



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

**SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE**

**AT A GLANCE**



**SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE**

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

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

#### **“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE**

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**ALBANIA:** March 10<sup>th</sup>, Turkish citizen Selami Simsek is awaiting a decision on whether he has been granted political asylum in Albania after claiming he will face prosecution if deported to Turkey as a member of cleric Fethullah Gulen's movement, which the Ankara authorities consider to be a terrorist organization. Simsek was brought to the Interior Ministry in central Tirana and kept in a minivan with civilian plates and no Police insignia on Monday evening while his case was being discussed with representatives of the National Commission for Asylum and Refugees. His father, Sami Simsek, who recently arrived from Turkey, said he was afraid that his son could share the fate of Harun Celik, a Turkish teacher who was put on a plane in murky circumstances by Albanian authorities and sent to Turkey on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. The Albanian Government claimed it was neither aware that Celik faced prosecution in Turkey nor that he was an alleged Gulenist. But media in Turkey claimed Celik's transfer to Istanbul was result of a Turkish secret service operation. A group of Albanian and Turkish supporters of Simsek kept a vigil for him outside the Interior Ministry building in Tirana on Monday evening. After midnight, Police detained about 20 of them overnight *"for verification."* Among those held was Bekim Bici, a television journalist, who expressed anger about the incident. *"As a journalist, I express my deep indignation about the General Directorate of the State Police and specifically about Director Ardi Veliu, who in front of me, knowing that I am a journalist, ordered that I should be taken away,"* Bici wrote on social media. Interior Minister Sander Lleshaj did not respond to BIRN's questions about Simsek. Several other officials, including a

Deputy Minister and the Prime Minister's Spokesperson, also declined to clarify situation. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama enjoys warm relations with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has been seeking the extradition of Gulenists living in other countries since the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016. It is thought that several hundred supporters of Gulen live in Albania, most of whom are too afraid to reveal publicly that they follow the cleric. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- March 13<sup>th</sup>, Albanian mobile phone users have unexpectedly received a recorded message from the Prime Minister, Edi Rama advising them on how to protect themselves from the coronavirus and the media. *"Wash your hands, do not move from your house for pleasure, open windows as much as you can, protect yourself from the media,"* the message from Rama said. However often mobile phone users called, they had to listen to the message again, as there was no way of silencing it. Users of Telekom Albania mobile network got a slightly different message, merely advising them to protect themselves from false information. The media is an old target for the Socialist Premier, who over the years has seen his image tarnished by reports of links with organized crime, of controversial public contracts awarded to local companies without competition and of other scandals involving misuse of public funds. Rama has often attempted to deflect the blame by running a war against the media and claiming all allegations against him are manufactured lies. He once called Voice of America the voice of *"the garbage bin"* and more lately, he sued the German tabloid Bild for defamation, over leaked tapes that apparently showed close collaboration between Socialist politicians and underworld

figures in vote buying and pressuring public officials to vote for the party. Last November, as the country faced another crisis caused by an earthquake – and faced with questions over Government preparedness against natural calamities – Rama threatened unnamed media with closure, claiming he would use extraordinary powers against those who “*spread panic.*” Albania is now facing one of the most serious crises in its recent history as the economy goes into freefall thanks to the stringent restrictions Rama has put in place to slow down the spread of the coronavirus. Rama recently attempted to push forward law changes to create a regulatory body for online media, which has proven more difficult to control than the conventional TV networks that operate through Government-awarded permits. The law has been blocked amid intense international pressure, however. (www.balkaninsigt.com)

- March 15<sup>th</sup>, Albania has 42 confirmed coronavirus infections so far, as there were 4 new cases within the last 24 hours. Meanwhile austerity measures continue to be implemented by the Government to curb the spread of the virus (COVID-19). “*In the last 24 hours the field work has continued without interruption. 27 suspected citizens and medical personnel were tested. 4 new cases have been confirmed. A total of 532 cases have been tested and only 42 have been positive,*” said Deputy Health Minister Mira Rakacolli. Two of the affected are medical staff at the “*Shefqet Ndroqi*” hospital in Tirana. The two doctors had contact with one of the infected and subsequently received the COVID-19 virus. 17 patients are hospitalized in the Tirana Infectious Hospital (from Tirana, Durres, Fier, Lushnja and Rrogozhina). Three of these are in intensive care,

respectively a 66-year-old man from Lushnja, a 61-year-old man from Fier and a 50-year-old man from Tirana. While the rest of the hospitalized are in stable condition for the moment. (www.top-channel.tv)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT** ■ :

*Albania is taking measures to limit the spread of COVID-19. The health crisis has brought uncertainty and insecurity in state’s structures (economic, social etc). COVID-19 expansion could be added in the ongoing political, institutional and constitutional crisis of the country. If COVID-19 is expanded uncontrolled in Albania, could have detrimental results for the state’s function. In political field, President, Ilir Meta has become a harsh critic of the Edi Rama’s Government. It seems that Meta has undertaken the role of opposition leader. On the other hand, Rama and his Government have a significant responsibility that the country is still without an independent and functional justice system and is incompetent to provide the basic constitutional rights to its citizens. They are not able to address the state’s top Courts, the Constitutional and High Court. Apart from that there are serious concerns over judicial independence in the country since the “vetting process” has become more or less a measure of pressure against judges. Media freedom is questioned in the country, while Rama himself does not hesitate to attack them. Corruption, smuggling (weapons, drugs, people etc), money laundering and link between organized crime and politics are dominating in the country and the state’s authorities are not very keen on fighting them. Albania seeks to get a positive recommendation in 2020 (March or May 2020) and the messages from Brussels are positive so far. However, it*

*should work intensively to restore a transparent and credible justice system, to establish rule of law and to strengthen fight against corruption and organized crime.*



## **BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:**

March 9<sup>th</sup>, the Bosniak (Muslim Bosnian) and Bosnian Croat Presidency members had an agreement with the Montenegrin President who was supposed to come to Sarajevo and speak about “*malicious Russian and Serbian influence*” but this was prevented, Bosnian Serb Presidency member Milorad Dodik said on Monday. Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic was supposed to visit Bosnia on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020 but that never happened. Bosnia’s three Presidency members discussed it, and although two of them agreed to the visit, Dodik stopped it by declaring that it is a matter of Serb vital national interest. The Bosnian Serb leader also received support from MPs in the Parliament of Bosnia’s Serb-majority Republika Srpska (RS) region. Djukanovic wanted to come and talk about how normal situation is in Montenegro, when in fact it is “*dramatic,*” Dodik told Pink TV. He was referring to the mass protests of Montenegrin Serbs over a religious freedom law the country adopted recently. It would not make sense for Djukanovic to visit at a time when “*the Serb people, Serb Orthodox believers and the Serbian Orthodox Church are fighting for their rights,*” he said. He also spoke of his colleagues in the Presidency. “*Of course (Zeljko) Komsic and (Sefik) Dzaferovic did not agree and I had to use the mechanism of vital national interest and raise the issue in the National Assembly of Republika Srpska where the final decision is made,*” Dodik said. Djukanovic told the media recently that

Dodik’s recent actions regarding the political crisis in Bosnia could turn into an attempt to secede the RS from Bosnia. Dodik said that Djukanovic is only trying to attract attention with such statements. “*That is an attempt to come to Sarajevo and speak of this ‘expansion’ from outside and of ‘malicious Russian or Serbian influences’ and other things they are making up,*” he said. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 11<sup>th</sup>, the World Bank is ready to financially support Bosnia and Herzegovina with 20 million dollars towards the prevention and discovering of the coronavirus as well as the recovery from potential consequences, Bosnia’s Prime Minister Zoran Tegeltija said on Wednesday. Tegeltija informed the Prime Ministers of Bosnia’s two semi-autonomous regions about the World Bank’s offer. The amount would be used to enhance the healthcare system and its role in monitoring the development of the disease as the purchase of necessary equipment, construction of health facilities and similar purposes. The Prime Minister thanked the World Bank for showing its intention to provide support and assistance in this situation, said a statement issued by the Council of Ministers. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 15<sup>th</sup>, healthcare authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina have detected three more COVID-19 infection cases on Sunday, two in Republika Srpska (RS) region and one in the Federation (FBiH), bringing the total number of the patients to 24. Only minutes after RS Prime Minister Radovan Viskovic told media that there are two more confirmed cases in this part of Bosnia, the General Manager of Sarajevo University Clinical Centre, Sebija Izetbegovic, told N1 that one patient who recently returned from Germany

tested positive for the novel coronavirus. In response to the virus outbreak in the country, the authorities of both semi-autonomous regions as well as the state-level authorities have introduced a number of measures to prevent the virus spread. Schools have been temporarily closed in the whole country for at least 15 days, while control at all border crossings has become stricter. Bosnia Presidency member Milorad Dodik announced on Saturday that all citizens returning from the western countries will have to stay in 14-day quarantine in medically equipped tents, that will be installed on all border crossings before they resume the journey or return to the original destinations. (www.ba.n1info.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT      :

