



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

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

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

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ALBANIA: November 26th, at the fifth joint meeting of the Governments of Albania and Kosovo in Peja, in Kosovo, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama backed the decision of the Kosovo Government to raise the tax on imports from Serbia and Bosnia from 10 to 100%. Kosovo imposed the increase in taxes on Serbian and Bosnian imports on November 21st, 2018. The EU has called on Kosovo to withdraw the decision, saying it contradicts the terms of Kosovo's membership of the CEFT regional free trade deal. Rama said the new tax was politically justified. *“The tariff is not an economical act, but it is a silent political reaction and an invitation for Serbia to stand with its feet on the ground, because the path to the future cannot be built with a knife in the back of Albanians,”* Rama stated. *“It [the tax rise] is an irrational condition in normal circumstances, but it is normal in an irrational situation. Whoever thinks the tariff is economical is wrong, it is political, because of the approach of Serbia,”* he added. According to Rama, Albania wants to cooperate with Serbia, but *“Serbia cannot have one face with Albania and another with Kosovo.”* *“They [Serbs] cannot bring in goods with the description 'Kosovo i Metohija'; they can keep 'Metohija' for themselves,”* Rama stated, referring to the Serbian formula for the former province which declared independence in 2008. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- November 29th, the European Parliament MEPs assessed the progress made in Albania, Montenegro and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M) on their path towards possible EU accession. Three resolutions evaluating the current state of play were adopted by the full House. In a resolution adopted by 459 votes to 112, with 62 abstentions, MEPs welcome

Albania's steady progress on EU-related reforms and the steps taken to boost the independence and professionalism of the country's judiciary MEPs commended the significant improvements made by Albania to strengthen its legal and institutional framework as well as the progress achieved in the fight against organized crime. However, they remain concerned over the continued high level of corruption the slow pace and inefficiency of the justice system and the fact that rule-of-law deficiencies and cumbersome regulatory procedures continue to deter investment in the country. Nevertheless, the resolution endorses the path set out by the Council to open EU accession negotiations with Albania in June 2019, provided that the country meets all necessary conditions. EP rapporteur on Albania Knut Fleckenstein (S&D, DE) said *“After 4 years of being recognized as an EU candidate country, it is about time for the EU to open accession negotiations with Albania. The country has made good progress in justice reform with the vetting process, which was one of the key demands. The fight against corruption is ongoing and with a measure of success. The vote on the report in the plenary today recognizes their efforts. It is also a call on the Council and the member states to finally agree on opening accession negotiations with Albania in the next year.”* (www.europarl.europa.eu)

- November 30th, Democratic Party (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë - PD) MP, Ervin Saliانji stated that 80 people are missing in Vlora during last three years due to state's control by organized crime. Saliانji claimed that Police threatens the families of missing people, while PD has already denounced the case of missing people in Vlora. *“80 missing people is just the number has been reported to the Police by their relatives.*

Their testimony shows that Police is involved not only in facilitating traffic, but also in threatening the families of missing people. This is an alarm that the state has been fallen into the hands of crime,” Salianji said. He concluded by saying that it is unacceptable people to be disappeared without any trace, while cannabis is sold near schools without any control. At the same time, the EU Ambassador to Tirana, Luigi Soreca stated that Albania has made significant progress but there are still a lot to be done. He focused on fight against organized crime and corruption. “Fight against organized crime and corruption is crucial and there is no time to lose. Justice reform must continue; is a flexible process and everyone should work towards the same direction,” he claimed. (www.albaniandailynews.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Opposition accuses the Government of having links with organized crime. It 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 next year. 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, Albanian Prime Minister expressed publically his support on Kosovo latest decision to raise the tax on imports from Serbia and Bosnia from 10 to 100%. 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:

November 27th, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) will be on agenda of the next week's meeting of the NATO Foreign Ministers, a NATO official confirmed. “NATO supports Bosnia's aspirations to join the alliance, which will be one of the topics of discussion when NATO Foreign Ministers meet next week in Brussels,” said the official. The next ministerial meeting is set to take place on December 4th and 5th at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels, after last week's discussion by the European Union's (EU) Foreign Ministers. “The meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers is next week, December 4th and 5th. On December 5th, Ministers will have a session on the Western Balkans, together with EU High Representative Mogherini,” the NATO official told N1. “We expect Ministers will discuss how to take forward NATO’s relationship with Bosnia and Herzegovina, the accession talks with Skopje and dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina,” he said. The EU ministers at last week's meeting called on Bosnian leaders to focus on reform processes and

urged them to swiftly form the authorities following the October 7th, 2018 election. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- November 28th, the Head of Croatia's delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly tried to condition Bosnia's NATO accession with the change of Bosnia's Election Law, said the Head of Bosnia's Joint Commission for Defense and Security, Sifet Podzic, adding that Croatia's attitude towards Bosnia is "*contradicting*." After the Republika Srpska (RS) entity's 2017 decision to proclaim military neutrality, hampering Sarajevo's ambitions to join the Alliance, a new stumbling block emerged with the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH) conditioning Bosnia's NATO accession with their own political goals, Podzic said. "*Unfortunately they (HDZ BiH) are using their sister party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which is in power in Croatia, and their MPs for these goals,*" Podzic said. "*As you could see, Miroslav Tadjman, the son of the former Croatian President Franjo Tadjman, who is the Head of Croatia's delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, said they would condition Bosnia's NATO accession with changes to Bosnia's election law.*" Earlier this week, Croatian media reported that Miroslav Tadjman spoke with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the main topics of their discussion were the equality of peoples in Bosnia and changes to Bosnia's election law. Croatian officials have been very active after the October general election in Bosnia in speaking to western officials about the rights of Bosnian Croats living in the other Bosnian entity - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FB&H). They claim that Bosniaks living in the FB&H outvote the

Croats and make decisions on their behalf. One such example is the election of the Croat member of Bosnia's tripartite Presidency who defeated his main rival, the HDZ BiH's Dragan Covic, because although both are ethnic Croats, Komsic ran on a multi-ethnic centrist platform, whereas Covic on a nationalist platform. The Head of Bosnia's Defense Commission noted that Croatia's attitude towards Bosnia is contradicting since they keep saying that they advocate for Bosnia's EU and NATO accession, "*but then they do everything to prevent that.*" Podzic added that NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) requires the registration of all the military property at the state level, which is something Bosnia, has not done yet because the RS refuses to register many military facilities existing on the territory of this entity, to the state level. RS is not the only one refusing to hand over such property since the FB&H also has a number of barracks and other facilities used by lower levels of Government which are also not registered as state property despite the rulings by the State Constitutional Court for both entities to do so. "*These conditions are not something the Alliance will give up on,*" he said. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- November 30th, two political rivals in the Bosniak-Croat Federation (FB&H) met in the southern city of Mostar to discuss how they could cooperate during the implementation of the October election results. The FB&H is one of Bosnia's two semi-autonomous entities, and it is populated mostly by Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats. Leaders of the two national parties, the Bosniak ethnic-oriented Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA) Bakir Izetbegovic and the Bosnian Croat ethnic-oriented Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska

Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH) Dragan Covic said they spoke about the formation of a Government and what the priorities will be. “We want to talk with our Bosniak partners about the European perspective of this region,” Covic said. He emphasized that the first issue of a reform agenda or a European agenda was the change of the country’s Election Law, an issue the party has been insisting on for years. The HDZ had previously said that it was ready to talk about the formation of the Government with its Bosniak partners but left-leaning parties that won a significant number of seats in the Parliament replied that they do not consider themselves to be Bosniak, but rather Bosnian parties representing all citizens and not just one ethnic group. Izetbegovic said after the meeting that the two parties are obligated to stay together. “HDZ and SDA are coalition partners for a long time. They represent two peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The SDA has won the support of a relative majority of Bosniaks and the HDZ the absolute majority of Croats,” he said, adding, “We have to stick together.” Izetbegovic explained that the SDA and the HDZ are together keeping the country stable and that during their reign in the previous mandate, 70,000 jobs were created, progress on Bosnia’s path toward NATO and EU membership was negotiated and the Federation has met conditions to be turned into the “biggest construction site in the Balkans.” “Peace, stability and security in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans. Reforms on the path toward the EU (...) and mass construction. This can create a positive spiral. This could be the best mandate if we are smart and mature enough,” he added. (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust. It is under question if the general election held on October 7th, 2018 will bring political stability in the country. It is estimated that formation of Government would be a very difficult issue adding more problems in state’s function. Croats strengthens their rhetoric for a third entity in the country; the Croatian entity. 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.



