



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

## ***SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE***

### ***AT A GLANCE***



***SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE***

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

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

### **“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE**

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**ALBANIA:** December 31<sup>st</sup>, the Prime Minister, Edi Rama stressed that border between Albania and Kosovo will be in the spring according to the Schengen Agreement criteria aiming at spreading such agreements with all Balkan countries. He said that an important step has already been taken by the signing of the border agreement between Albania and Kosovo, but the Government is working intensively for fulfilling the agreement according to the Schengen standards. According to Rama the task is within the spring the two states to establish a single “security entity” in line with the Schengen Agreement namely that “*anyone entering Albania will be simultaneously enrolled in Kosovo database and anyone entering Kosovo will be registered in Albania.*” Rama added that Albania will promote such agreements with F.Y.R.O.M, Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro. Speaking about Albania and Kosovo border agreement, Rama said “*Above all the interpretations and conspiracies lays the human need of free movement of people and goods; to enjoy accessible borders. We also have to move forward in the exchange of goods and guarantee maximum security.*” “*We have done our homework, and in spring the Albanian – Kosovo borders will be European borders according to the Schengen Agreement including all privileges and obligations. My vision is to have this kind of borders with all the Balkan countries, starting with Kosovo,*” the Prime Minister concluded. (www.24-ore.com, www.b92.net)

- January 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Head of the Parliamentary Group of the Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim - LSI), Petrit Vasili accused the Prime Minister, Edi Rama that he “*robbed*” the Albanian citizens even

in on December 31<sup>st</sup>. According to him, on the day when all Albanians were celebrating, the Government was signing concessions. “*When all Albanians were celebrating on December 31<sup>st</sup>, the Government took the chance to offer concessions signed by the Ministers. Gjijnuri [the Minister of Infrastructure and Energy, Damian Gjijnuri] signed on December 31<sup>st</sup> 74 billion LEK [600 million euro] concessions for TEC of Vlora. The Minister, together with other predators who have robbed 40 million euro in the Big Ring [a case suspicious for corruption] does not stop stealing 10 more million of euro. These thieves are not ashamed and do not have limits,*” Vasili said. He concluded by saying that Albania could be saved only if the current Government is overthrown. (www.albaniandailynews.com)

- January 5<sup>th</sup>, the President of Albania, Ilir Meta, did not approve discharge of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ditmir Bushati signing only 7 out of 8 Minister’s discharges proposed by the Prime Minister, Edi Rama. Apart from that, Meta decreed only 4 out of 9 new Ministers; the Vice Prime Minister Erion Brace, Minister of Agriculture Bledi Cuci, Minister of Entrepreneurship Eduard Shalsi, and Minister of Relationships with the Parliament Elisa Spiropali. The other 5 people proposed for ministerial posts are not MPs and the President will use his 7 days time given by the Constitution to check if they are capable for their duties. Dismissal of Bushati caused a lot of critics in the country not only because Albania faces several challenges in the diplomatic field, but also because Bushati is considered as a successful Minister. The European integration process, 2020 OSCE leadership, and dialogue with Greece are just a few of the pending issues. Apart from that, his proposed successor and current Deputy Foreign

Minister, Genti Cakaj coming from Kosovo is seen with skepticism due to his young age and lack of experience. (www.albaniandailynews.com)



Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs,  
Ditmir Bushati

(Photo source: www.punetejashtme.gov.al)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

*Opposition keeps on accusing the Government of involving in scandals, while citizens plan new protests. Government's reshuffle it seems that did not change the climate; on the contrary, it provoked more skepticism. Especially the dismissal of the Foreign Minister Bushati who is considered as a successful one. The Albanian President expressed his skepticism towards governmental changes by not signing all proposals. It is not a secret that Meta puts obstacles to the Prime Minister expressing his opposition to the adopted governmental policy, but it is assessed that he will decree nomination of the new Ministers in the next few days. Moreover, it is assessed that collapse of Government is*

*rather unlikely because opposition is still too weak. 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 is up to the EU Heads of Governments for opening Albania's accession negotiations in June 2019. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a "mother nation." It is estimated that Albania will fully comply with the EU and U.S "line" for territorial exchanges or border changes between Serbia and Kosovo if it is necessary for a mutual accepted solution. Albania maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and F.Y.R.O.M. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on promoting Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access. Possible border changes may engage Albania in dangerous situations taking into consideration that it has the role of "protector" of Albanians in the region. Security situation stable without major incidents or challenges.*



## **BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:**

January 2<sup>nd</sup>, Banja Luka Police confirmed that it

filed reports to the competent Prosecutor's Office against four people under suspicion of posing a security threat and inciting it. Unofficially Davor Dragicevic is one of them. *“Person with initials D.D. is suspected of committing a criminal act of posing a security threat, because he addressed serious threats on December 17<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018 at two different locations in Banja Luka area against two people, who felt fear and insecurity,”* said the Police report. For nearly a year, Dragicevic (and the “Justice for David” group) push authorities to unveil who murdered his son, 21 year old David Dragicevic whose lifeless body was found in March 2018 in a river of the north-western Bosnian town of Banja Luka. “Justice for David” group protests in a central square of Banja Luka have turned into mass anti-government protests as Dragicevic claimed Police and its political leadership were involved in covering the evidence of the case. Banja Luka Police apprehended and then released several members of the group as well as some opposition politicians, banning all future protests of the group. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- January 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Chairman of Bosnia's Council of Ministers, Denis Zvizdic congratulated Romania on taking over the EU Presidency for the first six months of 2019, expressing hope that Romania's Chairmanship will further strengthen European perspective of the Western Balkans. Zvizdic thanked Romania for the political and technical support it provides aiming at speeding up the European path of the region. Zvizdic hopes Romania will keep the Western Balkans on the EU agenda. *“Knowing the continuity of your work, effort and commitment to the region's European integration, I am certain that your Chairmanship will further enhance the European perspective of the entire Western Balkans, having*

*our full support,”* Zvizdic said. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- January 4<sup>th</sup>, *“The past year was a turbulent one. We had a Government but only on paper, there were countless political misunderstandings, denials of the state by state officials, as well as Croatian and Serbian interference into our internal matters,”* the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Socijaldemokratska Partija Bosne i Hercegovine - SDP) MP Miro Lazovic said. *“It was a very turbulent year, and I wouldn't want it to be an introduction into 2019,”* he said. Speaking about the Government establishment process after the October 2018 general election, he said that his party is trying to implement a policy focusing on state level solutions. SDP won the most votes in federal level trying to push out from the Government the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA) even though SDA won the most votes in this entity. In general, nationalist parties such as the SDA and the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH) won the most votes in the Bosniak-Croat entity, whereas the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata - SNSD) won in the Serb-dominated part of Bosnia, the Republika Srpska (RS). The Government formation process in RS was quite clear and easy, with SNSD dominating the political scene, but the Federation of Bosnia & Herzegovina proved to be in a more complicated situation where parties are trying to form Governments at the cantonal and entity level. The State level Government will most likely be formed by SDA, HDZ BiH and SNSD. (www.ba.n1info.com)

**COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**     :

Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust. It is under question if the general election held on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018 will bring political stability in the country. Although it is estimated that formation of Government would be a very difficult issue adding more problems in state's function, establishment of a coalition Government is very likely to include the three main parties of its national entity (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats). It seems that HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) have reached an agreement to cooperate in forming a ruling coalition despite their different views on main issues. It is rumored the Bosnian Serb Zoran Tegeltija will be nominated as the new Chairman of the Council of Ministers. However, the Bosnian Croat member of the tripartite Presidency stated that he is not willing to support a Bosnian Serb who is opposed towards state's accession to NATO. It is assessed that the matter is a part of background negotiations between parties, but also an issue of inter-Croatian parties namely Komcic against Covic. Tension has broken out between Bosnia and Croatia due to the direct intervention of the latter in country's internal affairs. In our point of view it is another sign of "Dayton Peace Agreement" malfunction. Croatian actions put the agreement under question claiming that Bosnia's Croats rights are violated. In this context, Bosnia's Croats highlight the issue of re-establishment of Herzeg – Bosnia republic raising questions for Croatia's real intentions over Bosnia. One should take into consideration the current arms race in the region mainly by Serbia and Croatia. Not only that, but also the establishment of Kosovo Army complicates

current situation. Election of ultra nationalist Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia's EU and NATO integration. Dodik is a person who does not actually believe in B&H viability and is expected to promote (actually, he has already started) his own political agenda. Bosnia has become a field of influence's rivalry; Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Russia approach the country mainly through "investments" and/or funding ethnic or religious groups according to their interests. Approval of Bosnia's MAP by NATO aims at facilitating state's approach with the Alliance; however Dodik's presence in the tripartite Presidency is a critical obstacle for any further step. Dragisevic case tends to turn into an anti-government action. However, it is under question why just a few months after the general election where SNSD achieved a clear victory, RS citizens protest against the Government. State authorities and Police keep claiming that protests are a threat against national security implying that external stakeholders push for destabilizing RS.



