



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

# ***SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE AT A GLANCE***



***SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE***

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

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

### **“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE**

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**ALBANIA:** April 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Foreign Commission at the European Parliament painted once again a problematic Europe. After many long discussions related to Brexit, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Johannes Hahn, spoke about the countries that need to join the Union. Hahn gave details about the European Commission's recommendation for Albania and Northern Macedonia. *"We must see things in the long term. Our progress-report for each country of the region will be introduced to the European Commission by the end of May. Based on what we have seen so far, we will recommend that Albania and Northern Macedonia start the preliminary phase for opening the accession negotiations, and this should be done officially,"* Hahn said. Hahn was very direct when he asked the EU Parliament to keep its promises for the Balkan countries; *"I am convinced that our partners have fulfilled the criteria. The ball is in our camp now. We have to face our credibility and responsibility. When our partners fulfill the criteria for opening the accession negotiations, we must react positively,"* he said. Hahn explained very clearly that if the European countries do not give green light to the Western Balkans, other forces will be keen to fulfill their goals. *"Russia and China have their influence, together with Turkey and the Arab countries. We must not listen to our fears, since 75% of the foreign investments in those countries come from EU members,"* Hahn said. (www.top-channel.tv)

- April 3<sup>rd</sup>, Albania's opposition held its eighth protest, which kicked off in front of the Parliament and ended close to the Government building asking the Government to resign, while inside three of Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD)

MPs were expected to take their oath, going against their party's directives for boycott. The PD leader, Lulzim Basha, was not present at the protest as he traveled to Germany, to update the CDU representatives about political situation in Albania. Monika Kryemadhi, the leader of the Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim - LSI), who was among the politicians who led the protest, said that Rama makes the politics of crime, and that he is forcing Albanians to leave the country; *"Ambassadors come and go, but Albanians remain here. Rama is destroying their lives,"* she said. Protesters were holding a paper pyramid, at the top of which was Rama's name, symbolizing the pyramid of crime and corruption which, according to the opposition, is headed by the Socialist Government.

- April 5<sup>th</sup>, the U.S Government donated 37 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles ( MRAPs) to the Albanian Armed Forces in an effort to help Albania's military capabilities. Albanian Defense Minister Olta Xhaka, charge d' affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Tirana Leyla Moses-Ones and, Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces Brigadier General Bardhyl Kollcaku attended the delivery ceremony. In her speech, Xhaka thanked the U.S. Government for its continued support to Albania and expressed gratitude for the donation of 37 armored vehicles, which will increase the capabilities and performance of the country's Armed Forces. On her part, Moses-Ones underlined that the new armored capability will enhance Albanian's internal defense, strengthen NATO's southern flank, and provide critical combat power to NATO that can be deployed in support of global operations. (www.chinamil.com.cn)



Albanian Defense Minister Olta Xhacka, charge d' affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Tirana Leyla Moses-Ones, and Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces Brigadier General Bardhyl Kollcaku at the the delivery ceremony  
(Photo source: [www.al.usembassy.gov](http://www.al.usembassy.gov))

- April 5<sup>th</sup>, after the US Department of State published its annual report on drug traffic around the world, which said that Albania still remains a transit country, the former Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) MP, Enkelejd Alibeaj, said that the report makes a clear reference of the alarming situation that has been created by Edi Rama's Government. According to Alibeaj, to stop Albania from being a base for criminal gangs, it is necessary to remove Edi Rama from power. *"The only solution is to bring down the criminalized power of Edi Rama, the main source of this ugly image,"* he said. ([www.top-channel.tv](http://www.top-channel.tv))

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

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

*community namely the EU (and U.S) putting at risk the opening of accession negotiations in June 2019. The Prime Minister, Edi Rama urged opposition to return in the Parliament starting a constructive dialogue but PD and LSI leaders, Basha and Kryemadhi respectively pushing for the Government's topple and snap elections. Governmental institutions and media close to the Government strongly highlight that political destabilization is in favor of Russian influence in the country underlying that Rama and his Government are the only credible stakeholders which could guarantee the firm western orientation of the country. It is not normal for a stable country seeking to enter the European club to face such situation of political abnormality. Opposition MPs' resignation aiming at forcing the Government in collapse is not a reasonable political strategy for a functional and stable democracy. At the moment, the Government seeks to maintain Parliament fully functional, while opposition accuses Rama for buying its MPs to refuse resignation. In the meanwhile, several political executives of PD and LSI "disobeyed" their leaderships and accepted to replace the vacant seats in the Parliament invalidating partially their boycottage plans. Further polarization of political atmosphere in Albania by the opposition could not be excluded. Opposition PD and LSI did not submit their candidates within the deadline (March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019), while PD leader Basha stated that his party plans to boycott the local election scheduled for June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The Government is accused of having links with organized crime and current situation raises questions over the power of "Albanian mafia" in the country and its influence in state's politics. Undoubtedly, corruption and organized crime remains the most significant state's problem undermining its strategic goal of opening*

*accession negotiations with the EU. The EU closely monitors progress of reforms especially in justice sector. Commissioner Hanh urged the EU leaders to start accession negotiations with Albania (and North Macedonia) underlying that other forces namely Russia, China, Turkey, and Arab countries may increase influence in the region. The final decision for opening Albania's accession negotiations in June 2019 is up to the EU Heads of Governments. One should underline that unofficial concerns have already been raised regarding this date due to current political instability. Failure of opening accession talks with the EU it will further destabilize the country toppling the Government. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a "mother nation." Albania maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and F.Y.R.O.M. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on promoting Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access. Possible border changes may engage Albania in dangerous situations taking into consideration that it has the role of "protector" of Albanians in the region.*



## **BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:**

April 1<sup>st</sup>, according to Croatian Peasant Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Seljačka Stranka Bosne i Hercegovine - HSS BiH) leader Mario Karamatic, Bosnia is becoming dysfunctional because it cannot form a Government six months after the election. The crisis, he said, was caused by a faulty election law which must be changed. Bosnian Croat nationalists insist that the country's election law

should be changed so that people can vote only for members of their own ethnic group. This is vehemently rejected by the country's Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and leftist parties. Karamatic said that Brussels insist on the formation of a Government in order for the country to proceed toward EU membership but the election results, as far as the Croats are concerned, will not be implemented unless a new election law is adopted. Since this status quo cannot be resolved, things should go back to square one, he said, and that is the revival of Herzeg-Bosnia which is "a legitimate decision by the political leadership." "The (HNS) Presidency discussed this and we can start heading in that direction if Bosnia and Herzegovina becomes completely dysfunctional," he said. According to the Bosnian Croat politician, "it is not about destabilization, but about returning to the starting position." "It is very difficult to fix Bosnia and Herzegovina as it is or agree on anything," Karamatic said. Herzeg-Bosnia was established in the south of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991. Its armed forces, the Croatian Defense Council (HVO), were first allied with Bosniak armed forces. But HVO and Bosnia's Army turned against each other after Herceg-Bosnia declared itself a republic on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1993, and changed its name into the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosna, with Mostar being its capital. It had the ambition to become part of neighboring Croatia. The Croat-Bosniak conflict ended in 1994 with an agreement brokered in Washington, D.C. which established the Bosniak-Croat Federation entity (FBiH) out of territories controlled by Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats. Herzeg-Bosna was abolished two years later. ([www.ba.n1info.com](http://www.ba.n1info.com))

- April 6<sup>th</sup>, the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA) and

the Democratic Front (Demokratska Fronta – DF) signed an agreement on the constitution of parliamentary majority between the two political parties. The agreement was signed, without the presence of the media, at the premises of the Secretariat of the DF in Sarajevo. On behalf of SDA, the agreement was signed by Adil Osmanovic, Deputy President of the party and on behalf of DF, by Dzenan Donlagic, the Party's Vice-President. The agreement harmonizes the goals that will be implemented in the incumbent mandate and specifies that talks on the implementation of the agreement towards the establishment of the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina would continue in the coming period. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

- April 7<sup>th</sup>, Bosnia's Defense Minister Marina Pendes said that she believes the country will eventually join NATO as membership provides additional security and stability, despite resistance from Bosnian Serb politicians. *"I believe that Bosnia and Herzegovina and all of its citizens and political leaders will reach a consensus so that Bosnia fulfils the legally defined condition and becomes a member of NATO, which will also contribute to the security and stability of our homeland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also to all of its peoples and citizens,"* Pendes said. She said that so far NATO member states have supported the capacities of the Bosnian Defense Ministry since its conception with bilateral agreements. *"Of course, in all of this, the United States of America are leading,"* she said adding that other members of the alliance have also helped financial and material support, but also with education for members of the Armed Forces. Years ago Bosnia has expressed the desire to join the Alliance and has been working on fulfilling the conditions for membership. But Bosnian Serb

leaders have meanwhile changed their mind and now say they will not let the country join as long as neighboring Serbia does not join. Serbia has declared military neutrality. The issue has become an obstacle to the formation of the new Government after the election last October. The new Bosniak and Croat members of the tripartite Presidency said that they will greenlight only a new Prime Minister who is ready to work on NATO membership. Since it is the Serb's turn to take the post, the proposed candidate has already said he will not support the country's NATO path. (www.baninfo.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT     :

*Political instability and uncertainty continues in Bosnia because it has not a Government since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018 general elections. It seems that the three main parties representing the three constituent entities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats); HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) have reached an agreement to cooperate in forming a Government bypassing their different views on main issues. Bosnia's accession process towards NATO is the main disputable issue; Bosnian Serbs insist that the country should remain neutral staying out of NATO while the two other members of the tripartite Presidency set commitment to NATO accession as a precondition for supporting a Government. Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust. Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs destabilizing the state. It is more than impressive that Bosnian Serbs and Croats came very close aiming at achieving their special goals. Of*



