

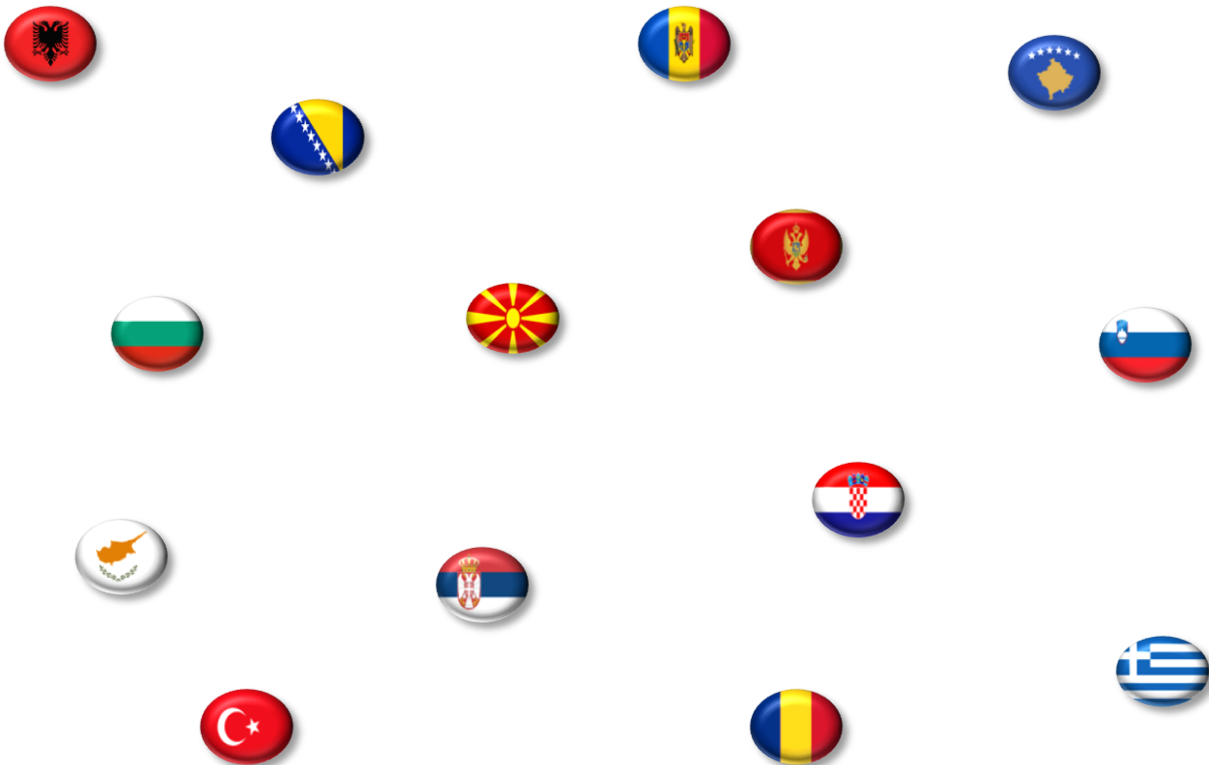
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**Hermes Institute of
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SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

“SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE AT A GLANCE” (ISSN: 2654-0304) is a weekly review of the most significant current political, economic, energy, defense, and security news of Southeastern Europe. It covers 14 countries; Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey. However Greece enjoys its own weekly review for a more detailed presentation of its current affairs (GREECE AT A GLANCE).

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

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ALBANIA: August 5th, Police operations in Gjirokastra are discovering new sites planted with narcotic plants in southern Albania. Within a week of controls, Police have announced three new narcotics cases as cultivation has affected areas of the border with Greece in the remote areas of Permet, Tepelena, Kelcyra and Memaliaj. For the first time in five years, marijuana cultivation has also recently returned to the village of Lazarat in Gjirokastra, which Police raided and where they prosecuted several people. Successive Police meetings with local Governments this year have also failed to curb marijuana cultivation in the county that is known to be one of the most problematic in the region in recent years. Most of the marijuana cultivated is trafficked to neighboring Greece because of its proximity to border areas, but also to Italy. Narcotics' trafficking in the region has strengthened criminal groups involved in organizing cultivation and trafficking to neighboring countries. Albanian Police estimates that narcotics' trafficking remains the most widespread cross-border crime in the area between Albania and neighboring Greece. Alongside Albanian border Police forces in the area for almost two months, the FRONTEX mission has also been operating with the intent to curb drug and refugee trafficking and cooperate with Albanian authorities to crack down on regional and international trafficking networks. (www.tiranatimes.com)

- August 5th, The Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) has changed its stance and refuses to sit for dialogue for as long as Edi Rama is the Prime

Minister. The vice PD leader, Edi Paloka, insists that the non-negotiable condition for dialogue from the PD is Edi Rama's resignation from his post. While the allies of PD registered themselves for the October 13th, 2019 election date, decreed by the President Ilir Meta and refused by the majority, the main opposition party has also refused to register for this date. "Our position has not changed. Rama cannot sit with the opposition as a Prime Minister. Yes, he can be SP leader. We cannot decide who will be their leader," Paloka said. (www.top-channel.tv)

- August 7th, a public letter was sent by President Ilir Meta to the OSCE, asking them to intervene and resolve the current political crisis in Albania. This Wednesday, the President received a response from the OSCE, signed by Miroslav Lajcak, the President of the OSCE, Thomas Greminger, the General Secretary of the OSCE, George Tsereteli, President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and Roberto Montella, General Secretary of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. The letter appreciates Meta's trust on the OSCE as an institution, but they underline that dialogue can only be successful if it can have the attendance of all the parties involved, through a wide national process. (www.top-channel.tv)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political crisis remain active in Albania since the Government and opposition cannot start a dialogue for deescalating tension. PD hardens its stance declaring that there is no dialogue as long as Rama remains the state's Prime Minister. Moreover, the President Ilir Meta and the Government are in an open confrontation seeking to undermine one another. Local elections held on

June 30th, 2019 are rejected by the opposition maintaining a tense situation. President Ilir Meta proposed presidential and local elections on October 13th, 2019 in an effort to resolve current political crisis, but Prime Minister Edi Rama has rejected the date; it seems that also opposition PD will not join the elections. The country has entered in an endless crisis undermining its democratic function according to the European values and standards. In other words, Albania is under a political and constitutional chaos. Such situation strongly affected Albania's EU perspective. Combination of political instability, ties between politics and organized crime, and corruption made the EU to postpone the opening of accession negotiations for Albania for the near future. According to the Enlargement Commissioner, situation will be re-examined by October 2019. Rama's Government collapse and snap elections is a possible scenario. The Government is accused of having links with organized crime and current situation raises questions over the power of "Albanian mafia" in the country and its influence in state's politics. Undoubtedly, corruption and organized crime remains the most significant state's problem undermining its strategic goal of opening accession negotiations with the EU. The EU closely monitors progress of reforms especially in justice sector. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a "mother nation." The state maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on promoting

Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

August 6th, hosted by the EU Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, with Ambassador Lars Gunnar Wigemark in attendance, a meeting of leaders of political parties, election winners of the 2018 General Election was held. Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA), Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata – SNSD) and Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH) leaders Bakir Izetbegovic, Dragan Covic and Milorad Dodik reached an agreement on the formation of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and signed the Principles for Government formation at the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The agreement will last 30 days and will be considered invalid if the Council of Ministers, which is equivalent to the national Government in BiH's complex political system, is not formed until then. The Chairman of the Council is going to be a member of Dodik's SNSD, as well as Ministers for Foreign Trade and Communications and Transport, Nezavisne newspapers report. On the other hand, Izetbegović's SDA will get the portfolios of Foreign Affairs, Defense and Security, while HDZ BiH will receive the Ministries of Finance, Justice and Civilian Affairs. (www.sarajecotimes.com)

- August 6th, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik denied recent allegations from an article in 'Die Welt' that said Russia intends to set up a military

base in Republika Srpska (RS), the Serb-dominated semi-autonomous part of the country. *“That is a total and absolute lie. Some are trying to damage Republika Srpska with lies. They wrote such things before as well, and it proved to be untrue,”* he told Serbia’s *“Alo”* newspaper. The Bosnian Serb leader reiterated his opposition to Bosnia’s NATO membership, saying that the RS is following neighboring Serbia’s lead on the issue. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- August 7th, Two days have passed since Bosnia’s political leaders have signed an agreement on how to form a new Government, but local and international officials are now asking whether one of the vaguely defined principles in the document says Bosnia will continue its path towards NATO membership or not. *“If this situation continues, it will show Bosnia and Herzegovina as unserious on the international scene as even European officials are not sure what they expressed support for - will Bosnia and Herzegovina activate its MAP or was the MAP dismissed,”* said Foreign Affairs Minister, Igor Crnadak, on Wednesday. Activating the MAP (Membership Action Plan) is an important step toward the membership with the Alliance. The Agreement, containing 12 principles that need to be met in order for the Government to be formed within 30 days, was signed by the leaders of the three strongest national parties that won the October election; Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA), Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata – SNSD) and Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica

Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH). The main reason they could not agree on naming the new Government - in Bosnia officially called the Council of Ministers - is a disagreement on whether the country should become a NATO member or not. The Bosniak (Bosnian Muslims) and Croat members of the tripartite Presidency said they will not greenlight the Prime Minister proposed by the Bosnian Serb member because the candidate is opposed to the country’s membership in the alliance. In line with neighboring Serbia, the Serb-majority part of Bosnia, Republika Srpska (RS), had declared military neutrality in 2017, which means it opposes membership in any military alliance. Bosnia has previously pursued NATO membership, but in recent years Bosnian Serb politicians have changed their minds. Among the principles according to which the new Government is to be formed is *“the commitment for advancing the relationship with NATO without predicting future decisions in relation to membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina.”* SDSM leader Milorad Dodik argued that this means Bosnia will continue cooperating with NATO, but not that it will work toward membership in the Alliance. According to Bakir Izetbegovic, however, Bosnia will continue working on becoming a NATO member but the process will slow down for the next few years. Crnadak said that Bosnia’s diplomatic representative offices in NATO member countries need to know specifically whether the country will now send off the Annual National Program (ANP) which Bosnian Serb representatives have been putting off and with that activate its MAP. Bosnia obligated itself to do so according to a decision in 2009, which was reached through a consensus.

