



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

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

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

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ALBANIA: March 11th, the Chief of the Albanian State Intelligence Service (SHISH), Helidon Bendo, declared in the Parliamentary Committee for National Security that there are concerns for Russia's increasing efforts to establish its influence in Albania. Some members of the National Security Committee insisted on this matter by posing him a series of question, including whether Russia's influence includes higher political levels, but Bendo said that they do not have such information. The Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) MP, Myslym Murrizi, asked Bendo if they have information about a group of corrupted officers among the state Police, but Bendo replied that there is no such thing as organized groups of corrupted officers. Meanwhile, a number of other media sources raised numerous doubts after Top-Channel made leaks from the meeting public in a special reportage, saying Bendo's words did nothing but reinforcing the thesis of the Prime Minister Edi Rama and a number of diplomats supporting him, that Rama is a stabilizing factor for the region now that the country's opposition has resigned its mandates and led political life to a deadlock. (www.top-channel.tv, www.tiranatimes.com)



SHISH's Chief, Helidon Bendo
(Photo source: www.shish.gov.al)

- March 13th, a drive by the main opposition parties in Albania to bring down the Government by boycotting Parliament appears to be failing, as more and more candidates from the parties agree to replace the absent MPs. Four candidates from the opposition Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) and three from the Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim - LSI) have now broken ranks and defied their respective parties' decisions to boycott Parliament. They agreed to serve as MPs for the next two years after taking their oaths. Four more election candidates from LSI took their oaths last week, bringing the total of those defying the boycott to 11. The two main opposition parties quit the Albanian Parliament in Tirana in February, aiming to create a political crisis and bring down the Socialist Party-led Government of Edi Rama. But, under the country's system of closed party lists, vacancies in Parliament are automatically offered to the election candidates next in line in their respective parties. After about 41 of the 43 PD MPs resigned last month, their mandates are being duly offered to the next candidates in the last election. The party fielded about 190 candidates in the last general election. Many of LSI election candidates have already agreed to replace the absent MPs. Of the 17 or so of the party's 19 MPs who resigned last month, six have been replaced. The LSI had 146 candidates in the last election. Albania's Western allies have criticized the opposition boycott as undemocratic and have urged individual MPs to defy their leaders on the matter. Meanwhile, while Rama has called the new replacement MPs "*the new opposition*," their respective parties have called them traitors. The Government claims the Parliament is fully functional now. But the opposition claims money has changed hands to

get the new MPs into the Parliament. One of the new MPs has issued a grandiose declaration, saying “*he will decide after consulting with Western partners,*” and claiming that he will work “*to preserve the country’s stability.*” Albania introduced a closed list system back in 2008 following a political agreement between the Socialist and Democratic parties. The decision has been widely criticized for giving party leaders too much power, and for weakening representative democracy. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- March 16th, the united opposition protested again against the Rama’s Government, which it is accused of winning the last elections through illegal ballot buying. The protest’s main demand is a caretaker Government which can facilitate early elections. The joint opposition protest in Tirana was accompanied by tensions in front of the Parliament, when protesters tried to break the protective Police line. Police used tear gas, while protesters were reported to throw strong items to law enforcement officials. Later, in front of the Parliament, Police also used water to disperse protesters. Some protesters were injured, falling on the ground, along with hurt Police officers. Opposition leader Lulzim Basha denied criticism that the opposition’s decision to resign its parliamentary mandates is destabilizing the country. “*Albania is destabilized by crime, we will put an end to this destabilization, Edi Rama should leave an hour early,*” said Basha. The President of Albania, Ilir Meta, who shortened his visit to Azerbaijan, reacted on Saturday saying that he is following the developments with concern, and has called for the avoidance of confrontation and violence. The protest was organized in the form of a march, where protesters “symbolically” surrounded the Prime Minister’s Office, and then proceeded to

Parliament. The citizens’ march and symbolic siege continued under the sound of the song “My country” and was headed by two opposition leaders, Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) Lulzim Basha and Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim - LSI) Monika Kryemadhi. The opposition has demanded early elections, and a caretaker Government that will remove Edi Rama from office as Prime Minister. The protest takes place in absence of political parties’ symbols. Meanwhile, Rama has stated that the Government cannot be touched, as it is a mandate given by the people. Protesters have repeatedly called “*Government of crime,*” “*Rama go,*” and “*we want Albania like the rest of Europe.*” About 1,800 Police officers were committed to ensure the protest would run smoothly, staying around the perimeter of the Prime Minister’s Office. This is the opposition’s fifth protest, which kicked off on February 16th, 2019 in front of the Prime Minister’s Office and continued with several protests in front of the Parliament. The united opposition accuses the governing Socialist majority of winning the elections through ballot buying. (www.tiranatimes.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Albania has entered in a period of political turmoil and fragile political stability not only because opposition organizes huge protests against the Government, but mainly because opposition MPs decided to abandon Parliament and resign. Such an action is blocking Parliament’s works undermining Albania’s reforms (economic, justice etc). Such decision was strongly criticized by the international community namely the EU (and U.S) putting at

risk the opening of accession negotiations in June 2019. The Prime Minister, Edi Rama urged opposition to return in the Parliament starting a constructive dialogue but PD and LSI leaders, Basha and Kryemadhi respectively pushing for the Government's topple and snap elections. Although there are opposition Deputies who refuse to resign it is a fact that Albanian politics have reached a stalemate; it is not normal for a stable country seeking to enter the European club to face such situation of political abnormality. Opposition MPs' resignation aiming at forcing the Government in collapse is not a reasonable political strategy for a functional and stable democracy. At the moment the Government seeks to maintain Parliament fully functional, while opposition accuses Rama for buying its MPs to refuse resignation. Further polarization of political atmosphere in Albania by the opposition could not be excluded. However, one could notice that day by the day protests lose momentum. 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. Latest European Parliament assessment on Albania accession negotiations is a rather positive sign underlining concerns over specific issues such as corruption, justice reforms, and implementation of rule of law. The final decision for opening Albania's accession negotiations in June 2019 is up to the EU Heads of Governments. One should underline that unofficial concerns have already been raised regarding this date due to current political

instability. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a "mother nation." It is estimated that Albania will fully comply with the EU and U.S "line" for territorial exchanges or border changes between Serbia and Kosovo if it is necessary for a mutual accepted solution. Albania maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and F.Y.R.O.M. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on promoting Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access. Possible border changes may engage Albania in dangerous situations taking into consideration that it has the role of "protector" of Albanians in the region.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

March 12th, Serb nationalists who gathered on March 10th, 2019 in the eastern Bosnian town of Visegrad in Chetnik uniforms singing songs about atrocities against non-Serbs said on Tuesday they were "stunned" by the reactions of the US and UK Embassies which condemned the event. Dressed in black and wearing Chetnik insignia, some 200 members of the so-called "Ravna Gora" movement commemorated the day their WWII leader Dragoljub Mihailovic was caught in 1946 and executed. "Hell will return and the Drina will be bloody again - the Chetniks are coming from the Serbian mountains," threatened one of the songs that echoed through the Visegrad streets. International officials condemned the gathering and called for Bosnia's institutions to address the threats. The US Embassy said it was "appalled" by the threats and called them "unacceptable." UK Ambassador Matt Field also expressed hope that the authorities would thoroughly investigate

the event. The US and the UK were their “*allies in the fights against fascism during the Second World War*,” said the statement of the “Ravnogorski pokret”; the official name of the movement. It reminded that President Truman decorated their leader Dragoljub Draza Mihailovic. Such a reaction from the Embassies was not expected, the statement said. “*We would consider it normal for you to take part in the gathering and pay respect to general Mihailovic and his soldiers for their sacrifices for their own but also for your people during the joint fights against fascism*,” the statement concluded. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 12th, I am very surprised by the large majority decision of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) entity's House of Representatives on a public guarantee in favor of China's Exim Bank loan for Tuzla Thermal Power Plant's Block 7, the EU Commissioner for European Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn, wrote on social media. According to him, this raises serious questions “*not only about Bosnia's commitment to international treaties and European rules under the Energy Community Treaty but also about the choice of the energy technology as well as about a sound cost-benefit analysis in a responsible and transparent manner*.” Last week, the FBiH Parliament adopted several decisions needed for the beginning of the construction of Block 7, which is supposed to substitute the already dated blocks 1, 2, 3 and 4, which are due to shut gradually by 2027. The 450 MW Block 7 will cost the FBiH whooping 870 million euro, but, as the FBiH Prime Minister, Fadil Novalic, said “*the FBiH entity has no alternative because the scenario of it running out of power by 2027 is real*.” This would compromise the entire energy

system of the country, and the consequences of this scenario would be devastating for the country. When it comes to reasons why Bosnia signed a loan contract with a Chinese bank and not an EU one, only one dominated the negotiations – high interest-rates from EU banks caused by Bosnia's weak economy and unfavorable political situation. The Chinese Exim Bank, on the other hand, bullishly, offered highly favorable repayment conditions which the FBiH Government could not resist. Hahn added that FBiH representatives probably have good reasons for their decision and that they will be able to explain this to their citizens. “*Issues like environmental impact assessments, state aid and public procurement procedures will certainly be closely looked at during the opinion process*,” the EU official said, probably hinting at the EU Commission's opinion on Bosnia's candidate status application which was formalized by the submission of answers to the Commissions Questionnaire on the state of affairs in the country. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 15th, Bosnia's Security Minister Dragan Mektic accused the state Prosecution of being unfit to probe allegations that Croatian intelligence tried to smuggle weapons into mosques that Police would later discover in order to discredit the country as a terrorist hub. Mektic confirmed all the allegations to the state Prosecution regarding the alleged plot but said he had no confidence in the Prosecution to verify them. “*The security sector has no confidence in this Prosecution and its Chief Prosecutor. In the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia, they have to know this and consider it*,” Mektic told regional TV station N1. Mektic claimed that Croatia's secret service tried to manipulate a Police operation that would result in