*course, both entities (Croats and Serbs) take in advantage “Dayton Peace Agreement” weaknesses and malfunctions. Russia pays special attention in Serbia and Bosnia in order to maintain its influence in the region. Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and Montenegro have already entered NATO, while North Macedonia would join the Alliance on June 2019. These two countries (Serbia and Bosnia) are the only “vehicles” for Russia to maintain a narrow influence in Southeastern Europe. Apart from external influence and intervention the country has to confront several internal “threats” which undermine its sovereignty, cohesion, and viability. Election of ultra nationalist pro-Russian Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia’s EU and NATO (mostly) integration. Dodik is a person who does not actually believe in B&H viability and is expected to promote (actually, he has already started) his own political agenda. Moreover, Croats promote the re-establishment of Herzeg-Bosnia claiming secession from Bosnia. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey approach the country mainly through “investments” and/or funding ethnic or religious groups according to their interests.*



**BULGARIA:** April 1<sup>st</sup>, the Bulgarian Ministry of Defense announced on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019 the award of the contract for the overhaul and life extension of four Mi-24V attack and two Mi-17 tactical transport helicopters to local military maintenance, repair, and overhaul company TEREM Holding EAD, reports Jane's 360. The helicopters will be overhauled at the company's subsidiary TEREM-Letets at Sofia Airport-North under a four-year framework

agreement, with specific contracts placed subject to the availability of funds allocated in the Ministry of Defense budget. The total price of the agreement, if performed in full, is more about 22 million dollars. ([www.novinite.com](http://www.novinite.com))

- April 3<sup>rd</sup>, President Rumen Radev convened a meeting of the National Security Advisory Council on April 8th, 2019 on “Outcomes of Counteracting High Level Corruption, Necessity of Measures.” The decision for the session comes ten days after the beginning of the scandal of apartments bought by representatives of the ruling Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Граждани за европейско развитие на България – GERB) party at lower than market prices by Arteks Company. Because of the revelations about the acquired properties resignations were submitted by the Minister of Justice Tsetska Tsacheva, the Deputy Ministers of Sport Vanya Koleva, and the Energy Minister Krasimir Parvanov. The parliamentary leader of Bulgarian GERB, Tsvetan Tsvetanov announced that he will resign that from his position, but he will remain GERB's Deputy Chairpesron and Head of the party's election campaign headquarters. By law, members of the National Security Council are the Speaker of the Parliament, the Prime Minister, the Interior, Foreign, Defense, and Finance Ministers, the Head of the National Security State Agency, the Chief of Defense, the Intelligence Leader, and the Secretary of the Government Council on security. One representative of each of the parliamentary groups is entitled to participate, and other representatives of the state or parties may be involved, depending on the issues discussed. ([www.novinite.com](http://www.novinite.com))



- April 6<sup>th</sup>, because of the situation in Greece, Bulgaria has already strengthened the border patrols, Interior Minister Mladen Marinov told journalists in Parliament. According to him, Bulgaria has an action plan in case tensions escalate, reported BNT. *“We are monitoring situation and we are in constant contact with all neighboring countries, including Northern Macedonia,”* Marinov said. Since yesterday afternoon, additional patrols have been deployed along the border. Marinov added that his Ministry is ready to introduce a plan it has been developed for crisis management, where regional departments of the Interior Ministry are also engaged. *“For the time being, we can not foresee how the situation with migrants will develop in Greece and that is why our country is ready to react in every situation,”* he said. (www.novinite.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Although the Government claims that there is no parliamentary crisis and possibility of snap elections, BSP absence from parliamentary sessions it is not a good sign of democratic function and the Government always has a responsibility about it. However, one should claim that Bulgarian politics follows the Balkan trend (Albania, Montenegro, Serbia etc) of leaving the Parliament; a strong sign of democratic and parliamentary immaturity. It is assessed that Bulgaria has not entered yet in political instability but it could be evolved into a potential major crisis. On the other hand, the junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots remains the vulnerable and unpredictable piece of the inter-governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus, Bulgaria has*

*entered in a period of rather stable political situation. The President Radev grabs every opportunity to criticize the Government (and the Prime Minister Borissov) highlighting his different political affiliation (Radev is backed by the opposition Socialists). Opposition BSP tries to push further Borisov and his Government by strengthening its rhetoric and having tabled three motions of no confidence so far. The country strengthened its efforts towards entering the Eurozone achieving a positive decision of the Eurogroup. However, the EC made clear that Bulgaria could not enter the Eurozone before 2022. Fitch upgraded Bulgarian economy from stable to positive; a good sign of economic function. Apart from that the European Parliament adopted a resolution for the accession of Bulgaria (and Romania) in Schengen Zone. However, it is questioned if the European Council will receive a unanimous final decision for Bulgaria under the current migration pressure. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles and should be addressed decisively. Although modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc) military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards. Security situation stable; no major threats.*



**CROATIA:** April 5<sup>th</sup>, Croatia experienced economic growth of 2.6% in 2018, which is expected to remain moderate going forward, at an average of 2.5% in the 2019-21 period, World Bank's Economic Update for Europe and Central Asia said. Overall, economic growth in the Europe and Central Asia region,

which is a geographical grouping of 23 countries in the area from eastern Europe across the Balkans all the way to central Asia, slowed down to 3.1% in 2018, and is projected to decline to 2.1% in 2019, amid slowing global growth and uncertain prospects. Croatia's total public debt was 38 billion euro at the end of December 2018, down by 0.5% or 200 million euro from 2017, according to recently released data compiled by the Central Bank. However, analysts warned, the 74.1% debt-to-GDP ratio is still higher than other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where it hovers close to 50% on average, and Southeast Europe, where it is around 42%. (www.n1info.com)

- April 5<sup>th</sup>, with a majority of votes, Croatian Parliament has rejected the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska Partija Hrvatske - SDP) interpellation on the work of the Government in implementing structural reforms. This was the fifth consecutive interpellation to be rejected. 27 representatives voted for the interpellation, one abstained and 75 were against. Questioning the work of the Government was initiated by 23 SDP MPs a year ago, following a report by the European Commission on implementation of reforms, in which they said it there was mainly no or little progress in Croatia. The SDP then demanded that within 15 days the Government reports to Parliament on the implementation of the National Reform Program for 2017 and the Convergence Plan for the Period up until 2020. The SDP accuses the Government of not conducting reforms, not even conducting what they announced on their own, that some reforms are being delayed, some abandoned, and that there have been no reforms of the health care system or state administration. SDP leader Davor Bernardic repeated his claims again that “Croatia

*is sinking ever deeper, the country is in a shambles, the judiciary and State Attorney's Office are not functioning, and industrial production is dropping, along with the number of employed persons. We are also dropping in terms of human rights protection.”* Claims by Bernardic and his SDP were firmly refuted by the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ), MPs, who said that the Government has worked the best it can, it implemented tax and pension reforms, lowered public debt, increased the number of employed people and the country's credit rating. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- April 6<sup>th</sup>, the Minister of Interior, Davor Bozinovic, said that Croatia joining the Schengen Zone is important not only for the Croatian and European security but for Slovenian as well, noting that Croatian and Slovenian Police cooperate well at the border. “*You saw the news from Greece, namely what is happening on the so-called Balkan route which is potentially the biggest migrant route in Europe. Croatian and Slovenian Police have good cooperation at the border and I am confident that Slovenian citizens appreciate what the Croatian Police is doing to protect the EU external borders,*” Bozinovic said commenting on a statement by Slovenian Prime Minister Marjan Sarec who said Croatia is far from Schengen area membership. Asked if Slovenia could make Croatia's Schengen membership conditional of some sort of an agreement concerning the two countries' arbitration issue, Bozinovic said the two issues are unrelated. “*This is an important security issue for both Croatia and Slovenia. I am talking about the migrant crisis and the EU. All EU member states, notably those still on that route, such as Germany and Austria, highly appreciate what the*

*Croatian Police is doing and I am confident that all stakeholders are aware of that,” Bozinovic said. Sarec said on Saturday that Croatia is still far from membership of the Schengen area, without ruling out a possibility for his Government to tie Slovenia's support to Croatia's membership to the unresolved dispute over the border at the Adriatic Sea. In 2017 the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled in favor of Slovenia in the territorial dispute, but Croatia is refusing to implement the ruling. It claims the arbitration process was compromised. (www.n1info.com)*

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT   :

*Croatia follows a tough regional policy with neighboring countries. It is openly intervene in Bosnia's internal affairs, while it maintains open disputes with Slovenia, Serbia, and Bosnia. It is estimated Croatia tries to establish a leading role in Western Balkans not only as an EU and NATO member state but also as a rising “local” (Western Balkans) power. One should take into consideration that Croatia shows its military strength and capabilities quite often not only in international, but also in national level sending strong messages to neighboring countries. Apart from that, Croatia pays special attention in energy strategy and security announcing ambitious projects. The state enjoys political stability. Concerns have been raised over media freedom in Croatia and one should focus on the Government's action on this matter. Border dispute on Piran Bay remains active and Slovenia's initiative to file a lawsuit against Croatia adds a new chapter between the two countries conflict. The state accelerates its efforts towards accession in Schengen zone, while the EC sends good news regarding Croatia's fiscal*

*policy. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Failure to complete successfully the purchase of a modern fighter jet maintains a long period of an ineffective and weak Croatian Air Force.*