BULGARIA: November 29th, at today’s regular meeting, the Council of Ministers of Bulgaria has approved the investment costs of the projects for the repair of the old Soviet aircraft MiG-29 and Su-25, providing additional 23.5 million euro for the first and 42.2 million euro for the Su-25s. The first project, which has been approved, for the maintenance of the 8 MiG-29 aircraft will be completed by the Russian Aircraft Building Corp RSK MiG, with which the Bulgarian Defense Ministry has signed a framework agreement in March this year, as it is the MiG aircraft manufacturer which is certified for such repair. The budget of the project cannot exceed more than 41.5 million euro (without VAT) and the funds, needed for concluding

specific contracts under the framework agreement with the RSK-MiG in 2018, amount to 36.68 million euro. The project is expected to be realized by the end of 2020. Furthermore, the Bulgarian Government has approved the project for the Su-25 overhaul, allocating additionally up to 42.2 million euro, for the conclusion of specific contracts with the Belarus' 558 ARP. The procedure envisages to be secured a framework agreement, after that and the specific repair contracts depending on the needs and financial capabilities of the Ministry. The statement of the Bulgarian Ministry of Defense said that the MiG-29 and Su-25 repair will provide an opportunity the existing defense capabilities to be used in the period before Bulgaria acquires its new type of fighter and its operational readiness is declared. The additional funds, approved today, are provided at the expense of restructuring the expenditure in the Central Budget for 2018. The Bulgarian Ministry of Defense emphasized that today's Government decisions have showed that the funds allocated to the three projects for the modernization of the Armed Forces for 2018, will not be redirected for the fulfillment of objectives other than enhancing combat capabilities. (www.bulgarianmilitary.com)

- November 30th, Bulgarian President Roumen Radev appeared to blame Ukraine for the increased tension between Moscow and Kyiv, sparked by Russia's capture of three Ukrainian boats and 24 crew members at the weekend. "*The risk of escalation in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is real, but Europe should in no way become a hostage of Ukrainian domestic politics and ambitions,*" Radev said, answering a question about Bulgaria's position on the issue. "*This is why it is important to understand that we have no interest in the militarization of the Black Sea,*

which will have a direct impact on Bulgaria and I hope this conflict is over as soon as possible," he said. Radev's statement appeared to closely echo the accusations levelled by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who accused his Ukrainian counterpart Petro Poroshenko of engineering the crisis in order to win re-election. Radev also called on both sides to follow international law and not infringe on legal borders – appearing to repeat another allegation made by Putin, who claimed that the Ukrainian vessels entered Russia's territorial waters. Ukraine has denied the allegation, saying its ships were in international waters. Earlier in the week, Radev had called for moderation and the release of Ukrainian sailors – a call he repeated again, saying that sailors should not pay the price of political stand-offs – but stopped short of assigning blame for the incident. Radev, who was elected to the presidency in 2016 on the ticket of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya - BSP), has largely adopted the party's position of advocating for closer ties with Moscow and opposing the EU sanctions on Russia, imposed over the annexation of Crimea and Russia's support for separatist forces in eastern Ukraine. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- November 30th, Bulgaria's Parliament approved the cabinet's amendments to the country's energy strategy that outlined the next steps to be undertaken by gas grid operator Bulgartransgaz in several major gas infrastructure projects. The motion passed with 162 votes in favor and 10 abstentions, which came mainly from the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (Natsionalen Front za Spasenie na Bulgaria - NFSB), one of the three parties in the nationalist United Patriots coalition that is the junior partner in the ruling coalition. Despite the wide support for the

amendments, the debate preceding the vote did not pass without the usual barbs from the opposition socialists, who are traditionally strong supporters of energy infrastructure projects involving Russia. MP Tasko Ermenkov said his party would support the changes, which represented Bulgaria's last chance to remain relevant in gas transit and avoid becoming "gas appendicitis" on the European map. NFSB leader Valeri Simeonov was, surprisingly, critical of the plans to expand transit capacity, saying he was not persuaded that it would bring benefits to the country. Most notably, the updated 2020 strategy requires the company to set up a subsidiary, by the end of the year, that would handle gas contracts trading for Bulgaria's planned Balkan gas hub, as well as take the necessary steps to expand the gas grid's capacity to carry increased amounts of gas that are expected to follow the creation of such a hub. In particular, Bulgartransgaz is required to call public procurement tenders to expand, by the end of 2019, the capacity of its main gas pipeline to the Serbian border. Additionally, the company is given the official mandate to begin, no later than the end of 2018, the process to acquire a stake in the proposed liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal near Alexandroupolis, in northern Greece. The LNG floating terminal off the Greek coast near Alexandroupolis, developed by gas company Gastrade, is currently undergoing the market test process. Gastrade envisions construction on the 5.5 billion cubic metres a year terminal starting in the second quarter of 2019 and commercial operations launching before the end of 2020. Although the strategy does not specify how a big stake Bulgartransgaz is to take in the project, reports in Bulgarian media in recent days have claimed that it would be a 20% minority shareholding. As regards the current route of

Russian transit gas deliveries to Turkey (between Negru Voda in Romania and Malkoclar in Turkey), Bulgartransgaz is mandated to re-negotiate its long-term contract with Russia's Gazprom Export, but makes such any change in the point-of-entry of Russian gas conditional on Gazprom Export reserving any new transit capacity for long period of 15 to 20 years. Reports in Russian media have claimed that Gazprom plans to bid to reserve all new gas transit capacity in Bulgaria to carry gas from the second line of the TurkStream pipeline to EU markets, re-directing the gas flows that currently transit through Ukraine. The first line of TurkStream, which will serve the Turkish market, is also meant to eliminate the Ukrainian transit route, which includes the Bulgarian stretch between Negru Voda and Malkoclar. This provision in the amended energy strategy is thus meant to ensure that Bulgaria does not lose revenue should Gazprom eliminate the Ukrainian route by securing the transit route for TurkStream's second line. Finally, the amended strategy gave Bulgartransgaz the mandate to secure any funding necessary to carry out the new projects listed in the amended strategy. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

The junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots looks like the vulnerable piece of the Governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus, Bulgaria has entered in a period of fragile political stability. On the other hand, 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. 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: November 29th, representatives of the Serb, Jewish, and Roma ethnic minorities and World War II anti-fascist fighters called on Croatian state institutions to condemn and prevent what they call “*the spreading of hate*” against ethnic groups who had been victimized by fascism in the past. They also called on institutions to prevent the disseminating of false claims about the criminal nature of the World War II Nazi-allied Independent State of Croatia (NDH) which was based on racial laws. “*The way Germany and Austria are dealing with these phenomena should serve as an example of how Croatia should treat them too,*” a letter sent to the media and jointly signed by ethnic Serb MP Milorad Pupovac, ethnic Roma MP Veljko Kajtazi, Jewish community leader Ognjen Kraus, and the leader of the largest anti-fascist association SABA, Franjo Habulin, said on Thursday. The letter came days after Austria's Government moved to ban public displays of symbols related to NDH and the World War II Croatian fascist Ustasha regime, after they have been used by far-right groups and individuals at

the annual memorial ceremony near Austria's border town of Bleiburg. The statement, in which they warn about the alarming spread of historical revisionism and denialism in Croatia, was also sent to President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, Parliament Speaker Gordan Jandrokovic, as well as the Chief State Prosecutor Drazen Jelenic. Their statement said that Serbs, Jews, Roma, anti-fascists and all Croats who stood up against the Ustasha regime which ruled NDH are deeply concerned about “*the increasing number of cases which insult the memory of their compatriots, fellow fighters, and all opponents of the NDH - who were victims of the Holocaust, genocide, and war crimes.*” “*The number of victims gets downplayed, we hear denials that those crimes were committed in the NDH, and that NDH was based on racial laws. The President, the Government, the Parliament, the Chief State Prosecutor, Courts, and Police do not only fail to condemn such incidents, but their representatives sometimes even take part in them,*” the statement said. It went on to say that “*the revisionist movement has been gaining ground with the help of the Catholic Church, some local Government units, and some war veterans' associations,*” noting that the national media, primarily the public broadcaster HRT, are legitimizing the movement by promoting it in its news programming, as well as its education and entertainment shows. The statement included an observation that in recent year Croatian society has been faced with a tide of historical revisionism and forgeries of historical facts about the World War II fascist NDH, and that such phenomena have been steadily on the rise since 2012, when hardliner Tomislav Karamarko took the helm of the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica - HDZ). “*This culminated in the first half of 2016, during*

the short-lived cabinet of Tihomir Oreskovic, when ultra-conservative groups launched an offensive against many state institutions. Influential segments of the Catholic Church in Croatia have turned it into an institution most strongly involved in the promoting the deniers of crimes of the Ustasha regime, and the victimization of Ustasha soldiers killed in World War II,” said the letter signed by the leaders of ethnic minorities and anti-fascists. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- November 30th, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Energy Resources, Francis R. Fannon said in Zagreb that by building a liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal on the island of Krk, Croatia has the opportunity to become a regional energy leader. Energy infrastructure encourages economic growth and strengthens countries' self-determination and sovereignty, Fannon said at a round table in Zagreb. *“We live in extraordinary times in terms of energy, because of newly discovered fields around the world, and the progress in extraction technology and fuel production,”* he added. Fannon arrived in Croatia on Friday after visiting Israel, Cyprus, and Egypt. In those eastern Mediterranean countries large reserves of natural gas have been discovered over the past decade, Fannon said, and added that supplies from there should find a way to Europe across Croatia in a few years. Earlier this month, the state-owned company LNG Hrvatska, established to manage the yet-to-be-built terminal, selected a 160 million euro bid by Norway's Golar Power to convert an LNG tanker ship into a floating terminal on the site, expected to be operational by early 2021. The supplier of the ground-based terminal yet to be built on location in the northern Adriatic has not been selected yet. Fannon also mentioned the US, Australia, and