*Bosnia is receiving measures to cope with the coronavirus. State's health system and infrastructure maybe tasted harshly in the near future. Decision-making process in state level could be critical in receiving vital decisions regarding measures against COVID-19 spread. Bosnia continues to suffer from political and institutional crisis. Republica Srpska (RS) officials continue to abstain from state institutions and bodies blocking decision-making and function of the state. Tension may be escalated anytime. SDA, the main Bosnian Muslim party said that Russia is directly involved in the country's internal affairs claiming that Russian position is in line with RS's one. As long as Bosnia is not a full member of the Euro-Atlantic structures, namely the EU and NATO, Russia will try to exercise influence promoting its strategic interests in the region. In general, current crisis confirms that the Dayton peace agreement is a problematic one and it is time to be amended. One could claim*

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



**BULGARIA:** March 13<sup>th</sup>, for the term of the Government from May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017 to the end of 2019, various types of defense products and related services were provided to the Bulgarian Army with grants from the US Government to the total value of 87,237,534 US dollars. This was announced by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Krasimir Karakachanov in parliamentary control. In his words, gratuitous means a gift, and the correct term was gratuitous credit. "This is money you do not give back," explained the Minister in response to Pavel Shopov of Ataka (Attack) party, who announced that the loan is like wooden iron. Karakachanov listed that the US provided Bulgaria with various types of defense products and material equipment -

specialized automotive equipment and spare parts for it, unmanned aerial vehicles and spare parts, navigation and communication equipment, computer equipment, vessels, parachuting assets, accessories for navigation systems and more. The Secretary of Defense also said that from 2008 until this term, the US has provided us with a total of 126 million US dollars. Karakachanov explained that Bulgaria had additionally received specialized boats with auxiliary equipment for 1,227,308 US dollars. Also, equipment for language laboratories and language training courses, as well as targeted funding for an international language training program, with 174 military personnel have been trained there so far. (www.novinite.com)

- March 13<sup>th</sup>, Bulgaria's National Assembly has voted a State of Emergency, proposed by the Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's Government, to be in effect from March 13<sup>th</sup> to April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020 to deal with the COVID-19 new coronavirus crisis. The vote was approved unanimously after statements of support from all parliamentary groups. The item was added to Parliament's agenda on Friday following the proposal by the Cabinet at a late-night emergency session. The sitting of Parliament opened with a briefing by Major-General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, Chief of the Crisis Staff against COVID-19. He said that at the moment, following more than 1400 tests of samples, there were 23 confirmed cases of new coronavirus in Bulgaria. One person had died. Drastic measures were being taken worldwide, Mutafchiyski said. In Israel, the prison sentence for violating quarantine is seven years. In Greece, it is two years and in Russia, three years. Verbal messages were ineffective and controls need to be in place, he said. When facing a situation similar

to that in Italy, it should be possible to mobilize all medical personnel, Mutafchiyski said. Solutions to the problem of protective clothing had been found. Production already was underway. There were problems with sufficient breathing apparatuses. Ways were being sought to get them supplied quickly. Borissov complained that many people were not complying with the imposed quarantine measures and the Interior Ministry should find them and put them into mandatory detention. *"We want this state of emergency for a month. We need it because of those who violate the ban,"* Borissov said. Closing borders will literally block economic life; our economies are open, connected. Therefore, we will propose measures to prevent food supplies from becoming a problem. Amendments to the Budget Act were possible, he said. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- March 15<sup>th</sup>, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Bulgaria is 51, Crisis Staff Chief Major General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski said on a briefing. The first announcement of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Bulgaria was on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020; a week earlier, when there were four. Two people have died. A 74-year-old man who had tested positive for coronavirus died on March 14<sup>th</sup> at Pirogov emergency hospital in Sofia. His 66-year-old wife, who also had tested positive, died three days earlier. Mutafchiyski told on the evening briefing that the new results announced on Sunday were from 83 tests at the Military Medical Academy, of which six were positive, and 51 at the National Reference Laboratory, of which two were positive. In Varna, one test out of 12 samples proved positive. Sixteen samples from Stara Zagora all tested negative. Earlier on March 15<sup>th</sup>, a meeting between the Prime Minister Boyko



Borissov and Head of state President Roumen Radev resulted in an announcement that the state would pay 1000 leva (500 euro) extra a month to all medical professionals involved in the frontline against COVID-19. The sum would be paid in addition to their monthly salaries. In the payment, no distinction will be made among doctors, nurses, laboratory assistants and medical orderlies. In an afternoon briefing on Sunday was told that the Bulgarian Government with the Bulgarian Development Bank would propose measures to provide liquidity support to businesses suffering because of the measures imposed under the State of Emergency declared to contain COVID-19 coronavirus. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Bulgarian in line with other European countries is receiving measures against COVID-19. The country has been declared on state of emergency in order to facilitate state institutions to act effectively against the COVID-19 spread. Bulgaria enjoys political stability despite political struggle between the President, Rumen Radev and the Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov. Migration crisis due to uncontrolled refugee and migrant flows from Turkey is closely monitored by Bulgarian authorities but currently there is no pressure in Bulgarian borders since flows are directed towards Greek borders. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles for the country's development and should be addressed decisively. The country pays special attention to energy security developing several projects. Modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc). However, military operational*

*capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards.*



**CROATIA:** March 10<sup>th</sup>, four Croatian Police officers will be sent to the Greek - Turkish border as part of an operation run by EU's external border agency FRONTEX to assist Greek border Police, Croatia's Interior Ministry said on Tuesday. The operation was launched upon Greece's request, and will last from March 11<sup>th</sup> to May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020. It will involve a total of 100 Police officers from EU member countries. The four Croatian Police officers will be stationed in Greece until April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020 when they will be replaced by another four who will stay in the country until May, although the ongoing operation could potentially be extended and the four people group enlarged, the Ministry said. Greece is facing an influx of refugees and migrants on its border with Turkey, after Ankara had announced in February that it would opening its borders towards the EU and allow incoming migrants and refugees to travel freely towards the Europe. Turkey has taken in nearly four million people displaced by the Syrian war. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- March 11<sup>th</sup>, in Croatian Parliament the opposition has said that Croatia must not stick its head in the sand, adding that a recession is threatening due to the Coronavirus. They asked the Government to rebalance the budget and implement urgent measures to assist business and citizens. "We need a precise plan, with concrete proposals. We need to adapt all of our measures, amortize and prepare the economy to pull out of everything that will happen as soon as possible," said Bridge of Independent Lists (Most

Nezavisnih Lista - MOST) party MP Bozo Petrov. *“It is necessary to urgently rebalance the state budget, in order to properly and realistically estimate revenues for this year on the one hand and in the same manner free up funds for emergency intervention situations, such as possible transfers to those that will be most threatened, while at the same time with a growth of budgetary reserves,”* said Civic Liberal Alliance (Građansko-Liberalni Savez – GLAS) party MP Goran Beus Richebergh. *“The Croatian Government must, and we from the Social Democratic Party appeal upon them, to urgently prepare measures that will ease this situation for the economy and citizens. These measures must be in the direction of tax breaks, but in the same manner, these measures must be in the direction of imposing obligations to banks for example, to ensure for especially threatened groups of citizens a moratorium on the payment of their obligations that in the contrary citizens will not be able to pay,”* said Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska Partija Hrvatske - SDP) MP, Pedja Grbin. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- March 15<sup>th</sup>, Health Minister Vili Beros said at a news conference in Zagreb on Sunday that in the last few hours, there had been seven new cases of patients who tested positive for COVID-19, bringing the total number of positive cases in Croatia to 46. *“There are five new cases in Osijek with the virus transmission within a family, and there are two more cases in Zagreb,”* Beros said at the regular news conference which the civil protection authority has been holding every morning since the outbreak of the coronavirus. The Head of Zagreb's Fran Mihaljevic Infectious Diseases Hospital, Alemka Markotic, informed

the news conference that all those diagnosed with the virus did not have serious symptoms. Markotic also spoke about the importance of obeying the instructions for self-isolation. Croatian Institute of Public Health Head Krunoslav Capak said that the procedures at the border crossings had been simplified to enable easier flow of vehicles after traffic congestion in the last two days. (www.hr.n1info.com)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**   :