**CYPRUS:** April 2<sup>nd</sup>, Cyprus' aim is not to become a staging post during armed conflict, the President said, as it discussed the possibility of granting naval facilities to France. “On the contrary, we want to turn into, and we are gradually turning into, a provider of security through the facilities granted not only to European countries but also other forces like Russia and America,” Nicos Anastasiades said in an interview with the Cyprus News Agency. He added Cyprus wants to be a state that does not pose a danger to anyone, but to be a factor of stability that will contribute to peace in the region and not raise tensions or provoke threats through the use of its territory. Asked if a permanent naval base for French warships was on the cards, the President said it was an issue that was being discussed. Cyprus has agreed to offer France permanent facilities at the naval base in Mari, which has been confirmed by former Foreign Minister Ioannis Kasoulides who made it clear that this will not be a French base, but a Cypriot base on which facilities would be given to France. A docking area will be built at the Evangelos Florakis naval base to allow French warships to dock. The project will be co-financed by the two countries. Cyprus has been offering facilities to the French navy since 2013 at the Andreas Papandreou air force base. Cyprus is also in the process of boosting military cooperation with Germany. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- April 4<sup>th</sup>, Cyprus and the UK signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to enhance their defense and security cooperation. The MoU was signed in London by Defense Minister Savvas Angelides and his British counterpart Gavin Williamson. It agrees on *“strengthening the existing deep defense links between the two nations”* and is *“designed to help address common defense and security challenges and build on existing partnerships and shared interests in areas such as training, capability development and crisis planning,”* according to a British Government statement. *“The MoU will also help generate and support new opportunities for multilateral security training with our regional partners,”* the statement added. Williamson said Cyprus *“is a valued partner and friend, and through signing this agreement we have reinforced our already close ties across defense for years to come.”* He added that British bases in Cyprus are *“a vital asset in our fight against DAESH with Typhoon and Tornado fighter jets that were instrumental in the territorial defeat of the terrorist group in Syria flying out of RAF Akrotiri.”* The MoU also provides enhanced military staff cooperation, training of Cypriot officers at British military academies, as well as synergies in research and development, armaments programs and cyber-security. For his part, Angelides said that agreements like the one signed with the UK *“confirm other nations’ recognition of the fact that Cyprus is a pillar of stability in the eastern Mediterranean.”* Cyprus and Germany agreed last month to boost their cooperation in relation to projects within the framework of the EU’s Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). Earlier this year, the Government confirmed that it will expand the Mari naval base so that it can accommodate French military vessels. In October

2016 Nicosia and Paris signed the Franco-Cypriot Strategic Agenda, covering security and defense, as well as economic, educational and cultural cooperation. ([www.cyprus-mail.com](http://www.cyprus-mail.com))

- April 7<sup>th</sup>, President Nicos Anastasiades reiterated his determination to work for a solution as soon as possible and to develop the new ideas he has come up with within the Guterres framework, when he met UN envoy Jane Holl Lute, Chief Negotiator Andreas Mavroyiannis said. Lute left the palace without making any statements. The meeting was also attended by Foreign Minister Nicos Christodoulides, Mavroyiannis and Government Spokesman Prodromos Prodromou. Lute was also due to meet Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci in the north. Her mission is to facilitate the leaders to come up with terms of reference for a resumption of Cyprus negotiations, something she has been working on since last year. Speaking after the meeting, Mavroyiannis said the President had a *“very good and creative”* meeting with Lute during which he reiterated his commitment to a solution. *“He has developed new ideas within the framework of the UN Secretary-General’s framework... the so-called Guterres framework, and explained these new ideas,”* Mavroyiannis said, adding that the President referred, among other things, to the *“decentralization of powers, ideas he has already worked out in the past.”* Mavroyiannis referred to the Turkish Cypriot community’s demand for political equality *“as it perceives it.”* He called it *“a continuously expanding perception”* of the notion of political equality, which, he said, is not based at all on the report of the UN Secretary-General from 1991. Neither was it part of any discussions that had taken place since then, nor was it in the Annan plan, nor in meetings between previous leaders

Demetris Christofias and Mehmet Ali Talat “nor in the negotiations we have had over the last five years.” Anastasiades, Mavroyiannis added, “Reiterated in a clear manner that he accepts political equality as requested by the United Nations and as recorded in the Secretary-General’s report.” “He also accepts the concept of effective participation of Turkish Cypriots in the Government and the positive vote, where and when the circumstances are such that the positive vote will be exercised in such a way that any decision of the state institutions does not negatively affect the interests of the Turkish Cypriot community,” said Mavroyiannis. “It is clear to the President of the Republic that there is neither the intention nor the kind of regulation that allows one community to make decisions that are detrimental to the interests of the other community,” he added. “Of course, to move in this direction it should be clear that there will be an effective mechanism for deadlocks and that we are talking exclusively about those decisions and not, as the Turkish Cypriot side has recently raised, that we are talking about all decisions.” In addition to the issue of political equality, the President focused with Lute on all aspects of the Guterres framework such as the abolition of guarantees, rights of intervention, the withdrawal of troops, and the issue of territory, Mavroyiannis said. “Essentially the aim of the President of the Republic is to create conditions in order to come up with terms of reference that can create the conditions for a truly creative dialogue that leads to finding a functional and viable solution of the Cyprus problem and that ensures the existence of a truly independent and sovereign state which will work,” he added. Anastasiades also reiterated his willingness for a joint meeting with Akinci in Lute’s presence. The UN Chief must submit his report on his Good Offices Mission in Cyprus to

the Security Council by April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Asked if there had been any movement since Lute’s visit earlier in the year, Mavroyiannis said “Steps forward will be judged by results.” “We continue consultations and efforts, exchange of views, positions, and arguments. We have not yet arrived, but yes, the effort continues,” Mavroyiannis said. As Anastasiades was meeting Lute, Akinci was quoted as saying the Turkish Cypriot side, would like some clarifications about the issue of political equality. CNA quoted the Turkish Cypriot leader as saying it would be helpful to “clean up the muddy waters.” Then, he said it might be possible for the Turkish Cypriot side to accept a three-party, four-party or five-party conference. This was in response to a proposal by Anastasiades for a tripartite meeting with the two leaders and with Lute. The Turkish Cypriot side, Akinci said, is not trying to avoid any meeting agreement, or anything that would allow for peace and prosperity in Cyprus. He also said that he did not intend to just meet Lute to create an impression about the negotiations that might be likely to mislead public opinion. Akinci also referred to the importance of informing the public, as they would be the ones called upon to decide on their future. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT   :

*Cyprus works systematically in order to become a major part of the East Mediterranean energy hub. Its natural gas deposits affect not only its economy but also its security. The strategy of multilateral cooperation seems to be fruitful. At the moment, Cyprus is engaged in three different trilateral formations which also include strong features of strategic cooperation and alliance; Cyprus – Egypt – Greece, Cyprus – Israel – Greece, and Cyprus – Jordan – Greece. The last*

two are highly improved due to the US engagement. Turkey is isolated from the energy game and it is a good question how it will react since it is certain that it will not accept “fait accompli” in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. It is assessed that Turkish provocative actions may be intensified either by Turkish gas and oil drills within the Cypriot EEZ, or by military actions. It is a fact that Cyprus has a significant deficit of military power which is (externally) balanced by regional cooperation. Furthermore Cyprus improved its bilateral relations with the U.S, strengthened its defense cooperation with France, UK, and lately develops its defense and security relations with Germany. The US administration appears ready to abolish the arms embargo against Cyprus allowing it to improve its military capabilities. Conduct of aeronautical exercises in cooperation with other countries (Israel, Egypt etc) sends various messages of defense capability, readiness, and determination. Although the UN Secretary General appears optimistic for a new round of talks between the two communities, it is assessed that talks could not be resumed earlier than summer 2019. President Anastasiades promotes the scenario of a “bizonal, bicomunal decentralized federation”; an idea which is in principle accepted by the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and enjoys support from the U.S. However, there are a lot of disputed issues in which both parts should compromise; the most important is considered the decision-making process. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



**GREECE:** April 6<sup>th</sup>, hundreds of protesting migrants clashed with Police for a third straight day in northern Greece with migrants throwing rocks at officers who responded with tear gas and stun grenades. Authorities say the demonstrations outside a migrant camp in Diavata have been triggered by false reports on social media that restrictions on travel to northern Europe had been lifted. Several migrants, including children, fainted amid the clouds of tear gas Saturday. The protesters have lit fires to make the air more bearable, but blazes have also erupted from exploding stun grenades. In Athens, migrants left a main railway station after blocking trains on Friday and services resumed Saturday. Greek officials say the migrants have been mobilized by false reports originating on social media that the road to central Europe, tightly sealed to migrants for three years, is open again, and that buses chartered by non-governmental organizations are waiting on the other side of the border with North Macedonia, about 60 kilometers to the north of Diavata. “We must constantly fight the fake news,” Nikos Ragos, the Migrant Policy Ministry's Coordinator for northern Greece, told The Associated Press. He added that some of the migrants were now questioning the false reports, but that cybercrime Police must find the source and the motive for spreading the claims. Greek TV station Ant1 showed a migrant's cellphone screen containing a social media message, in Arabic, sent earlier this week from a purported NGO called “Caravan of Hope” advising migrants that Greece was to open the border with North Macedonia on April 5<sup>th</sup> at noon. The protesting migrants in Diavata are mostly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of them are not camp residents, but came from all over Greece in order to reach the North

Macedonia border. Some who tried to break into the camp were thrown out by Police and at least two were arrested. Almost none of the camp dwellers, and certainly none among the protesters, want to stay in Greece. They want to move on to wealthier central and northern European countries, especially Germany. Many feel trapped in Greece and despair with the slow pace of the processing of asylum applications. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 6<sup>th</sup>, acquisition by Greece of US-made F-35 fighter jets will hinge on the country's fiscal plans and Washington's ability to offer a long-term payment framework, reliable sources said Friday. The possibility of Greece acquiring the Lockheed Martin jets as part of its efforts to upgrade the Hellenic Air Force fleet was raised Friday by Defense Minister Evangelos Apostolakis, following remarks on Thursday by a US official about the possibility of selling the aircraft to more countries. More specifically, Vice Admiral Mathias Winter, Head of the Pentagon's F-35 office, told Congress on Thursday that sales of the jets could be expanded to include five new countries – Singapore, Spain, Romania, Greece, and Poland. *“Beyond the upgrade of the F-16 fighter jets, we are in the process of selecting a new plane for Greece, so we can gradually move to the new generation of aircraft,”* Apostolakis told journalists during a visit to Andravida Air Base in the western Peloponnese. *“The statement by the US Congress helps in this perspective. We will examine all the elements, and see what will happen,”* he added. Sources said that given Greece's fiscal constraints, the purchase of the fighter jets will depend on whether it can pay for them over a time period ranging from six to eight years. For the time being, Greece has sent a letter of request for price and availability to Lockheed