The US Embassy welcomed the signing of the Agreement as well but posed the same question. “We welcome this and we will work with political parties and members of the Presidency to clarify the issue of how the next government will interpret this agreement, including in particular whether there is a clear consensus on the early submission of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Annual National Program (ANP) to NATO,” the Embassy said on Wednesday. (www.baninfo.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political instability and uncertainty continues in Bosnia because it has not formed a Government since October 7th, 2018 general elections. However, the three main parties representing the three constituent entities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats); HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) have reached an agreement last week in forming a Government within 30 days. However, a strong dispute has broken out if this agreement precedes progress on Bosnia’s NATO membership. There are several interpretations of the agreement according to each party interests. Bosniak SDA claims that agreement includes NATO membership of the country “but with a delay of a few years”, while SDSM leader Milorad Dodik claims that the agreement speaks about cooperation with NATO but not a membership relationship. Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust blocking any attempt for economic growth and major reforms. Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia’s internal affairs

destabilizing the state. Russia pays special attention in Serbia and Bosnia in order to maintain an influence in the region. Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and Montenegro have already entered NATO, while North Macedonia would join the Alliance within 2019. These two countries (Serbia and Bosnia) are the only “vehicles” for Russia to maintain a narrow influence in Southeastern Europe. Apart from external influence and intervention the country has to confront several internal “threats” which undermine its sovereignty, cohesion, and viability. EU path is too far for Bosnia and only for geopolitical interests it could have chances entering the EU. Election of ultra nationalist pro-Russian Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia’s EU and NATO (mostly) integration. Dodik is a person who does not actually believe in B&H viability and is expected to promote (actually, he has already started) his own political agenda. Bosnia faces a significant problem of illegal migration which may lead in new disputes between state’s ethnicities. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and other Muslim countries approach the country mainly through “investments” and/or funding ethnic or religious groups according to their interests.



BULGARIA: August 9th, the Bulgarian Ministry of Defense published a 3.3 million dollars tender on July 29th, 2019 for the modernization of the Bulgarian Air Force's (BuAF's) Bezmer Air Base, 250 km east of Sofia, under the NATO Security Investment Program (NSIP). The project involves the construction of facilities for personnel, cargo, ground equipment,

parking, and engineering networks for the reception, staging, and onward movement of units on Bulgarian territory. The deadline for bids is September 4th, 2019. Bezmer is the BuAF's Su-25 base and was already modernized in 2016. Its 3,000 m, 60 m-wide runway can be used by strategic transport aircraft. (www.novinite.com)



A US A-10 during a training mission with Bulgarian SU-25s in Bezmer airbase
(Photo source: www.eucom.mil)

- August 9th, Bulgaria's Ministry of Defense announced that, on August 5th, 2019 it had sent formal Requests for Proposals (RFP) to four companies invited to bid to supply armored infantry carriers. These four companies are ARTEC GmbH (Germany), Patria (Finland), Nexter Systems (France) and General Dynamics European Land Systems – MOWAG (Switzerland). The deadline for submission is October 31st, 2019, Army Recognition reported. In February 2019, the Ministry of Defense delayed the procurement of 150 new wheeled armored vehicles to equip three Battalion-size Battlegroups for a mechanized Brigade. For this new tender, Bulgaria plans to select a winner by December 2019. The Defense Ministry had announced a plan to spend 1.75 billion euro on rearmament programs between 2017 and 2029. The programs envisage the purchase of new

combat aircraft for 750 million euro, multi-purpose modular patrol vessels for 410 million euro and military equipment for land forces for 610 million euro. Currently, Bulgarian Armed Forces are mainly equipped with Soviet-made wheeled armored vehicles including BTR-60PB 8x8 personnel carriers and BRDM-2 4x4 armored vehicles. Bulgaria has also developed a modernized version of the Soviet-made BTR-60PB (called BTR-60PB-MD) with a new engine, a new design of the hull with side doors and additional protection. The vehicles presented by the four selected competitors are the Boxer from ARTEC (Rheinmetall - Krauss-Maffei Wegmann), the VBCI from Nexter, the AMV from Patria and the Piranha 5 from General Dynamics European Land Systems. An interdepartmental working group on selecting the final contractor has a deadline set on December 20th, 2019, to analyze and evaluate the submitted bids, the Defense Ministry said. The time interval for the contract implementation covers 12 years. (www.novinite.com)

- August 11th, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov will visit Turkmenistan from August 10th to 12th, 2019. The Bulgarian PM will participate in the First Caspian Economic Forum which will be held in the Avaza National Tourist Area near Turkmenbashi. The Forum will bring together Heads of State and Government of the Caspian countries, leaders of stakeholders close to the Caspian region, as well as representatives of international economic, financial, transport, environmental and other organizations. The focus of the Avaza discussions will be the development of economic cooperation in the Caspian region and the creation of

conditions for major projects. During discussions, leaders will also discuss the role of the Caspian economy in a global context, the investment attractiveness of the oil and gas industry, electricity, transport, trade, agro-industry, tourism and other areas of common interest to participants. The date of the high-level event was symbolically chosen - August 12th, when it is the Caspian Sea Day. In Avaza, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov will hold a bilateral meeting with Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, as well as an extended meeting with the participation of official delegations from both countries. Bilateral documents will be signed, prepared by the Intergovernmental Bulgarian -Turkmenistan Commission for Economic Cooperation, which will also meet in Avaza. The Minister of Regional Development and Public Works Petya Avramova, Minister of Transport, Information Technology and Communications Rosen Zhelyazkov, Minister of Economy Emil Karanikolov, and Minister of Energy Temenuzhka Petkova will also be part from the delegation. (www.novinite.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

United Patriots instability raises concerns over Government's viability (once again). However, it is assessed that the Government will remain "alive" enjoying support of Ataka MPs. Nevertheless, there is concern for the Government's future. Thus, Bulgaria has entered in a period of fragile political situation. After European elections, opposition BSP appears weakened facing internal problems. The country strengthened its efforts towards entering the Eurozone achieving a positive decision of the

Eurogroup. However, the EC made clear that Bulgaria could not enter the Eurozone before 2022. 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. The latest report on defense situation confirmed the major problems the Bulgarian Armed Forces are facing. Security situation stable; no major threats.



CROATIA: August 5th, President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic hinted at her desire to run for a second mandate on Monday, but failed to officially announce her candidacy. For months, the President would make her intentions clear only after Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day so as not to politicize the celebrations and draw attention away from the significance of August 5th. At the same time, several cabinet Ministers and leaders of the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ), including Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, and Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Davor Bozinovic, said the party would give its full support to the incumbent President once she makes her candidacy for a second term official. The Minister of the Sea, Transport, and Infrastructure, Oleg Butkovic, himself a member of the HDZ, said the entire party would be at the President's disposal in order to assure her victory in the presidential elections. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- August 8th, Croatia will finance a newly established Croat-language TV Channel in Bosnia, named after the wartime Croat unrecognized statelet of Herzeg-Bosnia (HB), with approximately 61,000 euro, “*Jutarnji List*” wrote on Monday. The paper wrote that Croatia’s Government on Thursday decided to give 3,490,000 million euro to Bosnian Croats by adopting the “*Decision on the division of resources for financing cultural, educational, scientific, healthcare and other programs and projects of interest to the Croat people in Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2019.*” A third of the funds are, the paper said, designated to Bosnia’s Catholic Church. But among the recipients is also the Croat Radio-television of Herzeg Bosnia, with its headquarters in Mostar. Radio-Television HB aired its radio program during the war in 1993. After it ceased to exist, it began airing again on June 1st, 2019. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- August 9th, we are monitoring the events on the Bosnian-Croatian border with special attention regarding the beating of migrants and we are taking media reports on such cases very seriously, the European Commission told N1, on Friday, when asked to comment on the incident involving 18 injured migrants found by Bosnian Border Police on Wednesday. The first and foremost responsibility of the Croatian authorities is to ensure that the rights of migrants are respected and that they have access to asylum procedures, which must be provided to anyone who applies in accordance with the EU law, the Commission said and added that they expect the Croatian authorities to respond promptly to these allegations. (www.hr.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The country enjoys political stability and support from EU towards its Eurozone goal. Croatia follows a tough regional policy with neighboring countries, but its new Foreign Minister Gordan Grlic Radman claimed that Croatia seeks resolution of all problems with its neighbors. Unofficial sources claim that the country has fulfilled all Schengen zone criteria and it is a matter of time (during September 2019) to officially announced. However, the matter may become a new field of confrontation with Slovenia. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces’ modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Failure to complete successfully the purchase of a modern fighter jet maintains a long period of an ineffective and weak Croatian Air Force.