**BULGARIA:** December 31<sup>st</sup>, the parliamentary leader of the United Patriots (the coalition of far-right and nationalist parties that is the minority partner of the Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Граждани за европейско развитие на България – GERB) in Bulgarian Government), Volen Siderov has questioned the Defense Ministry's Committee proposed the purchase of the U.S Lockheed Martin F-16 fighter jet as the new aircraft for the state's Air Force. Siderov said that the proposal would be discussed and approved by the Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's Cabinet on January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. On December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018 the Defense

Minister Krassimir Karakachanov (also a co-leader of the United Patriots) announced that the Committee that had evaluated the bids had recommended the F-16. Siderov asked the question why Bulgaria is choosing the F-16, which is the most expensive option *“given that the U.S has more than four military bases in Bulgaria for more than 12 years now.”* Siderov has long made an issue of the U.S - Bulgarian joint military bases. *“Why poor Bulgaria is giving free military bases to the world's most powerful military force and at the same time is buying the most expensive fighters third hand?”* Siderov wrote on social media. He claimed that there is still no open discussion in the coalition on the deal to buy the new fighters. Siderov posted a list of sums he said that other countries had paid to get the F-16s. According to him, each F-16 would cost for Bulgaria 115 million euro, while Bahrain had paid 61 million euro, Israel 38 million euro, and Poland 63 million euro. He said that at a coalition council meeting *“my question was why it is necessary to buy the most luxurious military goods and perhaps the most ineffective for defense. If Bulgaria needs to defend itself, is it not better to give money to the Army? My argument is that eight fighters will not increase the combat capability of the Bulgarian Army, if such money is spent on equipment and armaments.”* Siderov tried to connect the purchase of the new fighter jet with the U.S bases in Bulgaria; *“I have said that since we are realists, why we do not calculate the rent [of military bases in Bulgaria] by the Americans for 12 years and to see what we can get as military equipment,”* Siderov said. The Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov and GERB’s parliamentary leader, Tsvetan Tsvetanov have spoken publicly in favor of the F-16. The recommendation has been sharply criticized by the President Roumen Radev, a former Air Force

commander, while the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (Българска социалистическа партия - BSP) has said little. A day after the December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018 announcement, BSP leader Kornelia Ninova said that a decision on whether or not to buy the F-16s should be based on Bulgaria's national interest. It was too early to comment because the conditions for the purchase were not known, Ninova said. (www.balkaneu.com)

- January 2<sup>nd</sup>, *“NATO should consider its presence in Afghanistan at its next ministerial meeting,”* the Bulgarian Defense Minister Krassimir Karakachanov said responding to December 2018 reports that the U.S President Donald Trump plans to withdraw half of the 14,000 troops. The Voice of America reported that Trump has criticized the U.S Generals for not defeating the Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan after 19 years of engagement. Trump said the Generals got *“all the money they wanted and didn't do such a great job in Afghanistan.”* *“As you can see, Donald Trump takes decisions that match his understanding of foreign policy. He also announced the withdrawal of his contingent from Syria. How will it reflect on NATO? I personally think that Bulgaria has done enough,”* the Defense Minister said. Karakachanov, also one of the Deputy Prime Ministers in Boyko Borissov's governing coalition, was speaking at a ceremony to formally welcome home a Bulgarian military contingent that was participating in a NATO mission in Afghanistan. The Bulgarian contingent, the 36<sup>th</sup> deployed in Afghanistan, was the first that was more than 158 people. *“This contingent was 160 people. Bulgaria does not need to increase its presence any further,”* Karakachanov said. Asked if Bulgaria should withdraw, he said *“If the policy of the United*



*States, as a NATO ally is to withdraw its contingent, I personally do not think that Bulgaria has further business there.”* The Bulgarian participation in Afghanistan includes guard duty at the airport in the southern city of Kandahar and instruction for local security forces. (www.balkaneu.com)

- January 2<sup>nd</sup>, Bulgaria is taking over the rotating Presidency of the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) for the first 6 months of 2019, the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry has announced. The priorities of Bulgaria's Presidency include continuation of the reform process adapting the Organization to the modern challenges and promotion of cooperation with the EU, focusing on culture, transport and EP. Besides Bulgaria, members of BSEC are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. (www.novinite.com)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT** ■ :

*The junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots looks like the vulnerable piece of the Governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus, Bulgaria has entered in a period of fragile political stability. The President Radev grabs every opportunity to criticize the Government (and the Prime Minister 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. 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:** January 1<sup>st</sup>, euro has survived several ups and downs over the past two decades but is now inseparable from financial markets around the world and the wallets of citizens residing in nineteen of the European Union's strongest economies - including Germany, France, Italy, and Spain, among others. The Croatian Government made a commitment to adopt the euro when Croatia joined the EU in 2013. The Prime Minister, Andrej Plenkovic aims to fulfill that promise as soon as possible despite growing opposition from the public. Experts say Croatia could begin using the single currency in five to seven years time. The European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said the euro has become the symbol of unity, sovereignty, and stability. And with 340 million people using the currency in 19 of the 28 EU member states, and a further 60 countries tied to the euro, the EU's official currency is the second largest and second most traded currency in the foreign exchange market after the United States dollar. A recent study shows that in Croatia, more

than half the population is against replacing the national currency kuna with the euro. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- January 2<sup>nd</sup>, the U.S Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not reach an agreement on the sale of Israeli F-16 fighter jets to Croatia during their meeting in Brazil. An unnamed Israeli official claimed that the deal is now “*stuck in deep bureaucracy.*” Netanyahu and Pompeo had met on the margins of the inauguration ceremony of Brazil's new President Jair Bolsonaro. The meeting was seen as a last ditch attempt to resolve the deadlock which delayed the delivery of Israeli jets to Croatia, after Netanyahu had discussed the issue with the former US Defense Secretary James Mattis last week. According to media reports, the Trump administration has been blocking the deal for months, insisting that the 12 jets, originally sold to Israel by the United States, should be stripped of the modernized Israeli upgrades and technology before being handed over to Croatia. In March 2018 the Croatian Government had decided to purchase the jets, originally manufactured by the U.S company Lockheed Martin, for roughly 477 million dollars. The aircrafts, between 25 and 30 years old, were intended to replace the outdated Soviet-made MiG-21 aircraft currently used by the Croatian Air Force. Submitted bids included Sweden's JAS-39 Gripen fighter jets, and another F-16 by the U.S, which offered a batch of upgraded and more modern version of the planes, but at a price more than three times higher compared to the Israeli bid. After Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic had recently commented that unless Croatia gets the exact planes it agreed to pay for from Israel the deal would be scrapped, the failure of the meeting in Brazil is thought to mean that

the purchase has finally fallen through. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- January 3<sup>rd</sup>, in September 2018 Croatia's gross foreign debt totalled 38.7 billion euro, down by 2.5% or 977 million euro year-on-year, with the foreign debt-to-GDP ratio dropping to 76.2% of GDP, a report released by the Central Bank said. Analysts at Raiffeisenbank Austria (RBA) said in their comment on the latest figures that the drop in the debt-to-GDP ratio was mainly due to Croatia's economic growth in Q3 2018. The ratio, now at 76%, is down from 79.8% in the previous quarter of 2018, and from 81.8% twelve months ago in Q3 2017. RBA analysts said they expect the trend of foreign debt de-leveraging to continue, encouraged by record high levels of liquidity on the local financial market, which was helped by central bank's recent interventions in the money market. In December 2018, the Central Bank purchased nearly 1.1 billion euro from commercial banks, injecting about 8 billion kuna (1 billion euro) into the local money market. (www.hr.n1info.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

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

*on a hard line against Bosnia's politics requesting actually changes of Dayton Peace Agreement. It is more than obvious that Croatia tries to establish a leading role in Western Balkans not only as an EU and NATO member state but also as a rising "local" power. One should take into consideration that Croatia shows its military strength and capabilities quite often not only in international, but also in national level sending strong messages to neighboring countries. Although the President is a member of the ruling party, it is estimated that there is some kind of political distance between the President and Government. However, ruling coalition claims political stability. Border dispute on Piran Bay remains active and Slovenia's initiative to file a lawsuit against Croatia adds a new chapter between the two countries conflict. It is still a question how Croatia will react. Apart from that a new border conflict has emerged with Bosnia & Herzegovina regarding Peljesak Bridge. The state accelerates its efforts towards accession in Schengen zone. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards.*