Qatar as possible natural gas sources for supplying Europe, and added that Croatia has the opportunity to become a leader in the supplying gas from many incoming sources. The US Ambassador to Croatia, Robert Kohorst, said at the round table that future buyers of natural gas stored at the LNG terminal on Krk island would mainly come from Southeast Europe, given that the north of the continent has other sources of supply. He also welcomed Croatia's plans to explore for new oil and gas exploitation fields in its territory. In October 2018, the Croatian Government launched a tender for bids for exploration and exploitation at seven continental locations in the north of the country. Bids can be submitted by June 2019. *“We are glad that Croatia has embarked on an independent energy journey, and that it wants to be a regional energy hub,”* Fannon said. Earlier on Friday, Fannon had met with Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, and confirmed US support for the project to construct the LNG terminal on the island of Krk, the Government said in a press release. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- November 30th, the Government accepted only seven of the 217 amendments submitted by lawmakers to the budget bill. One of the few amendments that did win over the Government was one submitted by the Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats (Hrvatska Narodna Stranka – Liberalni Demokrati – HNS – LD) defector Marijana Puh now with Milan Bandic's party, and two of her Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica - HDZ) colleagues. This bill would allocate an additional 10 million kuna in funding for the development of the country's mountain regions. Milan Bandić's amendment that would have added 250 million kuna to the budget to pay for school textbooks for all elementary

school children did not pass. State Secretary for Education, Branka Ramljak, rejected the amendment, but did pledge that the Government would try to find a way over the next year to finance the textbook measure. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

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. 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: November 26th, energy companies Total and ENI have applied for an exploration license in block seven of Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone, the Energy Ministry announced. In a statement, the Ministry said the application will be examined in the next few days and a proposal will then be submitted to the cabinet. Last October, the Government invited bids from companies already licensed to explore offshore Cyprus to express an interest in block seven. The invitation concerns companies with concessions bordering the block – 6, 8, 10, and 11. Energy Minister Giorgos Lakkotrypīs said at the time that this option had been chosen instead of launching another licensing round because “there are particular geological reasons related to the Calypso discovery.” The Calypso field is located in block six where Italy's ENI carried out an exploratory drill early this year and is believed to hold between six and eight trillion cubic feet. Meanwhile, Turkey's Energy and Natural Resources Minister Fatih Donmez was quoted as saying they were starting drilling off the coast of Mersin. Turkey's drillship, Fatih made its way to the Mediterranean in late October to start drilling the Alanya-1 well, offshore of Alanya, near the Mediterranean town of Antalya. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- November 29th, the Ministers of Energy and Foreign Affairs, Georgios Lakkotrypīs and Nicos Christodoulides, US Ambassador Kathleen Doherty, and ExxonMobil's Vice President Tristan Aspray visited drillship that carries out an exploratory drilling at the Deflini target in block 10 of Cyprus Exclusive Economic Zone on behalf of the ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum. The exploratory deep-water drilling began on November 16th, 2018 and is expected to be

concluded by the end of the year. Sources told Cyprus National Agency (CAN) that during their visit to Stena Icemax, the two Ministers accompanied by Doherty, Asprey and other officials toured the drillship various installations and talked to the captain and crew as well as to the technical crew associated with the drilling. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- November 29th, Cyprus officially protested to the United Nations Turkey's continuing violations of its national airspace and territorial waters and called for them to end immediately. In a letter to the UN Secretary-General, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Cyprus to the UN, Polly Ioannou, sent two documents detailing the violations during August 2018. *"This persistent policy of violating international law and breaching international rules and regulations is a constant threat to international peace and security, has a negative impact on regional stability, jeopardizes the safety of international civil aviation, creates difficulties for air traffic over Cyprus and prevents the creation of an enabling environment in which to conduct the Cyprus peace process,"* Ioannou said in her letter dated November 14th, 2018. She said Turkey continued to systematically harass civilian and military aircrafts within the Nicosia Flight Information Region (FIR) via radio calls. In addition, Turkish commercial aircraft regularly use the Tymbou (Ercan) airport, which continues to operate illegally following the closure, by the Cyprus Government, of all ports of entry in the areas where it does not exercise effective control. *"The actions are clearly aimed at undermining the sovereignty of Cyprus, consolidating the ongoing de facto division and upgrading the secessionist entity's status by claiming a purported airspace over the occupied territory of*

the Republic," the letter said. Ioannou stressed there is only one Cypriot state, the Republic of Cyprus, something that is stipulated in various Security Council resolutions. *"The Republic of Cyprus reiterates, in this respect, its call for all states to respect Security Council resolutions and adhere to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations."* Ioannou concluded in her letter. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Cyprus expresses in highest level its commitment to continue its energy plans exploiting energy resources in Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) despite Turkish aggression. Involvement of an American company (ExxonMobil) in the drills it is proved "wise" and "smart". The US administration expresses its support in Cypriot energy plans through visits of high officials and statements. 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 sends various messages of defense capability, readiness, and determination. The UN Secretary General appears optimistic for a new round of talks between the two communities. President Anastasiades promotes the scenario of a "bizonal, bicommunal 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. The idea of NATO as the guarantor of Cyprus reunification and 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.



F.Y.R.O.M: November 29th, the European Parliament MEPs assessed the progress made in Albania, Montenegro and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M) on their path towards possible EU accession. MEPs praise F.Y.R.O.M's strong commitment to fully implementing the 2015 Przino Agreement and the Urgent Reform priorities, which has led to intensified efforts on EU reform. They also call on the national authorities to intensify the fight against money laundering and conflicts of interest, to better shield the judiciary from political interference and address remaining rule of law problems, which continue to pose serious challenges. The resolution was approved by 470 votes to 116, with 46 abstentions. Despite the September 30th, 2018 consultative referendum (which sought public support to change the country's name to the Republic of North Macedonia) falling short of the turnout required, MEPs nevertheless welcome the decision by the Parliament in Skopje to start the constitutional process of implementing the June 17th, 2018 Prespa agreement between the country and Greece which opens the door to EU and NATO accession negotiations. This agreement sends a much-needed positive signal for stability and

reconciliation in the whole Western Balkans region, say MEPs. They also call on the Hungarian authorities to extradite F.Y.R.O.M's ex-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski to his home country, who, having been convicted there of abuse of power and sentenced to prison, subsequently fled abroad. EP rapporteur on F.Y.R.O.M Ivo Vajgl (ALDE, SI) said: *“Once all conditions are fulfilled, Macedonia's [F.Y.R.O.M] membership in the EU will ensure a promising future for its current and future generations. The EU will also need to deliver on its own promises to a country that has been left in the waiting room for too long and can provide a substantial contribution to the stability, security and progress of South Eastern Europe as a whole.”* (www.europarl.europa.eu)

- November 29th, F.Y.R.O.M which hopes to soon unlock its stalled bids for European Union and NATO membership should boost productivity and reduce fiscal risks to start catching up with EU economic standards, a World Bank report said. Skopje's deal with Athens to change the country's name to the Republic of North Macedonia is likely to speed up its Euro-Atlantic integration. Parliament is expected to pass constitutional changes and officially adopt the new name by the end of January at the latest. F.Y.R.O.M is a Western Balkans leader when it comes to market-oriented reforms so is well positioned to seize the opportunities that EU accession can bring, the World Bank said in its latest F.Y.R.O.M country report. It should exploit its strategic location, openness to trade and prudent macro-economic management to boost growth and reduce high unemployment, the report said. *“Increasing the productivity of the economy, enhancing job opportunities for all, and achieving fiscal, social, and environmental sustainability would allow*

Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M] to maximize the benefits from EU integration,” said Linda Van Gelder, World Bank Regional Director for the Western Balkans. F.Y.R.O.M needs to foster a more dynamic and competitive private sector that creates more jobs, invest in people to build an adaptive labor force and push for more effective governance, the bank’s report said. Most jobs are now in low-productivity sectors and too many firms are small and uncompetitive. Only 50% of working-age citizens of F.Y.R.O.M are employed, and low birth rates and emigration are shrinking the workforce, according to the report. A lack of skills also hindered productivity, and 70% of 15 year olds fell short of basic reading proficiency. F.Y.R.O.M also must address fiscal risks since a lack of adequate fiscal discipline over the past decade had led to the doubling of public debt, with the pensions’ deficit now over 4% of GDP and the accumulation of public sector arrears threatening fiscal sustainability. (www.reuters.com)

- November 30th, F.Y.R.O.M’s Prime Minister Zoran Zaev said that his Government is willing to consider an amnesty for those involved in last year’s attack on the Parliament, after meeting the newly formed Coordinative Body for Reconciliation and Integration in Parliament which is tasked with proposing steps for national reconciliation after years of political crisis. Zaev said that his Government wanted an amnesty law prepared, but noted that a pardon or amnesty would only apply to those who had not directly used violence during the April 2017 rampage. *“Let’s leave the legal teams to do the next steps now. We showed our political will today,”* Zaev said, adding that the legal and technical details of the offer would be left for a later date. Despite criticism from political, judicial and human rights

experts that such a step would mean interfering with the work of the judiciary – a practice that the new Government vowed to end when it took power in May last year – Zaev maintained that it would not interfere with the work of the Courts. *“There are red lines that must not be crossed, whatever our will and wishes [for a partial amnesty]”*, Zaev said, repeating that he greatly valued the maintenance of judicial independence as an *“imperative”* for the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration hopes. The Reconciliation Committee was formed right after the start of still ongoing procedures for constitutional changes, in October, which form part of the historic agreement with Greece on the country’s name. The body was formed on the initiative of the eight opposition MPs, seven of whom are now excluded from the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE), due to their key support for the start of the parliamentary procedure on the Greek deal – but conditioned their further support on progress in reconciliation that would include an amnesty. Three of the eight opposition MPs are now on trial for involvement in the attack on Parliament. Critics have accused Zaev of trading the rule of law for opposition votes in order to reach the political goal of implementing the agreement with Greece, which would then unlock F.Y.R.O.M’s stalled Euro-Atlantic integration process. On November 26th, 2018, the Parliament rejected VMRO DPMNE’s proposal for a full amnesty for all participants in the rampage. Members of and sympathizers with the former ruling and now opposition VMRO DPMNE party had stormed the Parliament in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent the new majority from electing a new Speaker and

then forming a new Government under Zaev. During the violence, some 100 people, including Zaev, other opposition MPs and journalists, were injured, some of them severely. Some 30 people, including VMRO DPMNE MPs who are accused of helping the crowd to enter the Parliament building, now stand trial for “terrorist endangerment” of the country’s security. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

The Prime Minister Zaev accelerates procedures for constitutional amendments aiming at concluding the whole process successfully. It is expected late January 2019 the whole process will have been finished successfully. Not only F.Y.R.O.M’s future is based on this process, but also Zaev’s political future. It is more than certain that constitutional change will end successfully not only because Zaev fully controls political balance in the Parliament, but also because international community namely the US and EU strongly supports F.Y.R.O.M’s name change. Initiative for political reconciliation is a positive step by Zaev’s governance, although there are claims that it’s the price for 8 opposition MPs support regarding constitutional amendments and more specifically the name deal with Greece. The European Parliament has sent an encouraging message to F.Y.R.O.M for opening accession negotiations in June 2019. The country has become a field of rivalry between the US and EU on the one side and Russia on the other. After Montenegro, NATO seeks to bring F.Y.R.O.M within the alliance isolating Russian influence in the region. 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: November 26th, Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarch Vartholomaios sent a letter to the Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras last year to protest potential changes to Article 3 of the country’s Constitution, according to reports. In his two-page letter dated August 1st, 2017 which was made public Monday by the orthodoxia.info website, Vartholomaios said that the Phanar objects to plans to remove references in the Constitution to the patriarchate and its jurisdiction, as well as references to the Patriarchal Act of 1928 with which the patriarchate granted the Greek Church temporary administrative powers over 36 bishoprics belonging to the patriarchate. Doing so would alienate the patriarchate, Vartholomaios said in the letter which was personally addressed to Tsipras. On Monday, Education and Religious Affairs Minister Costas Gavroglou was to travel to Istanbul to meet with Vartholomaios amid ongoing tensions over a tentative deal between Tsipras and Archbishop Ieronymos to relax church-state ties. Gavroglou is to visit the patriarchate on Tuesday when the Holy Synod is due to convene to discuss the deal among other issues, including the anticipated replacement of Archbishop Demetrios of America. According to sources, Gavroglou aims to brief members of the patriarchate’s Holy Synod of the details of the agreement being proposed by Tsipras and the archbishop. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- November 28th, the Greek Foreign Ministry has said that the recent rhetoric from Ankara concerning Turkey’s rights in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean is undermining regional stability. “*The Turkish provocations undermine the stability of the region at a crucial juncture and demonstrate the paucity of Turkey’s legal*

arguments,” the Ministry said in a statement. The Foreign Ministry’s statement came on the heels of remarks by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warning Greece and Cyprus against behaving “recklessly” with regard to Nicosia’s initiatives to develop its natural gas resources in the region. Turkey said these initiatives impinge on its own rights in the region. “*The reckless behavior of Greece – supported by the European states – acting together with the Greek-Cypriot administration is a danger and above all a threat to themselves,*” Erdogan said a day after Cyprus announced that energy giants Total and Eni had jointly bid for another license to explore and exploit oil and gas reserves off the island. “*We will use our rights under international law and conventions to the end. And we are determined to put anyone who wants to stop us in their place,*” he warned. The Foreign Ministry in Athens however insisted that Greece “*is not going to be influenced by the neighboring country’s outbursts of aggressive rhetoric.*” “*On the contrary, as a factor of stability and security in the region, Greece will continue, in collaboration with its allies and partners, to defend international law and its own inalienable rights,*” it said, adding that “*the rest of the Eastern Mediterranean countries recognize that energy must be a bridge of dialogue and cooperation in our region. Instead of insisting on threats and on its illegal claims and challenges, Turkey ought to adhere to this responsible stance.*” (www.ekathimerini.com)

- November 30th, Greece's fleet is in a constant state of readiness to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity, Hellenic Navy Commander Admiral Nikos Tsounis said. Whenever the passage of Turkish vessels in the Aegean is deemed to be of concern, there is a Greek response, Tsounis said. “*Every night there*

is a war in the Aegean,” he said. In 2009, there were just 90 such passages deemed to be non-innocuous, compared to 1,998 in 2017 and 1,249 in the first nine months of this year. Last year, a total of 3,317 violations of Greek air space by Turkish jets were recorded and 3,147 in the first nine months of this year. (www.ekathimerini.gr)



Hellenic navy

(Photo source: www.hellenicnavy.gr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Ruling coalition of SYRIZA – ANEL intensifies its efforts to reverse political atmosphere since the country enters gradually in a long pre-electoral period. Tsipras and Kammenos try to gain political time planning to relief society with social care measures. Taking into consideration that measures will start to be voted next month it is assessed that early election may be called in May 2019 together with local and European election. Ruling coalition believes that it is enough time so people to enjoy relief measures reversing political climate. Of course there is always the alternative scenario of parliamentary election in autumn 2019 when actually mandate of current Government expires. The ruling coalition tries to put in the political agenda issues which will turn the interest of public opinion from daily life and governmental failures. Constitutional reform is a

typical example, while the prime Minister's initiative to seek an agreement with the Church separating it from the state may have controversial results. One should take into consideration that Greek Church is extremely powerful with high influence in Greek society. Greece (and Cyprus) has entered in a risky period of tension with Turkey. Several Turkish NAVTEX in the Aegean Sea for aeronautical exercises included fires establish conditions of tension and possible crisis. Coming days will be critical to see if Turkey keeps maintaining a war of words or it will escalate situation.