CYPRUS: August 6th, Turkish drillship Yavuz has started drilling off Karpasia, while Turkey’s Armed Forces provide protection for the country’s vessels operating off the island, reports said on Tuesday. According to Turkish daily Sabah, the Yavuz has started operations off Karpasia. Drilling operations are expected to last three weeks, the paper reported. The Yavuz is the second drillship dispatched by Turkey in Cyprus’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The first drillship, the Fatih, has been positioned off the west coast of the island since May. Ankara said drilling has begun. As regards Fatih’s operations, the paper reported drilling activity is expected to continue for a few more weeks. The drill rig has reached approximately 5,000 meters from sea

level, it said. In the meantime, seismic research ship Oruc Reis is expected to also travel to the Eastern Mediterranean to support the Barbaros in seismic research, it said. The paper reported that the Turkish Armed Forces have dispatched submarines, unmanned aerial vehicles and warplanes in the area to provide round the clock protection to the drilling and research vessels. News of the drilling comes as Turkey's Energy Minister Fatih Donmez is in the north for a one-day visit. Donmez was to meet with Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci, "Prime Minister" Ersin Tatar and Energy and Economy "Minister" Hasan Tacyo. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- August 8th, the credit profile of Cyprus (Ba2 stable) reflects its small but wealthy economy, improved economic resilience and the Government's fiscal outperformance in the wake of the country's banking crisis, Moody's Investors Service has said in an annual report. Moody's warned on Wednesday that it could change the rating outlook to negative if the positive debt trend were to reverse, or if recent legislative actions in the banking sector failed to significantly reduce non-performing exposures (NPEs). *"Cyprus' strong growth trends and primary surpluses have generated positive debt trends, and we expect deleveraging to resume this year, after a one-off spike in the debt burden in 2018 associated with the capital injection to Cyprus Cooperative Bank,"* said Sarah Carlson, a Moody's Senior Vice President and the report's co-author. According to Moody's, *"Cyprus' credit challenges stem from its small and relatively undiversified economy, as well as high levels of Government, banking and household debt."* It noted that *"increasing spending pressures have*

the potential to weigh on fiscal prospects, while the large financial sector is burdened by the highest non-performing exposure (NPE) ratio in the EU." The stable outlook, said Moody's, reflects the balanced risks following the country's financial crisis. Debt dynamics are robust and so debt metrics will likely improve steadily. Conversely, it stressed, *"Negative rating pressure would emerge if the debt trend were to reverse, or if recent legislative actions in the banking sector failed to significantly reduce NPEs."* (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- August 9th, leaders of the island's divided communities agreed Friday to pursue efforts to restart reunification talks but failed to find common ground on gas exploitation, which has become a major sticking point. In their first meeting since February, President Nicos Anastasiades and Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci said they had a constructive exchange of views and would continue to work with UN envoy Jane Holl Lute on the terms of reference that would kick-start a new round of negotiations. Added to the Cyprus problem woes is the issue of the island's natural gas reserves with Turkey disputing the Republic's right to explore for gas and Turkish Cypriots demanding a say and a share in the endeavor. Akinci has tabled a proposal to form a joint committee, which was rejected by the Greek Cypriot side. Anastasiades said after the meeting that they discussed the matter on Friday, adding that he made a counter proposal that would create a sense of security among the two communities as regards the benefits that would arise from the exercise of the Republic's sovereign rights in its own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). *"I first raised Turkey's*

illegal actions, which challenge the convergences achieved between the two communities that provide that the sea area of the Republic of Cyprus must be in line with the law of the sea [...] and not what Turkey defines,” he said. Anastasiades also said he argued why Akinci’s proposal on a joint committee on natural resources cannot be accepted. “Only sovereign states can grant licences or make decisions about their Exclusive Economic Zones,” he said. During the meeting, Anastasiades said he was prepared to provide additional assurances in a bid to allay Turkish Cypriot concerns. Akinci confirmed afterwards that he had received a counter-proposal, and although still unofficial, it appeared to fall short of the Turkish Cypriot side’s expectations. “We do not think a proposal to exchange information only will solve the problem. Mr Anastasiades promised to give us their thoughts on the matter in writing. However, I can say that ... this proposal is not a breakthrough,” Akinci said. The Turkish Cypriot leader insisted that his proposal for a joint committee did not breach the convergences achieved in the part as the Greek Cypriot side argued. The disagreement over gas appears to hamper moves on Varosha, the town its Greek Cypriot inhabitants abandoned in August 1974 ahead of the advancing Turkish army. The town has been fenced-off and held by the Turkish side as a bargaining chip since. The issue was discussed by the leaders on Friday, with Turkish Cypriots rejecting a Greek Cypriot proposal for the creation of a joint committee on Varosha. “If we had seen a serious approach on the issue of hydrocarbons, we could have developed different thoughts. However, due to the approach we saw, we could not have discussed an initiative (on Varosha. Unfortunately, both

matters are at a point where joint moves cannot be made,” Akinci said. The leaders did agree to hold a tripartite meeting with the UN Secretary General in September to plan a way forward to resume talks. Reports after the meeting said Anastasiades had tabled a proposal relating to the terms of reference, aiming at speeding up the procedure. The President told Akinci that negotiations can start immediately on the basis of the February 11th, 2014 joint declaration, the convergences that led to the conference in Switzerland, and the six UN parameters tabled in July 2017. Akinci said the two sides now have a roadmap ahead of their meeting with the UNSG. “The meeting with the UNSG will certainly be important because an effort will be made there to draw a roadmap for later. And as far as what we can foresee, it could lead to an informal even, five-party meeting.” Akinci did not rule out discussing Anastasiades’ idea of a decentralized federal system as a form of solution in detail provided there was an agreement on past convergences, February 11th, 2014, the UNSG framework of June 30th, 2017, without changes. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Cyprus has reached a deadlock in the ongoing crisis with Turkish invasion of drillship Fatih (while the second one Yavuz has also started drilling activity off Karpasia, according to Turkey) within its EEZ. Fatih is there for five months, while Turkish administration declares that offshore drilling will continue until an agreement between Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities will be reached regarding exploration and exploitation of natural gas. In

other words, Turkey's objective goal is to force (by the presence and activity of drill ships) Cyprus to compromise reaching an agreement with the occupied north part. Turkish actions seems to achieve its goal since the put on the table of negotiations the issues of hydrocarbons exploitation during the last meeting of President Nikos Anastasiades and the Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci. Despite international calls to Turkey for abandoning its plans of violating the Cypriot EEZ and its sovereign rights, Turkish actions remain "unanswered." Cyprus is trapped failing to act decisively and effectively for protecting its sovereignty. Actually, Cyprus is trapped because it does not have a mechanism of power (military, diplomatic, economic etc) to force Turkey to withdraw its ships. Cyprus lacks of naval and air forces which could deter Turkey of violating Cypriot sovereign rights, while Greece appears reluctant in sending naval units in the region showing presence and exercising deterrence. The EU prepared a draft with sanctions against Turkey but the latter rejected them claiming that it will continue its activity. Turkish message is very clear; we are present in Cyprus, we are present in the energy "game" and nothing works leaving Turkey aside. In other words, energy security includes Turkey; otherwise eastern Mediterranean is not a stable and secure sea. A "hot" incident cannot be excluded. However, Anastasiades and Akinci were met last week in an effort to restart talks for resolving the Cypriot question. The Cypriot President immediate withdrawal of Turkish vessels for restarting talks, while Akinci insisted on resolving gas issue before proceeding. Biocommunal, biozonal federation is a base for talks regarding Cyprus status. Despite current situation, Cyprus

works systematically in order to become a major part of the East Mediterranean energy hub. It is favored not only by its natural gas deposits, but also by its strategic position in the "heart" of East Mediterranean Sea and of course of being an EU member state. The strategy of multilateral cooperation seems to be fruitful. It joined the trilateral plus one summit in Athens with Greece, Israel, and the US. Cyprus seeks to negotiate and reach agreements with its neighboring countries regarding their EEZ expanding maritime cooperation and energy security. Turkey looks like being isolated from the energy game and its current aggressive reaction is attributed to this situation. It is certain that Turkey will not accept "fait accompli" in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



GREECE: August 7th, Greece, Israel, Cyprus and the US agreed to enhance cooperation in energy, cyber and infrastructure security, Greek Energy Minister Kostis Hatzidakis said on Wednesday after Ministers of the four countries met in Athens. Natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean in the past decade have rendered the region a viable alternative energy source for Europe, but also exposed long-simmering disputes between neighbors jostling for rights over resources. Regional tripartite meetings between Israel and Cyprus, which have made discoveries, and Greece, keen to be a hub, have recently been extended to include the US.

“Energy can be a bridge for broader political stability,” US Assistant Energy Secretary Frank Fannon told reporters. Cypriot Energy Minister Yiorgos Lakkotrypis said he had received assurances from his Israeli, Greek and US counterparts of full support over his country's right to search for natural resources. Turkey, which has no diplomatic relations with Cyprus, disputes the EU-member state's right to explore for natural gas, staking a claim over offshore areas Cyprus claims as its own. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- August 8th, amid a tense climate sparked by the Government's decision to introduce two eleventh-hour amendments to an omnibus bill Thursday, Greek lawmakers voted in favor of a provision that abolished regulations that forbade Police from entering university premises. The initiative had been fiercely debated, with the Government saying it will put an end to lawlessness in universities and main opposition Coalition of Radical Left (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – SYRIZA) calling it a bid to crack down on free expression. *“We do not want Police in university, but we do want to get rid of the hoodlums who police students' lives,”* said Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who had campaigned passionately in the run-up to the general election to restore safety to universities and Athens. The asylum law had been originally introduced in 1982 to protect protesting students and freedom of expression, but the conservative administration says it has degenerated into a cover for lawlessness, including violence and drug dealing. The new legislation does away with a provision introduced by the previous SYRIZA administration which forbade Police from