Martin for between 25 and 30 jets. Greek interest comes at a time of growing tensions between the US and Turkey over Ankara's acquisition of Russian missile defense systems, which Washington opposes. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 7<sup>th</sup>, the Greek Police's security division has launched an investigation into last week's fiasco involving an assault by a crowd of masked individuals on Coast Guard officers in the anarchist stronghold of Exarchia, amid indications that Police had not been adequately briefed about the officers' drug-related raid in the area. The 50 or so individuals that attacked the eight officers in Exarchia had been armed with clubs, knives, pistols or Kalashnikov assault rifles, leading Police to believe that they are affiliated to drug dealing gangs operating in the area. It appears that they had gotten wind of the Coast Guard officers' raid and sought to sabotage it. They managed to free one of two suspects detained in the raid, a Greek-Australian woman, while injuring two of the officers in the process. The probe will aim to determine the identity and activities of the attackers, as well as exactly what transpired on Thursday night, over which there are differing reports. Citizens' Protection Minister Olga Gerovasili on Friday claimed that Police had not known about the raid, while a Coast Guard statement said the Police had been informed in advance. A Police source said later the Exarchia Police department was informed by the Coast Guard but only after the raid had begun. The incident once again brought to the fore the problem of increasing lawlessness and the transformation of Exarchia into a no-gone zone of sorts for Police. Conservative New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία – ND) leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis described the assault as *“unprecedented,”* pledging to improve policing



under an ND Government and restore the public's sense of safety. ([www.ekathimerini.gr](http://www.ekathimerini.gr))

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Political situation in the country is rapidly evolving and it is assessed that early parliamentary elections will be held on May 2019 (although the Prime Minister Tsipras insists that his Government will complete its mandate by October 2019). The country has entered in pre-electoral period due to EU elections scheduled for May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and local elections scheduled also for May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019 (second round). A long pre-electoral period first of all may polarize society with unpredictable results and secondly it hurts national economy. The Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras focuses on approaching the center-left voters and weakening KINAL (former PASOK). In this context, SYRIZA inaugurated alignment with DIMAR, a wing of KINAL so far. Moreover, the ruling SYRIZA intensifies its efforts to gain the electoral body by announcing social care measures. Political turmoil emerged in a period where Greece faces several diplomatic, security, and economic challenges. Internal terrorism is considered as a major unresolved problem of national security undermining stability of the state. Although Greek Defense Minister announced mutual efforts with his Turkish counterpart for confidence-building measures the latter insists on a provocative rhetoric undermining de-escalation efforts between the two countries. Turkish fighter jets keep violating Greek airspace and NAVTEXs reserves part of Greek continental shelf and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone. Security situation is of significant risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident.*



**KOSOVO:** April 1<sup>st</sup>, Ramush

Haradinaj the Prime Minister of Kosovo said Pristina is facing challenges in the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union, (SSA) blaming EU High Representative Federica Mogherini for that, the FoNet news agency reported, citing Kosovo's media. Speaking at the EPIK Institute conference on the three years of the SSA application, Haradinaj accused Mogherini, who mediates the Belgrade – Pristina dialogue on normalization of relations, of traumatizing Kosovo political life by introducing the exchange of territories into the talks. Last December Mogherini said the bloc would greet a comprehensive, legally binding agreement as an outcome of the Belgrade – Pristina dialogue, without any division along the ethnic lines. She added such a deal should be in line with the international law and the EU values. Haradinaj told the conference on Monday his Government was working on the implementation of the SAA, the fact they could not move freely hurt the citizens, adding he hoped Kosovo would soon be granted visa liberalization. Last week, the European Parliament (EP) adopted a suggestion by the European Commission (EC) asking the EU to liberalize visa regime for Kosovo's citizens. Dimitris Avramopoulos, the EU Commissioner for Internal Affairs, said he was satisfied that the EP recognised the importance of visa-free regime for Kosovo. ([www.rs.n1info.com](http://www.rs.n1info.com))

- April 4<sup>th</sup>, a group of soldiers from different NATO countries, escorted by the Alliance-led KFOR force in Kosovo strolled the streets of the divided northern town of Mitrovica, mostly populated by the local Serbs, drawing angry reactions from Serb political parties, N1 reported.

The soldiers, not visibly armed, walked from the bridge on the Ibar river dividing Mitrovica, to the center of northern Mitrovica. Their appearance, especially the four soldiers from Albania, caused bitter comments on social networks as well. KFOR responded that the intention was not to provoke anyone since Albania had been NATO member for ten years and that group consisted of different nationalities. *“NATO soldiers, accompanied by KFOR, have been conducting reconnaissance activities in Kosovo. That includes visits to different places in Kosovo, including Mitrovica and other in the north,”* KFOR spokesperson Vincenzo Grasso told the KoSSev website. Later on Thursday, KFOR stated in response to political and media interpretation of the NATO and KFOR soldiers walk through north Mitrovica. The statement said that *“again today we read about unproven weird plots and series of strange events, which are only generating panic and confusion in the people that deserves more respect. Notwithstanding the numerous appeals to refrain from spreading irresponsible speculations, unfortunately, fabricated rumors continue circulating on the media and causing unfounded concerns among the population.”* It confirmed that *“situation in the north, as well as all over Kosovo, is absolutely under control and there is no sign or evidence of possible unrest or violence. In reality, there is no reason to be worried and nothing to be afraid of. In those days a group of NATO Officers, escorted by KFOR, is conducting a reconnaissance activity in Kosovo.”* (www.rs.n1info.com)

- April 6<sup>th</sup>, Kosovo Deputy Prime Minister and co-head of delegation in dialogue with Serbia, Fatmir Limaj, said that there is no date on resumption of Pristina-Belgrade dialogue. According to Limaj the 100% tax imposed by

Government of Kosovo in all Serbia's goods is not the only reason for stalling of the dialogue adding that also the EU is delaying resumption due to the European Parliament elections set to take place in May this year. Limaj in an interview with Ekonomika Online said that regardless circumstances the European Union is interested to resume the dialogue. Serbia is refusing to return at the negotiation table conditioning resumption of dialogue with rescinding of tax on its products. Limaj said that the main issue on continuation of dialogue is Serbia's conditioning to this process. *“Our position is clear, we are interested to continue the dialogue, but the problem is Serbia and its conditions,”* he said. *“Also we are aware of the elections in the European Parliament which are expected to take place in May, but we are in continuous contact with Brussels and see how things will develop,”* Limaj said. He also said that Belgrade is interested to negotiate suspension of tax. *“There are signals coming from Belgrade expressing interest to negotiate the tax,”* Limaj said. He said that the Government wants Serbia to stop its aggressive campaign against Kosovo's statehood, removal of non-tariff barriers for Kosovo goods, before launching talks on potential suspension of tax. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT   :

*Haradinaj's decision to impose 100% tax on Serbian and Bosnian products provoked major problems in Kosovo affecting Governments stability. The international community namely the EU and the U.S put a lot of pressure on the Government to suspend taxes. The UN Secretary General confirmed that tax is the major problem regarding dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. The US has started sending officials in Pristina in an effort to convince Kosovo leaders*

to restart dialogue with Serbia, while a joint French – German initiative for restarting the dialogue is underway. Although Kosovo still enjoys the EU and U.S support none could avoid recognizing that the state acts beyond European standards violating international agreements such as CEFTA. On the other hand dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has reached a deadlock trapping mostly Pristina in an endless conflict. Only through normalization of relations with Serbia it will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. However, the state's authorities show a tendency of escalating tension with Serbia undermining a peaceful resolution of the case. By imposing 100% tariff on Serbian (and Bosnian products), establishing Kosovo army, executing Special Forces operation in northern Kosovo, arresting Serbs, and requesting special court for Serbs it is created a climate which does not facilitate dialogue and the establishment of confidence between the two parties. Thaci changed his position claiming that he is not in favor of border correction. It is estimated that internal politics affect political leaders' stance in Kosovo – Serbia issue. The question of border exchange or simply change continues to divide Kosovo political forces and population. It seems that the U.S (and the EU) has a leading role in the background pushing for the idea of territorial change (or exchange). Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish in the country rule of law and modern functional administration. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard. Establishment of Kosovo Army is also a factor of destabilization since there is always a possibility of Police or military engagement with Serbian forces. Kosovo seeks KSF to be operating all over the country pushing NATO towards such direction. The

presence of Kosovo Army in the north it is assessed of high security risk which may lead in armed violence. One should take into consideration that the Serb President has already ordered all defense and security stakeholders to take all necessary measures for protecting Serbian population in Kosovo.