KOSOVO: November 27th, the Serb Mayor of North Mitrovica, Goran Rakic, told an extraordinary session of the local assembly in the northern Kosovo town that he is resigning because of Pristina's decision to increase import tariffs on Serbian goods and because of violations of the human rights of Serbs living in Kosovo. Rakic also said he resigned because of an operation by Police Special Forces in northern Kosovo on November 23rd, 2018, in which three Serbs were arrested for suspected involvement in the murder of Kosovo Serb politician Oliver Ivanovic, and a fourth Serb detained for obstructing Police Officers. Local assemblies in all four Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo have also decided to end all communication with Kosovo state institutions. The Head of the Serbian Government's Office for Kosovo, Marko Djuric, told Serbian media that the Mayors of all four Serb-majority municipalities have informed him that they will resign today. *"Serbian representatives [from North Kosovo] informed me that starting from today, the municipal administration that functioned according to the*

Pristina-Albanian system in the north [of Kosovo] will no longer function," Djuric said. He added that the local assemblies and all other local bodies cease to operate until the withdrawal of what he called *"discriminatory measures and the cessation of human rights violations."* Serbs in north Kosovo have announced they will also hold a major protest on Tuesday against the rise in import tariffs. The Kosovo Government raised tariffs on imports from Serbia and Bosnia from 10 to 100% on November 21st, 2018. The move came in retaliation for both countries' negative behavior towards Kosovo, Pristina officials said. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- November 29th, Kosovo President Hashim Thaci said defining the borders between Kosovo and Serbia is a key step toward easing tensions. He made the comments during an interview with Voice of America. *"One thing should be clear: Without defining the borders, there cannot be a final, peaceful agreement that would guarantee mutual recognition [between Kosovo and Serbia],"* Thaci said in an interview with VOA's Albanian Service. He added that teams from Kosovo and Serbia, as well as representatives from the United States, NATO and the European Union, will work together to *"clearly define the border between Kosovo and Serbia."* His comments follow meetings in Washington with National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Pompeo *"encouraged Kosovo to seize this unique window of opportunity to reach a historic comprehensive normalization deal with Serbia."* Bolton wrote in social media that *"the U.S. stands ready to help both parties achieve this historic goal."* Thaci did not elaborate on what has changed to allow progress after 10 years of tension and apparent stalemate. According to VoA neither Bolton's nor

Pompeo's statements mention border changes, although in August, Bolton was the first senior U.S. official to say that Washington would contemplate the idea if the parties agree to it. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- November 30th, On December 3rd, 2018 chiefs of parliamentary groups will convene to schedule a plenary session when MPs among other points of the agenda are expected to vote the package of laws on transition of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) into the Army of Kosovo. Speaker of the Parliament Kadri Veseli said that Kosovo Army will be established by mid-December 2018. In October 2018 MPs of both ruling and opposition approved in principle the three draft laws giving more power to current KSF civilian force, and bypassing the constitutional amendments required to change it into regular army. A constitutional obligation for that would require a “double majority” – meaning the support of two-thirds of all 120 MPs and two-thirds of the 20 ethnic non-Albanian MPs. Kosovo Serb MPs, who hold 10 of the 20 seats in the Parliament reserved for non-Albanian communities, have blocked such initiatives and strongly opposed creation of Kosovo Army. (www.gazetaexpress.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 (or at least he decided that he is). There is even a matter of legitimacy within the state regarding who is authorized to represent the country in dialogue with Serbia. 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). 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 is ready to announce 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: November 26th, the Foreign Affairs and European Integration Ministry expressed “deep concern” about the tension in the Sea of Azov and Kerch Strait. The Ministry also informed that “Moldova reconfirmed the support and recognition of the

sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, as well as the latter's right to use international waters." In the context, the Ministry condemned any kind of *"aggression acts and provocations which undermine regional security."* Tension between Ukraine and Russia sharply escalated on November 25th, 2018, when Kiev accused Russia of having hit a Ukrainian ship and of blocking access to the Sea of Azov, situated between Crimea, annexed by Moscow in 2014, and the Eastern Ukraine – a theatre of a war with pro-Russian separatists. Rosian Vasiloï, an expert in security policies from the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDIS) "Viitorul" expects the Ukrainian authorities and the EU institutions would concentrate their forces for promoting policies and measures that would sanction a possible Russia's aggression against its neighboring state. In his view Moldova should align to these sanctions. *"The eventual war declaration from the Russian side is not a thing to be ignored. The risks for the Republic of Moldova are high, taking into consideration the presence of Russian troops on the Moldovan territory. Therefore, a clear reaction and concrete measures from Moldovan side regarding this subject is needed,"* Vasiloï said. Denis Cenusă, the associated expert at Expert-Grup also expressed his concerns over situation between Russia and Ukraine and its impact in Moldova. *"In a way, we are faced with a security and geopolitical reality easily disputed by Moscow whenever it deems necessary and neglecting any existing diplomatic framework. This represents a reason to worry, as Moldova has Russian military forces stationed in the Transnistrian region, low military training, lack of any solid strategic vision, and a local political context fragile or tolerant of Russian interference,"* Cenusă said. (www.moldova.org, www.moldpres.md)

- November 26th, the Defense Minister Eugen Sturza and the new US Ambassador to Moldova Dereck J. Hogan have reviewed bilateral cooperation and discussed opportunities to intensify the Moldovan-American dialogue on the defense matter. Sturza presented the most important achievements of the military reform to the American diplomat, with emphasis on the National Army's professionalization project, elaboration, and approval of strategic documents, as well as the initiation of programs aimed at improving the caliber of soldiers and civilian employees in the sector. The Minister thanked for the constant support the US Government has given to modernizing the National Army, through assistance and training programs, which are aimed at strengthening the defense system of Moldova. In this respect, the Minister referred to the training of the military in the specialized educational institutions in the USA, where up to now, about 500 military personnel, the equipment and technical equipment, as well as the activities and exercises held jointly with the National Guard of the North Carolina State. The Minister of Defense also mentioned the US contribution to the renovation of the Bulboacă National Army Military Training Base within the Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative (GPOI), which aims to create the best training conditions for Moldovan soldiers. Ambassador Hogan, for his part, appreciated the progress made by the Ministry of Defense in the sectoral reform and said that the US will continue to support the modernization of the National Army through assistance projects and programs. The two officials also discussed the regional situation and settlement of the Transnistrian conflict on a peaceful basis. (www.moldova.org)

- November 27th, Daniel Danielsson, the European Commission Director-General for European Neighborhood Policy and Thomas Mayr Harting, General Manager of the European External Action Service for Europe and Central Asia visited Chisinau to reaffirm the EU's commitment to bring tangible benefits to Moldovan citizens. This visit came amid a continuous deterioration of the rule of law and democracy in the country. The EU expects the authorities of Moldova to take urgent and immediate action to remedy situation. The EU focuses on four key points; ensuring that future parliamentary elections are organized in a credible, inclusive and transparent manner, involvement of the in-depth, impartial and comprehensive pursuit of bank fraud exposed in 2014 to recover the appropriated funds and to bring all those responsible to justice, regardless of any political affiliation and without delay, Substantial engagement in judicial reform to guarantee the quality, transparency, impartiality, and independence of the judiciary, and Fighting high-level corruption. In view of this deterioration and in line with the strict conditionality principle, the European Commission has taken the decision to substantially recalculate financial assistance and redirect support to projects that have a direct and positive impact on Moldovan citizens. Payments from EU macro-financial assistance and budget support programs have been put on hold, pending concrete progress in the areas mentioned above. The EU will continue to pay close attention to all issues relevant to the preparation and conduct of parliamentary elections in Moldova. (www.moldova.org)

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 24th, 2019 will be closely monitored by the international community and especially the US and EU as a “democratic stress test.” 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 24th, 2019. 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. 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: November 29th, the European Parliament MEPs assessed the progress made in Albania, Montenegro and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M) on their path towards possible EU accession. While Montenegro is making good

progress overall in the EU integration process, MEPs call on the country's political leadership to prioritize tackling problems with the rule of law, media freedom, corruption, money laundering, organized crime and its associated violence. The resolution, approved by 484 votes to 80 with 63 abstentions, underlines Montenegro's efforts for constructive regional cooperation and good bilateral neighborly relations. MEPs also welcome the ratification of the State Border Agreement between Montenegro and Kosovo, while calling for outstanding border disputes with other neighboring countries to be resolved quickly. The text finally recalls the strategic importance of Montenegro's NATO accession on June 5th, 2017 in ensuring stability and peace in the Western Balkans. MEPs share the European Commission's assessment that, with strong political will and sustained progress, Montenegro could potentially be ready for EU membership by 2025. EP rapporteur on Montenegro Charles Tannock (ECR, UK) said: *"Today's report highlights Montenegro's strong overall progress and is positive about its general direction of travel. With such achievements, however, come greater responsibilities. In this regard, the Parliament has clearly laid out its concerns about media freedom in the country, and the need to intensify the fight against corruption and organized crime. This is my last report as Montenegro rapporteur, but I wish Montenegro well in the future and have no doubts about its successful eventual path to EU membership."* (www.europarl.europa.eu)

