



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

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

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

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ALBANIA: February 15th, while Germany is preparing to discuss Albania at the EU Council of Ministers, this June, the Director of the “Konrad Adenauer” Foundation, Walter Glos, said that Albania’s case should be postponed after June, since any discussion would influence the coming elections. *“It is the wrong moment, that is why Albania should achieve some results until September, which would help skeptic members to take a positive decision regarding the opening of the negotiations,”* Glos said. Although, this statement did not come from a member of the German Government, it is of special weight due to “Konrad Adenauer’s” credibility and influence indicating that the EU is moving towards that direction. (www.top-channel.tv)

- February 15th, the Minister of Infrastructure, Belinda Nalluku, announced that the Government has finalized the financial agreement with Turkish Airlines, while the company has been able to receive international certifications. *“We have worked to consolidate the technical testing phase and to produce the documents and manuals that lead to the certification. The final process will be completed within 10 days,”* she said. The CEO of Turkish Airlines said that “Air Albania” airplanes will be soon flying carrying passengers. *“We are very proud to cooperate with the Albanian company. The infrastructure is ready, as you have seen. The technical process is completed very carefully.”* The Prime Minister, Edi Rama replied to all critics regarding “Air Albania” saying *“Air Albania, the first national company, a joint venture with Turkey’s flag carrier Turkish Airlines which has launched its first test flight last October is not disappeared or lost, it just needs more time.”* Rama rejected last week’s leaks that Air Albania is heading toward failure.

(www.albaniandailynews.com,

www.top-

channel.tv)

- February 16th, the opposition’s national anti-governmental protest asking for Prime Minister Edi Rama’s withdrawal and a provisional cabinet concluded amid tensions. Thousands of citizens from different parts of the country have gathered in the square in front of the Prime Minister’s office. The first few minutes started amid tension, while Molotov bombs were thrown into the Prime Minister’s office. The protesters broke the line of policemen and gathered at its entrance with big numbers. However, while attempting to get into the door they were repelled from the security forces inside by using water pumps and tear gas. The anti-government rally was called since over a month ago, while opposition leader Lulzim Basha has been touring Albania during this time with the intention of inviting frustrated citizens to join. Opposition is supporting the idea of having a transitional Government that will prepare the country for free and fair elections. Basha insists that chances for political solution have been exhausted and that the time for words is over. Police, on its part, has repeatedly reiterated concerns about the risk of involvement among protesters of criminals, noting even it had information *“that certain people, with criminal records or previously convicted of serious criminal offenses, have been prepared to exert violence in the protest.”* For this reason, it exercised many controls at Tirana’s entry points, especially on vehicles coming from the districts. Basha announced the end of the protest warning *“the revolution will continue until this rotten system comes to an end.”* The country’s President Ilir Meta reacted by calling on all sides to show self-restraint in order to avoid any conflict or violence. In a public

announcement, the US Embassy strongly condemned the violence that took place during the protest namely, the destruction of the Prime Minister's office. In the same line, the EU Delegation to Tirana and embassies of other EU member states called on all parties to show immediate constraint. Meanwhile, some of the protesters have remained in front of the prime minister's office, while Basha declared it will be the citizens themselves who will decide how the protest will carry on. Opposition supporters have been called for a second protest next Thursday, February 21st, 2019. (www.tiranatimes.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political struggle between the Prime Minister, Edi Rama and President, Ilir Meta is ongoing. Both continue to blockade each other's political initiatives and decisions. Opposition organized a huge protest against the Government which ended amid violence between protesters and police forces. Opposition requests Governments resignation, establishment of a provisional Government, and early parliamentary elections. Although opposition puts pressure on the Government, it is assessed that the ruling majority is stable and its collapse is rather unlikely due to opposition's weakness for such an "achievement". However, it is estimated that opposition will try to polarize political atmosphere in the coming period which may lead in violent outbreak in the country. The Government is accused of having links with organized crime and current situation raises questions over the power of "Albanian mafia" in the country and its influence in state's politics. Undoubtedly, corruption and organized crime remains the most significant state's problem undermining its strategic goal of opening

accession negotiations with the EU. The EU closely monitors progress of reforms especially in justice sector. Latest European Parliament assessment on Albania accession negotiations is a rather positive sign underlining concerns over specific issues such as corruption, justice reforms, and implementation of rule of law. The final decision for opening Albania's accession negotiations in June 2019 is up to the EU Heads of Governments. One should underline that unofficial concerns have already been raised regarding this date. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a "mother nation." It is estimated that Albania will fully comply with the EU and U.S "line" for territorial exchanges or border changes between Serbia and Kosovo if it is necessary for a mutual accepted solution. Albania maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and F.Y.R.O.M. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on promoting Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access. Possible border changes may engage Albania in dangerous situations taking into consideration that it has the role of "protector" of Albanians in the region.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