**MOLDOVA:** April 3<sup>rd</sup>, President of Moldova Igor Dodon stated he will be standing for strategic partnership with Russia despite the participation and opinion of the ruling coalition. He stated this after the Tuesday's meeting with leaders of two parliamentary factions in the State Residence. At the sitting, one of journalists asked the President about the Sunday's reportage at the "Russia" television channel where the tv presenter Dmitry Kiselev speaking about situation in Moldova, highlighted that the Right refused to form coalition with the Democratic Party, naming its leader Vlad Plahotniuc "*a poisoned apple*." "*The poisoned apple is now rolling towards Igor Dodon, the President of the Republic of Moldova. Personally for Dodon this apple means a political death. A reputation is lost only once,*" Kiselev concluded. Commenting on these statements, Dodon said that it is not the President who is creating coalitions. "*Days, weeks are passing. The time is flying; we should clarify situation in order that people to know what they should expect from the new Parliament. It is up to the parties to decide if the coalition will be formed or not. How toxic the coalition may be is also the parties' business. Strategic relations with Russia are very important for us. Regardless of how the coalition will be, I will all the time be standing for strategic partnership with Russia. Together with the Parliament and the Government or without them, I will strive for resolving all the problems in*

*relations with Russia and development of our strategic cooperation,”* Dodon stressed. (www.infotag.md)

- April 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Russian newspaper Kommersant wrote that the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) and the the Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) have already agreed on forming a governing coalition, despite Moscow's resistance. The paper wrote in its article on Wednesday that the coalition formation negotiations in Moldova are now on a home stretch between the Moscow-backed PSRM and the PDM, whose leaders sharply criticize the Kremlin. *“Negotiations between the two parties were organized by the de-facto PSRM leader, President of Moldova Igor Dodon. Russia has warned him on television and by other channels that he may meet his ‘political death’ in case of cooperation with the pdm Chairman Vlad Plahotniuc, who is not considered by Moscow to be a person to shake hands with,”* wrote the newspaper, describing the Tuesday's meeting of the leaders of the two parties organized by the President. Kommersant reminded that Igor Dodon had announced himself not a participant in the process but an independent arbiter. *“The President has thus presented the party leaders as ones responsible for the results of their dialogue. Judging by their statements made afterwards, the meeting was productive,”* the newspaper wrote, and indicated some other signs of a coalition creation between the PSRM and PDM. In Russia, the Moldovan oligarch is wanted as the central figure of two criminal litigations; he is charged of money laundering and of an attempted organization of a contract killing. (www.infotag.md)

- April 5<sup>th</sup>, if snap polls are held, the most favored party will be the Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM), and the results gathered after voting would produce an unpleasant surprise for other political forces, political analyst Anatol Țaranu told MOLDPRES. ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] block's refusal to participate in the political dialogue takes them out of the power equation and chances to reach snap polls are increasing. *“We are now more likely to have a center-left coalition than snap polls, with the probability of 60- 40 percent. After elections,PDM will increase the chances of having more MPs in Parliament, because local elections are specific and require more personal involvement from local candidates. In local elections people need resources, and now the party with the most resources is PDM. In the event of cumulative voting, local plus parliamentary ballot, local candidates will extrapolate their success on the list of PDM, and PDM might accumulate a score that would be a nasty surprise for their opponents,”* he said. If the mechanism of the early elections is triggered, they will most likely be cumulated with the local elections and then the leadership of ACUM bloc will find it difficult to explain to its supporters why they did not come to power and did not form a coalition. In the meanwhile, the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) assessing current situation declared that if a solution cannot be found for the formation of the new Government, there will be snap elections. *“If no progress is registered on this topic in the nearest future, the PSRM sees no other solution than organizing and conducting snap*

parliamentary elections,” a PSRM press release stated. ([www.moldpres.md](http://www.moldpres.md), [www.moldova.org](http://www.moldova.org))

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT

*Political deadlock continues in Moldova after parties failed to form a ruling majority so far. Although snap elections are ahead it is assessed that a coalition of PSRM and PDM has a lot of possibilities to be established. President Dodon benefits from political gap promoting a closer relation between his country and Russia. Moldova is between the Euro-Atlantic structures on the one hand and the Russian influence on the other. Political situation in the country is alarming and the EU has hardened its policy towards Moldova pushing for more reforms which will strengthen state's transparency, accountability, and democratic values. The current Government has walked into dangerous paths which support corruption and organized crime and deep and determined justice reforms are needed. The U.S, EU and IMF express their major concerns. The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Moldova; First of all Russia maintains military forces in Transnistrian ground and secondly it shares common borders with Ukraine which cannot go unnoticed by international stakeholders. The “Transnistria case” is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.*



**MONTENEGRO:** April 1<sup>st</sup>, political columnist and analyst from Belgrade Vlatko Sekulovic said that after the signing of the “Agreement on the future” the protests in Montenegro will be under the influence of those political forces that have clearer ideas, simpler messages, and stronger motivational capacity, such as the Democratic Front (Demokratski Front

- DF) and the Socialist People's Party of Montenegro (Socijalistička Narodna Partija Crne Gore - SNP). Therefore, the goal of the protest cannot be separated from the goals of these political forces. Sekulovic, a former Head of the Serbian delegation for the negotiations on the application of CEFTA, believes that the DF and the SNP act as Serbs and the SPC believers, confirming that they are “*the wing of the non-parliamentary political party of the SPC.*” As for the authorities, the main challenge will be the “*challenge of justness.*” “*Not only economic development nor improvement of the work of institutions, including judicial ones, is enough, but also greater inclusiveness and affirmation of human potentials, especially for young people, based on professional and personal qualities,*” Sekulovic estimated in an interview with Dnevne novine. According to him the protests were always political, as they included demand for certain political changes, in the personal sense. ([www.rtcg.me](http://www.rtcg.me))

- April 4<sup>th</sup>, the leader of the opposition True Montenegro (Prava Crna Gora - PCG) party Marko Milacic burned down a NATO flag in the center of the country's capital Podgorica, while others carried photos of killed people in NATO 1999 bombing of the then Yugoslavia, the Beta news agency reported. During the event on the occasion of the NATO 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the sirens went off as a reminder of the 78 days of NATO air campaign to halt, as they said, Belgrade's oppression of Kosovo Albanians. “*Happy birthday NATO and let it be your last one,*” Milacic said, adding it was the largest NATO flag anyone ever burned in the history of the Alliance. He added his message was that NATO “*is an undemocratic organization which kills innocent people around the world*” and that the burning



flag was “a flame of freedom which should be seen in Washington and Brussels.” Montenegro's Defense Ministry said it was yet another failed performance by those who would take Montenegro back to “the Balkans mud of conflicts and lagging behind the democratic and advanced world.” Montenegro joined NATO in June 2017 and became the third ex-Yugoslav republic to be a part of the Alliance after Slovenia and Croatia. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- April 4<sup>th</sup>, Defense Minister Predrag Boskovic assessed that NATO today is not a military alliance, but an alliance that promotes 70 years of rule of law, protection of human rights and democracy. Namely, Boskovic congratulated 70 years of the NATO alliance. He pointed out that the allies were gathered around key values and principles, to which they are infinitely committed and which are a solid guarantee foundation of stability and longevity. “NATO is more credible today than ever, it is preserving the security of our territory, but it designs stability beyond its borders. Our credibility is based on adaptability, efficient confrontation with modern security challenges and a strong unity of allies,” Boskovic said. He expressed the belief that the Alliance is able to respond to all future tasks if “we remain united in diversity and committed to the principle of “all for one - one for all.” (www.rtcg.me)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Massive protests against the President and high officials disturbed a period of “euphoria”, emerging state's problems such as corruption, media freedom, and nepotism. Protest movement and opposition parties reached an agreement to join forces for toppling the Government ensuring fair and free elections. Of course, under these

circumstances polarization of political situation could not be excluded undermining the EU process of the country. The EP assessment was positive praising the state's efforts to implement major reforms, but on the other hand it underlined the problems of the rule of law, media freedom, corruption, money laundering, and organized crime. However, the EP stated that Montenegro under certain conditions may be able to access the EU by 2025. It is assessed that the EU and U.S strongly supports the President Djukanovic and the Montenegrin Government despite corruption accusations as being the only loyal partner committed to the Western orientation of the state. In other words the west is closing its eyes in lack of democratic values and rule of law due to geopolitical interests namely Russian influence. The Government promotes state's political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. Although the Government takes concrete measures against corruption, organized crime, and money laundering it is assessed that a lot should be done to reach such a level of economic activity; mainly in the field of public administration, public sector corruption, and money laundering. Imprisonment of opposition MPs is a worrying and alarming sign regarding rule of law and democratic values in the country. Montenegro shows activity within NATO trying to prove that it is an equal partner of the alliance with military capacity according to NATO standards. Moreover, it tries to modernize and strengthen its operational capabilities and in this context it raised its defense budget aiming at purchasing new assets such as armored vehicles. Establishment of a credible and effective system of Armed Forces reservists will strengthen defense capabilities of its Armed Forces.



**NORTH MACEDONIA:** April 2<sup>nd</sup>, for the first time since Greece's northern neighbor became independent in 1991, a Greek leader has visited the newly renamed North Macedonia. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras completed a deal in January 2018 to end their three-decade name row, and the two countries are now seeking to boost their relations. Counterpart Zoran Zaev greeted him with a “selfie” outside the Government building. *“The first Prime Minister of Greece to visit North Macedonia. Truly historic day,”* he wrote on social media. The Greek Prime Minister was accompanied by 10 Ministers and more than 100 business leaders. The two men signed a series of agreements before holding a joint news conference, in which Zaev spoke for his counterpart as a *“close, personal friend.”* Arriving in Skopje, Tsipras the visit began by crossing the Friendship motorway, which name was changed from Alexander of Macedonia motorway in February 2018 as part of efforts to improve relations. Greeks long accused their neighbors of trying to appropriate the ancient heritage of Alexander and of having territorial ambitions. Zaev said there would be big economic benefits from the deal with Greece. The two leaders convened the first co-operation council between the neighbors and they agreed to open a second border crossing. Under the deal, a joint committee of experts has been formed to assess possible bias in school textbooks, and Tsipras said their consultations had ended in a positive manner. Ahead of his arrival, Tsipras gave an interview with media in North Macedonia in which he acknowledged that *“a significant portion of the Greek people was and still is seriously concerned about this issue.”* An opinion poll late last month suggested 73% of Greeks *“probably disagreed”* with the Prespa agreement.

