supports Bosnia's next step toward NATO membership. The new Chairman of Bosnia's CoM is expected to be the Bosnian Serb Zoran Tegeltija, from the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrataor - SNSD) whose leader Milorad Dodik is currently the Chairman of Bosnia's Presidency. One of Dodik's predecessors and party colleague Nebojsa Radmanovic sent Bosnia's NATO membership application to Brussels in 2009, but since then the party changed its political stance and is now opposed to the activation of the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), which the Alliance recently greenlighted. Bosnia's three constituent groups rotate the position of the Head of Bosnia's Government and the next mandate has to go to the Serbs, precisely to a member of SNSD which is opposed to NATO membership. But the candidate needs the approval of all three

Bosnian Presidency members, and Komsic announced the criteria for his vote in favor. *“We expect from the future candidate for Chairman of the Council of Ministers, whose name is already being mentioned publically, to accept everything that has already been decided, not only by Bosnia’s Presidency but also by other state-level institutions,”* Komsic said reminding that in 2009 the Presidency had already decided that Bosnia would apply for NATO membership and that decision has never been retracted. Komsic said that it is *“not realistic to expect that the current presidency will support a person who says already beforehand that he does not want to realize the presidential decision,”* Komsic said. Komsic said he respects the Resolution on military neutrality which the National Assembly of RS has adopted last year, but he also pointed out that the RS does not have competencies to adopt any decisions on foreign policy according to Bosnia’s Constitution. The State Presidency, part of the Council of Ministers and the Parliament have exclusive competencies for that, he stressed. *“Because of this reason I think that support for the Chairman of the Council of Ministers could be withheld, but we will see,”* he concluded. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- December 28<sup>th</sup>, situation with migrants is likely to get complicated on Bosnia and Herzegovina's borders in the following months, Chief of Bosnia's Border Police Zoran Galic has warned. Due to the cold weather and bad conditions, the number of migrants attempting to cross borders in the eastern and north-eastern parts of Bosnia significantly decreased compared to September and October. *“Police officers prevented 2,699 illegal migrants' crossings in September, 1,919 in October, 971 in November and 323 in the first 25 days of December. We expect a more complex*

*situation with the upcoming warmer days,”* said Galic. Thousands of migrants have entered Bosnia on their way toward EU countries since the year began. The country became a significant transit point for them after numerous surrounding countries closed their borders, with Bosnia now being described as a *“migrant hotspot”* among local officials. After spending months in the open, in improvised tent camps and abandoned buildings of the north-western Bosnian towns of Bihac and Velika Kladusa, migrants were now accommodated in the facilities provided and equipped by international and local humanitarian organizations. The migrants arriving in and passing through Bosnia are mostly adult, able-bodied men and fall under the economic migrant category, said Galic. Women and children are rare. *“They're trying to illegally cross the border mostly on foot between two border crossings, in the buffer strip that is. Border Police officers of Bosnia and Herzegovina often take part in rescuing the migrants from drowning in rivers,”* he added. (www.ba.n1info.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT  :

*Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust. It is under question if the general election held on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018 will bring political stability in the country. Although it is estimated that formation of Government would be a very difficult issue adding more problems in state’s function, establishment of a coalition Government is very likely to include the three main parties of its national entity (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats). It seems that HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party) and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) have reached an agreement to cooperate in*

*forming a ruling coalition despite their different views on main issues. It is rumored the Bosnian Serb Zoran Tegeltija will be nominated as the new Chairman of the Council of Ministers. However, the Bosnian Croat member of the tripartite Presidency stated that he is not willing to support a Bosnian Serb who is opposed towards state's accession to NATO. It is assessed that the matter is a part of background negotiations between parties, but also an issue of inter-serb Croatian parties namely Komcic against Covic. Tension has broken out between Bosnia and Croatia due to the direct intervention of the latter in country's internal affairs. In our point of view it is another sign of "Dayton Peace Agreement" malfunction. Croatian actions put the agreement under question claiming that Bosnia's Croats rights are violated. In this context, Bosnia's Croats highlight the issue of re-establishment of Herzeg – Bosnia republic raising questions for Croatia's real intentions over Bosnia. One should take into consideration the current arms race in the region mainly by Serbia and Croatia. Not only that but also the establishment of Kosovo Army complicates current situation. Election of ultra nationalist Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia's EU and NATO 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. Bosnia has become a field of influence's rivalry; Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Russia approach the country mainly through "investments" and/or funding ethnic or religious groups according to their interests. Approval of Bosnia's MAP by NATO aims at facilitating state's approach with the Alliance; however*

*Dodik's presence in the tripartite Presidency is a critical obstacle for any further step.*



**BULGARIA:** December 24<sup>th</sup>, the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boiko Borissov held talks in Sofia with a delegation headed by Saudi Prince Turki bin Mohamed bin Fahad bin Abdulazis al Saud, advisor to the royal Court, who stated "Saudi Arabia is a promising foreign economic partner of Bulgaria." According to the Bulgarian Government announcement the purpose of the meeting, held at the Cabinet building, was to discuss specific actions to strengthen cooperation between the two countries. Borissov and the Saudi Prince discussed bilateral cooperation in infrastructure, energy, industry and the food industry, the statement said. The talks were part of the dialogue established after Borissov paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia at the end of November 2017, the first such high-level visit in the history of the countries' bilateral relations. At the talks, it was agreed that Bulgarian Economy Minister Emil Karanikolov would visit Saudi Arabia where, with his counterpart, he would begin work on specific projects. The Bulgarian Government statement said that the Saudi delegation included the counselor to the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers Ahmed Agil Alhatib, the Deputy Head of the Saudi Fund for Development Halid Sulayman Alhidairi, International Relations Adviser Hayfa Jedeja, Royal Court staffers Favaz Mohammed Alhazhdi and Tamer Mohamed Alhuhayni and the Deputy Director of Cyber Security, Mohamed Saleh Alhomrani. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

**COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**  :



*The junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots looks like the vulnerable piece of the Governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus, Bulgaria has entered in a period of fragile political stability. The President Radev grabs every opportunity to criticize the Government (and the Prime Minister Borisov) 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. 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:** December 25<sup>th</sup>, most Croatians are against the euro, their greatest concerns are immigration and terrorism at EU level and unemployment and the economic situation at home, and the number of Croatians who have a positive image of the EU is on the rise, the autumn Eurobarometer survey shows.

The survey was conducted from 8 to 22 November in the 28 member states, five membership candidate countries and the Turkish community in Cyprus. It revealed that 56% of respondents in Croatia are against the European single currency, the euro, 40% support it, while 4% said they do not know. Support for the euro among Croatians fell by six percentage points from the spring survey. Croatians said their greatest concerns at national level are unemployment (43%), the economic situation (28%) and rising prices and costs of living (27%). At the EU level, unemployment was mentioned as the greatest concern by 23% of those polled, followed by rising prices and immigration. Croatians are among the most pessimistic EU nations when it comes to the state of the national economy, as 83% of them consider it bad and only 16% good. These, however, are better results than those from the April survey when only 11% of Croatian respondents described the state of the national economy as good. Asked to identify the most important issue currently faced by the EU, 48% of Croatians mentioned immigration, 32% terrorism and 19% the state of public finances in member states. Overall, respondents in all 28 member states are mostly concerned about immigration (40%) and terrorism (20%). Most Croatians (65%) consider the economic situation in the EU good, 26% think it is bad, and 9% do not know. A total of 58% of Croatians believe that the impact of the economic crisis on the job market has already reached its peak and that the situation will recover, while 38% think that the worst is still to come. Some 39% of Croatians have a positive image of the EU, five percentage points more than in spring this year; 42% have a neutral image, five percentage points less than in spring, and 18% have a negative image. EU enlargement policy continues to be unpopular.