February 11th, improved migration control and management within Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the enhanced control of the country's eastern border are now priorities, the operation group for the migrant issue concluded in a meeting in Sarajevo. Due to weather conditions, the influx of migrants to Bosnia significantly decreased over the winter season and a little more than 1,000 were registered after entering the

country since the beginning of the year. Some 4,000 migrants are currently accommodated in Bosnia, in seven shelters – of which most are located in the northwestern Una-Sana region, the region bordering Croatia. Bosnia's authorities have been struggling with the migrant issue for the whole past year, after dozens of thousands of foreign nationals, coming from various Asian and African countries took to Bosnia, a route to their final destinations in Western Europe. The migrants, who said they have no intention to stay in Bosnia, are now stranded in the northwest of the country, hoping they would eventually enter Croatia and go further to other European countries. Croatia will not let them in, as the larger part of the migrants are illegal and possess no valid documents proving their origin. Minister Mektic said a new wave of migrants is possible in spring this year. *“Since the number of migrants might increase this spring, better migrant control and management within Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the priorities, in order to avoid overbooking of accommodation capacities in the Una-Sana Canton. Also, we agreed that people prone to criminal offences will be relocated to the Immigration Centre in Lukavica,”* a statement issued by the Ministry of Security. Enhancing the control of the country's eastern border in order to reduce the number of migrants' entrances will also be among the top priorities, the group concluded. The European Union's Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) earmarked this year 2 million euro for support and equipping of Bosnia's law enforcement agencies, the statement said, adding that the EU would also finance with 11 million euro the costs of migrants' accommodation, food, and medical services. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- February 12th, Bosnia's Annual National Programme (ANP) for 2018-2019, a precondition for the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), was taken off the Council of Ministers' session agenda for the fourth consecutive time. The State Foreign Minister, Igor Crnadak, asked that the ANP, which was proposed by the State NATO Integration Commission, be removed from the agenda and the State Security Minister Dragan Mektic said that this document should be returned to the Commission because the formal conditions for the Document's adoption have not been met. According to him, the NATO Integration Commission did not finish its job concerning the Document. The ANP is a precondition for the activation of Bosnia's Membership Action Plan (MAP) for NATO after the Alliance approved its activation for the country. But, even though Bosnia adopted a number of laws and regulations saying it will fulfill all the preconditions for the MAP, Bosnian Serbs stand against it. When it comes to Bosnia's NATO membership, its three largest ethnic groups stand divided on the issue. Bosnian Croats and Bosniaks (Muslim Bosnians) support the country's accession, while Bosnian Serbs are strictly against it, saying they will follow Serbia's lead on this. The Serb-dominated Republika Srpska (RS) entity's National Assembly even adopted a Declaration stipulating the entity will remain militarily neutral and that they will not join any military alliance. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- February 13th, the European Parliament (EP) expressed concern over a slowdown in the implementation of reforms in Bosnia and called for the swift formation of authorities following the October 2018 general election, according to a report the EU top institution adopted. The report which assesses the progress Bosnia and

Herzegovina has lately made on the road to possible accession to the EU warned that since mid-2017 there was “a noticeable slowdown” in the adoption of EU-related reforms, despite the country's commitment to it. The country formally applied for membership in February 2016 and is now about to submit the final answers to the European Commission's Questionnaire as a part of the process preceding the EU's opinion on the country's application. Following a recent visit to the EU headquarters in Brussels, Bosnia's State Presidency expressed a wish for the candidate status to be approved by November 1st, 2019 when the new Commission will take office. But a stalemate in the reform implementation may hinder that goal. “The European Parliament reiterates the need for Bosnia and Herzegovina to proceed with constitutional, political and electoral reforms to transform the country into a fully effective, inclusive and functional state based on the rule of law,” said the report which was adopted with 468 votes, while 123 MEPs voted against it and 83 abstained. The Special Rapporteur for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cristian Dan Preda, who prepared the report pointed out that the post-election Government formation must be completed soon. (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Bosnia has not a Government since October 7th, 2018 general elections. It seems that the three main parties representing the three constituent entities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats); HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) are reaching an agreement to cooperate in forming a Government bypassing their different views on main issues. Bosnia's accession process towards NATO is the main disputable issue;

Bosnian Serbs insist that the country should remain neutral staying out of NATO while the two other members of the tripartite Presidency set commitment to NATO accession as a precondition for supporting a Government. The EP released a report urging the three entities to show responsibility and to overcome their differences forming a Government and implementing the necessary reforms towards the EU accession process. Bosnian Serbs insist on blocking any further steps towards Bosnia's accession to NATO. Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust. Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs destabilizing the state. It is more than impressive that Bosnian Serbs and Croats came very close aiming at achieving their special goals. Of course, both entities take in advantage “Dayton Peace Agreement” weaknesses and malfunctions. Russia pays special attention in Serbia and Bosnia in order to maintain its influence in the region. Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and Montenegro have already entered NATO, while F.Y.R.O.M would join the Alliance on June 2019. These two countries (Serbia and Bosnia) are the only “vehicles” for Russia to maintain a narrow influence in Southeastern Europe. Election of ultra nationalist pro-Russian Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia's EU and NATO (mostly) integration. Dodik is a person who does not actually believe in B&H viability and is expected to promote (actually, he has already started) his own political agenda. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey approach the country mainly through “investments” and/or funding ethnic or religious groups according to their interests.