the discovery of weapons hidden in Bosnian villages inhabited by members of the ultra-conservative Wahhabi movement. This would then confirm claims made by Croatia's President Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic in 2016 that there were 10,000 terrorists in Bosnia, and that country is a security threat. Tomo Medved, Croatia's War Veterans' Minister, on Friday called the allegations irresponsible and unfounded. He asked why Mektic did not address issues such as a rally by uniformed Serb nationalists in the eastern town of Visegrad. Two members of the three-member state Presidency of Bosnia have condemned the claims, if true, while one declined to comment. Safik Dzaferovic, the Bosniak member of the Presidency, and Zeljko Komsic, the Croat member, said the claims could have serious implications, if confirmed. "If what the media reported is true, then this is a very grave issue that will require a reaction from Bosnia," Dzaferovic said. But Milorad Dodik, the Serbian Chair of the Presidency declined to comment. The Croatian President, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic has also not commented on the allegations. Reports of the alleged Croatian plot to discredit Bosnia emerged after the website Zurnal.info on Wednesday accused Croatia's intelligence service of recruiting Bosnian citizens to smuggle arms into Wahhabi villages. Citing anonymous sources, and not backing up its claims with any documents, the website claimed the goal was to reveal the villages in Zenica Doboje Canton, in the country's Federation entity, as terrorist hubs. Croatian officials and its intelligence service have dismissed the claims, as Balkan Investigative Reporting Network has previously reported. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Bosnia has not a Government since October 7th, 2018 general elections. It seems that the three main parties representing the three constituent entities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats); HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) are reaching an agreement to cooperate in forming a Government bypassing their different views on main issues. Bosnia's accession process towards NATO is the main disputable issue; Bosnian Serbs insist that the country should remain neutral staying out of NATO while the two other members of the tripartite Presidency set commitment to NATO accession as a precondition for supporting a Government. However, it seems that during last meeting the three leaders decided to put aside the NATO issue in an effort to form a Government bringing the country back to political normality. Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust. Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs destabilizing the state. It is more than impressive that Bosnian Serbs and Croats came very close aiming at achieving their special goals. Of course, both entities take in advantage "Dayton Peace Agreement" weaknesses and malfunctions. Russia pays special attention in Serbia and Bosnia in order to maintain its influence in the region. Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and Montenegro have already entered NATO, while North Macedonia would join the Alliance on June 2019. These two countries (Serbia and Bosnia) are the only "vehicles" for Russia to maintain a narrow influence in Southeastern Europe. Election of ultra nationalist pro-Russian Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia's EU

and NATO (mostly) integration. Dodik is a person who does not actually believe in B&H viability and is expected to promote (actually, he has already started) his own political agenda. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey approach the country mainly through “investments” and/or funding ethnic or religious groups according to their interests. Lately, a Chinese investment in energy sector provoked the EU’s reaction due to Federal Government’s decision to choose China instead of EU as a financier.



BULGARIA: March 11th,

negotiations between the Governments of Bulgaria and the United States on the acquisition of F-16 fighter jets could conclude in July 2019 and the order delivered in the year 2023 at the earliest, a representative of the Lockheed Martin company was reported to have told at a briefing in Plovdiv. Production of the F-16 Block 70 fighter jets is to begin this summer at the South Carolina plant, with the first aircraft going to Bahrain. Lockheed Martin representative James Robinson was reported by Bulgarian National Radio to have said that the package price for the deal, being negotiated by the two Governments, could include the training of the Bulgarian Air Force pilots, which would last between nine and 12 months. The F-16s could arrive in Bulgaria at the earliest in 2023 provided the Governments manage to reach an agreement by July 2019, Robinson was quoted as saying. Training of the pilots could start as soon as the two Governments reached a deal, he said. The training includes two phases, first to fly the aircraft, and then to serve as instructors for other pilots on their return to Bulgaria. The manufacturer guaranteed 8,000 hours of use before service, making the aircraft considerably cheaper to use than comparable ones, Robinson

said. He said that this version of the F-16 was the best to date. Its advanced radar system could track at least 20 terrestrial and aerial targets, after which the automated system chose the most suitable weapon for attack. The F-16 Block 70 also had another advantage, according to Robinson, a unique collision avoidance system, special software that worked in situations such as the pilot being unconscious or temporarily unable to operate the aircraft. The system would correct the altitude and speed of the aircraft, providing time for the pilot to recover and take control. Bulgaria’s National Assembly approved on January 16th, 2018 the Government a mandate to negotiate with the United States on acquiring F-16 fighter jets. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- March 13th, Bulgaria’s Cabinet approved a memorandum of understanding with China that envisages the establishment of a Global Partnership Centre in Sofia, the Government information service said. The Global Partnership Centre will be part of the “16+1” initiative involving China and countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The Centre will have various functions, including to co-ordinate and conduct research to contribute to the development of sustainable economic co-operation and partnership between “16 + 1” participants, the statement said. It will organize training and consultancy activities and exchanges to promote co-operation in the fields of trade, investment and infrastructure. The Centre will assist the various actors in the “16 + 1” format in order to better understand the laws and regulations in China of the CEE and EU countries. It will establish a network of contacts between institutions, trade and business associations, enterprises from CEE countries and China to facilitate business contacts and exchange of information, the Bulgarian

Government statement said.
(www.sofiaglobe.com)

- March 14th, MPs from Volya (Воля) also leave the National Assembly. This was announced by party leader Veselin Mareshki at a briefing in Parliament. However, it was not clear which are the reasons for leaving since Mareshki said he could not yet share them. Thus Volya becomes the second parliamentary group, which will not participate in the plenary sittings, after the MPs of Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya - BSP) are absent from the plenary hall since February 17th, 2019. "Today, at the meeting of the parliamentary group leadership, we also decided to leave the Parliament, and in order to avoid any false news and speculation, I wanted to communicate it personally. I cannot say the reasons for the moment, because the talks are still going on," Mareshki said in front of journalists. Without the 12 MPs, the quorum in the National Assembly is questioned, as the ruling coalition of Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Граждани за европейско развитие на България – GERB) and the United Patriots has a total of 122 of the 121 MPs required for the quorum. Neither GERB nor the United Patriots expressed concern about a possible parliamentary crisis. "There is no prerequisite for early parliamentary elections, the country is stable, the Parliament is doing its work, and I believe that the most important thing we are about to do is to make good results in the European elections and to be prepared much more seriously for the local elections," the Chairman of the GERB Parliamentary Group Tsvetan Tsvetanov commented. There is no parliamentary crisis according to the Chairman of the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (Natzionalen Front za Spasenie na

Bulgaria - NFSB), Valery Simeonov, who said "I cannot say there is a parliamentary crisis, I am very comfortable now, when there is no BSP, and the laws are adopted at a good pace, what does parliamentary crisis mean? the Parliament works." (www.novinite.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

A second party (Volya) after BSP, decided to abstain from Parliament's works. However, the ruling coalition claims that there is no parliamentary crisis and possibility of snap elections. Nevertheless, it should be noted that absence of opposition parties from parliamentary sessions it is not a good sign of democratic function and the Government always has a responsibility about it. However, one should claim that Bulgarian politics follows the Balkan trend (Albania, Montenegro, Serbia etc) of leaving the Parliament; a strong sign of democratic and parliamentary immaturity. It is assessed that Bulgaria has not entered yet in political instability but it could be evolved into a major crisis. On the other hand, the junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots remains the vulnerable and unpredictable piece of the inter-governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus, Bulgaria has entered in a period of rather stable political situation. The President Radev grabs every opportunity to criticize the Government (and the Prime Minister Borissov) highlighting his different political affiliation (Radev is backed by the opposition Socialists). Opposition BSP tries to push further Borisov and his Government by strengthening its rhetoric and having tabled three motions of no confidence so far. The country strengthened its efforts towards entering the Eurozone achieving a positive

decision of the Eurogroup. However, the EC made clear that Bulgaria could not enter the Eurozone before 2022. Apart from that the European Parliament adopted a resolution for the accession of Bulgaria (and Romania) in Schengen Zone. However, it is questioned if the European Council will receive a unanimous final decision for Bulgaria under the current migration pressure. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles and should be addressed decisively. Although modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc) military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards. Security situation stable; no major threats.