43% of respondents in the EU are in favor of further enlargement, 45% are against, while 12% do not know. (www.n1info.com)

- December 29<sup>th</sup>, the Defense Ministry will propose to the Government not to sign the agreement with the Israeli Government on the purchase of 12 fighter jets should they be modified as requested by the US Government, because, then they would no longer be F-16 Barak aircraft with which Israel won the Croatian tender, Defense Ministry official Davor Tretinjak said. *“If the whole equipment is changed, both the Israeli and American, and modified with state-of-the-art American equipment, then it's no longer the F-16 CD Barak,”* Tretinjak said commenting on the latest media reports that the US was making the sale of the US-made Israeli aircraft conditional on the removal of the Israeli equipment built into them. In that case, the Defense Ministry would have to propose to the Government not to conclude the Government to Government agreement with Israel and to suspend any further talks, he added. Asked if that meant that a new tender would be issued, Tretinjak said *“We will see with the Government what a Plan B would be and what further steps to take.”* The US news website “Axios” said on Thursday, citing an unnamed Israeli official that the sale of the US-made Israeli fighter jets to Croatia was practically “dead” after outgoing US Defense Secretary James Mattis refused to soften the US terms for the transfer of the aircraft. To approve the deal, the US demanded that Israel remove the Israeli systems installed in the F-16s and return the jets to their original condition before transferring them to Croatia. HTV said that Israel should respond to the US demands by January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Tretinjak said that Israel had built its own equipment into the F-16 CD Barak and that these

modifications were decisive for its selection. *“This plane satisfies our needs,”* he said, adding that Croatia and Israel had been given a guarantee from the US approving the sale of such modified aircraft. In September 2018, the US State Department sent approval to Israel, which in turn forwarded it to Croatia, permitting it to sell the F-16 CD Barak aircraft, modified with Israeli equipment, to Croatia. *“That letter is filed both in Israel and in the Croatian Defense Ministry,”* Tretinjak said. *“We expect this matter to be resolved in the coming days because so far there has been no mention of replacing the entire equipment of the F-16 Barak with American equipment. In that case, it would no longer be a Government to Government agreement, but several agreements would be required. The Defense Ministry has not been authorized by the Croatian Government to conclude such an agreement on the Government's behalf nor would it manipulate others. We would bring into question our own transparency, the transparency of the entire procedure,”* he said. (www.hr.n1info.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Croatia follows a tough external policy with neighboring countries. Although it has territorial disputes with Slovenia and Bosnia it does not hesitate to intervene in Bosnia's internal affairs in the name of Croatian entity living there. Declaration on the status of Croats in Bosnia was considered by the neighboring country as a direct interference in its internal affairs. Bosnia's Croats announced their plans to re-establish the Republic Herzeg Bosnia, while Croatia keeps funding Bosnia's Croats highlighting the existence of three equal entities. It is a fact, that after the October 2018 elections Croatia insists*

*on a hard line against Bosnia's politics requesting actually changes of Dayton Peace Agreement. It is more than obvious that 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" 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. Although the President is a member of the ruling party, it is estimated that there is some kind of political distance between the President and Government. However, ruling coalition claims political stability. 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. It is still a question how Croatia will react. Apart from that a new border conflict has emerged with Bosnia & Herzegovina regarding Peljesak Bridge. The state accelerates its efforts towards accession in Schengen zone. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards.*



**CYPRUS:** December 27<sup>th</sup>, the President Nicos Anastasiades suggested Greek Cypriots would be at a disadvantage if the island was reunited under the current provisions of a federal model, as there were no signs in sight of resumption any time soon of negotiations that broke down amid acrimony in 2017. Anastasiades said political equality was one thing and *"The demand of one community to impose itself on the other through special provisions,"* adding *"We are not talking about minorities and majorities, we are talking about the functionality of the state*

*so as to ensure its viability."* Addressing Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci, who had advised Anastasiades to change tack, the President challenged him to name one country with a federal system *"where one of the constituent states will define the other one's destiny through positive vote mechanisms."* *"Let him show me one country, not a federation, which is under the guarantee of a third country that invaded and occupies the territory of another,"* Anastasiades said. Anastasiades' raised the matter of decentralized or loose federation early in October, after years of negotiations in which the Greek Cypriot side tried to make the central state stronger. Main opposition Progressive Party of Working People (Ανορθωτικό Κόμμα Εργαζόμενου Λαού - AKEL), suggested he was departing from the side's long-standing position and risked dragging the island into official partition and two states. Other observers believe it is a stalling tactic, since the fuss is all about secondary matters, although it was not clear what the endgame is. The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres had dispatched a special envoy to speak to all the sides, including Cyprus' guarantors, with a view of resuming the talks, which broke down in the summer of 2017 with the two sides blaming each other. Turkish Cypriot "foreign minister" Kudret Ozersay said he did not expect anything to happen before the end of the year. Ozersay said the terms of reference for the resumption of talks could be prepared by the end of the year since there was neither common vision, nor agreement on what the two sides would negotiate. In his view, the problem was everyone focusing on preparing a document, which would be interpreted differently by the two sides at the end of the day. *"In my view, there is no such possibility,"* he said, of a resumption of talks any time soon. He said possibly next year,

after the European Parliament elections, Brexit, local elections in Turkey “we must not discuss the terms of reference directly but whether we have a common vision or not. And if we don’t, there is common ground somewhere.” AKEL criticized the President over his comments, suggesting they were additional proof of his about-turn. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Cyprus expresses in highest level its commitment to continue its energy plans exploiting energy resources in Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) despite Turkish aggression. A 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 which expressed their interest by joining the latest summits by the presence of their Ambassador. It is a fact that Cyprus has a significant deficit of military power which is (externally) balanced by regional cooperation. Involvement of an American company (ExxonMobil) in the drills it is proved “wise” and “smart.” Announcement of Turkish seismographic research within the Cypriot EEZ (plot 4) could be assessed as spasmodic actions of Turkey against Cyprus (already predicted and expected). At the moment, none could assess the level of escalation Turkey seeks to reach. Taking into consideration that Cyprus lacks of military power and especially aeronautical forces it is expected Greece to be engaged more actively in the region. 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. It seems that not only the Turkish Cypriot side faces arguments with Turkey regarding negotiations, but also Cypriot political parties are divided regarding President Anastasiades’ negotiation plans. Recent close approach between Cyprus and the US provoked Russia’s strong reaction which foresees a possible isolation from its influence in the Island. It is not a secret that Russia enjoys or used to enjoy a privileged relationship with Cyprus due to the US distance regarding defense and foreign policy neutrality. It is a question how Cyprus will achieve to balance between the US and Russia interests in the region. Situation is complex since Russia strengthened its relation with Turkey, while the US and Turkey, two allies within NATO are deteriorating theirs. The idea of NATO as the guarantor of Cyprus reunification and its security is a new fact which may cause disputes within the Cypriot political life. 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



**F.Y.R.O.M:** December 27<sup>th</sup>, 130 new professional soldiers completed their training and joined F.Y.R.O.M's Armed Forces. The Defense Minister Radmila Sekerinska together with the Deputy Defense Minister Bekim Maksuti and Chief of the General Staff, Major General Vasko Gjurchinovski attended graduation of the third class in 2018 of new professional soldiers at the Ilinden Barracks. *"Welcome to the Army of the Republic of Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M]. I announced that in 2018 the Armed Forces of Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M] will be modernized and will be strengthened with 375 new professional soldiers. You will contribute in security, safety and peace of the citizens of our homeland,"* the Minister said. Sekerinska stressed that F.Y.R.O.M opened its doors for NATO in 2018. *"Invitation to NATO is our biggest success this year for the state and its defense. As far as I am concerned I believe that resolution of one of the long-standing problems, the problem of providing the basic needs and logistical support namely the problem called boots and uniforms, is a great success,"* the Minister said. She announced that delivery of 7,000 pairs of boots to the Armed Forces has been started, while an agreement for 14,000 new uniforms (namely two uniforms for each soldier) has been signed. For the amount of 840,000 euro, F.Y.R.O.M's Armed Forces should receive sets consisting of a hat, coat, and pants that were manufactured in accordance with its specifications. The acquisition, which main criterion was the lowest price, was given to a company from Shtip, and the material and the uniforms will be made by a company from Istanbul, Turkey, who is a subcontractor, as it is indicated in the Agreement. Referring to 2018, Shekerinska said wages were finally increased by 10% and a 5% increase is planned for 2019.