*COVID-19 is affecting Croatia as it happens in all other European countries. There is much concern over the economic ramifications of the state's measures against COVID-19. Croatia enjoys political stability in a difficult period due to coronavirus spread and the threat of new migrant flows. Croatian authorities are thinking of the Armed Forces engagement in the border control if migrant flows are increased. It is a sensitive issue which needs special institutional provisions to become legal. However, it is assessed that Croatia is not under imminent increase of migrant waves. Croatia currently holding the EU Presidency expressed its solidarity for Greece in securing the European borders. Moreover, it is ready to send a patrol ship in the Aegean Sea to assist in the border control, while four Croatian Police officers will join the FRONTEX operation in the Greek – Turkish borders. Croatia – Slovenia border dispute remains active and it should be noticed that Croatia needs Slovenia's support regarding its accession in the Schengen Zone and OECD. Under these circumstances, Croatia is forced to start thinking of dialogue and compromise since its stance has repercussions in state's national interests. Croatia implements a hard-line foreign*

*policy with its neighboring countries maintaining open disputes with Bosnia, Slovenia, and Serbia. Top officials do not hesitate to openly interfere in Bosnian domestic affairs in the name of Bosnian Croats. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Currently, the Ministry of Defense has restarted its efforts for acquiring 12 modern fighter jets since Croatia is a NATO member without operational Air Force.*



**CYPRUS:** March 10<sup>th</sup>, the

Government on Tuesday unveiled an action plan to tackle the recent spike in irregular migrants and asylum seekers, including a massive boost to resource and manpower allocations as well as tighter checks to weed out fakers. The steps were finalized during a meeting of the Cabinet, which followed two meetings of an inter-ministerial committee with legal guidance from the Attorney-General to ensure the actions are in line with domestic and EU law. Announcing the actions, Interior Minister Nicos Nouris spoke of a “holistic” approach to containing mass illegal immigration, which he called “*a matter of major import for the Republic.*” Noting that asylum applications have skyrocketed over the past week especially, Nouris said there are currently 33,000 asylum seekers on the island, corresponding to 3.8% of the population in the south. Top of the list of steps will be a drive to drastically reduce the time it takes to process asylum applications, by raising the number of application examiners from 32 currently to 69. Also the Government will amend the relevant legislation limiting the deadline for someone to file recourse with a Court. A list of “safe countries” will be drawn up

to enable immigration officers to immediately sort out applications that are manifestly bogus. These will be filed as such and their processing expedited, within a maximum of 10 days. Where an application is deemed manifestly spurious, the applicant will be given three days to file for legal recourse and, if he or she is denied, or fails to file within the three-day deadline, deportation orders are to be issued at once. To tackle the phenomenon of sham marriages, the Government intends to fast-track amendments to the law featuring tougher penalties. Moreover, starting from the next academic period, strict criteria are to be imposed on colleges relating to student registration of non-EU nationals. Additionally a new facility is to be created, able to hold 600 people, where asylum seekers are to stay until their applications are processed. Capacity will be increased at the Menoyia detention centre with the reopening there of a wing that is currently shut. In the meantime local authorities will crack down on squatting by migrants in derelict premises, as checks are intensified on illicit employment. Along the Green Line – a main point of entry for irregular migrants – Police and military will increase patrols. Nouris also said the Government will immediately begin implementing the framework of action agreed with the EU in November 2019, which among others provides for the establishment of a dedicated agency for the returning of migrants. The Cabinet likewise authorized the Interior Minister to engage in enhanced contact with FRONTEX – the European border and coast guard agency – aimed at boosting cooperation on issues pertaining to the return of migrants and containing the flows of irregular migrants by land or sea. President Nicos Anastasiades has formally requested financial assistance from the EU for the 2020-2021 period

to cover the costs of additional infrastructures for migrants as well as for the purchase of equipment monitoring the coastline and the Green Line. Asked what equipment this might involve, Nouris said it included ships and vehicles. According to the UNHCR, the top ten countries of origin for new asylum seekers in Cyprus as of November 2019 are Georgia, India, Bangladesh, Syria, Pakistan, Cameroon, Vietnam, Egypt, Sri Lanka and Nigeria. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 11<sup>th</sup>, UNFICYP said on Wednesday there had been no incursion into the buffer zone at Deneia by Turkish farmers, but the village's community leader insisted there had. The village has been reporting for some time that farmers from the north are entering its area in the buffer zone and are cultivating land used by Greek Cypriots. The latest incident was reported by Deneia community leader, Christakis Panayiotou, on Tuesday. Deneia residents caught on video the movement in the buffer zone. UNFICYP Spokesperson Aleem Siddique said on Wednesday no incursion inside the buffer zone at Deneia village had taken place. *"The tractor shown was clearly, according to our records, north of the ceasefire line. There was no tractor inside the buffer zone,"* Siddique told the Cyprus News Agency. He added that the UNFICYP has been in touch with both sides on this incident. Panayiotou, however, insisted that there were new violations on Tuesday by Turkish settlers in the buffer zone arguing that UNFICYP arrived at the area very late. *"Unfortunately, the UN position is not correct,"* Panayiotou told CNA. He added that the incident took place at the same area where violations were recorded last year as well. Panayiotou said he informed the Foreign Ministry about the incident. This incident follows several

that started in November 2018 and have continued since. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 15<sup>th</sup>, seven more new COVID-19 cases were confirmed on Sunday, the Health Ministry announced, bringing the total number islandwide to 39. The latest cases concern five people who were in self-isolation after returning from the UK and contacted the authorities after presenting symptoms. The other two cases concern people who were self-isolated after coming in contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case. The Health Ministry's epidemiology unit has already started tracing their contacts to be also tested. In total 12 cases have been confirmed over the weekend. Five coronavirus cases were detected on Saturday with one being a 70-year-old patient at Paphos General Hospital, forcing authorities to shut it down for 48 hours. There are now 33 confirmed cases in the Government-controlled areas and six in the north. All visits to patients in state hospitals have been banned after the 70-year-old man who was at the Paphos general hospital tested positive to COVID-19 after being visited by relatives arriving from the UK. State health services organization OKYPY announced that given the increase in COVID-19 cases, it was imposing a ban on visits to inpatients in state hospitals and health centres. The move aims at protecting everyone's health, OKYPY said, *"of inpatients but also health professionals and other hospital staff."* The Paphos hospital's Director, Dr Spyros Georgiou, told the Cyprus News Agency that the man has been an inpatient since February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. He was recently moved to the intensive care unit after his condition deteriorated and was tested positive for COVID-19 after being visited by relatives from the UK. OKYPY said the Paphos hospital would close for 48 hours for disinfection

whereas all staff and patients who may have come in contact with the 70-year-old are being tested for COVID-19. All staff and patients are being examined for symptoms. Paphos residents in need of urgent treatment will be referred to the private sector. All scheduled appointments, admissions and surgeries have been cancelled. OKYPY urged patients to go to the state hospitals' accident and emergency departments only if it is absolutely necessary. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

*Cyprus is taking measures against COVID-19. Tourism, a vital asset of Cypriot economy, is affected by the current situation in the world. Increased waves of migrants raise concerns in Cyprus with the President Nikos Anastasiades to imply that there is an organized plan from Turkey to send migrants in Cyprus. Cypriot Government presented last week an integrated plan for tackling migration problem. Violation of Cypriot sovereign rights by Turkish research vessels has become "normality" and nobody speaks about it; it is a routine. Cypriot administration lacking of military force is unable to forbid hostile actions in its waters so far. The Turkish goal is to deter international energy giants from investing in Cypriot fields and starting research activities. End of March or beginning of April the ENI – TOTAL consortium schedules a drill in block 6 and this will be a strong test for Cypriot energy plans. Turkey is determined to establish its presence in the region and especially within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claiming the Turkish Cypriot community rights. It maintains a significant military force on the island (Army Corps seize) and it reinforce it with modern systems such as UAVs. As long as tension*

*remains in eastern Mediterranean, there is always a high risk of an armed "hot" incident or a conflict. It is certain that Turkey will not accept "fait accompli" in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.*



**GREECE:** March 13<sup>th</sup>, Katerina Sakellaropoulou was sworn in as Greece's first woman President on Friday in a ceremony attended by a small number of dignitaries due to the measures in place to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In brief comments at the Presidential Mansion, where she was welcomed by her predecessor Prokopis Pavlopoulos, Sakellaropoulou expressed hope that the election of Greece's first female President "will improve position of women in the family and society, so that women stop facing obstacles simply for being born women."