He said he and Zaev had a responsibility to show how both countries could build mutual trust and benefit from the new deal. Both leaders have endured difficult political opposition at home. Tsipras faces elections later this year, with conservative leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis backing Greeks in the Macedonia region who he said felt humiliated by the agreement. Zaev has himself been bitterly criticized by President Gjorge Ivanov. ([www.mia.mk](http://www.mia.mk), [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com))

- April 3<sup>rd</sup>, North Macedonia's entry into NATO is fraught with destabilization of the Balkan Peninsula, and NATO's enlargement into the Balkans is bad for European security, the newspaper Izvestia quoted Russian Permanent Representative to the European Union Vladimir Chizhov as saying on Wednesday. *“We realize that the entire escapade with the Prespa Agreement [renaming of F.Y.R.O.M] was planned for the sake of soonest involvement of Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M] into NATO. The situation looks pretty clear to us; the country is being pushed into the alliance. This has a negative effect on European security and stability in the Balkan region. NATO's enlargement is an attempt at dealing with challenges posed by the 21<sup>st</sup> century with means and mechanisms devised in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in a different era and with different objectives,”* Chizhov said. The emotional altercation between Greece and North Macedonia has been resolved, but the way it has been done raises many questions, he said. The country was renamed in violation of its Constitution, despite what the President said, and on the basis of the referendum, which validity was not confirmed, Chizhov said. *“According to leading Greek politicians, 70% of Greeks opposed the decision [a substantial part of the population demanded a more drastic change of the neighbor country's*



name]. I believe the situation is similar in Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M]. Renaming the country is the simplest part of the story. Lots of other questions arise. For instance, who lives in this country and what language do they speak? All these issues give rise to highly sensitive emotions in Greece,” Chizhov said. (www.mia.mk, www.iz.ru)

- March 29<sup>th</sup>, the Special Police Forces of North Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo have conducted the first Police training in Skopje, simulating combat actions for the arrest of dangerous people. The purpose of this exercise, according to the representatives of the Ministries of the respective states was to intensify cooperation, increase security in the region, fight against crime and illegal trafficking. *“This cooperation represents a strong signal in our commitment to maintaining security and stability in the region,”* North Macedonia’s Interior Minister Oliver Spasovski said. Such cooperation will continue in the future according to the Minister of Internal Affairs of Kosovo, Ekrem Mustafa . *“With this exercise we have achieved the goal of proving that our Police and units are prepared to guarantee security for our citizens and beyond,”* the Minister said. The training was held at the Police polygon in Skopje and it was supported by the US Embassy in North Macedonia. (www.mia.mk)

- April 6<sup>th</sup>, Defense Minister Radmila Sekerinska confirmed that Turkey demands steps to counter the Fethullah Gulen supporters in North Macedonia and warned that failure to extradite them could lead to delays in the Turkish ratification of the North Macedonian NATO membership. Previously, Interior Minister Oliver Spasovski said that Turkey has been delivered a list of 15 people demanding their extradition.

These are North Macedonia’s residents who are accused by Turkey of cooperating with the FETO organization led by Fethullah Gulen which has been characterized by Turkish authorities as a terrorist one after accusations that it is involved in the failed coup in 2016. *“I do not see a direct correlation in the request but I am convinced that it will influence the speed with which Turkish authorities handle the ratification of our NATO accession,”* Sekerinska said. Turkey has long demanded that North Macedonia should approach the issue of FETO activities seriously. This includes the operation of FETO funded schools. National Defense Minister Hulusi Akar during his visit in Skopje said that Turkey has shared information regarding the Gulenist Terror Group (FETO) and its members with the authorities in North Macedonia. Akar added that Ankara believes that the country will take necessary actions against the group in the near future. *“I believe with that there will be significant developments and the North Macedonian side will take necessary steps,”* Akar told a joints press meeting with Sekerinska. He confirmed that the Turkish authorities have shared information on some of the FETO ringleaders with the related institutions in North Macedonia. At the press meeting, Akar also underscored that Turkey attaches great significance to peace and stability in the Balkan region and particularly in North Macedonia. He said that Turkey has exerted efforts to support North Macedonia in all fields since 1992. The Minister also underlined the military ties between the two countries have substantially enhanced. *“Up until today, 1,200 soldiers from North Macedonia trained in Turkey. Many Macedonian soldiers have been participating in different military exercises,”* Akar added. The Minister reiterated that it is known that some members of FETO reside in North

Macedonia. He said that Ankara believes that the country will take actions, and added that “we trust the authorities of North Macedonia.” (www.republica.mk, www.dailysabah.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Ratification of NATO accession protocol by the member states proceeds rapidly. However, the Defense Minister Sekerinska expressed her concerns over possible delays regarding the Turkish ratification process implying somekind of “blakmail.” Sekerinska said publically that Turkey has requested extradition of 15 people living in North Macedonia claiming ties with FETO; it is an issue which may affect on North Macedonia – Turkey relations. Zaev and his Government focus on domestic affairs trying to benefit by the successful name agreement. The ruling SDSM announced that it will not call for early parliamentary elections along with the presidential one. As it was assessed, the Government seeks to fully capitalize its gains from NATO accession and a possible opening of accession negotiations with the EU (June 2019). VMRO-DPMNE will strengthen its nationalistic rhetoric due to the coming presidential elections seeking to elect its own presidential candidate. However, the ruling coalition SDSM-DUI presented its own common candidate, Stevo Pendarovski. Polarization of state’s political life including low scale violent incidents could not be excluded during the pre-electoral campaign especially if VMRO-DPMNE realizes that it is not going to elect its own President. In case VMRO-DPMNE presidential candidate (Siljanovska) wins the elections Zaev will call for early parliamentary elections. The EU did not hesitate to send the message that coming presidential elections would be a stress test for state’s opening*

*of accession negotiations. The fact is the country is more stable and more coherent watching its future in a more optimistic way. One could claim that North Macedonia is a country in “identity transition”; name deal with Greece oblige it to change institutional documents, while the law on the use of languages also obliges the state’s institutions to implement changes that are brand new for public services. Too many changes in too little time. The country should focus on its economy and major administrative reforms aiming at reaching the EU standards. The U.S and EU enjoy their success since F.Y.R.O.M moves in their paths far from Russia’s influence. Needless to say that in a period where border questions are raised again in the Balkans F.Y.R.O.M achieved to strengthen its political stability and growth prospects.*



**ROMANIA:** April 5<sup>th</sup>, the triggering of Article 7 on Romania, meaning the suspension of the voting rights in European Parliament, depends on what happens in the next period, European Commissioner for Justice Vera Jourova said in Bucharest. Asked by the journalists about the European Commission reaction if the Government adopts the emergency ordinances to amend the laws of justice, Vera Jourova said “I will not speculate on this issue, Mr. Timmermans was clear yesterday that we want to see positive results of the dialogue. For us the two ordinances are steps towards a very wrong direction and we are waiting for reactions from the Government, with the hope the Government will return to the normal path, which was very positive and successful in the past ten years. I will not speculate on the next steps, but a reaction will exist.” Asked about Article 7, the European Commissioner said “not yet, but it may be a

*decision, we did not hesitate to trigger it against Poland. We need further discussions and it depends on what will take place in Romania in the coming days.*" (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- April 5<sup>th</sup>, Romania's President Klaus Iohannis announced two topics that he passed to the Parliament as national interest and could make the subject of the public referendum envisaged by the president for May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The first one regards the regime of the emergency ordinances (OUG) namely, the Government should be banned from issuing such OUGs in the sensitive area of "criminality" and, separately, the OUGs should be subject to appeal to the Constitutional Court (CC). Currently, only the Ombudsman can appeal an OUG to the CC. The second topic proposed by the President regards banning amnesty and pardon for acts of corruption. *"Today, we submitted to the Parliament a letter on the two topics of national interest that will be subjected to popular consultation, in the referendum held on May 26, along with the European Parliament elections,"* the Presidency announced. *"Zero tolerance for corruption by prohibiting amnesty and pardon is the most appropriate way to continue the fight against corruption,"* Iohannis commented. (www.romania-insider.com)

- April 5<sup>th</sup>, "Sea Shield - 19," the largest multinational exercise in the Black Sea, organized by the Romanian Navy, takes place between April 5<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019 in the Romanian and international waters of the Black Sea. A total of 14 Romanian military ships and six military ships from Bulgaria, Canada, Greece, the Netherlands, and Turkey with a total of approximately 2,200 troops participate in this year's exercise. They will practice joint battlegrounds against underwater, surface and air threats, tailored to the typology of

security threats in the Black Sea region, according to the Romanian Navy. The Romanian Navy participates with two frigates, two corvettes, two missile-carrying ships, two sea dredgers, two ships for combat divers, three tugboats, a detachment of EOD divers (specializing in the fight against underwater threats), two mobile rocket launchers, and other support vessels, as well as distinct specialized structures. Meanwhile, the Romanian Air Force will use MIG 21 LanceR and F-16 against air threats, and the US and Turkish naval forces will operate with two maritime patrol aircraft. The Romanian Land Forces will also be present with a detachment of the Brigade 9 "Marasesti," which job will be to protect the terrestrial communications routes and the port of Constanta. At the same time, the NATO Allied Maritime Command (MARCOM) will be represented by the Standing Maritime Group SNMG-2 operating in the Black Sea starting on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, consisting of vessels from Bulgaria, Canada, the Netherlands, Romania, and Turkey. In addition, Greece and Bulgaria will also be present with battle ships. The official start of the exercise was on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and all the participating ships will leave the port on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019 for a week. In the meanwhile, the U.S. is considering selling F-35 fighters to five new nations, including Romania, as European allies consolidate their defenses in the face of a strengthening Russia, a Pentagon official said in front of the Congress on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019 Reuters reported. (www.romania-insider.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Political struggle between the President Klaus Iohannis and Government has been transformed into an "open battle" leading the political*

functionality in a deadlock. Iohannis announced a referendum on justice issue together with the European elections on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019. It is another initiative which pushes further the Government over its decisions on manipulating justice system. 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. Under these circumstances, it is assessed that political climate will be fully polarized affecting Romania's political stability. Romania took over the Presidency of the Council of EU facing criticism and non-confidence by the EU member states' high officials. The state looks divided in major institutional issues such as national defense, justice, and security. In this context, one should add the direct European Parliament warning for activating article 7 of the EU Treaty (suspending certain rights of an EU member state when a country is considered at risk of breaching the EU's core values). The state faces political abnormality in many levels which at the moment could be resolved only by early parliamentary elections. The Prime Minister's announcement of transferring Romanian Embassy in Israel from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem harmed the state's relations with Arab world increasing security risk in the country. It should be noticed that foreign policy is a very complex field with sensitive balances. In this context, it is assessed that Dancila's announcement was on wrong time and without further analysis. In other words it is not very clear how such an initiative (transfer of the Embassy) could benefit the state's interests. Romania according to NATO strategic and operational planning has become an advanced base close to Russia. Its strategic importance and role has been upgraded and high level NATO exercises take place in its territory. Consequently,

Russia reacts mainly against the NATO military base in Deveselu where anti-missile defense systems have been deployed.