According to the Minister, the already increased in 2018 defense budget by 15% will be strengthened in 2019 by a new increase of 33%. Finally, Shekerinska underlined that F.Y.R.O.M Armed Forces' structure reflects the ethnic structure of the state. In the meanwhile, F.Y.R.O.M is prepared for the largest international military exercise which is to take place in the country called, "DECISIVE STRIKE", and will be held in June and July 2019 at the Army Training Ground "Krivolak" and at the Training Center "Pepeliste." It will be part of the complex exercises of the European Command of the U.S Armed Forces "SABER GUARDIAN 19" in the Black Sea and the Balkan region. ([www.makfax.com.mk](http://www.makfax.com.mk), [www.meta.mk](http://www.meta.mk))

- December 28<sup>th</sup>, F.Y.R.O.M's President Gjorge Ivanov addressed the Parliament in his traditional annual speech by claiming *"What is very important is the fact that the Macedonian knot cannot be simply cut, but must be very carefully untangled. Because, by cutting the knot, one cuts and divides the Macedonian people. As all my predecessors did, as President of the Republic of Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M] I too worked on untangling that knot. I was aware that there are issues that cannot be negotiated, acquired rights that cannot be discussed, red lines that cannot be crossed. However, in the past two years, there came someone to power, who thought that cutting the knot would be sufficient for resolving the Macedonian question, and this - at any price. That is the essence of the problem. When you are ready to resolve an issue at any price, then the price you pay is the highest. The price for resolving the Macedonian question in this manner is a legal and historical deletion of Macedonian people, because without the Macedonian people, Macedonian identity and Macedonian language,*



*there will no longer be a Macedonian question. In other words, the question of identity will be resolved through its deletion. With this, the Republic of Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M] and the Macedonian people [F.Y.R.O.M people] have been pushed into a legal, political and historical abyss. The Pandora's box has been opened and now almost everyone believes they have the right to deny what is our acquired right. And this at several levels and on several occasions.”* In regard to the “Prespa Agreement” he said that it puts an end to the Republic of Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M] as we know it and that it was put without a national consensus and without his knowledge or consent. *“On September 30, a referendum was held, whereby Macedonian people [F.Y.R.O.M people] were asked to state their opinion on the Prespa Agreement. On that referendum, people were given a false alternative. They had to choose between prosperity and identity, as if there is such a thing as prosperity without identity. During the referendum campaign, the Government claimed that the Prespa Agreement recognizes Macedonian people [F.Y.R.O.M people], protects Macedonian language [F.Y.R.O.M language] and strengthens Macedonian identity F.Y.R.O.M identity]. The referendum of September 30 could have brought the Republic of Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M] into a state of submission and dependence to another state. The referendum was unsuccessful. With the insufficient turnout at the referendum, the people spoke against premature, imposed and detrimental solutions made without a previous national consensus. On September 30, by not voting, the quiet majority made a loud vocal decision.”* he said. Ivanov claimed by the free interpretation of the Treaty with Bulgaria F.Y.R.O.M has been thrown into a labyrinth, which is difficult to get out of and now Bulgaria

has announced an annex to the Treaty. Ivanov said the law on languages, the way it was written, and the way it was adopted in Parliament, will fully block the work of the institutions. Almost all Articles in the Law violate the Constitution. The law was approved by Parliament in apparent breach of prescribed procedure. Ivanov said that on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018, political violence had led to physical violence and asked what was the difference between his pardons and the current amnesty law. On April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018 Ivanov said there was no scenario for a military state of emergency, unless someone abused his name for his own purposes. *“I am constantly informed of orders given for the surveillance, filming and wiretapping of myself, my cabinet, and members of my family. Systems, names, Governments, Directors are changing, but it seems that UDBA is still UDBA,”* the President concluded. He said he sees no other perspective than EU and NATO membership, which he believes will unite society, but he claimed that this it will not happen just by implementation of the agreement with Greece. (www.meta.mk)



F.Y.R.O.M's President Gjorge Ivanov Addressing the Parliament  
(www.president.mk)

- December 28<sup>th</sup>, the Criminal Court disclosed the contents of the letter the US Ambassador Jess

Baily had sent to the Presidents of Skopje Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court, as well as to Justice Minister Renata Deskoska and the Chairman of Judicial Council, Zoran Karadjovski, over rumors that the U.S Embassy is exerting influence on judiciary. In a letter dated December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018 Baily is asking judges not to openly point at the U.S Embassy as in charge of the processes and decisions made in regards to detentions and Court verdicts. Any suggestion that the U.S wants to manage the outcome of Court settlements is false, the U.S Ambassador to F.Y.R.O.M said. *“In the past several weeks, my colleagues and I have been told on several occasions that Macedonian [F.Y.R.O.M] judges have reportedly attributed decisions taken in current Court cases, investigations and detentions to instructions from the Americans. Nothing could be further from the truth to instructions from the Americans,”* Bailey said in the letter. *“Nothing could be further from the truth. The United States supports and advocates the independence of the Macedonian [F.Y.R.O.M] judiciary. We believe that judges should make decisions based on applicable laws and permitted evidence, not on the basis of any political assessments or interventions by any political or governmental person. It is our consistent message, publicly and privately,”* the Ambassador stressed. (www.makfax.com.mk)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*The Prime Minister Zaev accelerates procedures for constitutional amendments aiming at concluding the whole process successfully. It is expected late Janury 2019 the whole process will have been finished successfully. Not only F.Y.R.O.M's future is based on this process, but also Zaev's political future. It is more than*

*certain that constitutional change will end successfully not only because Zaev fully controls political balance in the Parliament, but also because international community namely the US and EU strongly supports F.Y.R.O.M's name change. However, latest statements by the Prime Minister about “Macedonian” language within Greece raised tension between the two countries. It is assessed that Zaev is addressed to his own internal audience and it is not in his direct interests to intervene in Greek internal affairs. He is trying to convince FYROM's citizens that “Prespa Agreement” is a good one securing the state's interests. Nevertheless, tension proves that the agreement is unclear allowing both parts to interpret it according to their interests. Initiative for political reconciliation is a positive step by Zaev's governance, although there are claims that it's the price for 8 opposition MPs support regarding constitutional amendments and more specifically the name deal with Greece. The European Parliament has sent an encouraging message to F.Y.RO.M for opening accession negotiations in June 2019. The country has become a field of rivalry between the US and EU on the one side and Russia on the other. After Montenegro, NATO seeks to bring F.Y.R.O.M within the alliance isolating Russian influence in the region. Lavrov openly claims that the US and EU blackmailed and bribed MPs to support the name agreement with Greece. Needless to say that in a period where border questions are raised again in the Balkans, F.Y.R.O.M needs political stability and growth prospects.*