entering university grounds unless they were granted permission to do so by the council of rectors in order to respond to a felony or a crime against human life. The move was slammed by SYRIZA leader and former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who derided it as an attempt to undermine Greece's public universities. Earlier, MPs of leftist SYRIZA, center-left Movement for Change (Κίνημα Αλλαγής – KINAL), the Communist Party of Greece (Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδας – KKE) and the anti-austerity MeRA25 party walked out of the debate on the omnibus bill, which included the scrapping of the asylum law, in protest at the submission of two last-minute provisions by Labor Minister Yiannis Vrontsis. Opposition parties called for the withdrawal of the Labor Ministry provisions, but their request was rejected. The omnibus bill also included provisions regarding changes to the administration of local Government and provides for the dismissal of members of the independent Competition Commission if they have recently served in Government offices. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- August 10th, Israeli Navy's INS Lahav (L), US Navy's USS Donald Cook (2-R), French Navy's Fremm Auvergne (C) and Hellenic Navy's HS Aegaeon (R) take part in a joint military exercise in the Mediterranean, near the city of Haifa from August 5th to 8th, 2019. Other countries have sent observers to the drill included Cyprus, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Britain and Chile, as well as NATO. The joint exercise called *“Mighty Waves”* simulates a scenario where a 7.5 magnitude earthquake strikes the African Syrian Rift at the Jordan Valley area with thousands of casualties with Israel requesting international assistance

from the US, Greece and France to provide humanitarian and medical aid from air and sea. Greek sailors joined their counterparts from 10 countries last week off the Israeli coastal city of Haifa for a four-day multinational exercise that simulated conditions created by a massive earthquake with hundreds of casualties, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. “Mighty Waves,” which ended on Thursday, examined ways that naval forces can provide humanitarian aid to areas impacted by a severe quake. It also looked at ways to rescue and collect the injured and how to find victims in tsunami-hit areas. (www.ekathimerini.com)



French, USA, Israel, and Greek vessels’
Commanders during “Mighty Waves” joint
military exercise
(Photo source: www.hellenicnavy.gr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■:

The new conservative Government brought in the Parliament a series of laws and amendments implementing its pre-electoral declarations regarding restore of security in universities and big cities, and improvement of public administration function. The new majority Government ensures political stability in a

“strange” time period that security, diplomatic, and economic issues challenge Greek administration. Apart from that Greece organized a joint meeting of Cyprus, Greece, Israel, and USA to discuss energy issues. At the same time Greek, Israeli, and US naval forces joined a naval exercise in the east Mediterranean Sea, while Cyprus sent observers. Greek – Turkish relations are in a critical point due to Turkey’s decision to violate Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) aiming at conducting oil and gas drills. Moreover, Turkey maintains a hard rhetoric against Greece regarding its territorial and maritime sovereign rights. Greece is concerned due to Turkish intention to search for hydrocarbons within its EEZ near to Kastelorizo region. The critical question is “how Greece would react if a Turkish drillship would appear in its territorial waters.” It should be noted that situation may be escalated rapidly especially after the end of the touristic season (end of September – mid October). Moreover, a crisis to Cyprus means a crisis to Greece forcing Armed Forces to deploy military, naval, and air units. Taking into consideration that Cyprus lacks of naval and air power it is Greece which will support the small and vulnerable island located in the East Mediterranean heart. Turkish fighter jets keep on violating Greek airspace. Strengthening of military cooperation between Greece and the US upgrades Greece’s strategic role in Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East as a western (US, EU, NATO) forward military base. Furthermore, Greece seeks to modernize its Armed Forces by receiving US military aid. It is a fact that Greek military force has been affected by the long economic crisis threatening the balance of power with Turkey. Security situation is of high risk due

to an accidental or preplanned incident by Turkey and the complicated current situation in Cypriot EEZ (not likely within the summer touristic period).



KOSOVO: August 5th, the extraordinary session of the Kosovo Assembly, which will discuss its dissolution, will be held on August 22nd, 2019 unanimously decided by Heads of parliamentary groups. Decision to convene this session was made after Ramush Haradinaj resigned as Prime Minister, for questioning at The Hague Special Prosecution, Lajmi reported. Following the session, Kosovo Parliament Speaker and most influential ruling Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës - PDK) Kadri Veseli called on Kosovo President Hashim Thaci to set an election date immediately. *“Dissolution of the assembly allows the President to automatically set an election date. I am fully convinced that elections are the only solution for citizens. They are not just an option or alternative, but the right decision for citizens. With this decision, we have shown dignity,”* he said. Elections will be held 30 to 45 days since dissolution of Parliament, Veseli told reporters, adding, however, that the date for the elections is in President’s responsibility. If the majority of MPs is in favor of dissolving the assembly, the 10 day deadline for Kosovo President Hashim Thaci to call early parliamentary elections will begin, according to Kossev. Dissolution of the Kosovo Assembly requires two-thirds of all MPs, or 81 votes. (www.balkans.aljazeera.net)

- August 8th, Kosovo sent an official letter to North Macedonia Government asking removal of tariffs on Kosovo products, namely in fish

products. If barriers are not revoked, Kosovo officials pledge to introduce reciprocity measures on North Macedonia products, Gazeta Express reported. Kosovo’s outgoing Minister of Trade and Industry, Endrit Gashi, sent a letter to North Macedonia Minister of Economy, Kreshnik Bekteshi threatening him with trade tariffs. In his letter Shala asked neighboring North Macedonia to revoke tariffs on Kosovo goods, namely fisheries and fish products. *“If tariffs are not revoked we will consider introducing of reciprocity measures in North Macedonia exports,”* Shala wrote in his letter. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- August 9th, John Bolton, the US National Security Advisor, has postponed a planned visit to Belgrade and Pristina until Kosovo forms a new Government and suspends or withdraws the decision on 100% import tariffs on goods from Serbia and Bosnia, Pristina media reported on Friday. The Voice of America (VOA) said it had unofficially learned that the reason for the cancellation was the fact that Kosovo was facing early elections after Ramush Haradinaj resigned as Prime Minister. Pristina media reported the visit had been scheduled in late August or early September. VOA said its sources confirmed the visit will be planned for another time in future but it did not get an official confirmation from the White House Council for National Security. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Parliament Speaker, Kadri Veseli announced that Parliament’s dissolution will be discussed in a session scheduled for August 22nd, 2019. If it is approved by the 2/3 of the MPs or 81 votes the

Parliament will be dissolved and the President Hashim Thaci will have to set a date for early parliamentary elections. Under these circumstances dialogue with Serbia comes in second priority. The US Security Advisor John Bolton canceled his trip in Belgrade and Pristina due to the latter's political instability. International community namely the US and EU will retaliate its efforts towards restarting dialogue between the two parties assessing the new Kosovo political reality, after elections. Tension between Serbia and Kosovo remains in high levels due to a series of provocative actions of the latter; ban of Serbian officials to enter north Kosovo populated mostly by Serbs, Police operation in the north arresting Serbs, 100% tax on Serbian and Bosnian products, Kosovo Assembly resolution that Serbs committed genocide during 1998-1999 war, establishment of Kosovo Army, request for a special Court for Serbs undermining any possibility of negotiations with Serbia. Only through normalization of relations with Serbia, Kosovo will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. 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. The possibility of Kosovo Army presence in the north it is assessed of high security risk which may lead in armed violence.



MOLDOVA: August 8th, The Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) is insisting on an immediate signing, next week at

the latest, of a political agreement with ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] bloc in order to implement decisively the tasks and objectives of the country's domestic and foreign policy excluding future situations which endanger country's governance, the PSRM Executive Secretary and parliamentary Socialist group Chairman, Vlad Batrincea, wrote on social media. Batrincea expressed concern that despite the accords reached between the component forces of the ruling coalition, statements of geopolitical character are being systematically spread dividing Moldovan society. *"We are expressing our surprise and regret that individual parliamentarians and Ministers, representing ACUM, make statements of geopolitical and ideological character that may seriously undermine our joint efforts to stabilize society and promote a well-balanced foreign policy of our State. Unpardonable verbal attacks against the Republic of Moldova's strategic partners are only nullifying our efforts to release the country from the oligarchs' paws and are devaluating the support we receive from our foreign partners from the West and the East,"* Batrincea said. He wrote that PSRM, despite some internal differences on many topics indicated by the Government and ACUM partners, *"is remaining monolith and supports the parliamentary majority by the votes of all its 35 Deputies."* (www.infotag.md)

- August 9th, Transnistria's President Vadim Krasnoselsky appears to have a Ukrainian passport and this discovery may complicate

Moldova - Ukraine relations because Chisinau, unlike Kiev, does not give the Moldovan citizenship to the leaders of the separatist Donbass republics, Foreign Affairs Columnist Yury Matsarsky stated on the ICTV television (Kiev). He wondered what is there that can link the Transnistrian authorities with the venal part of the Ukrainian officialdom, and he reminded in this connection that until recently, Krasnoselsky frequented Kiev and even wanted to establish an official representation of the unrecognized republic in the Ukrainian capital. *“The Krasnoselsky story abounds in inconvenient questions. Who and on what legal grounds has issued a Ukrainian passport to him? What for did he go to Ukraine? Whom does he meet there and hold negotiations with? Moldova may at any moment demand answers to these questions. Chisinau does not receive the fake leaders of the fake Donetsk and Lugansk republics, does not issue Moldovan passports to them, and does not discuss the possibilities to open their official representations in Moldova, right? The rules of interactions with separatists and with accomplices to occupants must be the same for all,”* Matsarsky claimed. He expressed surprise about the fact that yet not very long ago, Krasnoselsky was wanted by the Ukrainian Police, but shortly before his election as the President of Transnistria, his name mysteriously disappeared from the search list. (www.infotag.md)