**CYPRUS:** December 31<sup>st</sup>, the Turkish Cypriots are the only community working towards a solution to the Cyprus problem, the Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci said in his New Year address. *"The Turkish Cypriot community is the only one which is eagerly developing proposals and which worries about the passage of time"* in the Cypriot problem, Akinci said, according to Turkish Cypriot Bayrak. The reason for this, Akinci said, is that the Turkish Cypriot community continues to be the biggest victim of the status quo. *"Almost*

*everybody agrees that the solution will be achieved within the UN framework and through negotiations. No one alleges anything outside this,"* he said. If Turkish Cypriots demand that political equality and effective participation in decisions are included in the solution, it is because they have been agreed upon as UN parameters, the Turkish Cypriot leader said. *"Is there anyone of us who will say yes to the unitary state structure which will make the Turkish Cypriots a minority? Even asking this is absurd,"* Akinci said. The Turkish Cypriot leader questioned whether there is a Greek Cypriot or a third party which would accept two sovereign states, or a confederation, or the existence of two states in the EU. The Greek Cypriot side *"seeks decisions to be taken with a simple majority – that is, the Greek Cypriot majority – bypassing the political equality of the Turkish Cypriots and their effective participation in decisions,"* Akinci claimed. According to him, this is out of the question as a solution without political equality which is the sine qua non of a federal solution, would never be approved. A positive development this year was the opening of the Dherynia and Apliki checkpoints, despite what Akinci described as the delaying tactics from some circles in the Greek Cypriot community. Regarding decentralization, Akinci said that he is open to discuss the matter whenever the Greek Cypriot side was ready to define what this would entail, rather than proposing this model as a delaying tactic. ([www.cyprus-mail.com](http://www.cyprus-mail.com))

- January 3<sup>rd</sup>, Cyprus has protested over provocative Turkish actions in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) last October to the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. In a letter dated December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018 which was circulated on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018 as an official document

of the UN General Assembly, Cyprus' Permanent Representative to the UN Kornelios Korneliou focused on the illegal activities of the research vessel Barbaros. "On October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018 the Turkish State-owned survey vessel Barbaros Hayreddin Paşa and supporting vessels, accompanied and supported by Turkish warships, commenced seismic surveys in the southwest areas of the continental shelf/EEZ of Cyprus, including within parts of hydrocarbon exploration blocks 4 and 5," Korneliou said. "The area has purportedly been reserved for seismic surveys by Turkey, via an unauthorized navigational warning dated October 16<sup>th</sup> [2018], for the period from October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018 to February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019," he noted. These surveys, he pointed out, "constitute a violation by Turkey of the sovereign rights of Cyprus under international law and, in particular, the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the relevant provisions of which have long been crystallized into customary international law." "Turkey has no legal standing whatsoever to conduct exploration activities with respect to the natural resources of the island without the express consent of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus," Korneliou added. He further said that all seismic data collected by Turkey during those illegal and unauthorized surveys belong to the Republic of Cyprus. According to the Permanent Representative "the activity of the Turkish warships in the aforementioned area constitutes an abuse of the rights vested in all States by customary international law, which is also reflected in UNCLOS, and runs contrary to the rule of peaceful uses of the seas." "The behavior of Turkey has the effect of increasing tensions, putting at risk the peace and security of the region," he added. He reiterated the position of Cyprus regarding its rights to maritime zones,

noting that "*the Republic of Cyprus declared an EEZ in 2004 and has inherent rights over the continental shelf of the island of Cyprus, the outer limits of both zones being the median line with the opposite States, pending agreement to the contrary. In this regard, the Republic of Cyprus has signed EEZ delimitation agreements with Egypt, Lebanon and Israel, on the basis of the median line.*" (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- January 4<sup>th</sup>, ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum's drilling activities in block 10 will re-start before the weekend is over President Nicos Anastasiades said after reports said activity ceased for 10-days due to a technical difficulty. The President confirmed the technical issue, but added that it would be solved before long. "*The essence is that the energy plans move forward in regards to the research stage,*" Anastasiades said. He added the agreement on the Aphrodite field in block 12 of Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) needed to be completed and that the cooperation of the companies working in the area and the states needed to be secured. "*The Government's hope is that the French company Total will also be involved in the other blocks.*" Regarding research in block 10, the President added that the research stage was advanced and that after drilling in the block's Delphine target, a second drilling would be conducted in the block's Glafcos target. According to daily Politis, drilling at the Delphine target in block 10 ceased some 10 days ago after drill component was badly damaged. If the technical problem had not occurred, the energy companies and the Government may already have had indications on whether there was a natural gas deposit in Delphine, the daily said, as the drilling had reached a depth of approximately 3,000 meters below the seabed (5,000 meters from the surface of the sea). That is approximately the

point where the seismic surveys that preceded the drilling placed the existence of the coral structure that could contain natural gas. The Stena Icemax drillship leased by ExxonMobil started the exploratory deep-water drilling on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The drilling was expected to be concluded by the end of the year. Politis said that so far there was no information on when drilling would resume but personnel and equipment were being transported from Limassol to the Stena IceMax drilling rig. This, it said, could be an indication that the drilling would resume soon. Commenting on Turkish provocations in Cyprus' EEZ, Anastasiades said that by keeping a low tone the Government makes it clear that it never sought to usurp the rights of Turkish Cypriots. He added that the Government has not excluded Turkey as a country potentially interested in buying natural gas. *“What remains is the settlement of the Cyprus issue.”* The President said that with the settlement of the issue both Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots will benefit. Regarding the mechanism to settle issues in the case of solution, the President said that without its existence no system can work. *“Where there is an impasse, there could potentially exist the option of appealing to a Constitutional Court, as is done in the United States,”* Anastasiades said. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT** :

*Cyprus expresses in highest level its commitment to continue its energy plans exploiting energy resources in Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) despite Turkish threats and aggression. A strategy of multilateral cooperation seems to be fruitful. At the moment, Cyprus is engaged in three different trilateral formations which also include strong features of strategic cooperation*

*and alliance; Cyprus – Egypt – Greece, Cyprus – Israel – Greece, and Cyprus – Jordan – Greece. The last two are highly improved due to the US engagement which expressed their interest by joining the latest summit. It is a fact that Cyprus has a significant deficit of military power which is (externally) balanced by regional cooperation. Involvement of an American company (ExxonMobil) in the drills it is proved “wise” and “smart.” Announcement of Turkish seismographic research within the Cypriot EEZ (plot 4) could be assessed as spasmodic actions of Turkey against Cyprus (already predicted and expected). At the moment, none could assess the level of escalation Turkey seeks to reach. Taking into consideration that Cyprus lacks of military power and especially aeronautical forces it is expected Greece to be engaged more actively in the region. Conduct of aeronautical exercises in cooperation with other countries (Israel, Egypt etc) sends various messages of defense capability, readiness, and determination. Although the UN Secretary General appears optimistic for a new round of talks between the two communities, it is assessed that talks could not be resumed earlier than summer 2019. President Anastasiades promotes the scenario of a “bizonal, bicomunal decentralized federation”; an idea which is in principle accepted by the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and enjoys support from the U.S. However, there are a lot of disputed issues in which both parts should compromise; the most important is considered the decision-making process. It seems that not only the Turkish Cypriot side faces arguments with Turkey regarding negotiations, but also Cypriot political parties are divided regarding President Anastasiades' negotiation plans. Recent close approach between Cyprus and the US provoked Russia's strong reaction which foresees a possible isolation from*

*its influence in the Island. It is not a secret that Russia enjoys or used to enjoy a privileged relationship with Cyprus due to the US distance regarding defense and foreign policy neutrality. It is a question how Cyprus will achieve to balance between the US and Russia interests in the region. Situation is complex since Russia strengthened its relation with Turkey, while the US and Turkey, two allies within NATO are deteriorating theirs. The idea of NATO as the guarantor of Cyprus reunification and its security is a new fact which may cause disputes within the Cypriot political life. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.*



**F.Y.R.O.M:** January 4<sup>th</sup>, amid intensive talks with party leaders to secure the parliamentary votes needed to ratify a contentious deal on the name dispute with Greece, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev sought to dampen concerns in Athens over the agreement. In an interview with Greece's "Efimerida ton Syntakton" newspaper, Zaev said that according to a constitutional amendment to be put to vote in FYROM's Parliament this week, citizenship does not signify ethnic background. He added that the Balkan country's language is part of the Slavic family of languages, as recognized by the United Nations. Zaev also stressed the distinction between the ancient Greek legacy in the region and his country's own history. F.Y.R.O.M's Prime Minister went on to slam the controversial nation-building campaign carried out by his predecessor, Nikola Gruevski, including the erection of dozens of faux-antique statues of ancient warriors and kitschy columned structures.