**GREECE:** December 26<sup>th</sup>, Turkish violations of Greek airspace in the Aegean Sea continued with the Hellenic National Defense General Staff (GEETHA) recording 36 violations

of Greek national air space over the northeast, central and southeast parts of the Aegean Sea. GEETHA said nine of the violations were carried out by three formations of Turkish F-16 jets, four of which were armed, and the other 27 by two CN-235 planes. In five of the cases, the Turkish jets also infringed upon the Athens Flight Information Region (FIR). One of the airspace violations developed into a mock dogfight with Greek jets. All of the Turkish aircraft were identified and intercepted by Greek fighter planes in line with international rules of engagement, GEETHA said. A day earlier, on Christmas Day, two pairs of Turkish F-16 fighter aircrafts momentarily flew over some of Greece's easternmost islands at a height of over 27,000 feet. According to GEETHA, a pair of Turkish F-16 aircraft flew over Kastellorizo and Strongyli islands without submitting a flight plan to the Athens Flight Information Region (FIR) as Turkey was obligated to. Three minutes later, another pair of F-16s overflew the islet of Ro at a height of 28,000 feet and exited the Athens FIR on the same minute. Both pairs were intercepted by Greek fighter aircraft, as per the international rules of engagement. These Turkish forays into Greek air space happen often. According to Confidence Building Measures agreed by the two countries, such overflights are to be avoided. (www.ekathimerini.com)



Kastellorizo island and Ro – Stroggili islets



The Group of Megisti (Kastellorizo – Ro – Stroggili)

- December 28<sup>th</sup>, Police believes that the explosion on Thursday of a makeshift bomb outside a church in the central Kolonaki district of Athens, which injured a Policeman and a church employee, was the work of “apprentice” terrorists. Counterterrorism officials investigating the blast reportedly believe that the culprits do not belong to any of the country’s active domestic terror groups. Instead, they have described them as young anarchists aiming to upgrade their operations from Molotov cocktails to making and using makeshift explosive devices. However, despite the perpetrators’ perceived inexperience, Police have expressed serious concern, as there was no telephone warning, while the blast, albeit small, occurred on a busy Athens street, shortly before morning mass was due to begin. Moreover, it was the third terror-related incident after bomb disposal experts defused an explosive device placed outside the Athens home of Prosecutor Isidoros Doyiakos and the powerful December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018 bomb attack at Skai TV’s headquarters in southern Athens. Thursday’s explosion was caused by a device placed inside a shoebox. It was discovered by the church caretaker, who notified Police. The device exploded while the Police Officer who first arrived at the scene was examining the package. He suffered face and



hand injuries and was transferred to a military hospital. Media reports indicated that his life is not in danger. The church employee also suffered minor injuries and was transferred to nearby Evangelismos Hospital. The shoebox contained wires, a clock and two small plastic water bottles with a yellow liquid, probably petrol, inside them. The Minister of Education, Research, and Religious Affairs, Kostas Gavroglou visited the attacked church condemning such actions. The latest attack prompted statements of condemnation from political parties across the board. New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία – ND) leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis called for zero tolerance to violence. “A bomb outside a church in a densely populated commercial street in Athens is a cold attack against citizens,” he wrote in a social media post. “Unfortunately, the more the Government fails to acknowledge the need for zero tolerance toward violence, the more unprecedented the feelings of insecurity grow,” Mitsotakis added. The leader of the centrist Movement for Change (Κίνημα Αλλαγής - KINAL), Fofi Genimata, said the incident indicated the country is facing a security problem. “The Government must assume its responsibilities,” she said. (www.ekathimerini.gr, www.alphatv.gr)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*The country has entered in full pre-electoral period and parties are prepared for snap elections. Ruling coalition of SYRIZA – ANEL intensifies its efforts to reverse political atmosphere addressed to their special electoral audience. ANEL leader Kammenos hardens his rhetoric against the name deal with FYROM threatening to topple the Government if the agreement will come to the Parliament for*

*ratification. It is a fact, that ANEL as an ultra right-wing party with nationalist rhetoric has been trapped in the agreement with FYROM, which touches a sensitive issue for Greek society namely the Macedonian question. The burden of Prespa Agreement may be detrimental for political existence of ANEL and the party tries to eliminate it. On the other hand SYRIZA tries to gain political time planning to relief society with social care measures. Under these circumstances it is assessed that early election may be called in May 2019 together with local and European election. However, it is rumored another scenario; ANEL may topple the Government earlier, in the end of January 2019 or beginning of February 2019 when the Prespa Agreement will come to the Parliament for ratification. By this action, ANEL keeps a “patriotic” stance and SYRIZA leaves the burden of ratification to New Democracy which is expected to be the winner of next election (according to the polls) and its leader Mitsotakis has publically stated that his party will not ratify the agreement. Of course there is always the alternative scenario of parliamentary election in autumn 2019 when actually mandate of current Government expires, but with few possibilities under the current political situation. Internal terrorism showed up again by putting a bomb in an Athens downtown church proving that it remains a major unresolved problem of national security undermining stability of the state. Name agreement with F.Y.R.O.M is under question after provocative statements of the Prime Minister Zaev who openly raised the issue of “Macedonian” language in Greece and expressed irredentist ideas of “Macedonia of the Aegean.” Strategic dialogue between Greece and the US including defense, security, and energy matters strengthen geopolitical position of the state in the*

*fragile region of East Mediterranean Sea and sending strong messages to Turkey. However, Greek diplomacy (and Cypriot) keeps an eye on latest developments regarding the U.S military withdraw from Syria and ongoing talks between the U.S and Turkey. Tension between Greece and Turkey has been raised in rhetoric level. It is assessed that Greece is taking measures to deter any further escalation by the Turkish side showing determination and readiness to protect national interests. Next period will be critical to see if Turkey keeps maintaining a war of words or it will escalate situation taking in advantage an accidental or preplanned incident.*



**KOSOVO:** December 24<sup>th</sup>, the Government of Kosovo approved the draft law for the duties, responsibilities and competences of the Kosovo Republic in the dialogue process with Serbia. The Prime Minister of Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj, said that the draft law will be sent soon to be voted in the Parliament. *“The law will determine the institutional hierarchy and the decision-making procedures for handling the dialogue with Serbia,”* Haradinaj said during the meeting. (www.top-channel.tv)

- December 26<sup>th</sup>, the President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, addressed to the MPs of the Kosovo Parliament. Thaci thanked the political parties in Kosovo for being unanimous about the matter of the Army. He underlined that from a “Country destroyed by the genocide of Serbia’s military, Kosovo is now an independent and sovereign country.” Thaci added that the final agreement with Serbia will be signed at the White House, in presence of the U.S President, Donald Trump. According to Thaci Kosovo is ready to start dialogue with Serbia. He is convinced that an agreement with Belgrade is feasible. *“We will*

*work very seriously in Kosovo, responding to the country’s needs for good neighboring. Kosovo will be recognized by Serbia and will join the UN,”* Thaci said. According to the President, the agreement with Serbia will grant recognition from the five EU countries that still have not recognized Kosovo. Thaci reiterated once again his desire Preshevo, Medvegja and Bujanovac join Kosovo. (www.top-channel.tv)

- December 28<sup>th</sup>, at the trial of ten suspected members of “People’s Eye” the Kosovo President Hashim Thaci accused the leader of Kosovo’s main opposition party Self-Determination (Vetevendosje – LV), Albin Kurti, and one of its MPs, Glauk Konjufca, of being behind the organization. “People’s Eye” is accused of drawing up a hit-list of “traitors to the nation” in which Thaci was included among other officials, in an attempt to destabilize the state. Thaci told the court in Pristina that *“I had some information that behind this criminal organization is Sadri Ramabaja, Glauk Konjufca and Albin Kurti.”* Ramabaja is also a VL party official, and was arrested in October 2017 in Albania while trying to cross the border. The party denied he was guilty and described the arrest as politically motivated. On trial is also Murat Jashari, who wounded Azem Vllasi, the former Head of the former ruling League of Communists in Kosovo, in a shooting incident in March 2017 Thaci said that he did not know the main indictee Jashari, but only heard about him from the media. He said he knew Ramabaja but never had any disagreement with him. *“But I have seen from his writings that he has a hostile stance towards us,”* Thaci said. Asked by the Special Prosecutor Syle Hoxha if he had been intimidated by any individual, Thaci said he had. *“I had indications and information from the authorities or Kosovo friends about*