CROATIA: March 11th, progress has been made only in four out of total 25 recommendations given in order to improve the status of the Croat minority in Serbia, which is why the delegation of the Croat community conveyed dissatisfaction at a two-day meeting of the mixed Croatian-Serbian committee which was held in Zagreb and Pakrac on March 12th- 13th, 2019. According to the document the Croat representatives have prepared, progress has been made in only four recommendations referring to education. No progress at all has been made in nine recommendations, and ten recommendations are being implemented to some extent, reads the document. The Croat community is dissatisfied with a lack of progress in key areas such as representation and proportional employment of ethnic Croats in state agencies and bodies of local authority in Serbia. The main task of the Committee that held its 8th meeting in Zagreb and

Pakrac is the improvement of the status and protection of the rights of respective minorities in Croatia and Serbia. The previous meeting was held in early 2018 in Serbia. (www.n1info.com)

- March 12th, the Independent Democratic Serb Party (Samostalna Demokratska Srpska Stranka – SDSS) decided at a leadership meeting that it would not leave the ruling coalition, authorizing its leader Milorad Pupovac and the party's Parliamentary Group to discuss situation with the coalition partners. The party's Presidency discussed relations within the coalition and the party's status in the coalition, deciding that it has reached a line which it cannot cross for the sake of defending basic democratic values, rule of law, freedom of the press, Croatia's international commitments, the rights of the Serb minority and everything that has been agreed with the Government and signed and adopted in operational programs concerning the Serb minority, the Chairman of the SDSS parliamentary group, Boris Milosevic, told the press after the meeting. Pupovac declined to speak to the press. Last week he indicated in several statements that the SDSS was considering leaving the governing coalition. (www.n1info.com)

- March 14th, Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic was in Neum where he participated in a gathering titled "A European constitution for Bosnia and Herzegovina," the focus of which was on harmonizing that country's constitution with European standards. In his address Plenkovic made it clear that Croatia is not only a neighboring country, but one that is a close ally of Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in terms of its Euro-Atlantic integration. "What I want to reiterate, as I do every time I come to Bosnia and

Herzegovina, is that I am coming here as the Prime Minister of a country that is a great friend and supporter of Bosnia and Herzegovina. A friend to all three constituent peoples, Muslims, Croats and Serbs, and all those who live in Bosnia and Herzegovina. That is the key to understanding Croatia's position towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. This applies to all areas of our cooperation and our advocacy of Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress on the international level,” Plenkovic said. The Chair of the Croatian National Assembly of Croatian political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dragan Covic, emphasized the need to change his country's election law and constitution in order to achieve true equality among all three constituent peoples. *“We are looking for partners with whom we can create an atmosphere through which we can change the election law and very shortly Bosnia and Herzegovina's constitution, and in this search for solutions, we are working with our partners, the other two constituent peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We have no other option,”* Covic warned. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Croatia follows a tough regional policy with neighboring countries. It is openly intervene in Bosnia's internal affairs, while it maintains open disputes with Slovenia, Serbia, and Bosnia. It is estimated Croatia tries to establish a leading role in Western Balkans not only as an EU and NATO member state but also as a rising “local” (Western Balkans) power. One should take into consideration that Croatia shows its military strength and capabilities quite often not only in international, but also in national level sending strong messages to neighboring countries. Apart from that, Croatia pays special attention in

energy strategy and security announcing ambitious projects. Although the President is a member of the ruling party, it is estimated that there is some kind of political distance between the President and Government. However, the state enjoys political stability. Latest incidents with journalists' persecutions by the national broadcaster HRT has raised concerns over media freedom in Croatia and one should focus on the Government's action on this matter. Border dispute on Piran Bay remains active and Slovenia's initiative to file a lawsuit against Croatia adds a new chapter between the two countries conflict. The state accelerates its efforts towards accession in Schengen zone, while the EC sends good news regarding Croatia's fiscal policy. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Failure to complete successfully the purchase of a modern fighter jet maintains a long period of an ineffective and weak Croatian Air Force.



CYPRUS: March 12th, the Government criticized Turkey for preparing the ground for an alternative settlement to the Cyprus problem after the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu wrote on social media that all options are on the table for a permanent solution. Cavusoglu's announcement that he had met with UN envoy Jane Holl Lute caught Nicosia by surprise as no announcement had been made on the date of the meeting following a number of postponements by Ankara. *“Emphasized at our meeting with M. Jane Holl Lute, the official assigned by the UN Secretary-General, that all options are on the table for a permanent solution in Cyprus; yet, in any case, political equality of*

the Turkish Cypriots is a must!” Cavusoglu wrote. But the reference to all options being on the table did not sit well with Nicosia. A Government source told the Cyprus News Agency that Cavusoglu makes sure to set the ground for a solution at every opportunity outside UN parameters by referring to other options despite that he does not rule out a federal solution. *“This is worrying, and it may mean that special understanding on the terms of reference should be made,”* the source said. Government Spokesman Prodromos Prodromou said that now that Lute had concluded this round of contacts with the guarantor powers Nicosia is waiting for her visit to the island as had been agreed with President Nicos Anastasiades. He reiterated that the Government does not agree with Turkey’s demand that the talks begin after June. *“The negotiations could have started months ago,”* Prodromou told the CNA. The terms of reference for the resumption of the settlement talks, he said, should also include the six parameters of the UN Secretary General’s framework, including those relating to security and guarantees and the withdrawal of the occupation army. *“It is up to the guarantors to accept what is provided for in the framework for replacing the guarantee status with a modern security system,”* he said. Both Greece and the UK have agreed to this, he said, while all that remains is for Turkey’s consent, *“which, unfortunately was absent during the conference (on Cyprus) in Crans Montana.”* (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 14th, in what is seen as a response to the trilateral summit on March 20th, 2019 in Jerusalem between Greece, Israel and Cyprus, with the participation of the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Turkey has announced that it will start a naval exercise on the same day off the

Mediterranean island’s southern coast and within part of its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). During the summit, which has received Washington’s blessing, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades, and their Israeli host Benjamin Netanyahu are expected to sign an agreement that will pave the way for the construction of the EastMed pipeline to transfer natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe. Turkey said the exercise will take place on March 20th, 22nd, 25th, and 27th and it has reserved a wide area south of Cyprus, including parts of blocks 1, 7 and 8 of the island’s EEZ. The choice of area came as no surprise as the Turkish survey vessel Barbaros has been active in the area. Cyprus, which has filed a complaint to the UN over Turkey’s activities in the area, remains apprehensive over Ankara’s stated plan to beginning drilling for gas off the island’s southern coast. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 17th, the issue of the EuroAsia Interconnector is not closed and negotiations are continuing, Government Spokesman Prodromos Prodromou was quoted as saying on Sunday. In a statement to ANA-MPA regarding the electricity interconnection between Greece and Cyprus via Crete, Prodromou said the project is very important for Cyprus, not only for the development of the electricity market but also for the security of supply on the island. *“The interconnection will be financed by [EU] Community funds and is therefore feasible. There is a technical problem with some decisions in Greece that we hope to find a solution to that will not cancel out the possibility of its construction,”* he said. The Cyprus-Greece interconnection, which has been designated by the Commission as a project of common interest for the European Union, includes the interconnection of Crete with

Attica on the mainland. However, according to CNA, the interconnection with Cyprus could see a two-year delay while the Greek side is completing the interconnection between Crete and Attica, reports said. The cost of the interconnection between Crete and Attica is estimated at 1 billion euro and the project is expected to become operational by the end of 2022. In January 2019, the tender documents for the four contracts – worth a combined 3.5 billion euro – for the design and construction of the EuroAsia Interconnector were published in the official journal of the EU. The EuroAsia Interconnector is labeled as an “*electricity highway*” by the European Commission, connecting the national grids of Israel, Cyprus and Greece (Crete-Attica) and creating an energy bridge between the continents of Asia and Europe allowing bi-directional transmission of electricity. The pre-selection phase has been completed and all candidates have been notified about the decision regarding their request to participate in the procedure. The estimated budget of 3.5 billion euro concerns stage 1 of the project, designed for a transmission capacity of 1,000 MW. Upon full deployment the transmission capacity will be 2,000 MW. The doubling of the capacity will be achieved either through modifications to the converters or by laying a second cable. Stage 1 comprises one contract for the four converters to be built in Israel, Cyprus, Crete and Attica (Greece); plus three more contracts for the submarine cables and land cables for the three links – Israel to Cyprus, Cyprus to Crete, and Crete to Attica. The first two segments to be built are the internal line between Korakia, Crete and the Attica region, expected to go operational in June 2022; and the interconnection between Kofinou, Cyprus and Crete, to be completed by December 2023. It is understood that the EU is funding the Cyprus to

Crete link to the tune of 50%. The funds will be paid to the respective energy regulators in Cyprus and Greece. The remaining 50% will be raised by EuroAsia Interconnector Limited investors. (www.cyprus-mail.com)



EuroAsia Interconnector Project

(Photo source: www.euroasia-interconnector.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Cyprus works systematically in order to become a major part of the East Mediterranean energy hub. Its natural gas deposits affect not only its economy but also its security. The strategy of multilateral cooperation seems to be fruitful. At the moment, Cyprus is engaged in three different trilateral formations which also include strong features of strategic cooperation and alliance; Cyprus – Egypt – Greece, Cyprus – Israel – Greece, and Cyprus – Jordan – Greece. The last two are highly improved due to the US engagement. Cyprus, Greece, and Israel's leaders are scheduled to meet again on March 20th, 2019 in Jerusalem with the participation of the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and it is expected to sign an agreement that will pave the way for the construction of the EastMed pipeline. Turkey cannot hide its nervousness and announced an aeronautical exercise starting the same day, March 20th, 2019. Turkey is isolated from the energy game and it is a good question how it will react since it is certain that it will not accept “fait accompli” in a region considered as part of its