F.Y.R.O.M paid a hefty price for this policy, he said, adding that it will not repeat the same mistakes. Zaev's comments were picked up by the Greek Government, which said they "blew a hole" in the arguments of the main New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία – ND) opposition, which has criticized the agreement as recognizing a "Macedonian" nationality and language. ([www.efsyn.gr](http://www.efsyn.gr), [www.ekathimerini.gr](http://www.ekathimerini.gr))

- January 4<sup>th</sup>, the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev expressed his optimism that the required majority for the vote on constitutional amendments will be secured in the Parliament. However, he said the exact number of MPs will be known on the day of the vote. "We will know the final number on the day of the vote. The session is scheduled for January 9<sup>th</sup> [2019] and according to the opposition's statements regarding their intentions, I expect the hearing to last for two to three days...Talks with political parties will continue; tomorrow I have a meeting with Bela Kasami from the Besa Movement and I am glad that Albanian parties from the opposition bloc like Besa and the Alliance of Albanians support NATO and EU accession unambiguously," Zaev said in response to a journalist's question. In regard to the ratification of the "Prespa Agreement" on the Greek side, Zaev said he trusts the word of the Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras that he will secure a parliamentary majority for ratifying both the Agreement and the protocol for joining NATO. Regarding the letter by the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Zaev said that it is an encouraging message for both countries. However, Zaev expressed his skepticism with Stoltenberg's call for the deal to be approved in both parliaments by February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019 so that F.Y.R.O.M could join the Alliance without further delay. "Why should we wait for

*the middle or the end of February? NATO can submit a ratification protocol to the Greek Parliament in late January or early February,”* Zaev said. Finally, Zaev said that he is against the idea of early parliamentary elections, but it is not only up to him; there is also the party and other stakeholders. (www.meta.mk)

- January 6<sup>th</sup>, NATO accession protocol for F.Y.R.O.M will be drafted immediately after the ratification of “Prespa Agreement” the Defense Minister Radmila Sekerinska said. She made the remarks while visiting F.Y.R.O.M’s Army troops deployed at the southern border. According to Sekerinska, the signing of NATO accession protocol will be drafted once “Prespa Agreement” on the name settlement is implemented and ratified by F.Y.R.O.M and Greece. *“This timeframe is several weeks, expecting the NATO protocol to be drafted after the deal’s ratification in the Greek Parliament, followed by the protocol’s endorsement by Greek lawmakers,”* Sekerinska explained, adding that F.Y.R.O.M will achieve its strategic objective as of February 2019. (www.mia.mk)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT** ■ :

*Voting of constitutional amendments in the Parliament for concluding successfully the “Prespa Agreement” is close to the end as the parliamentary session has been scheduled for January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019. It is more than certain that constitutional change will end successfully not only because Zaev fully controls political balance in the Parliament, but also because international community namely the US and EU strongly supports F.Y.R.O.M’s name change. Not only F.Y.R.O.M’s future is based on this process, but also Zaev’s political future. However, it seems*

*that Zaev is more worried about ratification process in Greece; a possible failure in the Greek Parliament will block F.Y.R.O.M’s accession in NATO (and the EU). That is why Zaev appeared in a compromising stance in an interview in Greek media. It is a fact that the Prime Minister is addressed to his own internal audience with a rather nationalistic rhetoric seeking to get citizens’ support. The European Parliament has sent an encouraging message to F.Y.R.O.M for opening accession negotiations in June 2019. Needless to say that both, NATO and EU keep sending encouraging messages for F.Y.R.O.M’s accession in the Euro-Atlantic structures, but the “gates” will open only if the name agreement will be ratified by both Greece and F.Y.R.O.M. The country has become a field of rivalry between the US and EU on the one side and Russia on the other. After Montenegro, NATO seeks to bring F.Y.R.O.M within the alliance isolating Russian influence in the region. Lavrov openly claims that the US and EU blackmailed and bribed MPs to support the name agreement with Greece. Needless to say that in a period where border questions are raised again in the Balkans, F.Y.R.O.M needs political stability and growth prospects.*



**GREECE:** January 3<sup>rd</sup>, main opposition leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis said accusations launched by Alternate Health Minister Pavlos Polakis against judicial officials handling two major corruption cases are an *“unprecedented undermining”* of democratic institutions, and criticized the Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras for not disciplining the Minister. *“Everything that is happening in the past few days constitute an unprecedented undermining of our democratic institutions and threaten directly the*

*separation of powers in our country,”* he said in a statement. *“It cannot be tolerated in a state governed by the rule of law, to have an acting Minister accuse named Prosecutors and investigative magistrates that they not fulfill their mission, in the way he would have liked, and have the Prime Minister protect him,”* he added. Earlier on Thursday, Greece’s Union of Judges and Prosecutors slammed Polakis for insinuating that judicial officials handling those cases are deliberately stalling the investigation. *“At a time when European and Greek legislation fully protect the presumption of innocence, a Government Minister brutally violates this principle,”* the Union said in a statement. *“We stress that the Minister’s attempt to intervene in the work of the judicial and prosecution officials is an institutional aberration, since it constitutes a direct violation of the principle of separation of powers,”* it added. In a social media post on Wednesday, Polakis named specific judicial officials handling the alleged mismanagement of funds at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KEELPNO) and the alleged kickbacks scandal involving Swiss pharmaceutical industry Novartis, claiming he has submitted to them *“a wealth of evidence”* that proves *“beyond doubt”* the misuse of state money. Mitsotakis also commented separately on the new prison leave granted last week to Dimitris Koufodinas, the convicted hitman of the “November 17” terrorist organization. Koufodinas, who was convicted for carrying out 11 assassinations, was reportedly seen in central Athens during his six-day furlough. *“Convicted terrorist Koufodinas, on his 6th furlough, takes a walk in Athens. The next elections will be about the economy, but also the quality of our democracy,”* Mitsotakis said on social media. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- January 3<sup>rd</sup>, Government’s Spokesman Dimitris Tzanakopoulos has ruled out the prospect of a vote of confidence in the Coalition of Radical left (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – SYRIZA) led administration in the event that its junior partner, Independent Greeks (Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες - ANEL), quits the coalition over its objections to the name deal with F.Y.R.O.M. *“We are not examining the prospect of a confidence vote,”* Tzanakopoulos said. He added that there are no indications suggesting the Government will lose Parliament’s confidence and cited a pledge by ANEL leader Panos Kammenos not to back a censure motion, if it is tabled by conservative opposition New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία – ND). He also insisted that the name deal will secure the 151 votes necessary for its ratification, even without ANEL’s backing. Finally, Tzanakopoulos said, the Government would seek to extend its lease on life without ANEL through a *“vote of tolerance”* – whereby an administration can secure its survival with a minority of 120 MPs on the condition they form a majority at the time of the vote. However, constitutional experts told Kathimerini that such a minority Government would not last long. ND Spokesperson Maria Spyraiki said that it would lack legitimacy, hinting again that a censure motion could be tabled.

- January 4<sup>th</sup>, Athens sees the recent rhetoric emanating from Turkey’s Defense and Foreign Ministries, in tandem with a spike in airspace violations and overflights, as part of a calculated bid by Ankara to maintain a climate of tension over the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. According to analysts, tension serves a two-fold objective; to highlight Turkish claims in the region and to serve as a reminder that despite its military operations in Syria, Ankara is ready to uphold its interests on its western sea border. To



this end, Turkey issued a Navigational Telex (NAVTEX) on Thursday, reserving an area in the Eastern Mediterranean until January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019 for seismic research by the survey ship Barbaros Hayreddin Pasa and two support vessels. The area overlaps with a large part of the Greek continental shelf and a section of Cyprus's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Earlier on Thursday, a pair of Turkish F-16 fighter jets flew over some of Greece's easternmost islands at an altitude of over 28,000 feet. According to the Hellenic National Defense General Staff (GEETHA), the two Turkish fighter jets flew over the islets of Farmakonisi and Panagia without submitting a flight plan to the Athens Flight Information Region (FIR). Meanwhile, Greek Defense Minister Panos Kammenos said that the criticism he received from Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu earlier this week shows he is doing his job well, adding that "nobody is afraid" of Turkey. "Mr Cavusoglu, thank you for your provocative New Year's statements. It is my gift for doing my job well. Greece will continue this work, seeking peace, defending its sovereignty and building strong alliances. Nobody is afraid of you anymore," he wrote on social media. Cavusoglu reportedly described Kammenos as a "spoiled brat" over past comments on bilateral territorial disputes and airspace violations in the Aegean. "We have a warning for Greece. You have a spoiled brat you call your Defense Minister. Beware of your spoiled brat so that our Armed Forces do not get involved in possible accidents," he was quoted as saying by the Turkish Minute news website, during a speech at the Turkish Gendarmerie and Coast Guard Academy on Wednesday. ([www.ekathimerini.gr](http://www.ekathimerini.gr))