*intimidation coming from Serbia, although I only had real intimidation from 'People's Eye'," he responded. Asked if he knew who the founders of "People's Eye" were, Thaci said "Sadri Ramabaja, Glauk Konjufca and Albin Kurti, and if the hearing was closed to the public, I would mention some other names who have issued statements on behalf of the Kosovo Liberation Army during '98 and '99."* On Thaci's request, the hearing was then closed to the public and media, with the justification that he would testify about sensitive information. The Special Prosecution has alleged that on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015, members of "People's Eye" *"Decided to start illegal actions in March 2017 to seriously destabilize or destroy the basic political, constitutional, economic or social structures of the Republic of Kosovo, with attacks and murders of the highest state personalities... considering them traitors to the country."* Prosecution claims that "People's Eye" had an organized hierarchy, in which each member had a code name and specific duties. *"So, on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017 defendant M. J. [Murat Jashari] attempted to kill the victim Azem Vllasi [because he was] a former Kosovo official in the 1980s, who, according to their operational plan, was ranked first on the list as a traitor to the country,"* it said. (www.balkaninsight.com)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**   :

*Kosovo has reached a critical point where 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, and arresting Serbs it is created a climate which does not facilitate dialogue and the establishment of confidence between the two parties. It should be also underlined that at the moment Kosovo's political power are divided regarding negotiation process and goals. The Prime Minister Haradinaj and the Government are not in harmony with the President Thaci who is the chief negotiator of the state. There is even a matter of legitimacy within the state regarding who is authorized to represent the country in dialogue with Serbia. Kosovo Government works on establishing a legal framework regarding dialogue with Serbia. The EU and the Foreign Policy High Representative rejected Haradinaj's unilateral actions accusing him of undermining dialogue. The question of border exchange or simply change continues to divide Kosovo political forces and population. However, it could be estimated that if Kosovo keeps on acting in such way it may be isolated on the table of international negotiations. 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). Thaci reiterated once again his confidence that dialogue will start again and agreement will be reached. It is assessed that there is somekind background talks between Thaci and Vucic which strengthen Kosovo President's confidence that his country will be recognized by Serbia. It is a fact that Thaci, and the EU wish to isolate Haradinaj intervention in the dialogue process. 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. Kosovo announced the establishment of its army; an issue which may provoke rapid reaction by the Serbian side*

*including military and Police power. 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:** December 25<sup>th</sup>, the President Igor Dodon participated at the meeting of the Republican Council of the Union of Officers of Moldova, where he urged the Officers to draw up a plan of actions to mark *“660 years of the founding of the country of Moldova and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Moldova from fascists, within the framework of the Iasi-Chisinau operation.”* *“Our ancestors managed to triumph 75 years ago, I am sure we will also be able to liberate Moldova from the Euro-Unionists who have led the Republic of Moldova since 2009,”* Dodon said. The Head of state also proposed that a representative of the organization would be included on the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) pro-presidential lists. The Union of Moldovan Officers has a considerable contribution in helping the veterans of the Armed Forces and inspiring the young generation,” the President said. ([www.moldova.org](http://www.moldova.org))

- December 26<sup>th</sup>, Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, in a joint resolution, condemned the aggressive military actions of Russia against Ukraine in the Kerch Strait from the Sea of Azov. The resolution was signed by the Moldova – Georgia – Ukraine Inter-parliamentary Assembly, the Parliament’s communication and public relations department has reported. Under the document, Russia’s military attacks, which resulted in the confiscation of the Ukrainian ships and their crews, represents a flagrant violation of the international law norms,

principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. *“These actions represent a continuation of Russia’s policy of direct military aggression, of illegal occupation of the territories of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, of direct and disguised annexation of the territories under the sovereignty of these states, of maintaining and enhancement of the illegal military presence and establishment of the illegal border in occupied and annexed zones,”* the resolution reads. The Moldova – Georgia – Ukraine Inter-parliamentary Assembly reaffirms the unconditional support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and asks the Government of Russia to immediately return the Ukrainian ships and military, illegally detained. At the same time, the lawmakers ask Russia to ensure the movement of the international transport through the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov. Resolution also demands that Russia ceases the aggressive and provocative actions on the occupied and annexed territories, by observing the international commitments, unconditionally withdraws troops and ammunitions and stops the destabilization of the domestic situation in the neighboring states. Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine urge the international community to take measures against the illegal operations of Russia’s Government in the Kerch Strait, in order to prevent escalation of tensions. Those three countries ask the EU and the USA to extent political support provided to the democratic states of the Eastern Europe. Resolution also urges the Governments of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to join their forces, in order to ensure the release of the Ukrainian ships and the crew members, as well as for the safety of the international sea transport through the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov. The document also reads that the Parliaments of the three signatory states will never accept occupation

of territories by Russia and their annexation through military and illegal actions. The MPs said that Russia's interference in the internal affairs of the three countries has been recognized as illegal destabilizing the entire region. The Moldova – Georgia – Ukraine Inter-parliamentary Assembly, set up this year, represents a consultative forum for the promotion of joint defense and security policies. Among the priorities of the Inter-parliamentary Assembly, there is the active promotion of the three states' position on the international stage and cooperation against misinformation and propaganda. ([www.moldpres.md](http://www.moldpres.md))

- December 27<sup>th</sup>, all the main political parties in Moldova submitted their lists of candidates to the Central Electoral Commission for the parliamentary elections scheduled for February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Under the new and controversial “mixed” electoral system, half the winning candidates for the 101 seats will come from party lists and half will be elected in constituencies. The ruling Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova – PDM) has put the top three figures in the party at the top of its list, meaning party leader Vlad Plahotniuc, current Prime Minister Pavel Filip and the Parliament Speaker, Andrian Candu. There are also some surprises on the PDM list. In 11<sup>th</sup> place is Otilia Dragutanu, whose husband Dorin was Governor of the National Bank when one billion US dollars was stolen from the banking system. The former interim Mayor of Chisinau in 2017 and 2018, Silvia Radu, is also on the PDM list, despite her always having said that she was an “independent” candidate with no ties to the party. On the other hand, the pro-European opposition political ACUM [“NOW”] bloc has put the leader of Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și