BULGARIA: February 11th, Bulgaria should be ready for malicious cyber attacks, the Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev said warning that there is no election process excluded from such attempts. Election processes are within Donchev's portfolio as Deputy Head of Government. Bulgaria has scheduled to go to the polls twice in 2019, in European Parliament elections in May 2019 and local elections in the autumn same year. Donchev's comment came a day after Tsvetan Tsvetanov, parliamentary leader of Prime Minister Boiko Borissov's centre-right Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Граждани за европейско развитие на България – GERB) party, said that he is sure that Russia would try to interfere in Bulgaria's elections this year. Donchev said that in 2015, when Bulgaria held municipal elections in October, along with a national referendum on the electoral code there had been a *“powerful cyber-attack.”* This had been an attempt to halt the electoral process, he said. *“It is normal not only to expect, but to be prepared for any kind of attempts to mislead the electoral process,”* he said. In a television interview on February 10th, 2019, Tsvetanov, asked whether Russia would try to intervene in the upcoming elections in Bulgaria in 2019, replied *“I am sure.”* However, Russia's Ambassador to Bulgaria Anatoly Makarov commented Tsvetanov's statements rejecting his allegations of an expected Russian intervention in the elections in Bulgaria. (www.balkan.eu.com, www.novinite.com)

- February 12th, Bulgaria's Defense Minister Krassimir Karakachanov has suspended the procedure for a 2.5 million euro contract to overhaul the Air Force's Antonov An-30 aircraft because of errors including a wrong internet

address and a lack of specification of which currency is involved. This is the latest episode in which a Bulgarian Defense Ministry procurement has had to be suspended because of errors in documentation. The tender regarding the overhaul of the An-30, which is used for aerial photography, has served in Open Skies missions and been used for emergency transports, provided incorrect contact data. Tender's documentation did not also specify whether the currency involved was leva or euro. The amount that had been set aside for the overhaul is 5 million leva, excluding Value Added Tax. Bulgarian media quoted Karakachanov as saying that the violations could not be eliminated without changing the terms of the procedure. In 2018, the acquisition of four training aircrafts for the Bulgarian Air Force was suspended because of allegations that the tender was deliberately biased in favor of a particular potential supplier. The Defense Ministry also suspended a tender for the repair of Mi-17 and Mi-24 helicopters because the documentation failed to specify how many helicopters were to be repaired. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- February 14th, officials in Bulgaria said they have frozen several bank accounts that received millions of euro transferred from Venezuela's state-owned oil company. Chief Prosecutor Sotir Tsatsarov said that the money was meant to be eventually sent to accounts abroad. *“All measures have been taken so that the funds that are still in the accounts....will be fully under our control and not leave the country on false grounds,”* he said. Tsatsarov said charges for money laundering would likely be pressed against the accounts' owner, a Bulgarian citizen who is currently out of the country. *“Our Government is working very closely with Bulgaria and other EU members to*

ensure that the wealth of the people of Venezuela is not stolen,” the U.S Ambassador to Sofia, Eric Rubin said. The State Agency for National Security checks a Bulgarian bank for money transfers received from Venezuela. The alert was received in Bulgaria by the U.S services. The Prime Minister Boyko Borisov met with U.S Ambassador and the Heads of the Special Service and the Prosecutor's Office to talk on the issue. The Bulgarian Financial Intelligence has confirmed the person received the money as well as the bank accounts. Once the entire money transfer channel has been clarified, criminal proceedings for money laundering will be initiated, the Chief Prosecutor explained. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots looks like the vulnerable piece of the Governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus, Bulgaria has entered in a period of fragile political stability. The President Radev grabs every opportunity to criticize the Government (and the Prime Minister Borisov) highlighting his different political affiliation (Radev is backed by the opposition Socialists). Opposition BSP tries to push further Borisov and his Government by strengthening its rhetoric and having tabled three motions of no confidence so far. The country strengthened its efforts towards entering the Eurozone achieving a positive decision of the Eurogroup. However, the EC made clear that Bulgaria could not enter the Eurozone before 2022. Apart from that the European Parliament adopted a resolution for the accession of Bulgaria (and Romania) in Schengen Zone. However, it is questioned if the European Council will receive a

unanimous final decision for Bulgaria under the current migration pressure. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles and should be addressed decisively. Although modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc) military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards. Security situation stable; no major threats.