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

*The country has entered in full pre-electoral period and parties are prepared for snap elections. Ruling coalition of SYRIZA – ANEL intensifies its efforts to reverse political atmosphere addressed to their special electoral audience. ANEL leader Kammenos hardens his rhetoric against the name deal with FYROM threatening to withdraw from the ruling coalition if the agreement will come to the Parliament for ratification. It is a fact, that ANEL as an ultra right-wing party with nationalist rhetoric has been trapped in the agreement with FYROM, which touches a sensitive issue for Greek society namely the Macedonian question. The burden of Prespa Agreement may be detrimental for political existence of ANEL and the party tries to eliminate it. On the other hand SYRIZA tries to gain political time planning to relief society with social care measures. Under these circumstances it is assessed that early election may be called in May 2019 together with local and European election. Given that "Prespa Agreement" and constitutional amendments will be concluded by F.Y.R.O.M in mid January 2019, rapid political developments are expected. Ruling SYRIZA (145 seats out of 300 in the Parliament) presents the scenario of minority Government. Such a scenario definitely will raise legitimacy questions and would undermine state's political stability in a period where Greece faces several diplomatic, security, and economic challenges. The alternative scenario of parliamentary election in autumn 2019 when actually mandate of current Government expires has few possibilities under the current political situation. Internal terrorism is considered as a major unresolved problem of national security undermining stability of the state. Name agreement with F.Y.R.O.M is under question after provocative statements of the Prime Minister Zaev who openly raised the issue of*

*“Macedonian” language in Greece and expressed irredentist ideas of “Macedonia of the Aegean.” Strategic dialogue between Greece and the US including defense, security, and energy matters strengthen geopolitical position of the state in the fragile region of East Mediterranean Sea and sending strong messages to Turkey. However, Greek diplomacy (and Cypriot) keeps an eye on latest developments regarding the U.S military withdraw from Syria and ongoing talks between the U.S and Turkey. Tension between Greece and Turkey has been raised not only in rhetoric level. Turkish fighter jets keep violating Greek airspace, while NAVTEXs reserves part of Greek continental shelf and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone. It is assessed that Greece is taking measures to deter any further escalation by the Turkish side showing determination and readiness to protect national interests. Next period will be critical to see if Turkey keeps maintaining a war of words or it will escalate situation taking in advantage an accidental or preplanned incident.*



**KOSOVO:** January 4<sup>th</sup>, Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj said that holding early elections in 2019 would be detrimental for the country. According to him 2019 will not be easy because Kosovo will face dialogue process with Serbia and the war crimes Court. Haradinaj said that his party, the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës – AAK, is in a good position in case of early elections. “AAK has an advantage in case of early elections, but it is not in the interest of the country to hold extraordinary elections considering ongoing processes in Kosovo,” Haradinaj said. He also called on two biggest opposition parties, Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK) and Self-

Determination (Vetevendosje – LV), to join the Government’s negotiation team adding that boycott of the dialogue means avoiding responsibilities. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- January 4<sup>th</sup>, Kosovo has no pretentions to expand its territory, or give up parts of its territory, said the Speaker of Parliament, Kadri Veseli. He said the country needs unity for dialogue with Serbia and criticized the EU for non-liberalization of Kosovo citizens’ visas, adding that the EU remains Kosovo’s partner in its path towards Euro-Atlantic integration. The Parliament Speaker and Chairman of the biggest parliamentary political party, Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës - PDK) called on opposition parties of Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK) and Self-Determination (Vetevendosje – LV) not to refuse cooperation when it comes to issues of national interest. In an interview with news agency KosovaPress, Veseli urged the opposition to join the Government’s team in dialogue with Belgrade, and urged Serbia to recognize Kosovo’s independence. Talking on the land swap idea with Serbia, Veseli said that Kosovo has no territorial pretentions but also will not give away parts of its territory. He is convinced that recognition of Kosovo from Serbia is inevitable. Talking on President Hashim Thaci’s role in dialogue with Serbia, Veseli said that the President should respect its constitutional role. Opposition parties are claiming that the President Thaci has no legitimacy to lead the dialogue with Serbia. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- January 4<sup>th</sup>, Maja Kocijancic, the spokeswoman of EU High Representative Federica Mogherini, confirmed the meeting with the Kosovo state delegation on dialogue with Serbia. She said the

meeting between European External Action Service (EEAS) and Kosovo representatives will be held in Brussels on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019. “The European External Action Service has invited the Kosovo dialogue team for consultations on January 8<sup>th</sup>,” Kocijancic noted. (www.kosovapress.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Kosovo has reached a critical point where only through normalization of relations with Serbia it will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. However, the state's authorities show a tendency of escalating tension with Serbia undermining a peaceful resolution of the case. By imposing 100% tariff on Serbian (and Bosnian products), establishing Kosovo army, executing Special Forces operation in northern Kosovo, and arresting Serbs it is created a climate which does not facilitate dialogue and the establishment of confidence between the two parties. It should be also underlined that at the moment Kosovo's political power are divided regarding negotiation process and goals. The Prime Minister Haradinaj and the Government are not in harmony with the President Thaci who is the chief negotiator of the state. There is even a matter of legitimacy within the state regarding who is authorized to represent the country in dialogue with Serbia. Kosovo Government works on establishing a legal framework regarding dialogue with Serbia. The EU and the Foreign Policy High Representative rejected Haradinaj's unilateral actions accusing him of undermining dialogue. The question of border exchange or simply change continues to divide Kosovo political forces and population. However, it could be estimated that if Kosovo keeps on acting in such way it may be isolated on*

*the table of international negotiations. It seems that the U.S (and the EU) has a leading role in the background pushing for the idea of territorial change (or exchange). Thaci reiterated once again his confidence that dialogue will start again and agreement will be reached. It is assessed that there is somekind background talks between Thaci and Vucic which strengthen Kosovo President's confidence that his country will be recognized by Serbia. It is a fact that Thaci, and the EU wish to isolate Haradinaj intervention in the dialogue process. Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish in the country rule of law and modern functional administration. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard. Kosovo announced the establishment of its army; an issue which may provoke rapid reaction by the Serbian side including military and Police power. One should take into consideration that the Serb President has already ordered all defense and security stakeholders to take all necessary measures for protecting Serbian population in Kosovo.*



**MOLDOVA:** January 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Romanian presidency is a unique occasion to boost the EU - Moldova relation, beginning with the fostering of the political dialogue and backing the process of reforms and ending with speeding up the implementation of projects on energy inter-connection and infrastructure ones through the construction of bridges and highways. Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration Iurie Leanca has made statements to this effect, in the context of Romania taking over the Presidency of the EU Council on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019, 12 years after joining the EU in 2007, the Government's communication and protocol department reported. According to Leanca, besides many challenges

faced by the EU, Romania has responsibility and opportunity to maintain in the forefront of EU's agenda the evolution in the eastern neighborhood (especially in the present geopolitical context), energy and intelligence security, war in Ukraine and the frozen conflicts in the Black Sea basin. *"We rely, not in the least, on the support of Romania to trigger a wide discussion in EU on the need to offer Moldova clear-cut prospects for accession to EU,"* Leanca said. (www.moldpres.md)

- January 4<sup>th</sup>, the Prime Minister Pavel Filip sent a letter to Romanian Prime Minister Viorica Dancila, congratulating Romania on the occasion of taking over the presidency of the EU Council - a stage of great responsibility and a special opportunity to assert. According to the Government's communication and protocol department, Filip voiced hope that during the Romanian presidency over the EU, Moldova will move forward in its relations with the EU and will strengthen its position in the Eastern Partnership. *"We welcome the intention of the Romanian Presidency to launch strategic reflections on the future of cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries (EaP). Moldova is interested in the future of the EaP to combine in a more harmonious way the needs of technical and sectoral cooperation with the long-term political priorities of the Eastern partners, especially the three associated countries,"* the letter reads. The Prime Minister said that at present, there is a very good dialogue with Bucharest, and the common agenda is a European one. Infrastructure and interconnection projects will be further developed, so that Moldova should be closer to the big European family. Filip wished the Romanian Government success, and voiced confidence that this is an opportunity both for

advancing the European agenda of Moldova and for deepening bilateral cooperation. (www.moldpres.md)