Solidaritate - PAS), Maia Sandu, and the leader of the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA), Andrei Nastase, at the top of its list. With few exceptions, this list contains few names that ever held a Deputy's mandate or any other high positions in the state. Also on the list are the Vice-Presidents of both parties, Igor Grosu and Alexandru Slusari, and two personalities from civil society, Igor Munteanu, former Head of the Chisinau-based think tank IDIS Viitorul, and the historian Octavian Ticu. Their list was formatted with gender equality criteria in mind, having a 40 to 60% ratio of men to women. The list of the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova - PSRM, which opinion surveys say is leading with the support of 30 to 35% of the voters, is headed mainly by Deputies from the present Parliament. Some names in the top 30, like Corneliu Furculita, Vasile Bolea and Petru Burduja, were involved in controversial financial schemes involving Russian money coming from off-shore havens in the Bahamas, used to finance Igor Dodon's successful presidential campaign in 2016. Others, like Vlad Batrancea, are known for their hostility to LGBT rights and opposition to Romania. Another is Victor Gaiciuc, the former Ambassador to NATO and former Defense Minister, known also for his close connections to Moscow. He is also a relative of President Dodon's. The Communist Party of Moldova (Partidul Comunist al Moldovei - PCM led by ex-president Vladimir Voronin, told the media that his party will solve its “*bureaucratic issues*” and register for the election shortly, with him being first on the list. All the candidates must pass a 6% threshold to enter Parliament. The EU and local experts have voiced concerns about the present electoral system, which they say will



advantage the most powerful, richest and most influential parties, like the PSRM and the PDM. Both parties voted together to change the old proportional system in July 2017. Cancellation of the result of the mayoral race for Chisinau on June 2018 by a court angered the EU, triggering the suspension of macro-financial aid worth 100 million euro. Some fear the scenario will be repeated after the parliamentary elections. Many candidates of both the PSRM and the PDM have a political past in the Communist Party, prompting Voronin to label them “traitors” or “fugitives” on various occasions. (www.balkaninsight.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Political life is “hostage” of the pro-Russian President Igor Dodon and pro-Western Government rivalry which undermines the institutional function of the country. In the wider framework 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. Coming parliamentary elections scheduled for February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019 will be closely monitored by the international community and especially the US and EU as a “democratic stress test.” Moreover the US express concerns over a possible Russian interference in the elections. The Government is sliding 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. By autumn the state has entered in pre-election period although elections are scheduled for February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Opposition parties try to*

*establish a single united bloc against the ruling coalition accused of nepotism and corruption. 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. Moldova, together with Georgia and Ukraine released a particularly aggressive announcement against Russian actions in Kerch Strait and Azov Sea. One should keep an eye on current political (and public) trend on reunification with Romania. The “Transnistria case” is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.*



**MONTENEGRO:** December 26<sup>th</sup>, Ministry of Defense is planning to provide 3D radar for the supervision of air space of Montenegro. The radar would be set up on Bjelasica, reads the long-term defense development plan for the period 2019-2025. “This radar will enable full operation ability for generating the image of the situation of the air space in Montenegro,” reads the document. Military analyst Aleksandar Radic said that there were two options possible when it came to the analysis of the radar set-up: Vrsuta, near Bar, and Bjelasica. “In the previous document, Vrsuta was the chosen location. However, meanwhile, an agreement with SMATSA was confirmed. By means of this agreement, SMATSA will take the radar at its own expense, positioning it at Vrsuta hill and transferring the image to the operation center at the Airport in Golubovci that will be integrated into the NATO system anti-air and anti-rocket defense. Therefore, SMATSA is buying three radars, two of them will be in Serbia and one in Montenegro. The one in Vrsuta will be

*civil, whereas the one set in Bjelasica will be military radar,” explains Radic. Provision of the radar in Bjelasica is a whole different story. As Radic says, there are two options. “One option is temporary delay of the purchase and borrowing the radar from NATO or some other Member State. The other option is to start the purchase procedure as soon as possible. In this case, that will be more than 20 million euro. It’s an expensive investment especially considering that Montenegro bought 3 helicopters worth 30 million euro. That’s why we asked NATO to provide support in bridging the lack of resources. It’s still very uncertain but the expert commission will decide what to do in that sense at the beginning of 2019,” Radic said. (www.cdm.me)*

- December 26<sup>th</sup>, Ministry of Finance and the Government of Montenegro are implementing the measures of fiscal consolidation defined by 2020. Our economic growth is still going up. Strong economic growth recorded this year is a proof that measures of fiscal consolidation were appropriate, said the State Secretary in the Ministry of Finance, Nina Vujosevic. She added that measures had contributed to intense increase of profit and decrease of deficit. She also emphasized the improvement of the credit rating of Montenegro and specific activities of the Ministry of Finance performed in the domain of drafting laws important for further improvement of business environment and she announced some amendments of the set of laws, including the Law on TAV, Law on Tax Administration and Law on Income Tax. (www.cdm.me)

- December 28<sup>th</sup>, the Government of Montenegro adopted the Proposal Amendments to the Law on the Use of the Units of the Armed Forces of Montenegro in the international forces and the

participation of the members of the civil protection, police and state administration authorities in the peacekeeping missions and other activities abroad. The proposed amendments stipulate that the participation of the members of the Armed Forces of Montenegro in the missions, responses to crisis and missions within the humanitarian operations be mandatory. Up until now, the principle of volunteerism has been applied in the participation in missions. *“In order for some Armed Forces member to be sent to some international mission, the first step is applying for the announcement of the Ministry of Defense,”* explained the representatives of the Ministry. *“The reason why the Army can’t send some unit is that the unit lacks a couple of individuals. That brings its occupancy into question and, consequently, the operation capacity for the fulfillment of the deferred task.”* That is why the procedure for the amendment to the existing law has been initiated. *“The amendments will enable that a whole unit can be sent into a mission, provided that all the members had previously been trained for the joint fulfillment of the task,”* said the representatives of the Ministry. The Proposal Law on the Amendments to this law also defines that any member of the unit in charge will have the right to claim for the compensation of the damage caused in case they get injured during the participation in the mission or during training session. If Montenegro sends two officers in Iraq in the second half of 2019, that will be the fourth participation of Montenegro into the NATO peacekeeping missions, besides those where it takes part under the auspices of the EU. Montenegro sent the first troupes to the international peacekeeping mission ISAF, in Afghanistan which in 2014 became Resolute Support.

([www.cdm.me](http://www.cdm.me))

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Although the country enjoys a period of “euphoria”, major reforms should be implemented in order the country to come closer to the EU. The EP assessment is positive praising the state’s efforts to implement major reforms, but on the other hand it underlines the problems of the rule of law, media freedom, corruption, money laundering, and organized crime. However, the EP expressly states that Montenegro under certain conditions may be able to access the EU by 2025. 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. Although the state fulfills its obligations as a full member of the Alliance questions are raised for such initiatives due to their impact in Montenegro’s society but also in country’s foreign relations. A significant number of people is opposed in NATO and maintains pro-Russian stance while Montenegro’s presence in Kosovo may harm relations with Serbia.*



**ROMANIA:** December 27<sup>th</sup>, the Justice Minister, Tudorel Toader has sent to the

President Klaus Iohannis the request to revoke General Prosecutor Augustin Lazar from his post. He has also sent the request to appoint Adina Florea as Head of the Anticorruption Directorate DNA. The President previously rejected the Justice Minister’s proposal to appoint Florea as head of the DNA. The President also rejected four other nominations for senior Prosecutor positions within the General Prosecutor’s Office and the Anti-Organized Crime Directorate – DIICOT. He argued that the nominations did not meet all legal conditions. Toader said he would resend the four other appointment requests as well since no illegality can be found in the files of the candidates. In the event that the President will again reject the appointments, the Justice Minister said that he would see what he has to do when the time comes. In October, Toader announced he was starting the procedure to revoke Lazar, following an evaluation report. Among other reasons for his dismissal, the Justice Minister claimed that the legal procedure for his appointment had not been respected. Lazar, one of the main critics of the ruling coalition’s justice reform, requested in Court the suspension of the procedure to revoke him. The request was filed with the Alba Iulia Court, which sent the case to the Bucharest Court of Appeals. Toader has accused Lazar of stalling things in the hope of finishing his mandate, due to end in April of next year. ([www.romania-insider.com](http://www.romania-insider.com))