- August 9th, the Moldovan Government will discuss next week the establishment of a Bureau for struggle against corruption and for judiciary reform to function under the Prime Minister's auspices, Premier Maia Sandu announced at a

briefing she convened due to the Superior Council of Prosecutors' (SCP) decision to hold a contest for appointing Moldova's Prosecutor General. In her words, the SCP's decision, taken today contrary to the Government's initiatives and addresses concerning changing of the candidate selection procedure for the essential post, “goes contrary to citizens' expectations.” Sandu said that the main problem of the Moldovan justice system is the absence of a really independent Prosecution Service, and this is convincingly proved by the today's decision taken by the Superior Council of Prosecutors, which is showing that the SCP members will continue working for corrupt people. In her words, the Bureau will consist of the civil society representatives, international experts and the heads of all the state institutions related to justice and struggle against corruption. (www.infotag.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political stability has re-established in the country, while state's institutions have started becoming functional again by the appointment of new Directors. The new ruling coalition enjoys full control of Moldova establishing its power and removing everything reminds the previous power of PDM. Cooperation between PSRM and ACUM block continues without problems, although rumors are spread that the ruling coalition has cracked. It should be noted that Russia closely follows political developments in Moldova and it will not allow any overcome of its “red lines” such as Moldova's integration in NATO or EU. Moldova is considered as a pivotal country for Russian national security. Sandu has

characterized her country as “a state in transition” implying that it has a democratic deficit which will be restored by the new Government. EU seeks to improve cooperation with the new Government by restarting micro-economic assistance. The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Moldova, especially after Prime Minister Maia Sandu’s clear intention to strengthen cooperation with Ukraine. It should be underlined that Russia maintains military forces in Transnistrian ground and secondly Moldova shares common borders with Ukraine which cannot be unnoticed by international stakeholders. The “Transnistria case” is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: August 5th,

implementation of the initiative designed to set up special status for Sandzak, as optimal solution for all people living in this region, is a priority for the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslims) community, said in the interview for Radio Slobodna Evropa Jasmina Curic, President of the Bosniak National Committee. She expects Serbia and Montenegro to be sensitive to the real need for the implementation of this initiative and provide their support for it. Asked what she sees as priority questions of Bosniak community, Curic said *“In defining priorities of Bosniak people and Sandzak region we should first take into consideration historical facts, everything that Bosniaks have gone through. Current state of affairs has to be examined carefully too. How country treats Bosniak people is reflected in the Action plan for Exercise of the rights of national minorities which has not been adopted under legal procedure and*

which has clearly neglected any proposal made by the Bosniak National Committee. Finding optimal solution for the constitutional status of Bosniak people and region of Sandzak is the priority of Bosniak community.” According to her, Bosniak National Committee has adopted decision on launching the initiative to set up status of Bosniak people and region of Sandzak. *“The initiative outlines the establishment of special status of Sandzak, which is regarded as optimal solution for all people living in the region,”* stressed Curic. What does she expect from the authorities in Serbia and Montenegro? How far are they ready to go in order to support the implementation of this initiative? *“The initiative is based on the need for coexistence, cooperation, peace and stability. Dialogue regarding its implementation will be based on those principles. Serbian and Montenegrin people will lose nothing. Bosniak and Albanian people will acquire equal status. We expect vast amount of support from Serbia and Montenegro, as it would be very reasonable and in accordance with the European principles of equality and respect for human rights,”* pointed out Curic. (www.cdm.me)

- August 10th, Miodrag Vukovic, the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS) MP, said his party along with its coalition partners, has been working responsibly in the Committee on Further Reform of Electoral and Other Legislation, which cannot be said for the opposition. In an interview for the weekend edition of Dnevne Novine daily, Vukovic said there is no need for the transitional Government when the political situation in the country is stable. According to him, these days we

are witnessing the irresponsible and unnecessary actions of the opposition using media for their games with no other players but themselves. “We started with our work when opposition was boycotting us and when we were continuously urging them to join us. Now when that happened; when the largest opposition group joined us, we started from the very beginning,” Vukovic said. He underlined that opposition withdrew from the Committee for reasons that had nothing to do with his party and the electoral legislation. Fortunately, Montenegro has a stable parliamentary majority and its state stability and progress is not at stake, Vukovic claimed. The political parties in Montenegro should gather and agree on the conditions needed for the institutional and human resources changes that would result in the adoption of new laws. “But having in mind their [the opposition’s] behavior, I do not think we will be able to ensure such an atmosphere and environment,” he concluded. (www.cdm.me)

- August 10th, the Russian Foreign Ministry said that Montenegro and Russia have “significant potential for cooperation, but that these opportunities are not being taken into advantage because Podgorica has chosen officially a non-alternative pro-Western direction.” The Ministry, headed by Sergei Lavrov, told Podgorica News that Russia and Montenegro have a rich history of bilateral relations and significant potential for interaction, Beta reported. “Unfortunately, these opportunities are not being taken into advantage,” the information and media department of the Russian Foreign Ministry replied when asked what the current relations between the two countries are. According to the Russian Ministry, the reason for rejecting this

opportunity is that Montenegro has a stable pro-western route. “The practice shows that attempts to form one’s national identity solely by denying historical experience, breaking ties with neighbors and hoping for a bright Euro-Atlantic future leads only to increased confrontation in a region that is already burdened with numerous challenges,” the Russian Ministry said. Speaking of restoring Montenegro – Russia relations the Ministry said “Good relations between Montenegro and Russia have been eroded after the turn of the Montenegrin authorities towards the West and the decision to lead the country towards NATO membership, as well as the decision to fully adopt the EU sanctions against Russia,” the Podgorica newspaper reminded. Russia has been strongly reacted in these Montenegrin decisions following “harsh” statements, especially in 2017, when Montenegro officially became the 29th NATO member state. Bilateral relations were additionally harmed after the arrest of a group of Serbian and Montenegrin citizens for preparing a violent change of Government on the day of the 2016 parliamentary elections, which was a kind of referendum on Montenegro’s NATO membership. On May 9th, 2019 the High Court sentenced, among other people, two Russian citizens; Vladimir Popov to 12, and Eduard Shishmakov to 15 years in prison for the criminal offense of “criminal organization and attempted terrorism.” Following the Court’s ruling, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced that the High Court judgment in Podgorica “leaves no doubt about the politicization of the Montenegrin justice system and its vulnerability to manipulation from external actors.” The Russian Ministry concluded claiming that such actions it can only worsen Russian - Montenegrin

relations, which are already at the lowest point in their history. (www.balkans.aljazeera.net)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although political stability is re-establishing again slowly, opposition withdrew from Committee on reforming electoral legislation raising concerns for compromise between the ruling coalition and opposition and successful elections in 2020. The idea of a technical Government is removing. Although EC Progress Report is assessed as a positive one, it raises specific concerns over media freedom, corruption and organized crime. Report is elaborating on specific cases signaling detailed research. Montenegro enters in a crucial crossroad regarding its EU future and specific reforms and actions should be implemented if it remains committed in its goal to access the EU by 2025. The Government promotes state's political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment; However, the state needs more concrete reforms in the field of justice, rule of law, fight against corruption, money laundering, and organized crime, public administration transparency and accountability in order to become a stable and attractive investment environment. Montenegro shows activity within NATO trying to prove that it is an equal partner of the alliance with military capacity according to NATO standards. Moreover, it tries to modernize and strengthen its operational capabilities and in this context it raised its defense budget aiming at purchasing new assets such as armored vehicles.



NORTH MACEDONIA: August 7th, as of today, there are 125 new professional soldiers in the ranks of the North Macedonia's Armed Forces, the first of the two planned classes for this year after the intake of the last 375 professional soldiers in 2018. The ceremony was held in the Veles Barracks "Aleksa Demnievski – Bauman." The Defense Minister Radmila Shekerinska stressed that the intake of these 125 professional soldiers will rejuvenate the army and it will create future army generations which will represent the country as part of the most powerful military-political Alliance of today, a strategic goal that our country will attain after three long decades. "The past two years, on the one hand, we managed to reach the NATO membership, but on the other hand, we have not forgotten our Army, therefore we managed to secure a bigger budget, we managed to secure an increase of the salaries two years in a row and we managed to create conditions for the intake of new members of the Army, both this year, and last year," Shekerinska said. Shekerinska stressed that the focus is on improving the legislation, which, as she said, will soon enter the parliamentary procedure, and the phase of priority modernization projects. At the ceremony, in addition to Shekerinska, the newly accepted professional soldiers received their employment contracts from the Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff, Lieutenant General Vasco Gjurchinovski, Deputy Minister Bekim Maksuti, Director of the General Staff, Major General Zoran Milevski, and the Commander of the Joint Operational Command, Major General Pavle Arsoski. (www.mod.gov.mk)



Admission ceremony of 125 new professional soldiers

(Photo source: www.mod.gov.mk)

- August 9th, French Ambassador to North Macedonia, Christian Thimonier called for an urgent response from the judiciary with regard to the growing corruption scandal revolving around Special Prosecutor Katica Janeva. This is the latest in the series of such calls from Thimonier, which has prompted concerns that North Macedonia may be rejected in its request to open EU accession talks, given French pre-existing skepticism. *“All necessary steps need to be taken in the shortest possible time, so that assurances are made that a credible investigation is being conducted, without concern whether those involved have high positions. It needs to be shown that the time for impunity is over,”* Thimonier said in an interview with TV24, while calling for a trial that would put all the issues to rest. The investigation is mired for three weeks, after the initial arrest of Bojan Jovanovski (aka Boki 13) and Zoran Milieski (aka Zoki Kicheec), who likely acted as mere intermediaries and bag-men for the more powerful politicians and prosecutors extorting money from businessmen. Thimonier acknowledged that North Macedonia’s case is now *“less firm”* compared to what it was before the scandal. *“Time goes by quickly and there is not much of it left till October, when credible*

results need to be shown. It is necessary that the Government and the opposition find a way toward a more stable dossier for the country, so we could say that, while there are some problems with the rule of law, there is still the necessary will to act and not just declare intent. A will that would deserve the opening of chapters 23 and 24 from the accession talks,” the Ambassador added. He insisted that it is up to North Macedonia to prove that it has a dossier that is credible enough for it to demand the opening of EU accession talks. While recent EU and US visitors to North Macedonia completely ignored the scandal, a US diplomat followed up with a request similar to that made by Thimonier. (www.republika.mk)