The new President of the Hellenic republic, Aikaterini Sakellaropoulou with the outgoing President, Prokopios Pavlopoulos  
(Photo source: www.ekathimerini.com)

The former Head of the Council of State, Greece's highest Administrative Court secured an overwhelming majority in a vote in Parliament on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020. She urged citizens to fully comply with instructions issued by health authorities to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus and referred to the “*real risk to the elderly.*” Commenting on the migrant crisis at the Greek - Turkish border, she said “*we must safeguard our borders while fulfilling our humanitarian duty to people who are suffering... It is a difficult but not impossible equation.*” (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 14<sup>th</sup>, as Turkey persists in what is seen as a strategy of escalating tensions, Greece continues to closely monitor Ankara's moves in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean and at the Evros land border, seeking to convey a strong message that there will be no letup in defense of its sovereign rights and borders. Already in the last 24 hours, after multiple waves of escalation by Turkey on land, in the sea and in the air, the Defense Ministry and the Hellenic National Defense General Staff (GEETHA) have issued instructions for Greek forces to adhere to the rules of engagement and withdrawal where necessary. The purpose is to ensure that the armed forces assist the work of the country's Police and border guards. There has been constant tension at Evros, especially at the Kastanies - Pazarkule border crossing, after a Greek border guard vehicle came under fire on Wednesday from the Turkish side of the border while on patrol and Turkish F-16s flew over Greek territory. In the eastern Aegean, the Hellenic Navy units that had been initially deployed to intercept refugees and migrants from Turkey have now been moved to Chios, Lesbos, Samos, Kos and Syros, leaving the coast guard to

deal with the task. The Navy units will only intervene if necessary. At the same time, the Navy is also keeping close tabs on the large-scale Turkish exercise that began on Friday in the Aegean, from the north all the way down to Kastellorizo in the south. The exercise had not been included in those announced during the talks on confidence building measures between the two countries, and was only made known in the last 10 days. In addition, Turkey has reserved the entire area north of Crete for underwater exercises. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 14<sup>th</sup>, Greek authorities said on Saturday that an additional 38 patients have been infected by the new coronavirus, raising the new total in the country to 228. Twenty-two of the new cases are believed to be “*domestic,*” which means they concern patients who had not traveled recently abroad, Health Ministry Spokesman Sotiris Tsiodras said in a press conference. There are currently 57 COVID-19 patients in hospitals, five of which have been intubated. At the same time, eight patients have been released from hospital. Tsiodras said more than 3,400 DNA samples have been tested so far. On Saturday, the Government said it is suspending all remaining flights to and from Italy after the Health Ministry reported the third death from the new coronavirus. The two new victims were two men, aged 67 and 90, both with serious underlying health problems, the ministry said. (www.ekathimerini.com)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**   :

*Greece increases gradually its security level on COVID-19 spread receiving strict measures. Although it faces serious security threat in its northern land border with Turkey, the state's interest is moving towards the coronavirus*



problem. However, tension in land borders between Greece and Turkey remains with thousands of migrants to push forward for entering Greece. Situation is very dangerous and could easily be escalated into more serious incidents. It is assessed that Turkey backs migrant flows aiming to push the EU for more funds. Greek Government has reacted efficiently in both operational and diplomatic field. In the operational field, the Police assisted by the Army achieved to block any further move of migrants to Greek territory. Turkish Police and Army forces are engaged in current situation increasing the possibility of an accidental or pre-planned “hot” incident. On the diplomatic field, Greece achieved to confirm that Greek borders are European borders enjoying full support by European states. In this context, FRONTEX is ready to contribute in borders security with an integrated plan and deployment of forces. Additionally, Turkey insists on provoking the Greek forces in the Aegean Sea, both in the air and in the sea. Turkish fighter jets keep on violating Greek airspace and flying low over Greek islets, while Turkish coastguard vessels harass Greek Coast Guard boats. Greece is implementing a strategy of military deterrence and intensive diplomatic action against Turkish behavior. However, there is always a significant possibility of an armed incident which could be escalated into a crisis. Greece enjoys political stability which is a major asset for a country which faces several security challenges. Under the current situation in Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea Greece is obliged to strengthen and modernize its Armed Forces operational capability.



**KOSOVO:** March 10<sup>th</sup>, President Hashim Thaci said the Government of Kosovo should convene urgently and take decisions in accordance with the request of US officials who are pressing the Government to drop tariffs on Serbian goods, Gazeta Express reports. “As the President of the Republic of Kosovo I urge the Government to convene and take decision in compliance with the official requests of the United States of America. Enough with hampering our special relations with the US, without which we would have no free state or future. This approach puts at stakes the future of our state,” Thaci wrote on social media. Thaci said relations with the US are vital to Kosovo. “All of us, institutional leaders, political leaders or Government are replaceable. But to Republic of Kosovo only relations with the US are irreplaceable and crucial. Confronting the US is very harmful and unforgivable mistake for the modern history of Kosovo,” Thaci said. He made the comments after the US Senator David Perdue said that if Kosovo is not fully committed to peace the US might consider presence of its troops there. His statement was supported by US President Donald Trump’s eldest son. “I agree. There are 650 US troops in Kosovo. Time to bring them home,” Donald Trump Junior said. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 13<sup>th</sup>, Kosovo President Hashim Thaci hosted on Friday Prime Minister Albin Kurti marking the first official meeting after the latter became country’s Premier, on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. Thaci in a statement posted on social media said he had a useful working meeting with Kurti. “We touched on issues of state & national interest and agreed that coordination and cooperation

*between institutional and party leaders of Kosovo, is key for success, in particular on the issue of dialogue on normalization of relations with Serbia,”* Thaci said. Kurti addressing media said the meeting with Thaci was substantial and useful for the benefit of the country. Kurti said that he discussed with Thaci on all topics concerning Kosovo. *“The meeting was open and we discussed a wide range of topics, including the Balkans Mini-Schengen, ruling and opposition parties, dialogue, tariffs, and Washington,”* Kurti said. The Prime Minister sees as positive his first meeting with Thaci and emphasized the importance on coordination with the President’s Office. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 14<sup>th</sup>, two new cases of the COVID-19 were confirmed on Saturday afternoon bringing the Kosovo’s total to five. One of the new patients is a woman (37) living in Italy who reportedly arrived in Kosovo at the beginning of March and was staying to her relatives in Malisheva. Confirmation of the new case prompted reaction of the Government who ordered to quarantine the municipality of Malisheva. Testing confirmed one new case on Saturday morning and two first cases were confirmed on Friday. Minister of Health, Arben Vitia during a press conference on Saturday midday said that the third patient confirmed positive is a relative of a 77-old-man tested positive on Friday on coronavirus. After confirmation of two cases on Friday, authorities took measures and quarantined the municipalities of Vitia and Klina where the two cases appeared first. Both cases had a history of visiting Italy recently. One of the patients tested positive is a 20-year-old Italian woman who was doing a voluntary job in Kosovo. Kosovo Government held an urgent meeting late on Friday and took

additional restrictive measures to contain the spread of coronavirus including suspension of public transport, closure of borders, closure of all cafes, bars and restaurants, markets, and suspension of cultural and sport events. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**      :