- December 29<sup>th</sup>, Romania may lack the leadership skills to hold the EU Council Presidency, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said in an interview with German newspaper Welt am Sonntag. He said the Romanian Government is technically well prepared for the six-month Presidency but that it does not fully understand what it takes to hold this



position. Moreover, Romania's leaders are divided and cannot act as a "compact entity" in Europe, Juncker said. *"I believe that the Bucharest Government has not fully grasped what it means to chair the EU countries. Prudent action requires a willingness to listen to others and a strong desire to put one's own concerns behind them. I have some doubts,"* Juncker told Welt and Sonntag. Romania will take over the rotating EU Presidency from Austria on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 and will hold it until the end of June. During this period, Romania will also host the EU summit in Sibiu, in which the future of the EU after Brexit will be discussed. (www.romania-indider.com)

- December 29<sup>th</sup>, the President Klaus Iohannis has signed the decree extending the mandate of General Nicolae Ciuca as the Chief of Romanian Defense Staff after he had denied during the CSAT meeting the proposal of the Defense Minister to replace Ciuca. Defense Minister Gabriel Les had proposed Dumitru Scarlat to take over the helm of the Chief of Armed Forces General Staff. *"General Ciuca's mandate as Chief of Staff ends on December 31. Romania cannot remain without Head of the Army. This situation generated by the PSD's incompetence must be solved. And we solved it after the CSAT meeting. I have taken the decision and signed the decree that is extending the mandate of General Ciuca, who is a competent soldier, who has wonderful results. It would have been better for this situation to be solved sooner, but I think the Romanian Army must know who is leading it and how is leading it,"* the Head of state argued. *"The CSAT meeting had only one issue on the agenda, upon the request of the Defense Minister who aimed at various changes in the Army's leadership. His proposal is not in line with the law. Therefore,*

*CSAT has not Okayed the Defense Minister's request. It is an unpleasant situation that proves once again that PSD is not able to manage the big issues of the country,"* Iohannis said. Minister Les' proposal for the Chief of Staff position was Lieutenant General Dumitru Scarlat, Romania's military representative to NATO and EU. This proposal, as well as two more subsequent proposals (including Ovidiu-Liviu Uifaleanu, the incumbent Head of Land Forces) have been rejected by Iohannis. The Prime Minister Viorica Dancila has replied that the decree signed by the President to extend the mandate of Ciuca does not observe the law and creates the premises of another constitutional legal conflict. In retort, Defense Minister has stated that he would come up with a new proposal for the Chief of Staff in January, adding that Iohannis could extend Nicolae Ciuca's mandate only upon the Minister's proposal. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

## 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. The President rejects the Government's proposals one after another leading in institutional and constitutional deadlock. Apart from that the state looks divided in major institutional issues such as national defense, justice, and security. Iohannis strongly criticizes statements and actions by governmental officials. He has directly asked for toppling the Government calling them "an accident of the Romanian democracy." The Prime Minister Dancila requested by the Constitutional Court to solve the problem since Iohannis rejected the appointment of certain Ministers. Leader of the ruling PDM moved a step further stating that his*

party will file a criminal complaint against Iohannis for high treason. One should also take into consideration that the ruling coalition has lost majority in the Chamber of deputies which makes things more complex. Apart from that the EU released reports strongly criticizing the Government over rule of law and justice. 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. As a conclusion, the state faces political abnormality in many levels which at the moment only by early parliamentary elections could be resolved. 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. Current crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Romania's security situation as a forward NATO base.



**SERBIA:** December 25<sup>th</sup>, the President Aleksandar Vucic said *"the only and real truth"* is that Pristina's ROSU units can enter north Kosovo only under two conditions. And these are KFOR's permission, and the consent of the Serb community, Vucic said. *"That's the whole truth, the only truth. Whoever says otherwise is the worst kind of liar,"* the President said. He also pointed out that an agreement was made that explicitly meant there would be *"no rifles"* in northern Kosovo. Vucic recalled that the Brussels agreement was signed in 2013 and that in those talks, NATO's guarantees were sought, primarily concerning ROSU, *"because there were no FIT and other units, while an army (in Kosovo) was not even announced."* *"Our agreement is based on the absence of ROSU.*

*Personally I attended all the meetings, repeated it 500 times before [former EU Foreign Policy Chief] Ashton and NATO officials, and I personally went to NATO and said there can be no armed Albanians with rifles in the north, with an emphasis on ROSU, without these two conditions,"* he added. They wish to forget the other part, Vucic pointed out, and reiterated that the agreement was that there would be no entry into the north without NATO's permission; that is condition number one, but a cumulative rather than an alternative condition is the consent of the Serb community through its representatives namely the four Mayors. Vucic said he *"heard all kinds of lies"* and wanted to tell people *"the truth about what was agreed and achieved - and it wouldn't be the first time they invented something or violated an agreement."* *"That's why they got a clear warning from Serbia not to play with such things, that they would put everyone in the Balkans at risk and endanger peace and security of all,"* Vucic said. He added it was *"no secret that part of the international community is seeking every way to foster Albanian statehood in Kosovo. They violated (UN Security Council) Resolution 1244, which is not great for us anyway."* He also added that Serbia *"cannot expect them to act in accordance with the law - as could be seen at the session of the UN Security Council dedicated to the situation in Kosovo, through the mouth of the British Ambassador."* Vucic called on the Serbs in Kosovo to welcome the New Year and Christmas in peace, health and joy and told them that they can count on Serbia. *"We will not allow them to lie and deceive the public, I told you the truth and I will never allow anyone to announce something else,"* Vucic said. (www.b92.net)

- December 27<sup>th</sup>, the detailed plan of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin's January visit is still being worked on, and there is a possibility that Putin will visit *"one place outside Belgrade."* It is also stated that Putin is preparing at least 20 strategic agreements to be signed with Serbia, worth several hundred million euro, related to investments in infrastructure, energy, agriculture, defense systems, education and tourism. Among them should be contracts on the construction of a railway corridor, Serbia's connection to the TurkStream gas pipeline, delivery of Russian T-72 tanks and anti-aircraft missiles, and export of Serbian food products to Russia. According to Vecernje Novosti, the inevitable topic for the two leaders will be *"the perspective of the dialogue with Pristina and consideration of the possibility of finalizing it with a compromise solution."* (www.b92.net)

- December 28<sup>th</sup>, the President Aleksandar Vucic said it is not clear to him how Hashim Thaci came up with stating that an agreement between Belgrade and Pristina would be signed in Washington. The President told RTS that he *"knows neither who came up with it, nor when Thaci was told this,"* and also wondered *"what are we supposed to sign. As he pointed out, a Kosovo solution is not in sight, and added that he had "stressed this before."* Vucic also said that Serbia is often *"falling into the trap of the fake quarrels taking place in Pristina."* *"Becim Colaku [advisor to Hashim Thaci] said that he was in favor of revoking the tax (on goods from central Serbia), in order to open the way for Thaci in the U.S. Do not forget that these taxes would not exist if Thaci's party didn't vote in favor. They play good cop, bad cop. In Brussels, they like Thaci, in London they like Haradinaj...,"* said Vucic. He also said that the state will help its

people in Kosovo affected by Pristina's trade measures. The President stressed that *"Serbia will win and our people in Kosovo and Metohija will survive and will not be hungry."* *"We will not allow them to be without the state's support, in every sense, for one moment,"* Vucic said. He added that *"we don't have many choices when someone acts not just unlawfully, but irrationally, like Pristina has done with the taxes, and in this situation we have to endure and wait for the moment when those who supported them will come to reason and the taxes will be abolished."* (www.b92.net)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT   :

*It is assessed that Serbia has followed so far a successful diplomatic strategy achieving to be appeared in the international community as a reasonable voice seeking a compromise resolution via dialogue. Apart from that Serbia took in advantage that it is a member of the UN, while Kosovo it is not. In this context, Serbia pushed the UNSC for a more active role in resolution process sending a message to the EU that its dialogue process has reached a deadlock. 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. It is assessed that a possible Kosovo Police operation in the north or security*