- January 5<sup>th</sup>, Dean of the International Relations, Political and Administrative Sciences Faculty of Moldova's State University (USM) Alexandru Solcan claimed that there might be possibility to create a parliamentary majority due to manage to set up the Government following the February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019 parliamentary elections. *"I think that things will not get to snap elections. I believe that, following the polls, a parliamentary majority will be created, the Government will be set up and most likely, this cabinet will be around the current governance, around the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM),"* Solcan said. According to Solcan, the present political situation is complicated, as the parties which are the closest on the political stage and can be eventual partners of a coalition, are in the greatest confrontation. Solcan also said that many MPs due to be elected in uninominal constituencies would try to join a Government, in order to bring as many as possible benefits to the citizens who voted for them. (www.moldpres.md)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**  :

*Political life is "hostage" of the pro-Russian President Igor Dodon and pro-Western Government rivalry which undermines the institutional function of the country. In the wider framework Moldova is between the Euro-Atlantic structures on the one hand and the Russian influence on the other. Political situation in the country is alarming and the EU has hardened its policy towards Moldova pushing for more reforms which will strengthen state's transparency, accountability and democratic values. Coming parliamentary elections*

*scheduled for February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019 will be closely monitored by the international community and especially the US and EU as a “democratic stress test.” Romanian Presidency of the EU Council is a positive conjuncture for Moldova changing the climate between Moldova and EU. Moreover the US express concerns over a possible Russian interference in the elections. The Government is sliding into dangerous paths which support corruption and organized crime and deep and determined justice reforms are needed. The U.S, EU and IMF express their major concerns. By autumn the state has entered in pre-election period although elections are scheduled for February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Opposition parties try to establish a single united bloc against the ruling coalition accused of nepotism and corruption. The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Moldova; First of all Russia maintains military forces in Transnistrian ground and secondly it shares common borders with Ukraine which cannot go unnoticed by international stakeholders. Moldova, together with Georgia and Ukraine released a particularly aggressive announcement against Russian actions in Kerch Strait and Azov Sea. One should keep an eye on current political (and public) trend on reunification with Romania. The “Transnistria case” is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.*



**MONTENEGRO:** January 4<sup>th</sup>, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Srdan Darmanovic, said in an interview for CdM portal that Montenegro and China have great relations, but also points out that state’s path is clear; the EU membership and it has no alternative. Tensions between Podgorica and Moscow eased. However the Minister did not hesitate to point out that

Montenegro is aware of Russia’s hybrid war doctrine which “*is still in force.*” Darmanovic underlined that Montenegro is a NATO country and Russia “*has accepted the fact.*” He claimed that Montenegro is definitely the best EU candidate and announced opening of the last chapter and as well as closing several already opened chapters. “*Montenegro is without any doubt the readiest of all Western Balkans countries. But we still need to work more in many areas. Key areas are rule of law and additional improvement of judicial system,*” the Minister said. Finally, the Minister highlighted that NATO membership is the most important achievement after regaining independence. “*For first time we became the state of the Western world. Apart of well known security benefits, economic benefits are very important too. Investments in Montenegro increased; number of tourists broke all records... Their perception is that they come to a safe state,*” Darmanovic said. (www.cdm.me)

- January 4<sup>th</sup>, the most common barriers that businessmen point out are grey economy and unfair competition, non-liquidity/ recovery of debts, numerous and high taxes, fees at the local level, high contributions on wages, high capital prices and difficult access to loans, barriers in legal regulation, problems of insufficient flexibility of labor market, lack of professional staff and frequent amendments of regulations, said in an interview for “Pobjeda” the President of the Chamber of Commerce, Vlastimir Golubovic. “*In order to overcome those barriers, we need to provide greater flexibility of labor market, and enable the employer more space to cancel the contract of employment in case the employee fails to justify the reasons for his employment, reduce labor costs, primarily contributions thereof. That will provide higher employment, reduce grey*

*economy and create new jobs. It will also increase minimum wage and consequently, reduce the unfair competition and increase the budget revenues,” Golubovic claimed. In his opinion 2018 was a successful business year. Montenegrin economy recorded high growth rates. He pointed out that Montenegro is constantly working on improving the business environment. “Business conditions are relatively favorable, and a great number of investors who are willing to invest in our state confirm it. However, the most recent World Bank report shows that we have to work on improving that environment more and with more speed,” Golubovic said. (www.cdm.me)*

- January 5<sup>th</sup>, a meeting of the leaders of the ruling parties, which is supposed to tackle relations in the ruling coalition, should be held around mid-January, Andrija Popovic, the leader of the Liberal Party of Montenegro (Liberalna Partija Crne Gore - LPCG), told Pobjeda daily. Popovic also said this meeting was supposed to be held in December 2018 but was delayed due to a hectic schedule of the leaders of the ruling parties. *“We agreed to meet by mid-January as some things have definitely altered, especially concerning the program side of the coalition agreement. Nothing’s perfect but we’re still moving forward,”* stressed Popovic, adding that he had already expressed his dissatisfaction with the implementation of the post-election coalition agreement. (www.cdm.me)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :**

*Although the country enjoys a period of “euphoria”, major reforms should be implemented in order the country to come closer to the EU. The EP assessment is positive praising the state’s efforts to implement major reforms, but*

*on the other hand it underlines the problems of the rule of law, media freedom, corruption, money laundering, and organized crime. However, the EP expressly states that Montenegro under certain conditions may be able to access the EU by 2025. The Government promotes state’s political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. Although the Government takes concrete measures against corruption, organized crime, and money laundering it is assessed that a lot should be done to reach such a level of economic activity; mainly in the field of public administration, public sector corruption, and money laundering. Imprisonment of opposition MPs is a worrying and alarming sign regarding rule of law and democratic values in the country. Montenegro shows activity within NATO trying to prove that it is an equal partner of the alliance with military capacity according to NATO standards. Although the state fulfills its obligations as a full member of the Alliance questions are raised for such initiatives due to their impact in Montenegro’s society but also in country’s foreign relations. A significant number of people is opposed in NATO and maintains pro-Russian stance.*



**ROMANIA:** December 31<sup>st</sup>, in a TV interview the Prime Minister Viorica Dancila has stated that although the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis has not done good things for Romania, including not naming the two new Ministers, she would not sign a request to charge Iohannis of high treason. Dancila reminded that she had gone through such an experience, when the President had accused her of high treason for taking stance on the relocation of the Romanian embassy to Jerusalem. *“The fact that we have not had Ministers for two very important portfolios,*

considering that we take over the Presidency of the EU Council, has not been beneficial. A President must do what is good for his country (...) I don't know if I'd sign a request for high treason, for I had myself such an accusation on a relation with a strategic partner, Israel. I know how unpleasant has been to explain that to our strategic partners. We have to make an analysis, to see what from the President's actions is in Romania's interest and what is not," Dancila said, adding that she does not consider the Head of state as a political foe. Dancila also said that, for what she understands Iohannis wants to represent the state to the European Council, criticizing the Head of state for this. She argued that the Presidency of the EU Council is held by the Prime Minister and the Government and if the President seeks to represent Romania to the European Council it would be an unusual situation, which will not be beneficial for Romania. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- January 4<sup>th</sup>, the hardest challenge for Romania when holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU will be to regain confidence from the Member States, said Bernd Fabritius, assigned by the German Government for national minorities issues and President of the Federation of Expellees (BdV). Fabritius said that President Klaus Iohannis is the one to stay "at the top of the table" during the six-month mandate and not the Prime Minister Viorica Dancila. He added that Romania's "severe disability" is the distant attitude in regard to European values. "The Romanian Government is not ready for this task [the Presidency of the Council of the EU]. To be ready means to have the confidence of the European partners in terms of democracy, rule of law, fighting corruption and the Romanian Government has acted contrary to these issues,

has destroyed the confidence that existed," the German official said. He stressed that from the technical point of view Romania is ready. "I am afraid this is not only a technical matter, it is related to political confidence, to deal with the EU funds. Romania has not succeeded to have the needed confidence, has shown a distant position in regard to European values and this is a severe disability for this position," he added. Fabritius said Iohannis, as Head of state, is a very well-known person, very pragmatic for the EU partners. "Premier Dancila is less known in this framework, she is known mainly for meeting the party demands and the demands of people not authorized to represent the country in Europe. For this reason, the only chance for this period to be successful is that President Iohannis is the driving engine for the EU Council Presidency," he said. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- January 4<sup>th</sup>, the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis said that he would not sign the decrees appointing Lia-Olguta Vasilescu as Development Minister and Mircea Draghici as Transport Minister, thus refusing the Prime Minister's proposals for the two Ministries for second time. The leaders of the ruling Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) decided in November 2018 that a Government reshuffle is needed, and changed some of the key Ministers. The President accepted the new Minister proposals, except for two of them: that of former Labor Minister Lia-Olguta Vasilescu as Transport Minister and Ilan Laufer as Regional Development Minister. He said at that time that the proposals were "unfit." PSD came up with new names proposing Lia-Olguta Vasilescu for the Development Ministry and Mircea Draghici for the Transport Ministry. But Iohannis postponed their appointment twice. Firstly until