*Despite Kosovo has only five confirmed COVID-19 cases, it is entering in the uncertain and insecure situation of coronavirus spread. In politics, the underground struggle for power between the President, Hashim Thaci and Prime Minister, Albin Kurti is underway undermining Kosovo’s interests. Thaci implements his own external policy regarding the Kosovo – Serbia relations, while Kurti seeks to gain control of the process. The latter claims that the constitutional order should be restored and the legitimate Government should negotiate with Serbia. On the other hand, Thaci refuses to give up his power and influence in Kosovo issues and to be restricted only in his presidential duties. However, he has powerful allies; the US administration promotes Thaci’s role in the whole process isolating the “radical” Kurti. The “duel” between the two men could become harder undermining even Kosovo political stability. However, expectations for a spectacular progress on Kosovo – Serbia dialogue should not be expected. Serbia is entering in pre-electoral campaign and elections are scheduled for April, 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Fight against corruption, organized crime, money laundering and trafficking, establishment of rule of law, accountable and transparent state institutions, and functional public administration are the main challenges for Kosovo towards its European path.*





**MOLDOVA:** March 11<sup>th</sup>, the working groups of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) and Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) had today a new round of negotiations, in order to create a political platform due to provide a governmental majority. According to the PSRM press service, the participants in the meeting, held at the Parliament, discussed the principles of the draft agreement. At this round of talks, the participants focused mostly on the chapter concerning the domestic policy, measures due to be undertaken by the coalition cabinet, as well as the parliamentary majority to improve the living standards of Moldova’s citizens. Also, the Democrat and Socialist lawmakers discussed the part of the document dedicated to the foreign policy. In this respect, the MPs highlighted the need to preserve a balanced multi-vector foreign policy. Also, they pointed out the importance of continuing the implementation of the provisions of the Moldova - EU Association Agreement. The Socialists said that the document signed in 2019 by PSRM and the ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] bloc stays at the basis of the negotiations for the creation of a new majority coalition. They noted that this agreement had received a wide social support, including on behalf of the development partners. ([www.moldpres.md](http://www.moldpres.md))

- March 12<sup>th</sup>, the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) completed the sixth and final review of Moldova’s economic

performance under the Extended Credit Facility (ECF) and Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangements, having recognized it as on the whole successful at achieving its goals. The IMF wrote in its press release that the completion of this review enables the disbursement of about 20 million US dollars, bringing total disbursements under the arrangements to 178.7 million US dollars. Following the Executive Board discussion, Mitsuhiro Furusawa, Deputy Managing Director and Acting Chair, made the following statement “*The Moldovan authorities have successfully completed the three-year Fund-supported arrangements despite a challenging political landscape. A key objective achieved was the rehabilitation of the banking sector, which—alongside other reforms—helped entrench macroeconomic and financial stability. However, growth remains insufficient to significantly boost living standards of the Moldovan people. Going forward, it is imperative that the authorities continue to pursue a prudent and well-coordinated policy mix, including structural reforms aimed at further strengthening the financial sector, a growth-friendly fiscal policy to increase infrastructure spending and support priority social expenditure while maintaining fiscal sustainability, and strengthening Moldova’s governance framework and institutions.*” He pointed out that “*Significant progress has been achieved in reforming the banking sector, including by securing bank shareholder transparency via fitness and probity of bank owners, improved supervisory and regulatory frameworks, unwinding bank related-party exposures, and strengthening financial safety nets. Moving ahead, addressing risks in the non-bank financial sector, improving the AML/CFT framework, and making decisive progress on*

*asset recovery will be critical to safeguard macro-financial stability.”* As was already reported by Infotag, Moldova’s 40-month ECF/EFF arrangements to support the country’s economic and financial reform program, were approved on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016. (www.infotag.md)

- March 12<sup>th</sup>, Prime Minister Ion Chicu and his Hungarian counterpart Viktor Orban, on an official visit to Chisinau, signed today a joint declaration on the strategic partnership between Moldova and Hungary. Chicu thanked Orban for the fact that, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, he had paid an official visit to Chisinau. *“We had quite good discussions, which lay foundations for concrete actions, in order to achieve the pragmatic goals of cooperation, in the spirit of trust, solidarity, mutual support and respect,”* Chicu said. The Moldovan Prime Minister noted that the strategic partnership signed was for backing the support of European integration of the Moldovan state, as well as for extending the bilateral cooperation between the two states. *“There is economic potential, which has not been explored well enough; I am happy that the Hungarian side is willing to invest in Moldova, through the 100-million-dollar-worth fund. We are ready to provide attractive fiscal regime to Hungarian companies,”* Chicu said. For his part, Orban said that there were no stories in history about Moldovan - Hungarian conflicts and that *“from the geopolitical viewpoint, Hungary has been a supporter of Moldova’s integration into the European Union. We have much enough experience in the European Union to say that it is not easy, while being in EU, to defend your national interests; yet, it is better to be inside EU, than outside it,”* Orban stressed. He added that

Hungary’s interest was to invest in Moldova’s agricultural sector and the education field. He also said that the present fund of 100 million dollars would be used for developing the economic cooperation between Hungary and Moldova. *“Moldova is a friend of Hungary,”* Orban said in conclusion. (www.moldpres.md)



Prime Ministers of Moldova and Hungary, Ion Chicu and Viktor Orban sign the bilateral agreement

(Photo source: www.gov.md)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT  :

*The country enjoys relative political stability since the President Igor Dodon achieved to establish his own Government putting aside the pro-western ACUM bloc. Ruling PSRM seeks to strengthen its power by establishing a majority coalition together with PDM. Talks have been progressed and it is assessed that the coalition is very likely to be established. However, this is a problematic step, taking into consideration that PDM has been identified with corruption and “oligarchization” of the country. Its former leader, Vladimir Plahotniuc is still a fugitive and he is wanted on an international arrest warrant. The EU and the US have not expressed their opinion yet. It seems that PDM is a “hostage” of PSRM servicing Dodon’s political plans. The country definitely follows a pro-Russian*

*orientation, although it declares that it seeks to join the EU. Due to its strategic geographic position, Moldova has become a field of rivalry between Russia and the US and NATO. The country lacks economic growth, while corruption is in high rates. Russia maintains troops in Transnistria which are considered by pro-western forces as violating Moldovan sovereignty. The frozen conflict of Transnistria is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.*



**MONTENEGRO:** March 11<sup>th</sup>, addressing the issue of religious communities falls within Montenegro’s competence and should be done in an inclusive way, gathering all relevant parties and complying with the relevant international and European human rights standards, Oliver Varhelyi, European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, has said. Tomas Zdecevski, member of the European Parliament, asked representatives of the European Commission if the EC would halt stop negotiations with Montenegro due to the Law on Freedom of Religion. *“Montenegro’s Parliament adopted the Law which enables nationalization of church property. And that incited thousands of people to protest. However, world media ignored it. For 100 years, Montenegro has been trying to seize the property that belonged to the Serbian Orthodox Church. Opinion of the Venice Commission is ambiguous and leaves room for speculation,”* Zdecevski said. In his response, Varhelyi said that rule of law was one of the fundamental EU values and a key element in the EU accession process. *“Therefore, the EC pays great attention to the rule of law, especially in*

*countries like Montenegro,”* Varhelyi said. He said that Montenegro would be obliged to meet specific criteria in relation to strengthening efficient implementation and enforcement of human rights and harmonization of this legal framework with the *acquis communautaire* and international human rights standards. *“This also encompasses efficient protection of right to ownership and freedom of religion,”* Varhelyi said. He added that EC had brought this question up several times. ([www.cdm.me](http://www.cdm.me))

- March 12<sup>th</sup>, seven electoral lists have been submitted to the Municipal Election panel in Tivat, which is more than expected after the boycott part of the opposition announced. By March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020 only two lists were submitted. Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS) submitted its list yesterday. DPS MP Jovanka Lalicic, pointed out that there were as many as 1.670 signatures and that it was a winning list. Then *“Group of Voters”* and Croatian Civil Initiative (Hrvatska Građanska Inicijativa – HGI), submitted their lists, as well as Socialist Democratic Party (Socijaldemokratska Partija Crne Gore - SDP). Municipal election panel shall determine and proclaim the summary electoral list not later than March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020. ([www.cdm.me](http://www.cdm.me))

- March 14<sup>th</sup>, according to latest data of Montenegro’s Public Health Institute, there are no confirmed cases yet of the coronavirus in Montenegro. Speaking in the morning show of the Public Service of the Television of Montenegro, Dr. Karolina Hajdukovic said that there are 536 people under surveillance in Montenegro, of whom 276 in the Public Health Institute, while the rest is in other municipalities of Montenegro.