- August 10th, the Italian newspaper La Verita published a third batch of audio recordings on the internet, like the first two relating to North Macedonia’s so-called extortion scandal, in which Prime Minister Zoran Zaev is mentioned for the first time. The latest recordings mainly focus on what appear to be conversations between the alleged victim, businessman Orce Kamcev, and his suspected extortionist, Bojan Jovanovski (aka Boki 13). In these recordings, they agree details about Kamcev’s release from house detention, the return of his passport and the closure of the Special Prosecution case, codenamed *“Empire,”* in which he is involved. The extortion case centers on claims that Kamcev paid Jovanovski a large sum of money to use his alleged influence with the Special Prosecution either to be acquitted in the *“Empire”* case, or at least get a lenient sentence. The claims have rocked the Special Prosecution, SJO, which was set up in 2015 to investigate high-level crime in the country. In one of the conversations, what appears to be

Jovanovski's voice is heard calling Chief Special Prosecutor Katica Janeva in front of Kamcev, to convince him that she has everything "under control." In a fresh reaction on Saturday, Janeva continued to deny any connection to the "Extortion" case. In another conversation, what is assumed to Jovanovski's voice mentions his acquaintance with Prime Minister Zoran Zaev to Kamcev. In the conversation, he refers to the Prime Minister by the codename "ZZ." "I think even ZZ will not make any problems for me," Kamcev replies. "I spoke with him on Monday," Jovanovski's assumed voice says. In a press release issued on Saturday, Zaev denied involvement in any wrongdoing, saying that the suspect in the so-called "Extortion" case – meaning Jovanovski – was clearly misusing his name "in order to strengthen his position of power and authority over the other interlocutor." He added "I categorically deny any connection, cooperation or communication with the suspect Bojan Jovanovski in relation to the 'Extortion' case, or any other issues that are now a subject of investigation in this case." Zaev insisted that he had only talked to Jovanovski about humanitarian activities linked to the latter's humanitarian organisation. Since Thursday, La Verita has uploaded three videos on the internet, each adding more weight to the "Extortion" scandal. The ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija – SDSM) have said they suspect that the publication of the videos forms part of a plan to undermine and topple their Government by implicating it in wrongdoings. The former ruling Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна

организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) party, which has long been opposed to the Special Prosecution, has said that Zaev must now resign and allow early elections. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

North Macedonia's politics are shaken by a series of corruption and extortion scandal which undermines not only country's political stability, but also its European perspective. Fancy names such as "Extortion", "Empire", "Racket", "Titanic" are nothing more than scandals involving politicians, businessmen, criminals, and judicial servants demonstrating that corruption, absence of rule of law and non transparency dominate in state's function. According to media reports, the "Extortion" scandal touches the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev creating conditions for the Government's collapse and snap elections. Besides, there are several European voices calling North Macedonia to focus on judicial reforms, rule of law, and fight against corruption in order to achieve a positive result in coming October regarding the opening of accession talks with the EU. Major EU countries such as France appear concerned over a positive signal under these circumstances. It looks quite difficult for Zaev and his Government to survive until October 2019; most probably he will be forced to call early elections. Zaev has strongly promoted his plan for a well-governed state where rule of law and a functional justice system would dominate. He actually based his pre-electoral campaign against VMRO-DPMNE on such rhetoric. Consequently, it is rather contradictory to watch

ruling SDSM politicians and state's servants to be involved in scandals and illegal activities. The country should focus on its economy and major administrative and judicial reforms, fight against corruption and impunity aiming at reaching the EU standards, but under current situation it is rather doubtful if there is the necessary political weight and time for the Government to focus on such projects.



ROMANIA: August 7th, Romanian opposition parties Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România - USR) and PLUS announced that they have agreed on a political alliance. However, due to the lengthy judicial procedure of registration, they will have an electoral alliance for the presidential elections this fall. The protocol will be signed in the coming days. The two parties aim to win the presidential, local and parliamentary elections and form, in 2020, a governing coalition in which the Alliance will name the Prime Minister. They also seek to win the parliamentary elections in 2024 and stay in power at least until 2028, according to a press release of the two parties. The Alliance will propose common candidates for all three rows of elections in 2019 and 2020. For the 2019 presidential elections, the presidential candidate will be USR President Dan Barna, who will run in tandem with PLUS President Dacian Cioloș, the Alliance's Prime Minister proposal. For the local elections of 2020, the Alliance will designate common candidates for Mayor (including Bucharest Mayor), county Council President, established based on negotiations or, in the absence of an agreement, by other means, such as internal elections in which all PLUS and USR

members will participate, or opinion polls. For the parliamentary elections of 2020, the Alliance will propose joint lists of candidates for both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, including candidates previously nominated by each party. Eligible positions on the lists will be distributed through negotiations or, in the absence of an agreement, according to opinion polls. (www.romania-insider.com)

- August 7th, Calin Popescu Tariceanu, the leader of junior ruling coalition partner Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (Alianța Liberalilor și Democraților - ALDE) announced on social media, a political alliance with PRO Romania (PRO România - PRO), the party of former Prime Minister Victor Ponta. However, a few minutes later, following a social media post of Ponta, Tariceanu reportedly changed his initial message, this time announcing only discussions for a political alliance. But shortly after this announcement Ponta also posted a message on social media, in which he said that no decision has been taken yet. (www.romania-insider.com)

- August 9th, although in prison, former Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) Chairman Liviu Dragnea has filed a complaint at the Bucharest Tribunal, through his lawyer, challenging the decisions at the PSD Congress regarding the changing statute and electing the new leadership of the party. Practically, Dragnea claims that the new PSD leadership has been illegally elected. Bucharest Tribunal, which judged Dragnea's complaint today, has rejected his motion, thus confirming the new Social Democrat leadership. The ruling is not final and can be challenged by appeal. Dragnea invoked in his claim even the dissolution

of PSD. The Tribunal should have validated the decisions of the PSD Congress held on June 29th, 2019 but the validation has been delayed due to Dragnea's appeal. Practically by delaying the enforcement of the Congress decisions, the validation of the new Social Democrat leadership is also postponed; Viorica Dancila was elected Chairwoman, Eugen Teodorovici – Executive President, and Mihai Fifor – Secretary General. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Political parties have started to announce collaborations not only for the coming presidential elections (November 10th, 2019 the first round and November 24th, 2019 the second one), but also for local and parliamentary ones. Romania according to NATO strategic and operational planning has become an advanced base close to Russia. Its strategic importance and role has been upgraded and high level NATO exercises take place in its territory. Consequently, Russia reacts mainly against the NATO military base in Deveselu where anti-missile defense systems have been deployed. Temporarily deployment of THAAD system, a modern high-capability system, may raise tension in the region. Romania keeps strengthening its Armed Forces seeking to achieve NATO standards.



SERBIA: August 5th, Serbia's Chief of Armed Forces General Staff Lieutenant General Milan Mojsilovic told Belgrade daily Vecernje Novosti that he had received support from his Russian counterpart for "what we are doing about Kosovo," adding "We still consider it part of Serbian territory and Pristina's unilateral

steps are deteriorating the security situation. We are interested in the security of Serbs not just in northern Kosovo but in the entire province," Mojsilovic said after his first official visit to Moscow.



Serbian Chief of Armed Forces General Staff Lieutenant General Milan Mojsilovic with his Russian counterpart General Valeriy Gerasimov
(Photo source: www.mod.gov.rs)

The General said that he had received confirmation during his meeting with Russian Chief of General Staff General Valeriy Gerasimov that Russia would continue providing support as Serbia's strategic partners. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- August 7th, according to "Vecernje Novosti," daily Belgrade had decided to embark on a campaign in order to present real state of affairs on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija to the US public and to the US officials, including the monstrous crimes committed against the Serbs on Kosovo and Metohija by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) militants. According to the newspaper the US Congress will organize a public hearing in the form of debate, on which representatives of Serbian Assembly will elaborate the chronology of the conflict in the Southern Serbian Province. It is added that this

would be a good chance to present new evidence against the outgoing Prime Minister of Pristina's Interim institutions Ramush Haradinaj that may send him to a Court trial. One of the inevitable issues for discussion will be alleged inhuman treatment of Serbian people and killing of prisoners with the purpose of removal and illicit trafficking in human organs of the abducted Serbs, as well as numerous murders of the Serbs, such as those that took place in Gorazdevac and Staro Gacko, no one was held responsible for. Deputy Speaker of the Serbian Parliament Vladimir Marinkovic is involved in the preparation of this event in the US Congress, in cooperation with the President of the Serbian Caucus in the US Congress, Steve Stivers, Novosti concluded. Milovan Drecun, the President of the Serbian Parliamentary Committee for Kosovo and Metohija, is envisaged as one of the speakers on the Capitol Hill, working hard on gathering new evidence against Haradinaj. According to Marinkovic, this will be taking "countermeasure" to the event organized in late April by the Congressman and Albanian lobbyist Eliot Engel in the US Congress. On that occasion, former President of Pristina Interim Institutions Atifete Jahjaga mentioned the number of 20.000 women raped on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, as a part of Pristina propaganda machinery. (www.b92.net)