- November 30th, Police arrested Nebojisa Medojevic, an MP from the opposition Democratic Front (Демократски фронт – DF), and sent him to jail in the capital Podgorica to serve a two-month sentence. He had been

convicted of refusing to testify against the former long-term Mayor of Podgorica, Miomir Mugosa, in a case involving corruption and misuse of office allegations. Medojevic, known as one of the sharpest critics of the Government and the ruling party run by veteran leader Milo Djukanovic, was arrested as he left the Parliament building early on Friday. Days before the arrest, Medojevic complained of *"being followed"* by Police Officers and Intelligence Agents, and on November 29th, 2018 he filed an official complaint to the Interior Ministry. *"This is a first-rate scandal, to arrest a lawmaker for the words he has said... this is a continuation of the repression against the Democratic Front,"* said the Front's leader Andrija Mandic. The DF also claimed that Medojevic could not be arrested without his immunity being lifted by the Parliament. In March, Medojevic was fined 1,000 euro for refusing to testify in a preliminary investigation into his allegations that former Podgorica Mayor Miomir Mugosa paid Special Public Prosecutor Milivoje Katnic 100,000 euro not to be kept in pre-trial custody. Both Katnic and Mugosa denied the allegations. Medojevic refused to pay the fine and the court imposed the two-month jail sentence, but Medojevic appealed. Montenegrin media reported on November 21st, 2018 that the appeal court had yet to decide on his case. The DF also fears that another MP from its ranks, Milan Knezevic, will be jailed on Friday, so he stayed in the party's premises in the Parliament building to avoid arrest. Knezevic was also fined 1,000 euro in March for refusing to testify in another preliminary investigation. He had alleged that *"a high-ranking judge"* asked him for a 10,000 euro bribe in return for overturning his sentence in the ongoing coup plot trial. Knezevic and Mandic currently standing trial on charges of involvement in an alleged coup

plot during the October 2016 elections. They have been charged with participating in attempts to undermine “*the constitutional rule and security of Montenegro.*” In the coup plot trial, which opened in May 2017, the prosecution alleges that a group of Serbs, Montenegrins and Russians, including Mandic and Knezevic, tried to overthrow Montenegro’s pro-Western Government and kill Djukanovic, mainly to stop the country from joining NATO. Both Mandic and Knezevic have dismissed the plot allegations as false. The DF has accused the Prosecutor’s Office of acting under the influence of Djukanovic. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- December 2nd, information on the accession of the Montenegrin Ministry of Defense to the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Defense of Germany and combat forces of Sweden, with reference to the “Resolute Support” mission, announced by the Government of Montenegro, says that costs of Montenegrin soldiers in this mission will amount to 2 million euro on annual basis. The costs will include contribution fees, accommodation and travel costs, moving of forces, as well as other expenditures arising from the engagement of members of the Army of Montenegro into the mission in Afghanistan. The document also says the Army of Montenegro has continued with the engagement in Afghanistan, in accordance with the decision of the Parliament of Montenegro on sending the Montenegrin soldiers into the international “Resolute Support” mission in Afghanistan. “*After Montenegro joined NATO Alliance, its presence in the international missions has increased, so the Parliament of Montenegro made the decision on sending the Montenegrin soldiers into the “Resolute Support” mission in Afghanistan on July 5th, 2018. The*

Decision approved sending of 40 soldiers into the Mission,” the government’s decision states. (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 state’s Prime Minister declares political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. Although the Government takes concrete measures against corruption, organized crime, and money laundering it is assessed that a lot should be done to reach such a level of economic activity; mainly in the field of public administration, public sector corruption, and money laundering. Imprisonment of opposition MPs is a worrying and alarming sign regarding rule of law and democratic values in the country. Montenegro shows activity within NATO trying to prove that it is an equal partner of the alliance with military capacity according to NATO standards. Although the state fulfills its obligations as a full member of the Alliance questions are raised for such initiatives due to their impact in Montenegro’s society but also in country’s foreign relations. A significant number of people is opposed in NATO and maintains pro-Russian stance while Montenegro’s presence in Kosovo may harm relations with Serbia.



ROMANIA: November 26th, Vice-Premier, and Development Minister Paul Stanescu resigned one week after Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) leader Liviu Dragnea requested him to step down. In the statement released by Paul Stanescu, he wrote that he is a man of honor and has not aimed any personal interest and that he did everything is his power to carry out the attributions as Minister with responsibility, having as priority the investments for health infrastructure, education, accommodation, water and sewerage. *“I still believe that the country needs unity and responsible governance, I thank all those who have had confidence in me and supported me, as well as the colleagues with the Regional Development and Public Administration Ministry, with whom we’ve had a great team,”* Stanescu wrote. The Prime Minister Viorica Dancila has said earlier on Monday she had asked Stanescu to resign, but he refused. *“I asked Paul Stanescu to resign, but he did not want to. As I’ve signed the revocation, it’s obvious I want to replace him from the Government. It’s over, the Executive Committee has voted for his resignation, we are looking to the future,”* the Premier said. She also said she requested to revoke Paul Stanescu and Transport Minister Lucian Sova from the position of Ministers, but the Head of state refused. In turn, PSD chairman Liviu Dragnea said on Monday about Paul Stanescu: *“it’s his problem, I am not interested. (...) I don’t want to comment on this issue, you make him more important than he is.”* His resignation was announced one hour after the PSD Executive Committee sitting at the Parliament Palace. Stanescu is one of the Ministers proposed by ruling PSD for reshuffling. He was one of the signatories of the letter in

September calling for Dragnea’s withdrawal from the party’s helm. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- November 27th, the country is ready for any scenario, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis said on the recent tension between Russia and Ukraine. *“We obviously follow very, very closely the developments in Ukraine, and of course, in the area of the Kerch strait, where the incident took place. We are ready for any scenario, any measure, but, as our allies in NATO and our friends in the European Union have said, and we are of the same opinion, we have asked the parties involved to treat the incident with calm, to move towards deactivating tension; in this way, things can go back to normal much easier,”* the President said. Iohannis added that Romanians do not have any reasons to be concerned. *“At this point we continue to follow the developments and we will be ready to react accordingly. But I can say that Romanians have no reasons to be concerned,”* he said. (www.romania-indider.com)

- November 29th, the President Klaus Iohannis said that if the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) insists on adopting an amnesty and pardon law *“to help criminal Dragnea get rid of jail”* and on passing laws to keep Romanians inside the borders by force, thus hinting to the controversial statement made by Finance Minister Eugen Teodorovici, then *“this ruling, this PSD approach is an anti-Romanian one.”* In Iohannis’ view, amnesty would prompt *“an unprecedented crisis.”* He called on *“sane”* PSD policy-makers to prevent this law from being adopted. *“Amnesty and pardon have already been the topic of an emergency ordinance in early 2017 and it led to wide street protests, for Romanians do not want such a thing. The GEO 13, at that time, has been withdrawn. Yet, there*

are still signs that this idea has not been abandoned inside PSD, with some Social Democrats spreading these ideas in public. Such an ordinance on pardoning some politicians would eventually be a catastrophe for Romania and would prompt an unprecedented crisis,” President Iohannis stated. He called on those politicians in PSD who *“are sane to undertake whatever they find suitable so that such an ordinance should be off the table.”* *“For now we only have statements of some politicians, but I will follow the issue and I will do my best from the President’s position to avoid getting to a new situation of this kind,”* the Head of state argued. On the other hand, the Prime Minister Viorica Dancila has said today that there is no such a draft on an amnesty and pardon law on the table and that she has never discussed this topic with any member of her Cabinet. As for the controversial statement by the Finance Minister Eugen Orlando Teodorovici on working rights restrictions, Klaus Iohannis said that, if the Minister is still in Office that proves his statement is endorsed in PSD. *“I hope I am not using an inappropriate phrase. When I read that news, so to speak, I was stunned by the suggestion of a remarkable PSD member to seize the Romanians inside the country’s borders. Something like that happened only in the communists’ time. Such an approach is extremely inappropriate and it concerns me the most. If this is what the PSD wants – to give an amnesty and pardon law to help criminal Dragnea get away with prison and to pass laws to keep Romanians inside the borders by force, that is to cancel a right that we all fought for decades – then I can only say that this governance, this PSD approach is anti-Romanian,”* the Romanian President said at Cotroceni Presidential Palace when asked about the statement of Finance Minister. Iohannis