“Sixty-four people have been tested in the microbiology laboratory of the Public Health Institute and the results of all tested people were negative, so the presence of COVID-19 in Montenegro has not been detected yet,” Hajdukovic explained. (www.cdn.me)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although Montenegro has not confirmed a COVID-19 case yet it receives measures to tackle its spread. Controversial law on religious freedom continues to be a source of political tension in Montenegro. The Government tries to de-escalate situation by establishing a team of experts for dialogue with the Church. The Government claims that tension is the result of external activity namely Serbia and Russia which seek to destabilize the country. On the other hand, opposition accuses the President, Milo Djukanovic and the Prime Minister, Dusko Markovic of authoritarian behavior claiming that religious law should be withdrawn in order to restore political stability in the country. Djukanovic considers the Church as a threat against the state's national identity and independence acting as the “long hand” of Serbia. It is true that Serbia interferes in the Montenegrin politics using the Serbian population in Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church influence. It is assessed that Serbia has never gave up the idea that Montenegro is the “natural extension of Serbia” and its (smooth) independence is nothing more than an abnormality. Besides, Serbia enjoys support in Montenegro by a strong pro-Serbian opposition. In this context, the Serbian factor could be under certain conditions to act destabilizing. Although a long political crisis continues in the country,

opposition fails to boycott local elections in Tivat as at least seven political groups have submitted their candidates. A sign that opposition is not united with a common stance. Corruption, smuggling (especially cigarettes) and money laundering are dominated in the country setting significant obstacles and risks for every investor. Such situation has strongly affected progress of accession negotiations with the EU. Montenegro needs more concrete reforms in the field of justice, rule of law, fight against corruption, money laundering, and organized crime, public administration transparency and accountability in order to become a stable and attractive investment environment. The coming elections in the country should be seen as a democratic stress test. The country focuses on strengthening its Armed Forces by purchasing modern equipment.



**NORTH MACEDONIA:** March 11<sup>th</sup>, the US Department of State released Wednesday the 2019 report on human rights practices for North Macedonia. High-level corruption and violence against LGBT individuals are noted as major issues, and it praises the Government's commitment to an independent judiciary. The report notes progress in media freedom and freedom of expression, but the main issue remains poor media independence. “The Government made progress in respecting media freedom and freedom of expression, but problems remained, including weak media independence, and violence and intimidation against journalists. While outlets and reporting continued to be largely divided along political lines, the number of independent media voices actively expressing a variety of views without overt restriction continued to increase. Laws that restrict speech

*inciting national, religious, or ethnic hatred also cover print and broadcast media, publication of books, and online newspapers and journals,”* reads the report. As for the rule of law, the report says the Government demonstrated greater respect for the independence of the judiciary. As regards corruption, the report says there is some progress, but the Government’s dominant role in the economy has created opportunities for corruption. (www.republika.mk)

- March 13<sup>th</sup>, four new people were diagnosed with the coronavirus and the total number of people infected is 13, informed Health Minister Venko Filipche. All four are from the region of Debar and are connected to the couple who were diagnosed on March 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020 upon their arrival from Italy. The woman is in a critical condition and she might be put on a respirator, Filipche said. Because of this, the Government decided to declare a crisis in Debar and Centar Zupa which means the western part of the country will be quarantined. Filipche explained that during the day they received materials for testing of 10 people from Debar that were in touch with the infected couple and four of them were positive. All of them will be moved to the Clinic of Infectious Diseases in Skopje. Today, the ban for entrance of foreign citizens that arrive from high risk countries has come into force, in accordance with Government’s decision, said Filipche. The first patient who was diagnosed on February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020 has healed and she will soon be released from the hospital. Filipche stressed that all previous decisions and measures by the Government regarding the coronavirus protection have to be obeyed as on contrary measures and sanctions will be taken in accordance with the law. (www.meta.mk)

- March 15<sup>th</sup>, the State Electoral Commission (SEC) members suggested that the early general elections, scheduled on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020 are postponed due to the coronavirus. The proposal came from the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) party nominated members of the SEC, while SEC President Oliver Derkovski, nominated by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE), said that a decision needs to be made with a cool head. The Commission reminded that parts of the country are in quarantine and that holding elections requires training 35.000 people who will oversee the voting of about a million people. Derkovski said that all efforts are made to complete the tasks before the SEC electronically but that preparing for elections sometimes requires holding meetings of several hundred people at the same time. *“We will continue to work until a new decision is made by the relevant institutions,”* Dekovski added. The Parliament is dissolved. There is precedent to re-call an already dissolved Parliament, from the 2016 political crisis, when a scheduled election was postponed on SDSM request. (www.republika.mk)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**   :

*North Macedonia is receiving measures against COVID-19. Situation seems under control but it is too early for such assessment. Coronavirus has a direct impact in state’s politics since early parliamentary elections are scheduled for April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020. SEC has already requested the*



*postponement of the elections following a SDSM request, due to the COVID-19 spread, but it is doubtful what will be decided. Pre-electoral campaign has been suspended temporarily, but questions are raised for fair elections. Besides, the elections may become a major factor of the virus spread. At the moment, North Macedonia has political uncertainty and next day of election it needs a strong Government to proceed with necessary reforms and securing opening of accession negotiations with the EU within 2020. The country should focus on reforms regarding justice, rule of law, fight against corruption and money laundering, public administration, and respect of human rights in order to accelerate its European integration process.*



**ROMANIA:** March 12<sup>th</sup>, the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR) admitted on Thursday the notification made by the Ombudsman in relation to the Emergency Ordinance (OUG) 26/2020 on the early elections, establishing that it is unconstitutional. Constitutional Judges say, in a release sent to AGERPRES, that *“the provisions of article 1 point 35 of the Government’s Emergency Ordinance 26/2020, which eliminates the restrictive condition and allows the voter to vote in any polling station, regardless of the constituency where they have their domicile or residence, removing the legal effects that the law in force attributes to some essential elements of exercising the right to vote and the right to be elected of the citizen (domicile and residence), with the consequence of eluding the very purpose for which election constituencies were set up, violates the fundamental rights enshrined in Articles 36 and 37 of the Constitution.”* The CCR

also found that the provisions of Article 4 of OUG 26/2020, which regulates the possibility of simultaneously organizing the early parliamentary elections and the general local elections in 2020, violates the citizen’s right to vote, provided by Article 36 of the Constitution, as it puts them in the situation of going through a cumbersome, complicated voting procedure, which may restrict their freedom of expression of political will and, implicitly, the effectiveness of the right to vote. Considering that the current Parliament started its mandate following the elections held on December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and, according to the provisions of Article 63 paragraph (1) of the Constitution, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate are elected for a term of four years, the Court remarked that the adoption of the normative act by which amendments to the law regarding the election of the Parliament of Romania are brought was made less than a year before the elections it regulates. The decision is final and generally binding and is communicated to the two Houses of Parliament, the Government and the Ombudsman. ([www.nineoclock.ro](http://www.nineoclock.ro))

- March 14<sup>th</sup>, the Parliament has voted Ludovic Orban Government II on Saturday after an unprecedented procedure, as the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) votes have been decisive and several Liberal MPs have missed the plenary session after they had been placed in self-isolation after having been in contact with senator Vergil Chitac who tested positive for Coronavirus on Friday. Liberal Prime Minister Orban himself is in isolation at Vila Lac until March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020 but he will get out to attend the swearing-in ceremony at Cotroceni Presidential Palace, following a last minute decision that allows members of the

Government to get out of self-isolation under exceptional situations and providing they observe certain conditions. However, the first test that Orban did tested negative. The second Orban Cabinet passed by 286 votes to 23 against and one abstention. Among the MPs who voted against, there were also PRO Romania (PRO România - PRO) MPs. Victor Ponta said that his vote is against the “*selfish and disastrous way in which PNL is treating the country in these moments of crisis.*” PSD Chairman Marcel Ciolacu said on social media that PSD is voting the Government now due to the crisis situation, but after the vote today PSD will exercise total opposition against Orban Cabinet. Only 40 National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal - PNL) MPs attended and voted the Government amid self-isolation measures. The vote took place in a disinfected hall and lasted six hours. Mass media was not allowed to attend. MPs entered the plenary session hall at a time, in small groups and wore masks and gloves. As for the swearing-in ceremony at the Cotroceni Palace, the Prime Minister and the Ministers will have to keep a 5 meters distance from President Klaus Iohannis and are compelled to wear protective masks. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- March 14<sup>th</sup>, the President Klaus Iohannis has announced on Saturday night that he is declaring state of emergency as of March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020 due to the novel Coronavirus epidemic. This state of emergency will allow the allotment of more funds for necessary medicines and medical equipment, under simplified procedures. 109 people have been confirmed with COVID-19 so far in Romania. Among the states that have already declared state of emergency due to the Coronavirus pandemic there are the US, Italy,