- August 9th, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that the authorities would do everything opposition thinks should be done to improve election conditions. Commenting the meeting on election conditions between the authorities and opposition in Belgrade, Vucic said that those conditions are much better now than they were

under the previous authorities, adding that the Government would do everything that the opposition thinks should be done to improve them. He said that he has neither the constitutional powers nor the desire to talk to the opposition but that if the ruling party had refused to meet opposition would have launched demonstrations. "Now that we have agreed they are saying that authorities have admitted that election conditions are bad," he said. "We will do what they think we can about the electoral rolls and the financing of political parties. We will do whatever they want because you cannot beat hard work and abilities with fabricated stories," Vucic concluded. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The country has entered in a period of fragile political stability due to opposition reactions against governmental practices regarding human rights, media freedom, and elections transparency. President Aleksandar Vucic announced that elections (parliamentary and local) will be held on March or April 2020. Opposition said that if its requests will not be fulfilled, elections will be boycotted. However, efforts for dialogue between the ruling SNS and opposition have started in order the crisis to be resolved. The first meeting was a hopeful step, but there is a "long distance" between the two parts. President Aleksandar Vucic's statement that he is willing to do whatever opposition asks for improving electoral procedure is a hopeful sign. Regarding Belgrade – Pristina dialogue there is nothing to be expected in the near future; the whole process has reached a deadlock. It is announced that next Belgrade – Pristina meeting

will be held on September, but it is more than doubtful if it will be held since early parliamentary elections are expected in Kosovo on September 2019. Armed Forces remain in operational readiness without any deployment of units across Serbia – Kosovo border. Serbia strengthens its relations with Russia (and China) seeking stronger support regarding Kosovo case. Security situation is complex and uncertain. None could predict Serbia's reaction in a possible accidental or pre-planned (provocation including) incident in Northern Kosovo against local Serbs. One should have in mind that top state officials have said repeatedly in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. At the moment, Serbia looks like acting in accordance with the international law aiming at reducing tension in the region. In other words state's leadership is acting in a "reasonable" and "wise" way avoiding mistakes of the past which have isolated Serbia from the international community. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its Armed Forces declaring towards all sides that they are the power of the state. In this context, it keeps acquiring weapons mainly from Russia.



SLOVENIA: August 5th, opposition New Slovenia (Nova Slovenija - NSi) Head Matej Tonin presented the party's plans for the autumn congress, announcing an “overhauled and fresh” platform, and noting that the party is still willing to cooperate with the minority Government. The party seeks to position itself in the center as it feels this is where it belongs. Speaking at a press

conference which also marked the 19th anniversary of the party, Tonin expressed again readiness of the right-leaning conservative party to cooperate in projects with the ruling minority coalition. The party is expected to confirm an overhauled platform in November. “*The change will be directed towards positioning the NSi in the center,*” Tonin said, adding that it would refer to the European system of content-based positioning of parties. Tonin said that he is in touch with the office of the Prime Minister, and that he and Prime Minister Marjan Sarec talk when it comes to major parliamentary issues. The party, which was in talks with the ruling minority coalition before withdrawing to see the role of the coalition supporter assumed by the Left (Levica), sees possibilities for cooperation with the Government on “*a one law at time and one project at a time*” basis. “*We do not want to sign any agreement, because the current coalition partners and the Left have the problem of the signed agreements not being implemented. Even the coalition MPs speak openly about this in Parliament,*” Tonin said. He assessed that the current cooperation between the Government and the Left does not enable structural reforms and a development breakthrough. The NSi wants reforms and cooperation mostly in healthcare, labor market and state investments. Tonin would like to see a kind of a “*partnership for development,*” which means that the opposition would be able to see and comment on proposed laws before they enter the formal procedure. He nevertheless thinks that the Marjan Sarec’s Government will be able to finish its term without major problems. “*You can see that despite all tensions, everybody is going forward peacefully and diligently,*” he added. Tonin also said that the NSi had prepared an

interpellation motion against Education Minister Jernej Pikalo over the Government-sponsored legislative changes cutting funds for private primary schools. However, he said that the motion was shelved for the time being proposing to the Minister to get back to talks with parties on how to implement the 2014 Constitutional Court decision ordering that funding be equalized with that for public schools. (www.sta.si)

- August 7th, the Government decided to extend the deployment of auxiliary Police to help the regular force cope with a spike in illegal migration on the Schengen border with Croatia and with other duties. In line with today's decision, auxiliary Police will be deployed until the end of the year to help patrol the border and stand in for absent regular Police officers. Under the valid legislation, auxiliary Police may be called in for up to 30 days in a calendar year. Only about 70% of Police force jobs are filled on average, while illegal migration is on the rise, the Government said. It also noted deterioration in road safety and engagement of larger numbers of Police Officers in providing security at a number of upcoming high-risk events such as the meeting of NATO Military Committee, and the VIP Forum 2019 to be held in Ljubljana in September. Security challenges will be stepped up later on in the year, so there is a reason to expect an increased scope of duties in various areas of police work. Some 460 auxiliary Police people have already been called in this year and they have already completed about a third of the 30 day-quota on average. (www.sta.si)

- August 9th, the Supreme Court has set an important legal precedent in a case involving hate

speech against the Roma by holding that public incitement to hatred, violence or intolerance is a crime not only when it threatens public peace and order but also in case of threats, abusive language or insults. The Supreme Court held that in cases when the act is committed by means of a threat, abusive language or insult, with other legal indications of a crime, the act does not necessarily need to potentially jeopardize public order and peace in order to be treated as crime. The comment, which was one of many at the time calling for use of arms against the Roma, is “*threat per se*,” the Court said, adding that the comment had all the elements of a crime, so it did not need to meet an additional condition that the act could lead to a disturbance of public order and peace. The Court said that prosecution of public incitement to hatred, violence or intolerance did not protect only public peace and order but also human dignity. It also noted that Constitution guarantees the Roma additional protection and positive discrimination. The Justice Ministry as well as human rights groups have welcomed the development. “*We are aware of the increasingly severe problem of hate speech, which has an extremely negative effect on society and social discourse*,” the Justice Ministry wrote. The Ministry also pointed to warnings by the Council of Europe's anti-racist Commission regarding problems in Slovenia “*with the understanding of legal issues pertaining to hate speech and problems with the social response to the spreading of hate speech*.” (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability, the minority Government of Marjan

Sarec has entered in a period of fragile balance due to the Left party announcement that it will re-assessed its support towards the ruling coalition. Left party is the key factor for Government's stability and viability by supporting it in the Parliament. Without the Left's support the Government would be toppled and early elections should be called. Under these circumstances Prime Minister Marjan Sarec does not exclude a confidence vote together with the 2020 – 2021 budget adoption by the Parliament. Sarec seeks to bear his partners responsibilities towards the Government's support and either to stabilize his ruling coalition or to call early elections. At the moment it is assessed that none of the ruling coalition parties wish snap elections. Besides, opposition NSi expressed its will to support the minority Government offering an alternative to Sarec Government. It is assessed that minority ruling coalition is stable with limited possibilities of an unexpected event. Sarec has been proved of being flexible in Slovenia's politics so far achieving to balance adequately between different political trends. Looking in the future and next parliamentary elections he seeks to unify political forces belong to the ALDE family against SDS which keeps on being the most powerful political force in the country. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc). Border dispute between Slovenia and Croatia remains active with low scale skirmishes not excluded periodically. Unofficial announcement by the EC that Croatia has fulfilled the Schengen Zone criteria and it would be accepted during the coming autumn has put a dilemma in Slovenian foreign policy towards its relations with Croatia. Is Slovenia going to block Croatia's entrance in

the Schengen area or it will vote for it? It is assessed that September will be a month of intense contacts between Slovenia and Croatia, while the EU is expected to push Slovenia to facilitate Croatia's accession to the Schengen zone. It should be underlined that relations between Croatia and Slovenia are in low level and an "underworld war" is ongoing (at political, diplomatic and intelligence context). The issue of illegal migrants entering Slovenia mainly from Croatia is high in the agenda lately. The Government deployed military force to support Police tasks. Furthermore, the Government decided to activate auxiliary Police for helping regular Police. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The annual report on the Armed Forces operational readiness released by the Armed Forces Chief of Staff is disappointing since it assessed that the Armed Forces have limited operational capabilities in war time namely they cannot accomplish their mission. The med-term 2018 – 2023 defense program it could improve situation, but under current political situation it is doubtful if it will be implemented to the end.



TURKEY: August 7th, Turkey and

the US have agreed to establish a joint operations centre in order to coordinate and manage the setting up of a safe zone in northern Syria. The agreement on Wednesday came after three days of intense negotiations between officials from the two NATO allies in Turkey's capital, Ankara. A joint statement by the Turkish Defense Ministry and the US Embassy in Ankara said the two sides had agreed to set up the Turkey-based operations

centre “as soon as possible” and that safe zone would become a “*peace corridor*,” without providing further details. It added that the delegations had agreed to address “*the rapid implementation of initial measures to address Turkey's security concerns*,” adding that “*every effort shall be made so that displaced Syrians can return to their country*.” The statement did not specify how and when the zone would be created, but it appeared to avert, for the time being, a threatened Turkish operation into the region east of the Euphrates River in Syria. Northeastern Syria is currently under control of the US-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), largely comprising of the People's Protection Units (YPG). Turkey deems the YPG to be an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which launched an armed campaign against the state 35 years ago. Turkey has for weeks been pressing to establish a 30-40 km deep zone within Syria, seeking the removal of the YPG from the area and the destruction of their tunnels and fortifications. The US, on the other hand, has tried to limit the safe zone to 10km. Before conclusion of the talks, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar reiterated the demands and said Turkey was ready to launch an operation into northern Syria. He added that Turkey expects the US to end its support of YPG, which has been Washington's main ground ally in the fight against DAESH. His statement came after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Sunday that the US and Russia had been informed of a planned operation, Turkey's third incursion into northern Syria in as many as years. (www.aljazeera.com)