strategic interests. It is assessed that Turkish provocative actions may be intensified either by Turkish gas and oil drills within the Cypriot EEZ, or by military actions. It is a fact that Cyprus has a significant deficit of military power which is (externally) balanced by regional cooperation. Furthermore Cyprus improved its bilateral relations with the U.S, strengthened its defense cooperation with France, and lately develops its defense and security relations with Germany. The US administration appears ready to abolish the arms embargo against Cyprus allowing it to improve its military capabilities. Conduct of aeronautical exercises in cooperation with other countries (Israel, Egypt etc) sends various messages of defense capability, readiness, and determination. Although the UN Secretary General appears optimistic for a new round of talks between the two communities, it is assessed that talks could not be resumed earlier than summer 2019. President Anastasiades promotes the scenario of a “bizonal, bicomunal decentralized federation”; an idea which is in principle accepted by the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and enjoys support from the U.S. However, there are a lot of disputed issues in which both parts should compromise; the most important is considered the decision-making process. Recent close approach between Cyprus and the US provoked Russia’s strong reaction which foresees a possible isolation from its influence in the Island. It is not a secret that Russia enjoys or used to enjoy a privileged relationship with Cyprus due to the US distance regarding defense and foreign policy neutrality. It is a question how Cyprus will achieve to balance between the US and Russia interests in the region. 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 13th, the Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras reiterated his intention to complete his four-year term in office, adding that the conservative main opposition will be defeated in the general elections. “*They should not expect us to make them the favor of bring forward national elections,*” he told in a meeting of ruling Coalition of Radical Left (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – SYRIZA) Parliamentary Group. “*They will swallow the bitter pills one by one. First they will face the resounding rejection in the European elections and then, in the autumn, it will be the final and definitive defeat in the national elections. [It will be] the great victory of progress versus conservatism, of the Greece of the many versus the Greece of the elites,*” he said. Tsipras blasted New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία – ND) leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis and his associates are “*representatives and exponents of the elite*” who dream of a country where “*few will thrive and the majority will suffer.*” He also rejected the validity of the polls showing a clear lead for the main opposition, describing them as a “*big deception.*” “*Prime Ministers are not elected by their businessmen friends and media owners, or by their pollster friends, but by the Greek people with their vote,*” he said. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 14th, in response to criticism from opposition parties, legal experts and even Coalition of Radical Left (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – SYRIZA) youth party of provisions included in the Government’s proposals for changes to Greece’s penal and criminal procedure codes, Justice Minister

Michalis Kalogirou insisted that they are still in draft form and have not been finalized. “*The draft codes are not final texts*,” Kalogirou announced on Wednesday, adding that changes will be made to the proposals. New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία – ND) denounced provisions included in the proposals, saying they aim to ensure more lenient sentences for the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn (Χρυσή Αυγή – XA) party – currently on trial for running a criminal organization – and those responsible for the natural disasters in Attica last year, and to embolden self-styled anarchists roaming the streets of Athens. “[*The changes*] scandalously favor Golden Dawn during its ongoing trial,” said ND Deputy Spokesperson Yiannis Mastrogeorgiou. More specifically, ND focused on a provision that will reduce sentences for those convicted of running a criminal organization to 5-10 years from the current 10-20 years. Moreover, having long accused the leftist Government of showing “*unprecedented*” tolerance to violence, ND charged that it is now trying to introduce legislation driven by its ideological bent for lawlessness. This view was seen to be reinforced by a provision that reduces the manufacture and possession of homemade firebombs from a felony to a misdemeanor. Mastrogeorgiou said the provisions encourage anarchists to throw Molotov cocktails at will. In response to the criticism, SYRIZA MP Giorgos Kyritsis stoked the fire further, saying “*in the 30 or more years that I worked as a journalist I do not recollect anyone being killed by a Molotov cocktail*.” ND denounced the remarks as offensive to the 3 victims (a pregnant woman among them) of a deadly firebomb attack on a branch of Marfin Bank in central Athens during anti-austerity riots in May 2010. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 15th, Greece's Foreign Ministry criticized comments by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who reportedly said his country will respond every time Greek fighter jets fly over the Aegean, saying it is “*completely unacceptable to compare the two events*.” “*Turkey's effort to equate the flights of Turkish military aircraft that violate Greece's national sovereignty with the identification and interception missions the Hellenic Air Force carries out in defense of national sovereignty is completely unacceptable*,” the Ministry said in a press release. “*Turkish military aircraft violate Greek national air space on an almost daily basis, including through low-altitude overflights of inhabited Greek islands. This is a practice that Greece systematically condemns and reports, both bilaterally as well as to the competent international bodies*.” The Ministry said the legal status in the Aegean is “*clear and fully enshrined*” in International Law, “*leaving no room for doubt*.” In an interview with news outlet Haberturk on Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reportedly said that whenever Greek military aircraft take off in the Aegean, Turkish jets will follow suit. (www.ekathimerini.gr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political situation in the country is rapidly evolving and it is assessed that early parliamentary elections will be held on May 2019 (although the Prime Minister Tsipras insists that his Government will complete its mandate by October 2019). The country has entered in pre-electoral period. A long pre-electoral period first of all may polarize society with unpredictable results and secondly it hurts national economy. The Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras focuses on approaching the center-left voters and weakening

KINAL (former PASOK). Political turmoil emerged in a period where Greece faces several diplomatic, security, and economic challenges. Internal terrorism is considered as a major unresolved problem of national security undermining stability of the state. Greek Defense Minister announced mutual efforts with his Turkish counterpart for confidence-building measures. However, Turkish high officials the President Erdogan included keep hard rhetoric against Greece, while Turkish fighter jets keep violating Greek airspace and NAVTEXs reserves part of Greek continental shelf and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone. None could exclude Greek Navy intervention in a possible incident with Turkish vessels accompanying Turkish drill ships. Security situation is of significant risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident.



KOSOVO: March 11th, NATO-led peacekeeping mission KFOR, announced that its troops continue with the training cycle in order to be ready for rapid deployment all over Kosovo preventing any threat to a Safe and Secure Environment.



KFOR training in Dragas Municipality
(Photo source: www.jfcnaples.int)

This time the exercise was held in Dragas Municipality and involved Multinational Battle Group West and Croatian helicopter assets. The activity saw a helicopter insertion of Moldavian

and Italian personnel into a secured area in a day and night tactical movement. Field training exercises are an important part of preparation to increase readiness and ensure Freedom of Movement for all people in Kosovo. In the meanwhile, KFOR Spokesperson Vincenzo Grasso said that the international military force is not aware of Pristina's alleged intention to raid northern Kosovo and takes over the Trepca (mining complex). When asked by Tanjug how KFOR would act in the event of armed forces raiding the north of Kosovo, Grasso briefly stated that KFOR maintains stable and good relations with all security forces in Kosovo, as well as with the Serbian Army, in order to prevent any unexpected action or event. *"KFOR is fully committed to carrying out its mandate in accordance with the (UN) Security Council Resolution 1244 to guarantee safety and security for all people in Kosovo. KFOR is working on prevention and is prepared to intervene in case of any threat to security,"* Grasso added. He pointed out that the security situation in Kosovo is under control and that there are no indications of possible incidents. (www.jfcnaples.nato.int, www.b92.net)

- March 11th, Kosovo expects the EU member countries to take a decision on lifting visas for Kosovo citizens after the European Parliament elections expected to be held in the first half of 2019, said Kosovo's Minister of EU Integration, Dhurata Hoxha. *"We are hoping in the emergence of a new momentum after elections of the European Parliament and during the meeting of the EU Council in June to have a decision on visas,"* for Kosovo, Hoxhaj said. Elections for the European Parliament will be held in May 2019. Minister Hoxha said that Kosovo is in the final phase of visa free regime with the EU Schengen

area, adding that Pristina has fulfilled all required criteria on visa liberalization. She said that it is with the EU member countries to decide on lifting visas for Kosovo citizens. Kosovo's EU Minister explained that the EU members are waiting for the European Parliament elections to be concluded in order to take a decision. Kosovo citizens are the most isolated in the Western Balkan region, who cannot travel without visas in the EU's Schengen area. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 13th, Kosovo authorities plan to have special Police units' storm in and take over the Trepca (mining complex) plant in the north of Kosovo and Metohija. That is according to a report in Belgrade-based daily Blic, carried by Tanjug on Wednesday. The daily said that Kosovo Albanians would in that infiltrate into the majority Serb part (of Kosovo). A source from diplomatic circles in Pristina told Blic that KFOR has knowledge of these preparations, and does not rule out the possibility of Kosovo institutions embarking on such an action. The unnamed source is further quoted as stating that implementation this campaign - and whether it will happen at all - also directly depends on the internal political developments in Pristina, but also on decisions of "broader political developments around Kosovo." "However, the basics and the intention for the operation exist," said the source. Earlier, Pristina passed a law on Trepca and its statute, as for this reason the Kosovo institutions consider Trepca as their property "based on Kosovo laws," writes Blic. (www.b92.net)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Haradinaj's decision to impose 100% tax on Serbian and Bosnian products provoked major problems in Kosovo affecting Governments stability. The international community namely the EU and the U.S put a lot of pressure on the Government to suspend taxes. The UN Secretary General confirmed that tax is the major problem regarding dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. The US has started sending officials in Pristina in an effort to convince Kosovo leaders to restart dialogue with Serbia. Although Kosovo still enjoys the EU and U.S support none could avoid recognizing that the state acts beyond European standards violating international agreements such as CEFTA. On the other hand dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has reached a deadlock trapping mostly Pristina in an endless conflict. Only through normalization of relations with Serbia it will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. However, the state's authorities show a tendency of escalating tension with Serbia undermining a peaceful resolution of the case. By imposing 100% tariff on Serbian (and Bosnian products), establishing Kosovo army, executing Special Forces operation in northern Kosovo, arresting Serbs, and requesting special court for Serbs it is created a climate which does not facilitate dialogue and the establishment of confidence between the two parties. Latest rumors for an imminent military operation in North for controlling the Trepca mines may trigger an armed conflict. In the meanwhile, Kosovo negotiation team promotes a platform of principles and goals regarding Kosovo – Serbia dialogue. It is a hardline document "seeking to take everything and give nothing"; however it is nothing more than a negotiation base which actually rejects Thaci's goal for border correction. Thaci changed last

week his position claiming that he is not in favor of border correction. It is estimated that internal politics affect political leaders' stance in Kosovo – Serbia issue. The question of border exchange or simply change continues to divide Kosovo political forces and population. It seems that the U.S (and the EU) has a leading role in the background pushing for the idea of territorial change (or exchange). Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish in the country rule of law and modern functional administration. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard. Establishment of Kosovo Army is also a factor of destabilization since there is always a possibility of Police or military engagement with Serbian forces. Kosovo seeks KSF to be operating all over the country pushing NATO towards such direction. The presence of Kosovo Army in the north it is assessed of high security risk which may lead in armed violence. One should take into consideration that the Serb President has already ordered all defense and security stakeholders to take all necessary measures for protecting Serbian population in Kosovo.