Bulgaria and Spain. Under a state of emergency, authorities might also limit or ban the movement of people or vehicles in certain areas, or to temporarily close some gas stations, some restaurants, cafes, clubs, casinos, headquarters of some public institutions and associations, and to order food rationing or to forbid road, railway, naval, river or air traffic on certain routes. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*COVID-19 is spreading also in Romania. The country has been declared on state of emergency. However, COVID-19 has contributed for the establishment of a new Government under the former Prime Minister, Ludovic Orban. Opposition PSD voted in favor of the PNL Government due to the current situation claiming that the country needs a Government to address the spread of the virus. Under these circumstances the country enjoys relative political stability due to public health reasons. The country enjoys advanced upgrade in US and NATO strategic plans due to its geographical position located close to Russia. Consequently, Russia reacts in this close military cooperation between the two countries and the Alliance perceiving it as a threat against its national security. Romania keeps strengthening its Armed Forces seeking to achieve NATO standards.*



**SERBIA:** March 9<sup>th</sup>, Transparency Serbia said on Monday that parties and political groups which cross the 1% threshold at the coming parliamentary elections will receive up to 70,000 euro from the state budget to cover their campaign expenses. The watchdog organization said that the exact amount will depend on the

number of parties and political groups registered for the elections. According to Transparency Serbia, the parties and groups which win seats will get about 21,500 Euro for each MP. At local level, parties and groups which win seats on local councils will get 255,000 euro a seat and 170,000 euro to cover campaign expenses. Transparency Serbia said that it has been advocating changes in the way election campaigns are financed but that no changes have been made. It added that it will be monitoring election campaign finances as well as campaigning by officials and media presentations. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 9<sup>th</sup>, Serbian Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin on Monday accused Kosovo President Hashim Thaci of attempting to annex parts of southern Serbia. *“Thaci has revealed his mission – an attempt to grab Bujanovac, Presevo and Medvedja,”* the Defense Ministry quoted Vulin as saying in its press release. Those three southern Serbia municipalities have large ethnic Albanian populations. Vulin also accused Thaci of trying to cause a disaster in the Balkans because he fears a war crimes trial. Thaci was a senior commander of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in the 1999 Kosovo war. *“Fear of a trial for KLA crimes is the reason behind all of Thaci’s madness and attempts to cause a disaster in the Balkans,”* Vulin said reacting to Thaci’s statement that his mission is to annex Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja to Kosovo without changing borders. *“Medicine has many names for his state but has not found a reliable cure,”* Vulin is quoted as saying, adding that he *“hopes a cure will be found and that Thaci will get that therapy in jail after a sentence for human organ trafficking.”* (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 15<sup>th</sup>, Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic said on Sunday night that the state of emergency was introduced in the whole of the country due to the coronavirus pandemic, N1 reported. The Government, Vucic said, would precise the set of measures. He pleaded with the older population to stay at home and younger relatives not to visit them for the time being. As of Monday, all pre-school institutions, schools and the faculties will be closed until the end of the school year. Also, there would not be any practices and gyms would be closed as well. The Army will be on guard outside the hospitals and will be deployed on the borders. Vucic warned that the EU’s promise to help was just a promise and the only country which aided Serbia was China. He said that five million masks were to arrive from China, and a new quantity of respirators was also on their way to Serbia. He added that the measures would be adjusted daily and that those who violate the rules of the state of emergency would immediately be sentenced to three years in prison. Vucic said that only Serbs and Chinese doctors and others who could help would be allowed to enter Serbia. He warned the Serbs living abroad not to come for the Easter holiday, saying they would have to be in isolation if came. Those coming from the most hit countries would have to be in 28 days of isolation. Depending on their health situation, it could be either quarantine or home isolation. The President said that two people were on respirators with worsening health situation. Earlier, the Government of Serbia decided to halt the export of basic groceries and sanitizers, telling citizens that there is sufficient stock and that they do not need to stockpile the groceries at home. (www.rs.n1info.com)

**COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**   :



*Serbia is taking measures increasing the emergency level gradually due to COVID-19. The health crisis affects parliamentary and local elections reo-electoral campaign due to people move restriction. Elections are scheduled for April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020. It is expected a polarized pre-electoral period with opposition seeking to boycott the elections. Serbia needs political stability since it has a lot of diplomatic, security and economic challenges ahead. Kosovo new Government has a lot of internal problems to resolve before becomes ready for dialogue with Serbia. However, the new Prime Minister, Albin Kurti announced a partial lifting of 100% taxes on Serbian goods which a good step for Serbia to come back to dialogue. Nevertheless, no progress is expected until the Serbian elections in late April. Montenegro – Serbia relations are in low level lately due to the Montenegrin law on religious freedom which is considered by Belgrade as a direct attack on Serbian Orthodox Church and consequently on Serbian population in Montenegro. Serbia is considered by Montenegro as a direct threat of destabilizing the country. Finally, Serbia is engaged with one way or another to the latest crisis in Bosnia where Bosnian Serbs claim that secession may become a possible choice for the entity. The country has developed very close relations with Russia, especially in the field of defense. Russia keeps supplying Serbia with weapons, while both countries conduct common military exercises. Serbia is trying to balance between the west, namely the EU and the US on one side and Russia on the other implementing the doctrine of “neutrality.” However, the latest Serbian arms purchases from Russia met the strong reaction of the US (and the EU) which did not hesitate to threaten Serbia with sanctions. The EU has raised*

*serious concerns over Serbia’s effectiveness on independence and accountability of the judiciary, freedom of expression, prevention of corruption and the fight against organized crime. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its Armed Forces declaring towards all sides that they are the power of the state. It implements an ambitious armament program mainly supported by Russia.*



**SLOVENIA:** March 12<sup>th</sup>, four Slovenian Police officers started serving on the Greek - Turkey border as part of a 100-member FRONTEX rapid border intervention team which is helping Greece cope with the new migration wave. They will stay on the land border in the north-east of Greece at least until to May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The Interior Ministry told the STA that the Slovenian officers are seasoned experts with years of experience with operations at home as well as abroad. They have been part of a number of FRONTEX deployments in the past. ([www.sta.si](http://www.sta.si))

- March 13<sup>th</sup>, Slovenia got its 14<sup>th</sup> Government at the height of the coronavirus epidemic as the National Assembly confirmed the center-right cabinet of Janez Jansa at a session at which the fight against coronavirus and the previous Government's inaction in the face of the outbreak dominated the debate. Jansa came out in force against the previous Government's efforts, accusing it of having missed the best time to take action. He promised the new Government would take concerted and far-reaching measures. The virus can no longer be stopped, but its spreading must be slowed. “*This is a battle with time, a battle that has to be won inasmuch as this is possible,*” he said. The opposition said it would be

constructive at a time of such a national emergency but would keep a close eye on any excesses. Jansa and his team already received congratulations from the US Embassy and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. (www.sta.si)

- March 15<sup>th</sup>, a total of 6,156 people have been tested for the novel coronavirus in Slovenia so far, with infection confirmed in 219 people on Sunday, the Government said. The Government also published statistics on people that have been confirmed as infected people by 10 am today (216 cases). The most of the infected belong to the 30-49 age group (73), followed by the 16-29 age group (45) and the 50-59 age group (41). (www.sta.si)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT  :

*Slovenia has a new Government which brings back political stability in the country. COVID-19 cases are increasing in the country and the state needs a strong Government to receive decisions for tackling current situation. The new Slovenian Government has to address major challenges such as migration, social care, and defense capabilities. On Slovenia – Croatia dispute the latter has started on calling for dialogue but it is doubtful what Slovenia will finally decide to do. Besides, Slovenia could push Croatia on this case taking into consideration that Croatia needs Slovenia's support to enter the Schengen zone and OECD. The issue of illegal migrants entering Slovenia mainly from Croatia is high in the agenda lately. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The annual report on the Armed Forces operational readiness released by the Armed Forces Chief of Staff is disappointing since it assessed that the Armed Forces have limited*