considered that Teodorovici should have been resigned over this statement. In his turn, Teodorovici retorted to the President that he does not intend to resign, accusing the Head of state of spreading political speculation in public. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political struggle between the President Klaus Iohannis and Government has been transformed into an “open battle”. The President rejects the Government’s plans for amnesty and pardon laws, while he strongly criticizes statements and actions by governmental officials. Iohannis directly asked for toppling the Government calling them “an accident of the Romanian democracy.” Opposition announced that beginning of December (December 10th, 2018) it will file a motion of no-confidence against the Government. Apart from that the EU released reports strongly criticizing the Government over rule of law and justice. Although the cabinet enjoys a fresh reshuffle, another Minister (and Vice-Premier) resigned due to inter-party rivalries. Romania has entered in political turmoil which may lead in rapid political developments. It is assessed that opposition move for toppling the Government may be successful and early election could be announced. 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. 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: November 28th, Director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija Marko Djuric said that the Pristina authorities seek to provoke *“the fire of war”* with their latest moves. Djuric said that Serbia is calling on the EU and the entire international community to *“bring (Pristina) back to respecting the law, respecting agreements, and stop them on the path of further escalation of the problem. Serbia and the Serbs reacted calmly, although it is completely clear that Pristina's actions were aimed at bringing the Serbs into an impossible position that would mean their expulsion from Kosovo and Metohija. On the other hand, Pristina's intention is to provoke the fire of war in Kosovo.”* He stressed that Serbia does not want any conflict, while it is quite clear that Pristina wants to challenge precisely that. *“Serbia calls on the international community to react, we will not take any further steps, except for the peaceful protests that the Serbs are holding these days in Kosovo,”* Djuric said. He added that Serbs will continue to respect the Brussels agreement and that Serbs will return to Kosovo institutions as soon as Pristina abolishes its *“discriminatory measures.”* *“We will not give Pristina an excuse for violence,”* he said. Djuric claimed that his message to the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija is that the entire Serb nation stands in solidarity with them, and that *“we understand their struggle for survival and staying in their homes, the fight for their piece of bread, the right to live the lives worthy of people.”* The Serbian official assessed that peaceful protests (of Serbs in Kosovo) that started on Tuesday and continued on Wednesday - showed the strength and determination *“to wisely fight for our goals.”*

Djuric said that *“the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija should listen to Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, who urged them not to rush with further steps, by leaving (Pristina's) institutions.”* *“We will wait some days to see if there will be further steps by the international community, and by then we will be peaceful and united. We will not give Pristina an excuse for violence and for bestial behavior,”* he stressed. (www.b92.net)

- November 29th, asked by a journalist about Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj's claim that the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic is ready to recognize Kosovo in exchange for a part of its territory, Vucic said *“what he should say at all, and whether he had any need to deny these allegations made in the text, which has no particular weight, except to insinuate something about the relationship between Serbia and Russia. I have better things to do. They mention the Russians every time they attack Serbia. We are proud of our friendship with Russia. The only thing is, I don't know why Hashim Thaci was running after Vladimir Putin in Paris, and elsewhere,”* Vucic said. The President added that it would be *“good if they agreed on what their stance towards Russia is.”* He also said that Serbia's stance towards the United States is *“crystal clear,”* and underlined that he is *“confident that any compromise would be the best solution.”* *“They are not even ready to withdraw the (100%) taxes; they say they will not give up statehood and sovereignty at any price, which means that the negotiations are ad acta [filed]. They will talk about their sovereignty, we about our rights. We will continue like that for a few years, instead of looking to the future,”* Vucic said in a critical tone. (www.b92.net)

- November 29th, the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that the Serbian authorities have no control over even one inch of Kosovo and Metohija, and that this is why Serbia's situation is difficult. *"Our situation is not easy at all, when you depend on the will of Pristina and whether they will respect the law or not. If someone behaves unjustly, your possibilities of acting are limited,"* Vucic said. On the other hand, he added, he is happy *"that Serbs have risen and woke up and understand how much they are affected by these measures and that in a civilized and reasonable way they showed the difference between themselves and those who introduced those measures."* Speaking about his meeting with representatives of the Serb List, Vucic said he asked them to continue with peaceful protests, and the state leadership will continue internationally to point to the detriment of Pristina's decisions, which profoundly destroy peace. (www.b92.net)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Security situation is becoming complex and uncertain due to Kosovo actions against not only Serbia, but Northern Kosovo as well. Although state's officials ask from Kosovo Serbs peaceful reactions and protests, it seems that the Serbian Government puts on condition of increased readiness all state's security and defense forces. Serbia receives Kosovo actions such as announcement of the establishment of Kosovo Army, decision for 100% tariff on Serbian goods, and special police unit operation in the north as hostile ones and is getting prepared for worse scenarios included escalation of tension. Serbia seeks support from Russia and China (two UN Security Council members) describing situation as the "worst in last ten years. It is assessed that

a possible Kosovo Police or military operation in the north may provoke Serbia's security forces engagement for the protection of Serbian population. 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.

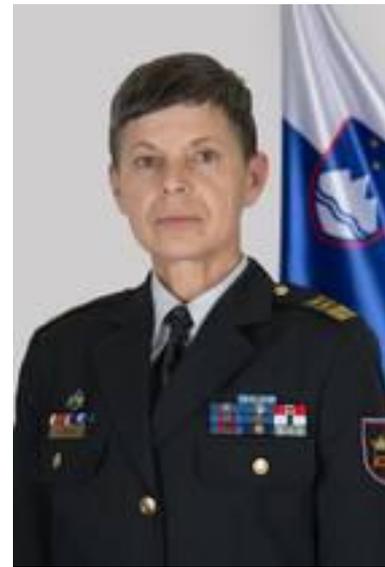


SLOVENIA: November 28th, Slovenian Prime Minister Marjan Sarec said he sees no possibility of progress in the relations between Slovenia and Croatia as long as Zagreb continues to reject the arbitration ruling determining the border between the two countries. Slovenia's previous Government, led by Miro Cerar, who is currently serving as Foreign Minister, filed a lawsuit against Croatia before the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) earlier this year, saying Croatia was in breach of the EU law by refusing to implement the arbitration ruling reached in June 2017. The new cabinet, confirmed in September and led by the Prime Minister Sarec of the centre-left List of Marjan Sarec (Lista Marjana Šarca - LMS) party,

has maintained that stance. *“We have suggested that Croatia accepts the idea to establish a commission for border demarcation. We could talk about that after Croatia says it accepts the arbitration ruling. Until that happens, I see no possibility of progress (in our relations),”* Sarec said. Croatia does not recognize the arbitration decision, and has withdrawn from the process in 2015 because of a scandal which involved leaked tapes showing Slovenian Government official discussing the case with the Court’s judge. Slovenia and Croatia had presented their cases before the European Commission (EC) in May this year, and the EC decided in mid-June to remain neutral in the matter and allow the countries to resolve the issue themselves. After becoming Prime Minister, Sarec has visited Berlin, where he spoke with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who offered Berlin’s help in solving the dispute between Slovenia and Croatia. She had said then it is time to resolve the matter, and that Germany would support all efforts to do so. Two months ago, after meeting with Sarec during an informal EU summit in Salzburg, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said that Zagreb’s position on the border issue remained unchanged – for Croatia, the arbitration process was *“irreversibly contaminated”* and Slovenia’s lawsuit before the CJEU was unnecessary, since the issue is bilateral and should be resolved as such. He added he wished a solution could be found which would be acceptable to both sides. (www.sta.si)

- November 28th, Slovenia’s Government, led by Prime Minister Marjan Sarec, appointed Alenka Ermenc as the Slovenian Army Chief of Staff, making her the first woman holding that post. President Borut Pahor who, according to Slovenia’s Constitution, is the Commander-in-

Chief of the Armed Forces, said that he agreed with the proposal put forward to the cabinet by Defense Minister Karl Erjavec. *“Major General Alenka Ermenc meets all the criteria, she has vast leadership experience, and has demonstrated resolute in conducting the duties required,”* Pahor’s office said in a press release, which came after Pahor promoted Ermenc to the rank of Major General.