MOLDOVA: March 15th, MP Alexander Slusari of the ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] Block commented on the Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) proposal to start negotiations on creating coalition and readiness to concede the post of Prime Minister to the ACUM. In a discussion with Infotag, the oppositionist said that Democrats keep judging others by themselves, but the ACUM representatives are thinking

differently. “We are not interested in public posts, as such; this was proved by all the bloc’s previous actions. Of course, Democrats used to deal with such figures as Filat or Ghimpu, who are used to forget their promises and start to form alliance in the Parliament. However, the ACUM’s main goal is to liberate the captured state, but not to get the post of premier,” the politician said. He wondered whether Democrats really believe that by such a cheap trick they can change the bloc positions. “Or this is done for a certain third party to demonstrate to it the desire to start negotiations, while in case of our refusal the Democrats will say they were forced to address to Socialists? PDM becomes difficult for understanding, it seems like they live in a parallel world,” Slusari said. He reminded that the ACUM has already proposed a package of initiatives, demonstrating what the bloc is going to achieve at first sittings of the Parliament. “There is no need to appoint Prime Minister for adopting this package of legislative acts, including the declaration about the captured state, the creation of several important parliamentary committees, the change of the election system. The initiatives should be supported by MPs, including Mr. Candu, if he wants to support the idea of country liberation. This is the ACUM’s first priority goal,” Slusari concluded. (www.infotag.md)

- March 15th, from January 1st, 2019, the price of natural gas delivered to Moldova by the Russian giant Gazprom is 237.46 dollars for a thousand cubic meters. This tariff is only valid for the first quarter of this year, according to an answer for Mold-street.com, given by the National Agency for Energy Regulation (ANRE). Thus, the import cost of Russian methane delivered by Gazprom in the first three months of this year is higher by about 25% compared to the import price of the

same period last year. According to ANRE data in 2018, 1.13 billion cubic meters of gas were imported into Moldova (not considering the Transnistrian region), with about 9.3% more (almost 96 million cubic meters) than in 2017. (www.moldova.org)

- March 15th, in his interview with Izvestia newspaper of Russia, Moldova President Igor Dodon offered an opinion that it is too early yet to speak of a political crisis in Moldova. The Head of state said that he is going to convene the first plenary meeting of the new Moldovan Parliament next week. *“After that, parliamentary factions will be formed in the forum, and then I, as President, will begin negotiations with the largest political forces elected to the Parliament. I hope the talks will lead us to achieving a concrete result. But if not, then I presume we should dissolve this Parliament without a delay so that to hold a snap election – together with the soon-to-be ordinary local election [due next summer],”* Dodon said. Speaking of relationship with Russia, Dodon said that more than a half of the Moldovan population stands for friendship with the Russian Federation and for promoting Moldova’s interests in the cooperation of the two countries. Speaking about Transnistrian administration role in the elections, Dodon said that at the February 24th parliamentary election, the leadership of Transnistria played into the hand of the Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM). In his opinion, the Transnistrian administration is counting on the formation of an anti-Russia and pro-NATO majority to rule Moldova *“because in such case it will be easier for Tiraspol to ask Russia’s help.”* (www.infotag.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT

Parliamentary elections in Moldova were hiding surprises and ACUM achieved to get the 2nd place, but due to the new electoral system got only 26 seats. ACUM looks reluctant to negotiate a possible coalition with PDM. At the moment the most possible scenario is a ruling coalition of PSRM – PDM. On the other hand, the US and EU it might push for a PDM – ACUM cooperation aiming at interdicting the pro-russian PSRM from entering a Government. New elections could not be excluded. Moldova is between the Euro-Atlantic structures on the one hand and the Russian influence on the other. Political situation in the country is alarming and the EU has hardened its policy towards Moldova pushing for more reforms which will strengthen state’s transparency, accountability and democratic values. The current Government has walked into dangerous paths which support corruption and organized crime and deep and determined justice reforms are needed. The U.S, EU and IMF express their major concerns. The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Moldova; First of all Russia maintains military forces in Transnistrian ground and secondly it shares common borders with Ukraine which cannot go unnoticed by international stakeholders. The “Transnistria case” is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: March 14th, commenting on the statement of Albania’s Prime Minister, Edi Rama, on *“Schengen borders among Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo,”* Montenegro’s Internal Affairs Minister, Mevludin Nuhodzic said Montenegro

and Albania have excellent friendly and good neighborly relations, but that this topic will be possible to be spoken when the Western Balkan countries adopt standards and have relations that exist among the Schengen countries. *“Ten years ago (2009) Montenegro and Albania opened a joint road border crossing Sukobin – Muricani, with the possibility of taking joint controls. Some other countries from the region did it almost a decade afterwards. But this was not all. In the second half of 2018, after the joint session of the two Governments, we signed the Agreement on opening the joint border crossing Ckla – Zogaj,”* Nuhodzic said in response to Rama’s statement. When it comes to faster and simpler border crossings Nuhodzic added that security of the citizens and state should come first. (www.cdm.me)

- March 16th, protesters marched demanding President Milo Djukanovic and Government to resign over widespread corruption and alleged links to organized crime. Civic activists, academics, students and journalists who say they are not affiliated with any political party, marched through the center Podgorica of the city chanting *“Milo thief,” “No more crime,” “Rebellion,”* and *“We are the state.”* Opposition parties support the protests started in early February but their leaders have distanced themselves of taking prominent role in the organization or addressing the crowd. An informal group of intellectuals, academics, NGO activists and journalists stand behind the protests dubbed *“Odupri se!”* [Resist!]. Opponents of Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic accused the country’s long-time leader of presiding over poverty, a loss of human rights and media freedoms, and corruption. Beside the resignation of President Djukanovic, who has ruled for almost 30 years, the protesters

demand the resignation of the Supreme State Prosecutor, Ivica Stankovic, and the Chief Prosecutor for Organized Crime, Milivoje Katnic. They accuse senior law officials of ignoring evidence and not prosecuting manifest corruption in the ranks of Djukanovic’s inner circle. The protesters marched by the Montenegrin broadcaster, RTCG, and demanded more professional and fair reporting. Saturday’s protest was the fifth in a row. It follows the revelation of footage and documents that appear to implicate top officials in obtaining suspicious funds for the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS). (www.balkaninsight.com)

- March 17th, Montenegrin Ministry of Defense plans to sell until 2020 a significant part of weapons not being used for a long time and which are currently at the military warehouses. The Armed Forces are going to sell 400 “Zolja” anti-tank grenade launchers, 581 “Malyutka” missiles, 19 PVO “Arrow 2” missile systems, and 30 mine throwers (82 mm) currently at the warehouse in Brezovik. According to this document, the warehouse in Danilovgrad has 3 armored all-terrain vehicles M81, 6 anti-tank guns, as well as 5 military transporters which are also not needed any more. (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Massive protests against the President and high officials disturbed a period of “euphoria”, emerging state’s problems such as corruption, media freedom, and nepotism. In this context, accusations against the country’s President for bribery by a fugitive businessman should be investigated with transparency and into depth. The EP assessment is positive praising the state’s

efforts to implement major reforms, but on the other hand it underlines the problems of the rule of law, media freedom, corruption, money laundering, and organized crime. However, the EP expressly states that Montenegro under certain conditions may be able to access the EU by 2025. It is assessed that the EU and U.S strongly supports the President Djukanovic and the Montenegrin Government despite corruption accusations as being the only loyal partner committed to the Western orientation of the state. In other words the west is closing its eyes in lack of democratic values and rule of law due to geopolitical interests namely Russian influence. The Government promotes state's political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. Although the Government takes concrete measures against corruption, organized crime, and money laundering it is assessed that a lot should be done to reach such a level of economic activity; mainly in the field of public administration, public sector corruption, and money laundering. Imprisonment of opposition MPs is a worrying and alarming sign regarding rule of law and democratic values in the country. Montenegro shows activity within NATO trying to prove that it is an equal partner of the alliance with military capacity according to NATO standards. Moreover, it tries to modernize and strengthen its operational capabilities and in this context it raised its defense budget aiming at purchasing new assets such as armored vehicles. Establishment of a credible and effective system of Armed Forces reservists will strengthen defense capabilities of its Armed Forces.