*operational capabilities in war time namely they cannot accomplish their mission. The White Book on Defense presented a rather ambitious program of improving operational capabilities of the Armed Forces. It foresees an 8,000-strong professional military force and a 2000-strong standing reserve by 2035, up from 6,400 and 700, respectively. Slovenia's defense budget will finally reach 2% of GDP (a NATO requirement) by 2035.*



**TURKEY:** March 9<sup>th</sup>, a former close ally of Turkish Recep Tayyip Erdogan has formally begun the process to launch a political party, saying Turkey needed a “fresh start” and calling for reforms to strengthen the rule of law and democracy. In a long-awaited move, Ali Babacan's supporters on Monday submitted an official request to the Interior Ministry to establish the new party, which name will be confirmed at a launch event on Wednesday. Babacan, 52-year-old former Deputy Prime Minister and founding member of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi - AKP) that ruled Turkey since 2002, announced last July he was resigning from the AKP over “deep differences” about its direction. He served as Economy and then Foreign Minister before becoming Deputy Prime Minister from 2009 to 2015. He was well regarded by foreign investors during his time in charge of the economy. “The need has emerged for a fresh start in Turkey,” Babacan said in an interview broadcast live on Turkey's Fox TV. “Nearly 20 years have passed (since the AKP was founded) ... Turkey has changed and unfortunately the political party of which I was a member began to do things very contrary to its

*founding principles,”* he said. *“There is a powerful need to create a more prosperous and livable Turkey and this is not possible with the current political order,”* Babacan added, stressing the importance of democracy, rule of law and human rights. Opposition politicians, human rights groups and the EU have long accused Erdogan and his party of trampling on basic freedoms, jailing critics, and undermining democracy, especially since a failed 2016 military coup. In December 2019, another one-time close ally of Erdogan, former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, established the Future Party (Gelecek Partisi – GP) to rival the AKP. (www.aljazeera.com)

- March 10<sup>th</sup>, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has said a 2016 refugee deal between Turkey and the EU needs to be updated, expressing Ankara's hopes to reach a new agreement in time for a summit of the bloc's leaders later this month. In an interview with state-run Anadolu news agency, Cavusoglu said on Tuesday Turkey was ready *“for constructive work”* on the issue, taking into account developments in neighboring Syria where a Government-led offensive has forced nearly a million people to flee towards the Turkish border. *“If we reach an agreement by March 26<sup>th</sup> when there will be an EU leaders' summit, this issue will come on to the agenda of this meeting,”* Cavusoglu said. He spoke a day after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan left meetings in Brussels with EU and NATO leaders without issuing a joint statement or appearing at a joint news conference, as had been expected. Erdogan's trip came as tens of thousands of asylum-seekers have been trying to break through the land border between Turkey and Greece for days after Ankara

announced it would no longer prevent people from trying to cross into the EU amid risk of new arrivals from Syria. Turkey, which hosts approximately four million mostly Syrian refugees, has repeatedly railed against what it describes as unfair burden-sharing following a 2016 deal with the bloc to halt the influx of refugees into Europe. In March 2016, Turkey and the EU agreed upon a deal in which Brussels would provide billions of euro in aid to help Ankara finance housing, schools and medical centers for the refugees it hosts on its soil. But Ankara has repeatedly accused the bloc of not fulfilling its commitments under the deal, including visa-free travel for Turkish citizens and an enhanced customs union. *“If we are to come up with a road map with the EU, we expect them to be sincere,”* Cavusoglu said. *“It is not only about keeping migrants in return for more money,”* he added, noting that EU visa liberalization and an update of the country's customs union with the bloc must be implemented to help solve the refugee issue. While the land crossing on the Turkish side of the border with Greece remains open, Erdogan on Friday ordered Turkey's coastguard to prevent risky Aegean Sea crossings after hundreds of refugees and migrants landed on Lesbos and four other Greek islands over the past week. Ankara also wants more European support in northwest Syria's Idlib province, where its troops are supporting rebels against the Russian-backed Syrian Government forces. Turkey and Russia back opposing sides in Syria's long-running conflict but last week agreed to a ceasefire in the country's northwest after Ankara launched an offensive against Damascus following the deaths of dozens of Turkish soldiers in recent attacks. Cavusoglu said on Tuesday that, as part of the ceasefire deal, Turkey's military will

patrol to the north of a security corridor being set up around a strategic highway in Idlib and Russian forces will patrol the southern side. A Russian military delegation arrived in Ankara on Tuesday for talks on details of the accord, Cavusoglu said. (www.aljazeera.com)

- March 11<sup>th</sup>, Turkey is expecting Russia to take measures over “*small violations*” of a week-long ceasefire by its allied Syrian Government forces in Idlib province, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said, warning that Ankara will respond heavily if its military observation posts in the region come under attack Turkey and Russia, which back opposing sides in Syria's war, agreed on the ceasefire to stop escalating clashes in Idlib that brought the two countries close to direct confrontation amid a Moscow-backed Syrian Government offensive that has displaced almost a million people. As well as supporting certain rebel groups in Idlib, the last opposition stronghold in Syria, Turkey set up 12 posts in the province under a 2018 deal with Russia aimed at preventing an assault by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces. “*In the face of the smallest attack [on our posts], we will not only retaliate, but we will respond much more heavily,*” Erdogan said in a speech in Ankara on Wednesday. The Turkish President agreed to the ceasefire last week with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, who supports Syrian Government forces, but previous such deals have proved temporary. “*Although there are only small incidents here and there, the ceasefire has started to be violated,*” Erdogan said. “*We are sharing these developments with Russia ... and expect them to take measures,*” he added. Under the ceasefire deal, Turkey and Russia also agreed to establish a secure corridor along a key east-west highway in

Idlib and hold joint patrols on it as of March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020. A Russian delegation arrived in Ankara on Tuesday for talks on details of the agreement, which the two sides said would be finalized by next week. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said the talks on implementing the ceasefire have so far been “*positive and constructive.*” Damascus, backed by Iranian forces and Russian air raids, has been fighting to retake Idlib since December, pushing close to a million civilians northwards towards Turkey's border. Turkey already hosts some four million refugees, and has called for greater assistance from Europe and its NATO partners in dealing with the crisis. It launched a full-scale military operation in Syria after dozens of its soldiers were killed in Idlib last month. (www.aljazeera.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

*Situation in Turkey regarding COVID-19 spread is not clear since the Government does not provide a clear picture. It is assessed that cases are increasing and the Government receives measures to tackle the problem. Turkey seeks to implement the ceasefire agreement between Turkey and Syria stabilizing situation in the Syrian front. Turkey is satisfied with the agreement since it secures its military presence in the Syrian ground and ensures that Syrian refugees will be relocated back in the region. Although Russia is the absolute dominant in the Syrian “playground”, Turkey achieved to stabilize situation and to support its interests. Tension in Greek – Turkish land borders continues with daily clashes between Greek security forces and illegal migrants, while Turkish security forces are engaged directly or indirectly. The continuous military campaigns in several fronts have a direct impact in the already*

*“wounded” economy. Due to the latest situation in Idlib, Turkish Lira faces pressure and it has weakened while inflation is rising. In general, Turkey exercises a multilateral, multifaceted, dynamic external policy ensuring its national interests. Enjoying a pivotal geographic location is engaged in several regional challenges. Despite that, enjoys special relationship with great powers such as the US and Russia. Erdogan made clear publically that “Turkish security is beyond its borders.” This statement summarizes the security doctrine of Turkey; Turkey will be engaged in regional challenges, conflicts and cooperation to ensure its security. Turkish engagement in Syria, Libya, Cyprus, Somalia is explained by this doctrine. The country combines both diplomatic means and “hard” power aiming to achieve its goals. It has conducted hydrocarbon drills in Mediterranean Sea within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and presents its aeronautical power against Greece and Cyprus questioning their sovereign rights. In the east Mediterranean front, Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in the region and is expected to react violently if balance of power is jeopardized. It is assessed that Turkey’s relations with the US will never reach a “zero point” since Turkey is an integral and critical part of the western security architecture. The country continues to face several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs, Mayors, journalists and thousands of citizens are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Turkey develops an ambitious armament project aiming at becoming self-sufficient in defense sector; if it succeeds it will set the base to become a regional*

*military super power. Without any question, Turkey has the characteristics of a regional superpower and it tries to act like one.*


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#### **NOTE**

 *Stable situation. No security risk.*

 *Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored.*

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

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

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