**SERBIA:** April 3<sup>rd</sup>, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurtz said that any solution to Kosovo issue should have the support of the great powers, especially among the UN Security Council members, adding close cooperation with the US was also crucial, the FoNet news agency reported. In an interview with the Cord magazine, Kurtz said Serbia belongs to the European Union, but warned that Serbia's people should be aware that without a comprehensive normalization between Belgrade and Pristina the EU membership would not be possible. Kurtz has said the stability is not given; it demands political courage for solving bilateral conflicts. He added Vienna strongly supported Belgrade's European path, as well as that of the whole region, but that it meant many reforms some of which Serbia, led by President Aleksandar Vucic, had already implemented. Speaking about a solution to Kosovo problem, Kurtz commented his words that the division of Kosovo would be acceptable although the EU, and notably Germany, were vehemently against it. "I said we would support everything the two sides agree on, but undoubtedly any solution must contribute to the stability and not create additional instability (in the region). I am convinced that it is achievable," he said. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- April 4<sup>th</sup>, anti-government demonstrations "1 in 5 million" continued in Serbia on Thursday with speakers calling on people to gather in Belgrade on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019 for a rally scheduled last month when the organizers and opposition gave a 30-days deadline to the regime to step down, media reported. The rally was held in the northern

town of Zrenjanin, where professor Cedomir Cupic told the crowd that *“only one man in Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, wrests democracy in the name of democracy, aided by greedy servants.”* Zrenjanin people were called to boycott the private Pink television considered close to the regime. Belgrade protesters announced they would walk to the Pink TV building next Saturday. In the central town of Trstenik, an opposition member to Serbia’s Parliament told the crowd that the whole country would be in Belgrade on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Miroslav Aleksic, from the People's Party (Narodna Stranka - NS), said *“Serbia is awakened. After seven years of the institutional destruction, raising poverty and misery, increasing crime and corruption and the insults on people’s intelligence, the end of (President Aleksandar) Vucic’s autocratic regime is closing.”* Another protest was held in the central town of Topola during which people were also called to join the April 13<sup>th</sup> rally in Belgrade. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- April 5<sup>th</sup>, the presence of the Albanian army in the northern part of Mitrovica was *“deliberate and planned,”* Aleksandar Vucic has said. The goal was to intimidate Serbs in Kosovo and provoke Serbia, the President said. Late on Thursday, the Serb List, a party representing Serbs in Kosovo, asked KFOR to explain the presence of several soldiers from Albania in the northern, Serb part of the ethnically divided town earlier in the day. They were among a large group of international soldiers brought to Kosovo Mitrovica by KFOR, Radio Kontakt Plus reported. Vucic said that it was *“quite logical that the presence of Albanian soldiers brought unease among people”* in the north of Kosovo. *“This is an unambiguous indication to KFOR to pay attention to such things. Take them to Djakovica,*

*but do not take them to northern Mitrovica,”* the Serbian President said, and reiterated that if KFOR fails to do its job and protect Serbs in Kosovo, *“there are those who will.”* Commenting on announcements that former US secretaries of state Madeleine Albright and Hillary Clinton will visit Pristina on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019 on the occasion of the anniversary of KFOR's entry into Kosovo, Vucic said that this was as expected, because the two had been involved in *“creating an independent Kosovo.”* *“It is their baby, they were creating an independent Kosovo contrary to the norms of international public law, which a majority of humankind sees today, and we will make sure that the Trump administration, too, sees who has created an independent Kosovo,”* the Serbian President said. (www.b92.net)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

*Serbia has entered in a period of fragile political stability due to citizens’ reactions against governmental practices regarding human rights, media freedom, and elections transparency. People protest in the streets, while opposition starts to take action. April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019 will be a hard day because protesters and opposition are prepared for a massive protest. Vucic is thinking of snap elections, but he has to balance a lot of things before his final decision. June 2019 is a possible time for early elections, but it would be determined by developments on Belgrade – Pristina dialogue progress and especially by Kosovo’s decision to remove 100% taxes on Serbian products. It is more likely early elections to be called on spring 2020. Serbia has followed so far a successful diplomatic strategy regarding Kosovo achieving to be appeared in the international community as a reasonable voice seeking a compromise resolution via dialogue.*



*Serbia realizes that time runs in favor of it and knows that Kosovo will become more and more nervous as long as it cannot get Serbia's recognition. On the other hand Serbia strengthens its relations with Russia (and China) seeking stronger support regarding Kosovo case. Security situation is complex and uncertain since Serbia apart from political and diplomatic means has engaged its military and security forces. The Armed Forces are in high readiness alert but Vucic tried to de-escalate situation by stating that war is not a possible solution. However, none could predict Serbia's reaction in a possible accidental or pre-planned (provocation included) incident in Northern Kosovo against local Serbs. One should have in mind that top state officials have said in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. At the moment, Serbia looks like acting in accordance with the international law aiming at reducing tension in the region. In other words state's leadership is acting in a "reasonable" and "wise" way avoiding mistakes of the past which have isolated Serbia from the international community. Of course, under these circumstances none could speak for restarting of Belgrade – Pristina dialogue. There are certain analysts who claim that such situation will inevitably lead in Kosovo partition with the north part going to Serbia. Some of them claim that this scenario has already agreed by Vucic and Thaci. Serbian repayment will be Kosovo recognition. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its armed forces. It receives new MIG-29 fighter jets from Belarus and reinforced with a new modern artillery battery.*



**SLOVENIA:** April 2<sup>nd</sup>, President Borut Pahor, the Supreme Commander of Slovenian Armed Forces, and Defense Minister Carl Erjavec have endorsed the Chief of Armed Forces General Staff, Major General Alenka Ermenc, after there have been speculations in the media she is facing dismissal. Pahor said “he could not imagine a third replacement of the Head of the Armed Forces in a year,” referring to Ermenc replacing last November Alan Geder, who was at the post only nine months after replacing Andrej Osterman in February 2018. The President stressed that he cannot see any valid reasons for Ermenc dismissal. Erjavec also expressed his support to the Chief of Armed Forces General Staff saying that he had not considered replacing her. Slovenia's first female Chief of General Staff and currently the only woman serving in such a position in NATO was reported to lose the ruling coalition's support due to a rumored dispute between her and Erjavec, the Government's general dissatisfaction with her work, and health reasons. Pahor pointed out that Slovenia had increased defense budget and called for joined support of Ermenc and her efforts to regenerate and modernize the Armed Forces fulfilling the 2020 goal of the Armed Forces's positive assessment, set up by Erjavec in November 2018. In the meanwhile, at the proposal of Ermenc, Erjavec signed the resolution of dismissal of the Slovenian Armed Forces, Force Commander, Brigadier General Miha Skerbinc. Skerbinc was dismissed due to fire shootings of heavy weapons to the disputed military training field of Pocek, near to the Postojna city. At the same time he appointed the Chief of Staff of the Force Command Brigadier General Milan Zurman to temporarily lead the Command. ([www.sta.si](http://www.sta.si), [www.vecer.com](http://www.vecer.com))

- April 5<sup>th</sup>, the Chief of Armed Forces General Staff, Major General Alenka Ermenc handed over to the President and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Borut Pahor the annual report on the Armed Forces operational readiness. The Slovenian Armed Forces received once again a negative assessment regarding operations of high-intensity crisis situations and a sufficient assessment for peacekeeping operations. However, the Slovenian Armed Forces are capable in performing unforeseen civilian tasks in the field of protection against natural and other disasters, transport of human organs, support to the police in border protection, and search and rescue in rough mountainous regions. Pahor stressed that the Armed Forces are carrying out all tasks in accordance with the defense law, but they face problems in conducting effectively operations of maximum intensity. According to him, the key problems affecting the Armed Forces readiness, both for action in peace, in emergency situations and in war, are the lack of personnel, armaments and equipment. Defense Minister Karl Erjavec said that the readiness assessment is the same as it was in 2017 underlying that he is aware of what kind of measures should be taken in order the Armed Forces increase their operational capabilities. *"I immediately decided that a White Paper on Defense is needed, which will provide answers on how we will achieve those objectives that are required by the Defense Act. The White Paper is under preparation and it will soon be known how the defense sector will face key challenges,"* Erjavec said. The Armed Forces have been deeply in trouble since at least 2014, when Pahor stated that *"they are at the lowest level of operational capabilities."* (www.vecer.com)

- April 5<sup>th</sup>, the Prime Minister, Marjan Sarec expressed concern over the news that the Croatian Intelligence Agency (SOA) is behind the wire-tapping of Slovenia's arbitrator and agent in the border arbitration. *"If this is the modus operandi in the EU, we are concerned,"* Sarec said. He said that the Head of the Slovenian Intelligence Agency (SOVA) has presented behind closed doors situation in this case and in the Balkans generally to the Government's members. *"I will not go in details because these are matters of national security and the Intelligence Agency and it is not wise to talk too much about them,"* Sarec said adding that what he heard is worrying. *"On the one hand we are satisfied because the Intelligence Agency is doing good job, but on the other we are concerned if this is the modus operandi within the EU and if this is how countries which are supposed to be treated each other friendly,"* he said. News portal 24ur.com reported that SOA was the one which wire-tapped the phone calls between the arbitrator Jernej Sekolec and the agent Simona Drenik, who were not allowed to communicate with each other in July 2015. After the recordings of the talks were leaked, Croatia declared the arbitration process irrevocably tainted. Even though Sekolec and Drenik resigned and the Tribunal decided that the breach was not too grave as to derail the process, Croatia declared that it will not accept the arbitration award. Sarec stressed that the arbitration process has concluded and solving the border dispute through arbitration was a precondition for Slovenia's support to Croatia's EU membership. The Croatian side rejected any involvement of its Intelligence Service with Foreign Ministry State Secretary for European Affairs, Metelko Zgombic stating that *"she does not know where the Slovenian Prime Minister got such information."* (www.sta.si)



## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. 2019 budget is the new field of political struggle with the opposition SDS claiming that it is unconstitutional, while the Government insists that does not breach the Constitution. If SDS achieves to find the necessary support from other opposition parties the Constitutional Court will decide about the budget's "fate." However, it is a fact that the budget of 2019 projects excessive expenditure putting at risk the fiscal policy of the country; that is why the Fiscal Council has already rejected it. Sarec has been proved of being flexible in Slovenia's politics so far achieving to balance adequately between different political trends. Although Government's stability has been reconfirmed there is some tension due to Sarec agreement with the Left party which is necessary for the Government's viability. Without the left's support the Government would be toppled and early elections should be called. At the moment none of the ruling coalition parties wish snap elections. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc) and at the ruling parties' summit it was paid special attention in tax reform, social care measures, health reform, and private education measures. Tension has been raised again regarding the border dispute with Croatia over Piran Bay due to Croatia's Police violation of Slovenia's territorial waters by boats. It is assessed that such low level skirmishes will continue without major incidents. However, Slovenia implies that such actions may affect its decision regarding Croatia's membership candidacy in Schengen Zone. Slovenia, as it is already known, has filed a lawsuit against Croatia over its refusal to implement the border arbitration. The Slovenian*

*Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The annual report on the Armed Forces operational readiness released by the Armed Forces Chief of Staff is disappointing since it assessed that the Armed Forces have limited operational capabilities in war time namely the cannot accomplish their mission. The med-term 2018 – 2023 defense program it could improve situation, but under current political situation it is doubtful if it will be implemented to the end. More attention should be paid on navy (or coast patrol) assets given the open dispute with Croatia on Piran Bay and Slovenia's weak surveillance and protection capabilities.*



**TURKEY:** April 2<sup>nd</sup>, the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) has lost mayoral elections in the country's three largest cities, Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, in a stunning election setback for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan according to unofficial results published by state-run Anadolu Agency. The official results will be released after the country's election board looks into objections by political parties, who have three days to file their complaints. Anadolu's unofficial data shows Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi - CHP) candidate Ekrem Imamoglu won the heated mayoral race in Istanbul, the country's largest city and economic center, with 48.8% of the vote, while the AKP candidate Binali Yildirim got 48.5%. In the capital, Ankara, unofficial results showed that CHP candidate Mansur Yavas had garnered 50.9%, with the AKP nominee Mehmet Ozhasaki trailing on 47.2%. In the third-largest city, Izmir, the CHP candidate, Mustafa Tunc Soyer, was leading with 58% votes while AKP's Nihat

Zeybekci stood at 38.5%. All of the votes have been counted in the three largest cities. The ruling AKP, which ran as part of the People's Alliance, suffered setback in Sunday's local elections, which were held against the backdrop of Turkey's first recession in a decade while its lira currency lost as much as 40% of its value against the US dollar last year. The race in Istanbul was particularly tight, with both AKP and the CHP claiming victory in Istanbul's mayoral election. Yildirim claimed early on Monday that he had won the race by around 4,000 votes, but later admitted he was 25,000 votes behind Imamoglu from CHP, which is part of the Nation Alliance. According to Galip Dalay, a visiting fellow at the University of Oxford, the results are not a mathematical loss for the AK Party, but they still would not be taken lightly by Erdogan's bloc. *"However, it is a psychological loss as it lost several major cities including the biggest three,"* Dalay, who is also a non-resident fellow at Brookings Institution in Doha, told Al Jazeera. Speaking at a news conference in Istanbul on Sunday, Erdogan acknowledged that his party had lost control in a number of cities and pledged that he would focus on carrying out economic reforms. (www.aljazeera.com)

- April 4<sup>th</sup>, the U.S Vice President Mike Pence warned Turkey that it could risk its membership in NATO if it goes ahead with plans to buy a Russian air defense system despite widespread international opposition. Pence's escalating rhetoric came after Turkey insisted on Wednesday that the Russian deal was done, signaling an apparent impasse between the two NATO allies. Speaking at a NATO 70th anniversary event in Brussels, Pence said Turkey risks expulsion from the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) program, which could cripple Turkish manufacturers who

are making parts for the aircraft. He also raised the possibility of much broader repercussions. *"Turkey must choose. Does it want to remain a critical partner in the most successful military alliance in the history of the world or does it want to risk the security of that partnership by making reckless decisions that undermine our alliance?"* Pence said. Turkey's Vice President Fuad Oktay replied on social media saying that *"The United States must choose"* about whether to remain allied with Ankara. He raised the contentious relationship of U.S support for Kurdish forces in Syria, accusing Washington of *"joining forces with terrorists."* Other US officials have stopped short of threatening Turkey's underlying relationship with the US or NATO over the S-400 purchase, but there have been growing calls for swift action to try to stop the deal, including possible sanctions against Ankara. Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu however, appeared unmoved by the U.S threats, saying that buying the Russian S-400 system *"is a done deal. We will not step back from this."* (www.aljazeera.com)

- April 4<sup>th</sup>, the Turkish military completed preparations for a cross border operation to the region east of the Euphrates River to clear Syrian Kurd forces of People's Protection Units (YPG), which have been posing a national security threat for Ankara, out of northern Syria. *"We are waiting for instructions of the Government for the military operation. Opening a forward operating base was part of these preparations,"* a military source said Thursday, speaking under condition of anonymity. Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) last week opened a forward operating base in southeastern Şanlıurfa province near the Syrian border with the attendance of Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and top military command. The base

is planning to be used as the main command center in case of an operation to the east of Euphrates. In December 2018, Turkish officials announced that Ankara is in preparations for a third offensive in northern Syria, this time east of the Euphrates, which is dominated by YPG. Previously, Turkey conducted two offensives in northern Syria, Operation Olive Branch and Operation Euphrates Shield. The source also indicated that the Manbij road map has been sluggish and slower than initially planned due to the indifferent attitude of the U.S., adding that bilateral talks are ongoing to expedite the process. In order to prevent YPG from tightening their grip in northeast Syria and disrupting peace efforts in the region, Turkey aims to accelerate the Manbij process that was launched in June with the U.S. As part of the deal, Turkey and the U.S. agreed to work on the withdrawal of the YPG from Manbij. The aim of the Manbij deal is to ensure security and stability in the province by eliminating YPG who currently control the region in northern Syria and ultimately handing the administration of the province to a body consisting of local people. The military source also emphasized that the training process for Turkish pilots for the F-35 program continues, and there have been ongoing talks to resolve the recent disagreements on the issue. On Monday, the U.S. halted the delivery of equipment related to the F-35 stealth fighter aircraft to Turkey, marking the first concrete step by Washington to block delivery of the jet to its NATO ally as Turkish officials have refused to back down from the planned purchase of S-400 systems from Russia. (www.dailysabah.com)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT** :

*Local elections were held on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019 in Turkey. Although mathematically and statistically*

*AKP was once again the winner, local elections sent an alarming message to Erdogan. By losing the three big cities (Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir) one could say that the result has a psychological impact to ruling AKP rather than tangible repercussions. Erdogan still enjoys full control of Turkish politics and has the necessary time for initiatives. It seems that he has already received the message by announcing the next day of elections that he will accelerate economic reforms in order to exit the country from the new financial recession. According to analysts economy and security were the main pillars which affected the electoral body. However, there is another factor; Turkish society looks like being fed up with autocratic practices of Erdogan and this is also a strong message against him. There is no current issue of snap elections since AKP maintained its political rates (reduced only by 2% compared with 2014 local elections). Another significant note of these elections is the cooperation between the opposition CHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP; a cooperation which strengthened CHP's candidates in big cities. Turkey faces several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs and journalists are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Turkish – U.S relations have strongly been harmed forcing Ankara to approach new allies such as Russia. Although Turkey maintains its strategic goal of entering the EU, the EU sends strong messages of suspending the EU – Turkey accession talks. Turkish Armed Forces have been engaged in military operations against Kurds and PKK in Northern Iraq and against YPG Kurds in Syria as well. Turkey declares its readiness to intervene militarily in Syria, eastern of Euphrates river but*

*the U.S does not give the “green light” aiming at protecting Syrian Kurds and YPG. Turkey is waiting for the “green light” for establishing a safe zone in Syria but it is doubtful if it will ever get it. Turkey has been developed into a “regional power” engaged actively in regional conflicts seeking to expand its influence and secure its interests. In this context, Turkey is conducting military operations in the territory of two other countries, it threatens to start a new operation in Syria, maintains a significant military force in North Cyprus, and threatens a NATO ally – Greece – with an armed conflict. Apart from the use or the threat of use of direct armed violence Turkey participates actively in diplomatic processes in the region (Syria negotiations, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Cyprus question, Qatar crisis etc). The country demonstrates its interests in Africa by strengthening its presence through various ways (economic, military etc) in several countries such as Somalia, Djibouti etc. Moreover, the state demonstrates decisively its leading role in the wider region of the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and East Mediterranean implementing its doctrine for a diligent capability development effort to be able to fight two multi-front, inter-state armed conflicts while being able to simultaneously carry on large-scale counterterrorism operations at home and beyond borders. It seems that economy is the major Turkish problem which may be emerged as the “Achilles’ heel” for Turkish President Erdogan and his political long reign. It cannot be excluded dramatic developments regarding Turkish economy right after the local elections. 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, Turkey looks like has been isolated from the energy activities in the region.*

*Cyprus, Egypt Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority have established an energy coalition promoting their interests and isolating Turkey. Turkey has proved so far its decisiveness in protecting its interests and it assessed that it will not give up its role in the “energy game” in Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Turkey is ready to start oil and gas drills within the Cypriot EEZ escalating tension which could not exclude an accidental or pre-planned “hot incident.”*

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#### NOTE

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