NORTH MACEDONIA: March 12th, as a future NATO member, North Macedonia has many potential security partners,

but two of them are of great importance; the U.S and Turkey with which the state has signed strategic military partnership agreements, while similar agreements with Greece and Bulgaria are ongoing. The Turkish Armed Forces are one of the most powerful within NATO and strategic relationship between North Macedonia and Turkey goes back in 1993 when the two countries signed a military training and cooperation agreement. In the meantime, thirty additional military financial assistance agreements have been signed, focusing on training and provision of logistical support to the state's Armed Forces. Over the past years, more than 800 members of the country's Armed Forces studied and trained in Turkey's military schools and training centers. At the same time, Turkey is a large donor of combat equipment and weapons of the North Macedonian Army. Turkish donations are valued so far at over 20 million dollars. One of the major Turkish donations for the North Macedonian Army, worth about 2 million dollars, is military camouflage uniforms of high quality according to NATO standards used by the personnel for several years. Both Armies have cooperated in peacekeeping missions abroad. One should note that the first North Macedonian peacekeepers in Afghanistan in 2002 were part of the Turkish contingent. On the other hand, there is information that North Macedonia develops defense partnerships with two neighbors, Greece and Bulgaria, which could potentially evolved at strategic level. In a recent interview the Greek Defense Minister Evangelos Apostolakis, said that Greece aspires to become a main strategic defense partner with North Macedonia aiming at maintaining peace and security in the Balkans. Earlier, in February 2018, during a visit to North Macedonia, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev said that it is extremely important for Sofia to open the topic of the

initiative for concluding a strategic partnership agreement between the two countries. After meeting with Radev, North Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov stressed that both countries could sign a cooperation agreement. (www.novamakedonija.com.mk)

- March 12th, the OSCE/ODIHR monitoring mission will cover the upcoming presidential elections with a total of 279 observers. The main team of 11 experts will be based in Skopje and 18 long-term observers who will be deployed in nine teams across the country from March 20th, 2019 said the Head of the observation mission, Corien Jonker at a news conference. ODIHR will additionally ask member states from OSCE to provide 250 short-term observers who will come a few days before the election. Jonker noted that he would monitor the election process not only on election day but also before, during, and after that day. The administration of the elections, the campaigns of the candidates and their funding will also be monitored. “*We are not interested in the result, but the quality of the election process and every voter to vote freely and transparently,*” Jonker said. OSCE/ODIHR will publish a report the day before the elections, and after the election there will be a press conference and a preliminary report. The final report will be released several months after the election process, which will include recommendations to the authorities on areas which need to be worked on. (www.meta.mk)

- March 15th, Mitko Chavkov was sentenced to 18 years, the highest punishment, for the attacks that occurred on April 27th, 2017, while the other 16 defendants were sentenced to totally 211 years imprisonment. Igor Durlovski was relieved from charges against him. Mitko Peshov was sentenced

to 15 years, Dushko Lazarov to 15 years, Goran Gjoshevski Levi to 15 years, Oliver Popovski to 13 years, Oliver radulov to 10 years, Munir Pepik to 15 years, Abdulfeta Alimi to 7 years, Mladen Dodevski to 12 years, Jane Chento to 15 years, Goranche Angelovski to 12 years, Igor Jug to 12 years, Vlatko Trajanovski to 15 years, Vilijam Mihajlovski to 14 years, Nikolo Mitrovski – Koljo to 15 years and Aleksandar Vasilevski Ninja to 8 years imprisonment. The Prosecutor proposed that the detention for Mitko Chavkov, Jane Chento, Igor Jug, Mladen Dodevski, Vlatko Trajkovski be prolonged because as she stated, there is a real danger of them fleeing the country. The trial began in August 2018 and they were accused of “*terrorism jeopardizing the constitutional order and security.*” When the Law on Amnesty was passed, 15 people were pardoned. (www.meta.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Ratification of NATO accession protocol by the member states proceeds rapidly. Zaev and his Government focus on domestic affairs trying to benefit by the successful name agreement. The ruling SDSM announced that it will not call for early parliamentary elections along with the presidential one. As it was assessed, the Government seeks to fully capitalize its gains from NATO accession (scheduled for June 2019) and a possible opening of accession negotiations with the EU (also for June 2019). VMRO-DPMNE will strengthen its nationalistic rhetoric due to the coming presidential elections seeking to elect its own presidential candidate. However, the ruling coalition SDSM-DUI presented its own common candidate, Stevo Pendarovski. Polarization of state's political life including low scale violent incidents could not be excluded

during the pre-electoral campaign especially if VMRO-DPMNE realizes that it is not going to elect its own President. The fact is the country is more stable and more coherent watching its future in a more optimistic way. However, the country should focus on its economy and major administrative reforms aiming at reaching the EU standards. The U.S and EU enjoy their success since F.Y.R.O.M moves in their paths far from Russia's influence. Needless to say that in a period where border questions are raised again in the Balkans F.Y.R.O.M achieved to strengthen its political stability and growth prospects.



ROMANIA: March 12th, Romania's Justice Minister Tudorel Toader received a respite, but he has to follow the indications of the senior ruling party, the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD), if he wants to keep his seat, Digi24 TV station commented. Notably, Toader was nominated for his seat by the junior coalition party, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (Alianța Liberalilor și Democraților - ALDE), but the Justice Minister portfolio initially belonged to PSD's Florin Iordache. The PSD leaders summoned in the National Permanent Bureau did not discuss the situation of the Justice Minister on Monday, as previously announced, and did not decide whether or not to dismiss Toader. The Minister has reportedly received an ultimatum; he will be reshuffled or asked to resign if he refuses to issue an emergency ordinance for changing the criminal codes and reopening cases in which final sentences were ruled but irregularities were spotted, such as illegally-composed panels of Judges or evidence collected with the breach of the law. Last week, PSD lawmakers refused to attend the vote of a simple motion against Toader,

a vote that would not have resulted in Toader's direct dismissal, and announced that his situation would be analyzed in the coalition. (www.romania-insider.com)

- March 13th, in an interview for 'Free Europe', the US Ambassador Hans Klemm said Laura Codruta Kovesi is "fully qualified" to be European Prosecutor and says the US Embassy has "a team that monitors Russia's malignant activities in the press and Romanian society." "Major strategic threat? Without question it is Russia. There are other threats, terrorism, trafficking, cybercrime and lack of cyber security, but if we think about the threats in the Eastern flank of NATO, the Black Sea region, it is certainly Russia. We are very concerned about Russian aggression, one decade ago in Georgia and more recently in Ukraine, aggression that occurred again towards the end of 2018 in the Kerch Strait. Also the militarization of Crimea that has occurred since Russia illegally seized Crimea several years ago. All these are manifestations that have caused great concern in Romania, but also for the Unites States," the US Ambassador said. Regarding the bilateral relations between Romania and the US, Hans Klemm said it is important for both countries. He has three priorities, one of them being to promote prosperity, the prosperity of America together with the prosperity of Romania. The US envoy said things are not so bad, because during his three years in Romania, the bilateral trade has increased by almost 30%, with US exports up by about 50%. In order to attract more US investors, Romania should consider changing policies, to consider the principles of stability, predictability, transparency and actual wish to consult the actors involved before making changes, the US Ambassador said. Ambassador Klemm said the

US military will remain in Romania as long as we are allies within NATO and as long as our countries face a threat that needs the presence of American troops. Referring to Laura Codruta Kovesi, the US Ambassador said that *“we have had excellent cooperation with Mrs. Kovesi when she was Prosecutor General and DNA Chief Prosecutor, we have great appreciation for her abilities and we believe she is qualified for the position of European prosecutor in Brussels.”* Referring to the changes to the justice system and legal framework, the Ambassador said *“If we look at the North Atlantic Treaty, the Washington Treaty, in its preamble it reads that all members of NATO must pursue the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. Our strategic partnership is founded on similar principles. Rule of law includes independent judiciary, prosecutors free from political influence and an effort to combat public corruption, The risk that we see here is that Romania does not fully embraces there principles, and by failing to fight corruption allows an opportunity for actors who wish Romania harm, such as Russia, to take advantage of these opportunities to create disunity within the Romanian society.”* (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- March 15th, the Romanian Foreign Minister Teodor Melescanu has appealed to Germany to actively support Romania's accession to the Schengen area, arguing that Romanian is safer than Berlin, Paris or Brussels. *“It would be helpful if Germany actively supported Romania's accession to the Schengen zone. We would be glad about it,”* Melescanu said in an interview with German publication Die Welt, local Mediafax reported. The Romanian Minister also said Romania is open to a proposal of Germany according to which the country's

accession to the Schengen area would be made in two stages. *“The customs controls at airports would be eliminated initially, followed in a second stage by those at the customs points installed on roads and highways. That would be much better than nothing,”* he said. Teodor Melescanu also gave some arguments in favor of Romania's accession to Schengen. For example, the country is already sharing information with the Schengen Information System and has *“state-of-the-art technologies”* for border monitoring, *“and anyone who is in Romania illegally, who does not behave properly or makes propaganda for radical Islamists is expelled from our country within 24 hours,”* Melescanu said, adding that in Romania *“one lives safer than in Berlin, Paris or Brussels.”* The European Parliament (EP) adopted on December 11th, 2018 a non-legislative report calling for admission of Romania and Bulgaria as full members in the Schengen area. Then, in mid-January 2019, European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker voiced his hope that Romania would become a member of Schengen by the end of this Commission's mandate. (www.romania-insider.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political struggle between the President Klaus Iohannis and Government has been transformed into an “open battle” leading the political functionality in a deadlock. However, it seems that both parts reached a compromise giving an end to the almost 4 month political crisis after Iohannis refusal to decree two Ministers proposed by the Government. Taking a look in the current political situation in Romania, which affects also the EU (due to Romania's Presidency) it is assessed as a Government's “wise” strategic retreat in order to overcome the political

deadlock. Romania took over the Presidency of the Council of EU facing criticism and non-confidence by the EU member states' high officials. The state looks divided in major institutional issues such as national defense, justice, and security. In this context, one should add the direct European Parliament warning for activating article 7 of the EU Treaty (suspending certain rights of an EU member state when a country is considered at risk of breaching the EU's core values). Iohannis strongly opposes in Government's plans to intervene in judicial system while there are specific signs that the Government works towards controlling state's justice. The state faces political abnormality in many levels which at the moment could be resolved only by early parliamentary elections. 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.