Chief of Slovenian Armed Forces General Staff,
Alenka Ermenc

(Photo source: www.slovenskavojska.si)

Ermenc is the first woman to head any Armed Forces in the NATO alliance, and perhaps the only woman holding this position in the world. Slovenia’s Armed Forces comprise a little more than 7,000 troops, one-sixth of whom are women. Fully professional since 2003, Slovenia’s Army participates in a number of NATO, EU, and UN missions around the world, with their largest foreign deployment in the KFOR peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, with 240 troops stationed. The 55 year old Ermenc had also served in Kosovo as part of KFOR from June to December 2009. She said that her motto will be *“actions, not words,”* a

principle she also follows in life. NATO has congratulated Slovenia for appointing the first woman Chief of the General Staff and becoming the first NATO country to have a woman at the top military post. (www.sta.si)

- December 1st, the Foreign Minister Miro Cerar said that there is no legal basis for granting a special status to the German-speaking community in Slovenia. His response came after the Federation of Cultural Associations of the German Speaking Ethnic Group in Slovenia's request to recognize the German speaking community as a minority. "In conversations with Austrian interlocutors on the Joint Committee V St. Stefan Stainz, I said that there is no legal basis and no other conditions that would dictate granting of a special status to this ethnic group," Cerar said adding "However, we will strive to further support in their cultural activities and identity." The Federation of Cultural Associations of the German Speaking Ethnic Group in Slovenia sent a resolution to the Government last week, requesting once again the constitutional recognition of the German speaking community as a national minority. The Federation requires from the state material support for the functioning and sustainable development of its cultural activities, respect for members of the German-speaking community as Slovene citizens, and the provision of appropriate school teaching of the German language in accordance with the European Charter of the Council of Europe for minority and regional languages. Slovenia considers that requests of the German speaking community are adequately addressed by the agreement on cooperation in the field of culture, education and science between Slovenia and Austria, signed by the state in 2001. Under the agreement, the community enjoys the rights stated

in article 61 of the Constitution, which stipulates that everyone has the right "to freely express affiliation with his/her nation or national community, to foster and give expression to his/her culture, and to use his/her language and script." It is estimated that the community has about 2,000 members living in several parts of Slovenia; mostly in the borders with Austria, but also in the area of Kocevje in the south. (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 and it is still a question how the new Government will continue with the case.



TURKEY: November 27th, the President Recep Tayyip Erdogan addressed several current issues of international relations, including tension in the eastern Mediterranean, the recent spat between Russia and Ukraine and the U.S. support for People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. Erdogan began by warning Greece and Cyprus against "reckless" actions in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. "The reckless behavior of Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration [in hydrocarbon search in the eastern Mediterranean] by receiving support from several European states has become a threat and danger primarily for themselves," Erdogan said at the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet

ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) parliamentary group meeting. *“Turkey will not make the slightest concession from our interests neither in the eastern Mediterranean nor any other region and it will defend its rights up to the end,”* he added. Turkey has consistently contested the Greek Cypriot Administration's unilateral drilling activity in the Eastern Mediterranean, saying Turkish Cypriots also have rights to the resources in the area. On October 18th, 2018 Turkey’s state-run Anadolu news agency said the navy had stopped a Greek frigate from harassing the Turkish seismic vessel Barbaros Hayreddin Pasa (a Greek defense source denied there was an incident but said the Greeks were monitoring the activity of Barbaros). The incident prompted an immediate response from Turkish officials who warned Greece against actions in the Mediterranean that would spark tension in the region. Erdogan also addressed the recent escalation of tension between Russia and Ukraine in Kerch Strait separating Crimea with mainland Russia, saying: *“We call on our Russian and Ukrainian friends to solve their problems through dialogue as soon as possible and make the Black Sea a sea of peace.” “Turkey would like to see brother nations Russia and Ukraine side by side, not facing off, when the world is faced with serious threats,”* he said. In regards to DAESH terror group in Syria, Erdogan said *“There's no more Daesh left in Syria anymore. There are only some small bands trained and kept in reserve under the disguise of Daesh to create chaos in (Turkey) and this region.” “As Turkey, we are committed to a complete removal of the leftovers of this organization (Daesh) within a couple of months,”* he said. The U.S. has partnered with the YPG in Syria in its fight against Daesh. Joint patrols between the U.S. and YPG have disturbed Ankara, who has urged Washington that

partnering with one terrorist group to fight another will not achieve its intended goals. Turkey recognizes the PKK and YPG as organically linked terrorist groups. The U.S. however, while listing the PKK as a terrorist group, has supported the YPG militarily, under the pretext of fighting DAESH. To date the U.S. has sent 4,700 heavy weapons and armored vehicles to the YPG. Earlier this month, U.S. Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey said that the U.S. administration hopes that the fight against DAESH, in its last foothold in northeastern Syria, will end within months. In accordance with the Manbij agreement, Turkish and U.S. troops began joint patrols on November 1st, 2018. Since June 18th, 2018 the Turkish Armed Forces have carried out 68 unilateral patrols in Manbij. (www.dailysabah.com)

- November 30th, a Turkish Court has rejected an appeal to release the former leader of Turkey's pro-Kurdish opposition from pre-trial detention, despite a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The Court turned down the release application of Selahattin Demirtas who was detained two years ago on *“terrorism-related”* charges, which he denies. Demirtas is a former co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi - HDP). Last week, the ECHR urged Turkey to swiftly process Demirtas's legal case, saying his pre-trial detention had gone on longer than could be justified. Although the ECHR accepted that Demirtas, who has been in jail since November 2016, was arrested on *“reasonable suspicion”* of having committed a criminal offence, it said Turkish authorities extended the politician's imprisonment on grounds that could not be regarded as *“sufficient”* to justify its duration. In its ruling the Turkish Court said the ECHR

decision had not been finalized and unanimously rejected the appeal for Demirtas release. Benan Molu, one of Demirtas lawyers, said the Turkish Court ruling was unfounded. *“The ECHR’s ‘immediate release’ ruling does not need to be finalized for it to be implemented. Every second he (Demirtas) is held in prison despite the ECHR ruling, there is a crime being committed,”* Molu wrote on social media. (www.aljazeera.com)

- November 30th, Turkey faces removal from the U.S.-led F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) Program if it continues its purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia, according to a Pentagon report obtained by Anadolu Agency. The report was sent to Congress earlier this month as a part of an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which prohibits F-35 sales to Turkey until the Pentagon issued a report on Turkish-American relations within 90 days. It includes an assessment of Turkey's participation in the program as well as the risks posed by Ankara's purchase of the S-400 missile defense system. The Pentagon outlined Turkey's *“unique geostrategic position”* in the middle of Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. In addition, Ankara is a productive military partner recognizing its efforts to defeat DAESH terrorist forces in the region. *“Turkey is a critical NATO ally, possessing the second largest military in NATO, as well as the willingness to use that military to advance NATO’s interests,”* the report said. It highlights Turkey's commitment to reach 2% of GDP in defense spending by 2024, a demand U.S. President Donald Trump stressed to NATO allies. However, the Pentagon said it *“will reassess Turkey’s continued participation as one of eight partner nations should they continue with their purchase of the S-400.”* Turkey announced it concluded an agreement with Russia to get the

first delivery of S-400 systems by July 2019, in an effort to fulfill its defense requirements. *“The U.S. Government has made clear to the Turkish Government that purchasing the S-400 would have unavoidable negative consequences for U.S.-Turkey bilateral relations, as well as Turkey’s role in NATO,”* the report said. Among the potential consequences are sanctions and risks to other future U.S. arms transfers to Turkey. The Pentagon outlined an alternative to the Russian missile systems, however, saying the U.S. could provide Turkey with defense systems that meet all of the country's requirements if it were to stop its purchase of the S-400. Turkey first joined the JSF Program in 2002, when it has invested more than 1.25 billion dollars, and also *“manufactures various aircraft parts for all F-35 variants and customers.”* Ankara is planning to purchase 100 F-35 fighter jets, pending congressional approval. Thirty fighter jets have already been approved for purchase. In June, Turkey took delivery of its first F-35 fighter jet at a ceremony in Forth Worth, Texas. In July, the Pentagon said Turkish pilots and maintenance personnel were being trained on the F-35 fighter jet in the state of Arizona. *“Despite bilateral tensions, Turkey remains a productive military partner in many areas, particularly for basing and access, as well as a key contributor to NATO missions,”* the report said. (www.yenisafak.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. Latest ECHR decision on HDP

former leader Selahattin Demirtas is a hard slap for Turkish Justice and state practices. 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 in Syria as well. The state tries to show a leading role regarding Syria’s “next day” claiming that developments in neighboring country are related to its national security mainly because of the Kurds. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Regarding Turkish interests in East Mediterranean Sea it seems that they are reaching a critical point since Cypriots have already started hydrocarbon drills in their Exclusive Economic Zone via the US energy giant ExxonMobil. Is Turkey ready to move from rhetoric to action? It is rather difficult to see a direct harassment against the drill ship (which is monitored by 4 U.S vessels), but none could exclude a “hot” incident in the Aegean Sea. The Turkish President and high state’s officials express Turkey’s determination to protect its interests no matter what. It seems that strengthened multilateral cooperation between Greece, Israel, Cyprus and Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt raises its concerns of regional isolation in a region (Eastern Mediterranean Sea) where Turkey considers it as a preferential field of action.

Editor in Chief: Ioannis Karampelas

NOTE

-  Stable situation. No security risk
-  Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored
-  Major concerns over stability and security. significant security risk in specific regions
-  Imminent major incidents regarding stability and security. High security risk
-  Evolving or ongoing crisis or violent/armed conflict

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