*forces deployment may provoke Serbia's security forces engagement for the protection of Serbian population. Serbia received support from Russia and China in the UN Security Council and Putin's visit to Belgrade on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019 is of high interest. 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. Of course, under these circumstances none could speak for restarting of Belgrade – Pristina dialogue. There are certain analysts who claim that such situation will inevitably lead in Kosovo partition with the north part going to Serbia. Some of them claim that this scenario has already agreed by Vucic and Thaci. Serbian repayment will be Kosovo recognition. By expressing neutrality and maintaining equal distance from the U.S.A and Russia it moves in an environment of fragile balance. Russia is getting involved in Kosovo case by supporting actively Serbian stance.*



**SLOVENIA:** December 29<sup>th</sup>,

Slovenian Prime Minister Marjan Sarec said that his Government's position on the border arbitration with Croatia could not be different from the position of the previous Government led by Miro Cerar, who is now Foreign Minister. *"The arbitration ruling has been made public, Slovenia has its position on it and cannot change it,"* Sarec said. Recalling that Slovenia had sued Croatia with the Luxembourg-based Court of Justice of the EU over its noncompliance with the arbitration ruling, alleging that Croatia was thus violating EU law, Sarec said that Ljubljana is waiting for the court to make a ruling and for

Croatia to respond to Slovenia's proposal for the establishment of a joint border demarcation commission to implement the arbitration ruling. *"We are still waiting for a response to our proposal,"* he said. Asked about his communication with Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, Sarec said that he respects him and that their discussions at sessions of the European Council were normal but that due to the principled position on the arbitration issue, he had not invited Plenkovic to visit Slovenia because he is waiting for Croatia to change its position on the arbitration issue, whereas Slovenia could not change its position about the implementation of the arbitration ruling being binding. Commenting on Cerar's recent visit to Washington, seen as an attempt by Slovenia to establish balance in its relationship with great powers, Sarec described it as good. *"We are being criticized for being pro-Russian, but I don't think that's the case. Our relations with the Russian Federation are just as they should be. There was a certain deficit in relations with the United States, but it is also true that those relations are now more problematic also at EU level, due to the new leadership in the White House,"* he said. (www.n1info.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc) which may test governmental cohesion. Opposition attempt to impeach the Prime Minister is of minor importance without threatening the ruling coalition coherence and stability. Border dispute with Croatia is still ongoing and former Government of Miro Cerar filed a lawsuit against Croatia over its refusal to implement the border arbitration. Although the*

*Prime Minister Marjan Sarec announced that his Government will follow the same policy in the issue, he showed up with an attitude of compromise by claiming that his country will not stop Croatia's accession in the Schengen zone. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. 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.*



## **TURKEY:** December 25<sup>th</sup>,

preparations for a counter-terror operation in Syria, east of the Euphrates River, are proceeding as planned, Turkey's Defense Minister, Hulusi Akar said. Akar said that talks will be held with U.S. officials in the coming days on the roadmap for Manbij, Syria. *“Work on the Manbij roadmap continues intensively,”* Akar told reporters. Turkey and the U.S. agreed to complete the Manbij roadmap before the U.S. finishes the withdrawal of its troops from Syria, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said earlier. The President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has signaled that a cross-border operation against the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria will happen soon. Since 2016, Ankara has carried out two similar military operations in northern Syria. The U.S. President Donald Trump last week made the surprise announcement that the U.S. would withdraw its troops from Syria. The action followed Trump's phone call with Erdogan in which the two leaders agreed on the need for more effective coordination over the civil war-torn country. (www.dailysabah.com)

- December 28<sup>th</sup>, in what is seen as another move by Ankara to dispute the sovereignty of Athens

and Nicosia, Turkey has announced it will send its Cesme research vessel to conduct surveys this week in an area stretching from south of Cyprus all the way up to the northern Aegean. According to a Navigational Telex (NAVTEX), the Cesme will carry out surveys in three areas within Cyprus's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and two within Greece's continental shelf south of the island of Kastellorizo. It will then proceed to survey three areas in the Aegean – southwest of Tilos, north of Icaria and west of Lesvos. The Cesme began its course from the Mediterranean port city of Iskenderun on Thursday and completed its course via the Aegean to Istanbul on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The NAVTEX is seen as a clear message to Athens and Nicosia with regard to Turkey's intentions in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. It also comes on the heels of a series of incendiary comments by Turkish officials and overflights by Turkish fighter jets over Kastellorizo on Christmas Day. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- December 29<sup>th</sup>, Russia and Turkey have agreed to coordinate ground operations in Syria after last week's announcement of the U.S. military withdrawal, Turkish and Russian Foreign Ministers said. *“We paid special attention to new circumstances which appeared in connection with the announced US military pullout,”* Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after talks with Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu in Moscow. *“An understanding was reached on how military representatives of Russia and Turkey will continue to coordinate their steps on the ground under new conditions with a view to finally rooting out terrorist threats in Syria,”* Lavrov said. Cavusoglu confirmed the two countries would coordinate Syria operations, adding they also discussed plans to help refugees to return



home. “We will continue active work (and) coordination with our Russian colleagues and colleagues from Iran to speed up the arrival of a political settlement in the Syrian Republic,” he said. He reminded that Turkey and Russia, as guarantors of the Astana peace process, are defending Syria's territorial integrity and political unity from all efforts to harm them. Turkey and Russia have a joint will to clear all “terrorist” groups from Syria, Cavusoglu added. Besides Lavrov and Cavusoglu, Turkey's Defense Minister Hulusi Akar, Intelligence Chief Hakan Fidan and presidential aide Ibrahim Kalin held talks with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov, Presidential Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentiev, and presidential aide Yuri Ushakov. (www.aljazeera.com)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :**

*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. Turkish – U.S relations have strongly been harmed forcing Ankara to approach new allies such as Russia. Although Turkey re-examines its relations with the EU in an effort to avoid international and regional isolation, the EU sends messages of terminating the EU – Turkey accession talks. Turkish Armed Forces have been engaged in military operations against Kurds and PKK in Northern Iraq and against YPG Kurds in Syria as well. Trump and the US offered a gift to Turkey by their military withdrawal from Syria. Turkey is free to intervene in Kurdish Syria eliminating YPG far from east bank of Euphrates*

*river. Although Erdogan announced that Turkey will not conduct a new military operation against Syrian Kurds, it reinforces its military presence in the area. It is assessed that the Turkish armed forces plan an imminent military operation in cooperation with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). At the moment, Turkey is engaged in military operations in the territory of two other countries, it threatens to start a new operation in Syria, maintains a significant military force in North Cyprus, and threatens a NATO ally – Greece – with an armed conflict. Apart from the use or the threat of use of direct armed violence Turkey participates actively in diplomatic processes in the region (Syria negotiations, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Cyprus question, Qatar crisis etc). The state tries to show a leading role regarding Syria's “next day” claiming that developments in neighboring country are related to its national security mainly because of the Kurds. 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 it seems that they are reaching a critical point since Cypriots have already started hydrocarbon drills in their Exclusive Economic Zone via the US energy giant ExxonMobil. Is Turkey ready to move from rhetoric to action? It is rather difficult to see a direct harassment against the drill ship (which is monitored by 4 U.S vessels), but none could exclude a “hot” incident in the Aegean Sea. The Turkish President and high state's officials express Turkey's determination to protect its interests no matter what. It seems that strengthened multilateral cooperation between Greece, Israel, Cyprus and Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt raises its concerns of regional isolation in a region (Eastern Mediterranean Sea) where*


*Turkey considers it as a preferential field of action.*


[www.hermesresearch.eu](http://www.hermesresearch.eu)


email: [info@hermesresearch.eu](mailto:info@hermesresearch.eu)


Editor in Chief: Ioannis Karampelas


#### 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