SERBIA: March 12th, Serbian Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Milan Mojsilovic said situation in Kosovo and Metohija is very complex. However, Serbia is not currently considering the option of a military response, the General said, Beta agency reported. Mojsilovic told the public broadcaster RTS that situation in Kosovo is *“filled with tension and unilateral moves. The state of security is stable, but by all parameters it is very unpredictable.”* He emphasized that the Serbian Army is in constant contact with KFOR and is concerned about the northern and southern parts of Kosovo. He said

that the Serbian Army would monitor situation on the ground and excluded the use of military force in that area. *“You are witnesses to the President of Serbia and the Government being committed to a peaceful state of affairs and resolving the situation in Kosovo and Metohija. The option of military intervention is excluded; it is not currently being considered,”* Mojsilovic said. He added that he cannot say that situation is regular, because there is an open security issue in Serbia, but that there is visible progress in equipping the army that currently has ten MiG-29 aircraft, while four more are being overhauled. *“We count the days until the first helicopters enter service in the Serbian Armed Forces,”* Mojsilovic said, adding that the state of the Air Force reflected on overall capability. He announced that the start of (NATO's) bombing of Serbia in 1999 will be marked in the town of Nis, on March 24th, 2019. *“The Serbian Army is ready, equipped, trained and motivated to perform all its tasks,”* Mojsilovic said. (www.b92.net)

- March 13th, all international factors have been told clearly that any military intervention undermining the Brussels deal with NATO and KFOR would cause Serbia's reaction, Serbian Foreign Minister and First Deputy Prime Minister Ivica Dacic said. *“Everyone knows well that no one must play with fire and expect Serbia not to react. Serbia will react,”* Dacic told reporters in response to questions about reports of the Kosovo authorities' plans to mount a raid on the Trepca (mining complex) plant in the north of Kosovo, Tanjug has reported. Dacic urged all parties involved to be careful not to provoke Serbia. He also said Serbia would not become a part of the problem and would not join Pristina in making various unilateral decisions. Dacic said the Kosovo Assembly's platform for dialogue with

Belgrade is in fact against dialogue and that it was an ultimatum to Serbia and that Belgrade has no intention of considering something like that, he noted. A united appeal by the international community to Pristina to abolish its taxes on goods from Serbia has been lacking and that is why they survive. He said that the United States has an interest in the revoking of the taxes and continuation of the dialogue *“because they want to gain a political plus for themselves.”* *“Some EU countries do not want to do this and they are constantly telling Ramush Haradinaj not to revoke the taxes. They want dialogue to continue, and when everyone is sitting at the negotiating table, to then revoke the taxes,”* Dacic said. As for the reported Kosovo Police operation in the northern, mostly Serb part, dubbed *“steel ring,”* Dacic said that Serbia has warned KFOR and NATO that it would intervene if Serbs were attacked in Kosovo. *“Serbia will not allow an attack on Serbs in the north of Kosovo and Metohija. Of course, it will not allow an attack (on Serbs) anywhere in Kosovo - but it is the north that is their obsession,”* the Minister concluded. (www.b92.net)

- March 17th, anti-government protesters and Police clashed during a rally outside the Serbian Presidency in Belgrade, where President Aleksandar Vucic was inside delivering a press conference on Saturday night's storming of public broadcaster RTS. Having encircled the Presidency building, protesters and opposition leaders reiterated their calls for the resignation of President Aleksandar Vucic, breaking down security fences and attempting to enter the building. They were stopped by riot Police. On the street outside, clashes broke out between protesters and Police, who used tear gas to try to disperse the crowd. The violence quickly

subsided, with citizens coming together to form a human chain around the Presidency, blocking all entrances. Inside the building, President Aleksandar Vucic told a press conference *“The state won't allow you [demonstrators] to endanger anyone with violence. Everyone who partakes in violence will be held accountable,”* he said. Addressing the crowd of protesters the leader of far-right Dveri movement, Bosko Obradovic, said *“It is up to Aleksandar Vucic to decide if he will be a man and resign, or a rat, fleeing through rat tunnels.”* Other opposition leaders and activists stood on the protest truck to speak to the demonstrators. They called for early elections and the resignations of President Vucic, Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, Parliament Spokesperson Maja Gojkovic and RTS Director Dragan Bujosevic. Sunday's protest was called following the weekly *“1 of 5 million”* rally on Saturday against Vucic's Government, in which protesters stormed RTS, calling for organizers to be allowed to speak live on air. They were forcefully removed by police. Protest organizers claim that around 10 people were arrested for entering the RTS building. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Serbia has entered in a period of fragile political stability due to citizens' reactions against governmental practices regarding human rights, media freedom, and elections transparency. People protest in the streets, while opposition starts to take action. Vucic is thinking of snap elections, but he has to balance a lot of things before his final decision. It is assessed that he will try to avoid early elections but it is likely to be forced to conduct them. Serbia has followed so far a successful diplomatic strategy regarding

Kosovo achieving to be appeared in the international community as a reasonable voice seeking a compromise resolution via dialogue. Serbia realizes that time runs in favor of it and knows that Kosovo will become more and more nervous as long as it cannot get Serbia's recognition. On the other hand Serbia strengthens its relations with Russia (and China) seeking stronger support regarding Kosovo case. Security situation is complex and uncertain since Serbia apart from political and diplomatic means has engaged its military and security forces. The Armed Forces are in high readiness alert but Vucic tried to de-escalate situation by stating that war is not a possible solution. However, none could predict Serbia's reaction in a possible accidental or pre-planned (provocation included) incident in Northern Kosovo against local Serbs. One should have in mind that top state officials have said in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. At the moment, Serbia looks like acting in accordance with the international law aiming at reducing tension in the region. In other words state's leadership is acting in a "reasonable" and "wise" way avoiding mistakes of the past which have isolated Serbia from the international community. Of course, under these circumstances none could speak for restarting of Belgrade – Pristina dialogue. There are certain analysts who claim that such situation will inevitably lead in Kosovo partition with the north part going to Serbia. Some of them claim that this scenario has already agreed by Vucic and Thaci. Serbian repayment will be Kosovo recognition. By expressing neutrality and maintaining equal distance from the U.S.A and Russia it moves in an environment of fragile balance.



SLOVENIA: March 12th, Simon Zajc who currently serves as a State Secretary at the Environment and Spatial Planning Ministry is the candidate for new environment Minister, Miro Cerar, the leader of the Modern Center Party (Stranka Modernega Centra – SMC) announced. Addressing reporters in Ljubljana, Cerar said the Prime Minister Marjan Sarec agreed with the party's proposal for Zajc to succeed Jure Leben, who resigned in late February 2019 after becoming embroiled in allegations that he was involved in a tender rigging in his previous capacity as Infrastructure Ministry State Secretary. Ruling coalition partners have reacted positively to Zajc nomination. The Alenka Bratusek Party (Stranka Alenke Bratušek – SAB) wished Zajc to understand the connection of his Ministry with the Ministry of Infrastructure, headed by SAB leader Alenka Bratusek. (www.sta.si)

- March 13th, the coalition summit hosted by Prime Minister Marjan Sarec was deemed a success albeit somewhat overshadowed by tensions between the coalition Social Democrats (Socialni Demokrati - SD) and the Left (Levica), the minority Government's partner in the opposition, as it remains unclear whether the SD will support the new cooperation agreement with the Left. Sarec was happy with the meeting in which the Government team presented various projects that are in the pipeline. Coalition partners expressed satisfaction with the recently presented tax reform, while the Minister in charge of Social Affairs, Ksenija Klampfer, is to present to the public a set of social policy changes tomorrow. Behind closed doors, Education Minister Jernej Pikalo presented a draft solution that would implement the 2014 decision

of the Constitutional Court that private schools providing public curricula must be 100% state funded. Another priority of the Government, health reform, is awaiting a new Minister, after Samo Fakin resigned last week due to poor health. Talking to the press after the meeting at the Brdo pri Kranju conference centre, Sarec said that the summit fulfilled its purpose regarding presentation of projects running at various Ministries. The coalition parties came together just as the SD, which cannot accept that the ruling List of Marjan Sarec (Lista Marjana Šarca - LMS) and Left hammered out the agreement on their own, said it needed another two months of negotiations on the cooperation agreement with the Left, a condition the latter finds unacceptable. *"We expect to sign the agreement as soon as possible. This is the agreement for 2019 and we cannot agree to sign it in mid-June. If we do that the timeline falls apart and nothing will get done,"* Luka Mesec, the Head of the Left's Deputy Group, told the press. Sarec said after the summit that the support by the Left seemed solid, considering that the party supported the 2019 and 2020 supplementary budgets last week. However, the documents might get vetoed by the upper chamber tomorrow and to be passed again, the coalition will need the votes of the Left. The potential revote will be *"the moment of truth for everybody,"* Sarec said.