December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018 and then until after the Constitutional Court's ruling giving an answer to the Prime Minister Viorica Dancila. The Court ruled in December that the President must issue the decree confirming the two vacancies in the cabinet following the resignation of the Development and Transport Ministers, and thus Iohannis signed on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019 the two decrees to revoke the two Ministers. However, on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019 came the announcement that he would refuse the Prime Minister's proposals for the two positions. *"My team is currently working on this analysis but by the middle of next week I will publicly present the reasons for refusing the Prime Minister's proposals,"* Iohannis told the press. The President also said that he would not revoke General Prosecutor Augustin Lazar, as requested by the Justice Minister. The Minister presented last fall an evaluation report that also included several reasons for Lazar's dismissal, such as the fact that the legal procedure for his appointment had not been respected. In his turn, Lazar requested in Court the suspension of the procedure to revoke him. *"General Prosecutor Lazar is doing a very good job there. I am pleased with his activity and the evaluation, or the so-called evaluation presented by the Minister of Justice, doesn't meet the requirements of the law,"* the President said. He also announced that he would run for a new term as President of Romania, having the support of the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal - PNL). Romania will organize presidential elections later this year. (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. The President rejects the Government's proposals one after another leading in institutional and constitutional deadlock. Apart from that the state looks divided in major institutional issues such as national defense, justice, and security. Romania took over the Presidency of the Council of EU facing criticism and non-confidence by the EU member states' high officials. It is assessed that the Romanian Government is reaching a deadlock which could overthrow it. On the other hand, it is "unrealistic" a state holding the EU Presidency to face snap elections; It could be detrimental. One should also take into consideration that the ruling coalition has lost majority in the Chamber of deputies which makes things more complex. Iohannis strongly opposes in Government's plans to intervene in judicial system while there are specific signs that the Government works towards controlling state's justice. As a conclusion, the state faces political abnormality in many levels which at the moment 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. Current crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Romania's security situation as a forward NATO base.*



**SERBIA:** January 1<sup>st</sup>, *"There aren't many offered solutions on the table, I know one; delimitation, and there are others,"* said Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic. He said that these other solutions are *"for us to recognize Kosovo, which we will not do it, or that Kosovo be a province in Serbia, which they will not do it."* Dacic noted



that for now, no one has answered what a compromise would be; *“there are some alternatives.”* *“Pristina, first of all, is seeking a change in the format of the dialogue and the involvement of the United States, but they are against the involvement of Russia,”* Dacic said and added that *“no one has been deciding on that yet, everything is at the wish level. The U.S has no special desire to become a formal part of the dialogue. If someone really wants the U.S to get involved, we will ask China and Russia to be included too,”* Dacic said. He pointed out that Serbia, regardless of that, must say that there is no international force or pressure that will make Serbia to change its position on national and state issues. He reiterated that Serbia is ready for dialogue and finding a solution, but that Pristina is not, and is looking for ways to delay it. Asked if he is an optimist in that regard, Dacic said that no one can be overly optimistic, because Belgrade wants to create conditions for continuing the dialogue and finding a solution *“but when that will happen does not depend on us. Those who support Kosovo must create the conditions for the dialogue to continue, which means revoking the taxes,”* Dacic said. He is not optimistic also because the EU has now to deal with internal issues, European Parliament elections, the formation of new EU bodies and the appointment of EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini's successor. He emphasized that he is pleased with the results in Serbia's foreign policy, primarily because 12 countries have withdrawn their recognition of the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo, which means it now does not have a majority to be a member in any international organization. Dacic noted that this brought Serbia back on the political stage as a factor without which there can be no discussion or

agreement on any topic related to Kosovo. (www.b92.net)

- January 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic is not ruling out the possibility of elections in 2019. Vucic, who is the leader of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka - SNS), added that he thinks there are ideas within the party that he should head the election list. *“I do not exclude the possibility of elections because we are entering the election year in March or April, and there's nothing early about it. Apparently, everyone thinks they are very strong and can win. I think we can go to the polls. There are ideas within the SNS that I should head its election list, before somebody else comes in. It seems to me that this could bring them more convincing results,”* Vucic said. When asked why SNS founder Tomislav Nikolic is being visibly sidelined, Vucic said he did not know what that meant adding that Nikolic is making appearances and doing *“a serious job.”* (www.b92.net)

- January 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin said that he has repeatedly suggested to President Aleksandar Vucic that Serbia should *“redefine”* its policy towards the EU. According to Vulin, Serbia should do that because of *“the double standards”* that the EU applies to Serbia, and because the organization is not reacting to *“the creation of Greater Albania.”* The Minister also said that he did not receive Vucic's support for this. *“I am asking to consider whether we need this kind of EU, whether we need this kind of policy, or if we should change our political position towards the EU,”* Vulin said after the opening of the renovated helipad at the Military Medical Academy in Belgrade, adding that *“it depends on Vucic.”* If, he continued, the EU is unwilling to *“stop the creation of Great Albania,*

*we need to change our position towards it.”* When Pristina introduce taxes of 100%, the EU says that Albanians will reduce them a little to continue the dialogue with Belgrade, and “*puts us into the same basket,*” Vulin said. He said that because of such attitude, he has repeatedly suggested to Vucic that Serbia should change its policy towards the EU, and that so far he did not have Vucic's support “*but it's up to me to ask for it,*” he concluded. He also said that the creation of Greater Albania is an evil that leads to conflict, not only with the Serbs but also with others in the Balkans. “*And the EU is silent, I urge it to speak,*” Vulin said, adding that Vucic is the only leader in the Balkans who sincerely stands for regional stability. (www.b92.net)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**   :

*It is assessed that Serbia has followed so far a successful diplomatic strategy achieving to be appeared in the international community as a reasonable voice seeking a compromise resolution via dialogue. Apart from that Serbia took in advantage that it is a member of the UN, while Kosovo it is not. In this context, Serbia pushed the UNSC for a more active role in resolution process sending a message to the EU that its dialogue process has reached a deadlock. Security situation is complex and uncertain since Serbia apart from political and diplomatic means has engaged its military and security forces. The Armed Forces are in high readiness alert but Vucic tried to de-escalate situation by stating that war is not a possible solution. However, none could predict Serbia's reaction in a possible accidental or pre-planned (provocation included) incident in Northern Kosovo against local Serbs. One should have in mind that top state officials have said in public that Serbia will protect*

*Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. It is assessed that a possible Kosovo Police operation in the north or security forces deployment may provoke Serbia's security forces engagement for the protection of Serbian population. Serbia received support from Russia and China in the UN Security Council and Putin's visit to Belgrade on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019 is of high interest. At the moment, Serbia looks like acting in accordance with the international law aiming at reducing tension in the region. In other words state's leadership is acting in a “reasonable” and “wise” way avoiding mistakes of the past which have isolated Serbia from the international community. Of course, under these circumstances none could speak for restarting of Belgrade – Pristina dialogue. There are certain analysts who claim that such situation will inevitably lead in Kosovo partition with the north part going to Serbia. Some of them claim that this scenario has already agreed by Vucic and Thaci. Serbian repayment will be Kosovo recognition. By expressing neutrality and maintaining equal distance from the U.S.A and Russia it moves in an environment of fragile balance. Russia is getting involved in Kosovo case by supporting actively Serbian stance.*



**SLOVENIA:** January 3<sup>rd</sup>, According to Delo daily, 2019 will be probably critical for the economy to carry out overdue reforms, or else the year could end with much less optimism. In 2019, Slovenians will live on average better than last year, as domestic and foreign macroeconomic forecasters expect the good times to continue. Slovenia's economy is expected to do well as several of its segments, not just one, are in a good shape, listing export-oriented companies, the construction sector, private consumption and

government spending. But when forecasting upbeat economic trends, both the domestic and foreign institutions never forget to list risks, such as trade wars, a chaotic Brexit, indebtedness. Some of them downgraded their forecasts already in the autumn, and worst-case scenarios coming true could mean a lot of trouble for the global and Slovenian economies. Slovenia has high public debt, a shortage of trained staff and hi-tech products, unfavorable demographic trends and low productivity. “*So this year ... is perhaps crucial for the Government and economy. Crucial for them to do the homework they have failed to do so far, or else the year could well end with less optimism than we have today,*” Delo concluded. (www.sloveniatimes.com)