- August 9th, tension with the US over the procurement of Russian made S-400 air defense missiles, the terror corridor in northern Syria threatening Turkey's national security and associated developments have been the main topics on Turkey's agenda for a long time. Yet, last week witnessed the launch of new strategies that will hit the headlines soon when it comes to Turkish foreign policy. In this regard, two new foreign policy initiatives by Turkey drew respectable attention at the 11th Ambassadors' Conference this week in the capital Ankara. The first of these initiatives is the revival of Turkey-EU relations. In his speech at the conference, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reiterated Turkey's intention to attain full EU membership, signaling imminent developments in the process. Likewise, in a meeting with top authorities in the Foreign Ministry in the past few weeks, cues were given about entering a new era with the EU. Authorities announced that the process for the last six of the criteria for the free movement of Turkish citizens in the EU would be accelerated with the new legislative year of the Turkish Grand National Assembly beginning in October. This new initiative regarding the EU is supported by Erdogan, in particular, who follows the process closely. Opening a fresh page in Turkey-EU relations serves the strategic interests of both sides. Erdogan said “*If the EU intends to be a global actor, it has to win over Turkey first. Turkey's membership should not be sacrificed for the ambitions of some countries*.” Turkey's performance on the issue of irregular migrants must be one of the main topics Europe needs to consider, in particular. If Turkey did not intercept migrants, 35,000 illegal immigrants would be knocking on Europe's doors today. As a result, it

is not difficult to guess the economic burden it would cause considering that Turkey spent nearly five times more than the 6 billion euro the EU promised for Syrian refugees and given in a roundabout way. According to the authorities in Ankara, Turkey could demand the EU assistance be delivered directly in the new period, rather than through associations and institutions. In other respects, it is expected that crucial reassignments in EU institutions, namely the Joint Parliamentary Committee, the European Commission, Parliament and the Enlargement Committee will take place. Ankara will work diligently on legislation and lobbying in the presence of these institutions to return to the relations of 2017 for the remaining six criteria out of 72 required for the visa exemption. While accelerated legal reforms will be realized on one side, the perception that Turkey is moving away from the Copenhagen criteria uttered by some circles will be altered on the other. Another noteworthy initiative of Turkish foreign policy is the “*Asia Anew*” endeavor announced by Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavusoglu again in this week's Ambassador's Conference. It is known that Turkey intensified its economic, cultural and trade relations with the Far East and South Asian countries including mainly China, India, Pakistan, and Japan for a long time. “*Asia Anew*” would include cooperation in education, the defense industry, investments, trade, technology, culture and political dialogue. Cavusoglu answered in advance the possible claims of EU capitals concerning the issue that Turkey is shifting its axis, especially after the S-400 discussions. He noted that Turkey's main goal with the “*Asia Anew*” initiative is not an “*axis shift*.” According to him “*Has Turkey turned its back on Europe*

and faced another place? Then let me ask you this; Do you shift the axis of your foreign policy when you go there [Asia]? Why does it become an axis change when Turkey goes there?” Çavusoglu added that Turkey is an axis itself. From this point of view, it is obvious how important it is to look in two directions and be an axis, as Turkey is located in both Asia and Europe. So, Turkey's two initiatives should be assessed from this focal point. (www.dailysabah.com)

- August 11th, hosting nearly 5 million refugees from around the world who mostly fled from destruction in their homelands, Turkey has intensified efforts to prepare a more detailed migration strategy. According to the new road map, Ankara is expected to strengthen national mechanisms for refugees and boost international cooperation with transnational organizations to increase border security and fight irregular migration. On a certain level, regulations on employment for refugees come to the fore in the new strategy. Managing the irregular workforce with effective and extensive policies stands as a priority for Ankara. Apart from that, strengthening mechanisms to deport irregular migrants, according to international agreements, constitutes another pillar of this action plan. Istanbul has seen a significant increase in the number of irregular migrants caught since 2016. While the number was about 10,000 in 2016, it has reached 35,000, with Afghan refugees leading the list. They are followed by refugees from Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria and Bangladesh. As part of the refugee strategy, The Directorate General of Migration Management has completed 47 projects. They include the establishment of an action plan,

developing legislation, building readmission centers, training for personnel at refugee centers, researching migration on an academic level, and improving the living conditions of refugee children. The Directorate cooperated with many international organizations on these projects, including the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), the European Council and some Interior Ministries and universities of foreign countries, including the UK, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands. There are still 4.9 million foreigners living in Turkey and 3.6 million of these are Syrians under temporary protection status. While 1 million foreigners have residency permits, 320,000 of them are under international protection. The Istanbul Governorate set an August 20th, 2019 deadline for Syrian nationals who reside in Istanbul despite being registered elsewhere in Turkey to leave the city. Those who were found to have not returned will be transferred to the provinces where they were registered according to the Interior Ministry directive, the Governorate said. Those who are unregistered would be brought to camps where the registration processes take place. Turkey has an important duty in this regard, as hosting the most refugees in the world brings economic and social challenges. However, Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) Deputy Chairman Leyla Şahin Usta announced that this deadline of August 20th, 2019 could be extended by three months. If foreigners residing in Turkey are evaluated in four categories, these can be described as regular migrants with a residence permit, those who entered the country via unlawful ways or came legally but whose visas expired and did not leave

the country, Syrians under the temporary protected status and lastly, refugees under international protection, conditional refugees. Turkey has still 26 repatriation centers with a capacity of 15,876 people and plans for 2019 aim for a further 9 centers with a capacity of an additional 3,800 people. Syrians under the temporary protected status in Turkey have access to health care, education, subscriptions, social services and employment. When the distribution of Syrians under protection is considered, Istanbul ranks first. This is followed by Gaziantep with 440,618, Şanlıurfa with 432,000, Hatay with 428,000, Adana with 240,000, Mersin with 201,000, Bursa with 172,000 Izmir with 143,000, Kilis with 115,000 and finally Konya with 107,000. The main targets within Turkey's Migration Strategy Document are administering regular migration, preventing irregular migration, activating the international protection mechanism, the fight against human trafficking, strengthening the adaptation of refugees and social integration, and developing legislative, administrative and humanitarian capacity. (www.dailysabah.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Public threats of Turkish administration that a military operation against Syrian Kurds will be launched unilaterally by Turkey achieved its main goal forcing the US to start bilateral talks with its NATO ally for the establishment of a safe zone within Syria. It could be assessed that Turkey is satisfied since it accomplished its initial goal; to force the US to announce the safe zone establishment recognizing Turkish concerns for its national security. However, there is a long road until the establishment of the zone on the

ground and one could note that declaration after Turkey – US talks is rather vague regarding details of implementation of the agreement. Besides, the President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signaled a positive “atmosphere” between the two countries saying that S-400 advanced air defense system issue should not become a reason of harming bilateral relations. Latest developments strengthen the idea that Turkey is a pivotal country enjoying geopolitical importance and having one of the largest militaries (the 2nd within NATO). Due to its geopolitical and geostrategical aspects Turkey has the ability to achieve its national goals and protect its interests either by diplomatic means or by the threat of use or use of force. The US obviously does not seek a full rift with its NATO ally. On the contrary, there are still open official and unofficial channels of communication working on improving bilateral relations. Such an “official channel” visited Turkey for talks reaching an agreement for Syrian safe zone. Undoubtedly, the US needs Turkey and the opposite, especially in a period where Middle East is in turbulence. Nevertheless, the American administration exercise pressure to its ally through a couple of sensitive issues such as expulsion of the F-35 fighter jet project, support of Kurdish Syrian YPG (and avoidance of establishing a safe zone within Syrian territory), and support of Cypriot activities in East Mediterranean. It is noted a dynamic change in Turkish foreign policy with initiatives which ostensibly aim to restore or upgrade Turkish external relations. First of all, Erdogan announced that Turkey will intensify its efforts for accessing the EU as a full member. His declaration was somekind of restarting the Turkey – EU relations. However, latest Progress Report


on Turkey was disappointing “freezing” any further development regarding its accession process. Moreover, the EU has presented a draft of imposing sanctions to Turkey due to illegal drilling for gas and oil off Cyprus. Secondly, the “Asia Anew” initiative is a new ambitious diplomatic project aiming to approach the eastern neighbors of the country. Turkey is heading in a major economic crisis, although the new Central Bank Governor takes initiatives to restart Turkish economy after a long period of recession. 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 Armed Forces military intervention in Syria, eastern of Euphrates river has been removed at the moment due to the Turkey – US agreement on establishing a safe zone. The state demonstrates decisively its leading role in the wider region of the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and East Mediterranean implementing its doctrine for a diligent capability development effort to be able to fight two multi-front, inter-state armed conflicts while being able to simultaneously carry on large-scale counterterrorism operations at home and beyond borders. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. In Eastern Mediterranean Turkey continues its drilling operations with two ships (Fatih and Yavuz) maintaining a tense situation. It achieved to establish an almost permanent presence within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) without any real cost. It is assessed that Turkish actions seek to incorporate

the hydrocarbon exploitation issue as part of the talks between the Cypriot state and the Turkish Cypriot community for resolving the Cypriot question. The cost so far, for Turkey, is zero achieving simultaneously to question Cypriot sovereign rights. EU declaration for imposing sanctions against Turkey seems not enough to force Turkey to back down. It is assessed that Turkey is fully determined to escalate tension in the region including armed violence (if it is necessary) aiming at securing its interests. Taking into consideration that Cyprus and Greece act in coordination and the latter guarantees defense and security of Cyprus it cannot be excluded an accidental or pre-planned “hot incident” in Cyprus or the Aegean Sea (not likely scenario during summer).


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 Evolving or ongoing crisis including major armed violence or violent/armed conflict. Civil, inter-state or non –state actors war.

NOTE

 Stable situation. No security risk.

 Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored.

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

 Imminent major incidents regarding stability and security. Violent incidents or armed violence in specific regions. Ongoing tension or crisis. High security risk.