- March 14th, Foreign Ministers of Egypt and Slovenia, Sameh Shoukry and Miro Cerar signed a cooperation protocol for Consumer Protection after the end of the first session of the joint Egyptian -Slovenian economic committee. This protocol aims at boosting investment and cooperation in all fields. Shoukry called on Slovenian companies to increase flow of investments to Egypt. Moreover, Egyptian

President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi received Cerar, in the presence of the Egyptian Foreign Minister and Slovenian Ambassador to Egypt. According to Bassam Rady, Presidency Spokesperson, the meeting might be the trigger for further cooperation and investments. Sisi also welcomed holding the Egyptian-Slovenian Business Forum on the sidelines of the committee's meetings which will enhance investment and trade between the two sides. Cerar expressed gratitude for the good hospitality, assuring their readiness to engage in further cooperation on all fronts. *"Egypt is a fundamental pillar of stability in the Middle East and Mediterranean regions,"* Slovenian Foreign Minister stated. *"We aspire to engage in various projects, particularly in the Suez Canal Economic Zone. Egypt enjoys a unique location, promising investment opportunities, and stability. All these factors encourage us to further invest in it,"* Cerar added. Furthermore, the Slovenian Foreign Minister lauded the success of the Euro-Arab Summit held recently in Sharm El-Sheikh. (www.sta.si, www.egypttoday.com)



Slovenian Foreign Minister Miro Cerar with his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry

(Photo source: www.mfa.gov.eg)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. Sarec's Government faced the biggest exodus of

Ministers since its independence in 1991 put ruling coalition cohesion under question. Sarec has been proved of being flexible in Slovenia's politics achieving to balance adequately between different political trends. Last week coalition parties' summit reconfirmed the Government's stability although there is some tension due to Sarec agreement with the Left party which is necessary for the Government's viability. Without the left's support the Government would be toppled and early elections should be called. At the moment none of the ruling coalition parties wish snap elections. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc) and at the ruling parties' summit it was paid special attention in tax reform, social care measures, health reform, and private education measures. Border dispute with Croatia is still ongoing and former Government of Miro Cerar filed a lawsuit against Croatia over its refusal to implement the border arbitration. Although the Prime Minister Marjan Sarec announced that his Government will follow the same policy in the issue, he showed up with an attitude of compromise by claiming that his country will not stop Croatia's accession in the Schengen zone. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The med-term 2018 – 2023 defense program it could improve situation, but under current political situation it is doubtful if it will be implemented to the end.



TURKEY: March 11th, Turkey's economy fell into its first recession in a decade at the end of last year official data has shown, as the country heads towards key local elections at the end of the month. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the fourth quarter fell by a seasonally adjusted

2.4% compared with the previous three months, the Turkish Statistics Institute announced. The drop followed a contraction of 1.6% in the third quarter. Two consecutive quarter-on-quarter contractions in economic output is widely considered to be the definition of a recession. Despite the downturn, which was expected by economists and analysts, Turkish Finance Minister Berat Albayrak said, *"The worst is behind, in terms of economic activity."* *"The worst forecasts were not realized,"* he wrote on social media after the data was published. The economy was battered last year by a 30% slide in the value of the lira brought on by concerns over a diplomatic spat with the United States and Central Bank independence. The country is holding local elections on March 31st, 2019 with growth and inflation expected to be key issues for voters. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has been in power since 2003 first as Prime Minister and then as President, has often boasted of the country's strong growth during his time in office. (www.aljazeera.com)

- March 13th, the European Parliament (EP) voted against Turkey's EU accession negotiations and called on the European countries to formally suspend the process. A total of 370 lawmakers voted in favor, 109 against, and 143 abstained. Turkey's Foreign Ministry rejected the recommendation, which is not legally binding, stating *"It is not possible for us to attribute any value to the one-sided and non-objective approach adopted by the European Parliament. Turkey expects the new European Parliament, to be formed after the elections in May, will adopt a constructive approach to the Turkey-EU relations in the upcoming period, take qualified and objective decisions and boost Turkey's EU integration process."* Ruling Justice and

Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) Spokesman Omer Celik rebuked approval of the resolution. *“This disreputable decision shows that the European Parliament is under the influence of far-right ideology,”* he said. Recalling that the European Parliament failed to show solidarity with Turkey when the Turkish Parliament was bombed during the coup attempt in July 15th, 2016, Celik said the EP President visited Turkey months after the defeated coup. *“However, they see no harm in working with coup leaders. Everybody knows the racist (tendency) of the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy and that the rapporteur who prepared this report is close to terror supporters more than the democracy,”* Çelik said. Romanian Ambassador (Romania holds the EU Presidency for the first semester of 2019) to Turkey Gabriel Sopanda said that Romania *“openly and strongly”* supports Turkey's accession process to the EU. Sopanda said the vote of Turkey's accession process follows the *“political division”* within Europe. In October, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he would consider putting Turkey's long-stalled bid to join the European Union to a referendum, signaling exasperation with a process he says has been waylaid by prejudice against Muslims. EU membership remains a top strategic goal for Turkey even though the accession talks, formally launched in 2004, have been stalled for years due to the objections of the Greek Cypriot administration on the divided island of Cyprus as well as opposition from Germany and France. (www.dailysabah.com)

- March 14th, Djiboutian Ambassador to Ankara Aden H. Abdillahi noted the developing bilateral ties in all fields in the context of Turkey's opening policy to Africa, adding that Djibouti would welcome initiatives from Turkey to strengthen

bilateral ties by implementing an economic zone. *“Our vision is providing room for Turkey in the region. We want to see Turkey as a strategic partner,”* Abdillahi told Daily Sabah. Djibouti has a geostrategic location near Bab el-Mandeb, an entryway to the Red Sea for ships from Asia and oil tankers from Arab Gulf countries heading to Europe, and is also one of the busiest shipping routes. The country hosts the largest permanent U.S. military base in Africa as well as military bases of France and China and Japan's only foreign base. As part of this Africa opening, Turkey has been boosting bilateral relations with Djibouti, which gained momentum after 2012 when the Djibouti Embassy in Turkey was established; the Turkish Embassy in Djibouti was inaugurated a year later. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Djibouti in January 2015, and his Djiboutian counterpart Ismail Omar Guelleh visited Turkey in December 2017. To further boost bilateral ties, Turkish Airlines has had direct flights between the two countries since 2012, while TİKA inaugurated an office in the country in 2012, carrying out numerous projects. So far, 60 protocols, memorandums of understanding and conventions have been signed in concerning areas such as energy, health and economy. Djibouti has allocated 5 million square meters to Turkey to establish special economic zones where feasibility studies by the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB) and the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) are ongoing. The Ambassador added that he has been meeting with many major Turkish companies to increase investments, highlighting the activities of Turkish state-run institutions in Djibouti. *“The Turkish Coordination and Cooperation Agency (TİKA) will start constructing a hospital very soon. Also, we are cooperating with the Turkish State*


Hydraulic Works (DSİ) for the construction of a dam, which will be the first dam that they are supervising outside of Turkey's borders. In addition, there is the construction of an Ottoman-style mosque, which is almost completed," he said. DSİ is building the Ambouli Friendship Dam for 17.5 million euro in the arid Red Sea coast nation in the Horn of Africa to prevent flooding and introduce vital agriculture. Also, a mosque built by Turkey's Diyanet Foundation in Djibouti should be inaugurated very soon. Istanbul Technical University (ITU) provided technical support and helped create the curriculum as well as sharing experience in teaching foreign languages. Abdillahi said that there are more than 500 Djiboutian students being educated in Turkey as the two countries have been working on more cooperation in education, adding that establishing a Turkish Maarif Foundation school and recently signed agreements between the two countries' universities enhanced these ties. (www.dailysabah.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Turkey faces several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs and journalists are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Turkish – U.S relations have strongly been harmed forcing Ankara to approach new allies such as Russia. Although Turkey maintains its strategic goal of entering the EU, the EU sends strong messages of suspending the EU – Turkey accession talks. Turkish Armed Forces have been engaged in military operations against Kurds and PKK in Northern Iraq and against YPG Kurds in

Syria as well. Turkey declares its readiness to intervene militarily in Syria, eastern of Euphrates river but the U.S does not give the “green light” aiming at protecting Syrian Kurds and YPG. Turkey is waiting for the “green light” for establishing a safe zone in Syria but it is doubtful if it will ever get it. However, Turkey strengthening its cooperation with Russia and Iran announced the beginning of joint military patrols with Russia in Syrian Idlib, while it plans together with Iran a joint military operation against PKK in North Iraq. Turkey has been developed into a “regional power” engaged actively in regional conflicts seeking to expand its influence and secure its interests. In this context, Turkey is conducting military operations in the territory of two other countries, it threatens to start a new operation in Syria, maintains a significant military force in North Cyprus, and threatens a NATO ally – Greece – with an armed conflict. Apart from the use or the threat of use of direct armed violence Turkey participates actively in diplomatic processes in the region (Syria negotiations, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Cyprus question, Qatar crisis etc). The country demonstrates its interests in Africa by strengthening its presence through various ways (economic, military etc) in several countries such as Somalia, Djibouti etc. Moreover, 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. Turkish economy inaugurated a period of recession bringing back memories of 2009. It seems that economy is the major Turkish problem

which may be emerged as the “Achilles’ heel” for Turkish President Erdogan and his political long reign starting with the local elections scheduled for March 31st, 2019. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Regarding Turkish interests in East Mediterranean Sea it seems that they are reaching a critical point since Cypriots announced last week the discovery of a significant natural gas field in their Exclusive Economic Zone via the US energy giant ExxonMobi, while Cyprus, Egypt Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority have established an energy coalition promoting their interests and isolating Turkey. Turkey has proved so far its decisiveness in protecting its interests and it assessed that it will not give up its role in the “energy game” in Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Turkey is ready to start oil and gas drills within the Cypriot EEZ escalating tension which could not exclude an accidental or pre-planned “hot incident”.


 Evolving or ongoing crisis or violent/armed conflict


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NOTE

 Stable situation. No security risk

 Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored

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

 Imminent major incidents regarding stability and security. High security risk