- January 5<sup>th</sup>, arrangement of salaries in the Slovenian Armed Forces will move to the courts. The Union of Slovenian Soldiers will challenge the new regulation on wages in the Slovenian Army, which does not eliminate salary abnormalities, at the Constitutional Court, while the Defense Ministry Trade Union is considering a lawsuit before the Labor and Social Court. On the New Year's Eve, the Government adopted a revised salary regulation in the Slovenian Armed Forces, which raised wages to military personnel of various ranks. But two of the four unions are not satisfied with the adopted regulation and changes in wage ratios. Both the Slovenian Trade Union (SVS) and the Trade Union of Soldiers and employees of the Ministry of Defense (SMO) announced legal procedures against the regulation both in the Constitutional Court and in the labor and social Courts. In principle, the Government has raised wages for all members of the Slovenian Armed Forces. However, mismatch between the Armed Forces hierarchy of ranks and hierarchy in wage system creates several abnormalities. Darko

Milenkovic, President of the SMO, announced legal measures against the new salary system in the Slovenian Army. “*It is possible to launch a collective lawsuit in the labor and social Court,*” announced Milenkovic, adding that the lawyers are still searching the case. The Trade Union of Slovenian Soldiers prepares a protest rally in the second half of January 2019 before the Slovene Government building. There is no exact date yet. They seek to push the Government to work towards fixing current problems in the salary system. (www.dnevnik.si)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc) which may test governmental cohesion. 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:** January 2<sup>nd</sup>, Turkey deployed more military equipment to its frontier with Syria, as preparations for its cross-border operation continued. Military convoys were

spotted in the southeastern Turkish provinces of Gaziantep, Kilis and Şanlıurfa. A truck convoy carrying ammunition, generators and tank fuel passed through Şanlıurfa city center before proceeding toward Mardin. Another convoy of ammunition-loaded trucks and armored personnel carriers transited through Kilis to Gaziantep. Meanwhile, military vehicles and howitzers previously brought to Hatay also started their journey to Gaziantep. Enhanced security measures were taken in the area during the continued deployment of military equipment. In mid-December 2018, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced an imminent Turkish operation east of the Euphrates River in northern Syria, saying Turkey had begun taking action toward the offensive against the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Almost all the territory east of the Euphrates comprises about a third of the territory of Syria, except for the Bashar Assad regime-controlled area near Deir el-Zour and the area near the Iraqi border controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a group dominated by YPG members. Erdogan said Turkey would postpone the operation after U.S. President Donald Trump's surprise decision to withdraw American troops from Syria. (www.dailysabah.com)

- January 3<sup>rd</sup>, the U.S. made an official offer to Turkey for a 3.5 billion dollars sale of Patriot air and missile defense systems, which has long been on the negotiating table for the two NATO allies. Anadolu Agency (AA) reported that the U.S. delegation that arrived in Turkey made the offer during the meeting with officials from the Foreign and Defense Ministry. However, no further details were revealed about the offer. The offer includes 80 Patriot missiles and 60 other missiles along with radar sets, engagement control stations and

launching stations. The offer came after the U.S. State Department on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018 approved a possible sale of the Patriot air and missile defense system and notified Congress of the proposal, saying that Turkey continues to be an essential element of the national security and defense strategy. The State Department also informed Congress about the sale proposal. The move was regarded as a breakthrough after Washington's delayed delivery of F-35 airplanes to Turkey due to Ankara's purchase of Russian made S-400 air defense system. Ankara is, on the other hand, opposing any prerequisite in the contract that foresees the cancellation of the S-400 systems. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan previously said the S-400 missile system negotiations between Ankara and Moscow are a done deal, and the U.S. are not in a position to say something about it, adding that Turkey needs both the Russian S-400 air defense systems and the U.S. F-35 fighter jets. Turkey had been trying to purchase the air defense system from the U.S. for some time but was never able to get a commitment from Washington when it was needed most. As the U.S. failed to meet the defense needs of Turkey and risked losing its NATO ally, Turkey turned to Russia and decided to purchase Russia's S-400 missile system in 2017, which caused a major political impasse between the two countries. In the face of Ankara's decision, Washington complained that the Russian system is not compatible with weapons of the NATO air-and-missile defense system and that purchasing the S-400 system would jeopardize Turkey's purchase of F-35 fighter jets, possibly resulting in unavoidable negative consequences for U.S.-Turkey relations. Subsequently, the U.S. President Donald Trump approved a defense budget law delaying delivery of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets to Turkey,

citing Turkey's purchase from the Russians. Subsequently, the U.S. Congress passed a bill blocking the delivery of the jets until the Pentagon issued a report on Turkish-American relations. (www.dailysabah.com)

- January 6<sup>th</sup>, the US. President Donald Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton, said that the U.S. military withdrawal from northeastern Syria is conditioned on defeating the remnants of DAESH terrorist group, and on Turkey assuring the safety of fighters allied with the United States — the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG). Bolton, who traveled to Israel to reassure the U.S. ally of the Trump-ordered withdrawal, said there is no timetable for the pullout of American forces in northeastern Syria, but insisted it's not an unlimited commitment. *“There are objectives that we want to accomplish that condition the withdrawal,”* Bolton told reporters in Jerusalem. *“The timetable flows from the policy decisions that we need to implement.”* Bolton's comments mark the first public confirmation that the drawdown has been slowed, as Trump faced widespread criticism from allies and the resignation of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis for a policy that was to have been conducted within weeks. Trump announced in mid-December that the U.S. will withdraw all of its 2,000 forces in Syria. Bolton, who is to travel to Turkey on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019, said the U.S. is insisting that the YPG are protected from any planned Turkish cross-border operation. He is to deliver a warning to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan this week. *“We don't think the Turks ought to undertake military action that's not fully coordinated with and agreed to by the United States,”* Bolton said. Trump has stated that he would *“not allow Turkey to kill the Kurds,”* Bolton said, referring to the

YPG. *“That's what the President said, the ones that fought with us.”* In response to Bolton's remarks, Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin said it is irrational to claim Turkey targeted Kurds, saying Ankara's targets were the PKK, YPG and DAESH terrorists. *“To argue that a terrorist organization represents Kurds is, above all, disrespectful to our Kurdish brothers,”* Kalin said. *“One of the goals of Turkey's struggle against the PKK and its Syrian offshoots is to save the Kurds from the tyranny and oppression of this terror group,”* Kalin added. Bolton said the U.S. has asked the YPG to *“stand fast now”* and refrain from seeking protection from Russia or Bashar Assad's regime. He said Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford would continue negotiations with his Turkish counterparts this week to seek protection for Kurds in northern Syria. Bolton said U.S. troops would remain at the critical area of al-Tanf, in southern Syria, to counter growing Iranian activity in the region. He defended the legal basis for the deployment, saying it's justified by the President's Constitutional authority, adding *“I'm a strong believer in Article II.”* (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 re-examines its relations with the EU in an effort to avoid international and regional isolation, the EU*

*sends messages of terminating the EU – Turkey accession talks. Turkish Armed Forces have been engaged in military operations against Kurds and PKK in Northern Iraq and against YPG Kurds in Syria as well. It seems that the U.S reconsiders its unconditional withdrawal from Syria after domestic and international critics. Protection of Syrian Kurds and YPG forces is a priority for the U.S troops which will remain in Syria as long as it is necessary. Bolton’s message was absolutely clear and it will be transferred on Monday to Turkish President “Do not touch the Syrian Kurds.” Although Erdogan announced that Turkey will not conduct a new military operation against Syrian Kurds, it reinforces its military presence in the area. It is assessed that the Turkish armed forces plan an imminent military operation. At the moment, Turkey is engaged in military operations in the territory of two other countries, it threatens to start a new operation in Syria, maintains a significant military force in North Cyprus, and threatens a NATO ally – Greece – with an armed conflict. Apart from the use or the threat of use of direct armed violence Turkey participates actively in diplomatic processes in the region (Syria negotiations, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Cyprus question, Qatar crisis etc). The state tries to show a leading role regarding Syria’s “next day” claiming that developments in neighboring country are related to its national security mainly because of the Kurds. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Regarding Turkish interests in East Mediterranean Sea it seems that they are reaching a critical point since Cypriots have already started hydrocarbon drills in their Exclusive Economic Zone via the US energy giant ExxonMobil. Is Turkey ready to move from rhetoric to action? It is rather difficult*

*to see a direct harassment against the drill ship but none could exclude a “hot” incident in the Aegean Sea. The Turkish President and high state’s officials express Turkey’s determination to protect its interests no matter what. It seems that strengthened multilateral cooperation between Greece, Israel, Cyprus and Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt raises its concerns of regional isolation in a region (Eastern Mediterranean Sea) where Turkey considers it as a preferential field of action.*

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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
-  Evolving or ongoing crisis or violent/armed conflict