CROATIA: February 11th, the President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, apologised for the controversial statements about “*Italian Istria and Italian Dalmatia*” he had made on Sunday while attending a commemoration of the victims of the mass killings of Italians in the aftermath of World War II at the Basovizza pit near the Italian town of Trieste. Speaking at the event, Tajani said “*Long live Trieste, long live Italian Istria, long live Italian Dalmatia,*” Italian media reported. The words caused outrage in Croatia and Slovenia, with officials of both countries calling them an example of historical revisionism. Tajani issued a statement, saying his words were misinterpreted. “*It was not my intention to offend anyone. I just wanted to send a message of peace between peoples, so that what happened never happens again,*” Tajani said. He said his speech was meant to highlight peace between the three nations, and their contribution to the European project. “*My reference to Istria and Italian Dalmatia was in no way a territorial claim. I was referring to the Istrian and Dalmatian Italian-language exiles, their children and grandchildren, many of whom were present at the ceremony,*” he said. Croatian top state officials strongly

condemned Tajani's words, with Prime Minister and leader of the ruling centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ) Andrej Plenkovic, saying the statement has elements of territorial claims and revisionism. *“I spoke to Tajani today. I told him we were extremely displeased with such a statement, which is inappropriate, and we requested an explanation,”* Plenkovic said. Croatian President, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, condemned Tajani's words as well, adding she would notify Italian and EU institutions on the issue, while Croatian Foreign Minister, Marija Pejcinovic-Buric, said *“Such statements are not conducive to reconciliation, coexistence and all civilization values on which the European Union was built.”* She added the statements were particularly problematic coming from a high-ranking official representing the European Parliament, an EU institution which was created so that war never happens in Europe again. (www.n1info.com)

- February 14th, in December 2018 industrial production dropped by 2.7% year-on-year in the EU, with Croatia among EU countries recording one of the largest drops, Eurostat reported. Croatia had posted a 6.6% year-on-year drop in December 2018, with only Ireland and Spain recording even larger declines, at 19.8% and 6.7% respectively. The smallest decrease was in non-durable consumer goods which include products intended to be consumed immediately or with a short lifespan, such as food, beverages, shoes, clothing, and fuels which inched down 0.2%. Industrial production figures published by Eurostat are used to measure changes in the volume of output of the industrial sector, which includes all manufacturing, mining, and utilities. (www.n1info.com)

- February 14th, NATO members Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia, along with non-member Austria, have signed a letter of intent to establish a five-country Regional Special Operations Component Command (R-SOCC), which is expected to improve the capabilities of their special forces. The four NATO allies, led by Hungary, and in partnership with Austria, will work together to form a deployable R-SOCC for small-scale joint special forces operations, NATO said in a press release. The letter of intent was signed on Wednesday, on the margins of a two-day meeting of NATO Defense Ministers in Brussels. On behalf of Croatia, the letter was signed by Assistant Defense Minister Petar Mihatov, who stood in for Minister Damir Krsticevic. Krsticevic did not attend the meeting himself because of a parliamentary debate on the failed purchase of F-16 Barak fighter jets from Israel. *“This command will increase dramatically the ability of these five nations to effectively employ their special forces. The non-permanent structure of the R-SOCC enables each participant to use its own contributions separately, while benefiting from the integrated R-SOCC structure, once activated for a deployment,”* NATO said. The new multi-national command will be developed in line with NATO standards, leveraging the expertise of NATO's Special Operations Headquarters in Mons, Belgium. While primarily intended for NATO and EU operations, the command would also be able to participate in other multilateral missions, exercises or trainings. (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 assessed that Croatia's strategic goal is to amend "Dayton Peace Agreement" achieving to recognize Bosnian Croats as a third entity in the country. It is more than obvious that Croatia tries to establish a leading role in Western Balkans not only as an EU and NATO member state but also as a rising "local" (Western Balkans) power. One should take into consideration that Croatia shows its military strength and capabilities quite often not only in international, but also in national level sending strong messages to neighboring countries. Apart from that, Croatia pays special attention in energy strategy and security announcing ambitious projects. Although the President is a member of the ruling party, it is estimated that there is some kind of political distance between the President and Government. However, the state enjoys political stability. Border dispute on Piran Bay remains active and Slovenia's initiative to file a lawsuit against Croatia adds a new chapter between the two countries conflict. It is still a question how Croatia will react. The state accelerates its efforts towards accession in Schengen zone. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Failure to complete successfully the purchase of a modern fighter jet maintains a long period of an ineffective and weak Croatian Air Force.



CYPRUS: February 11th, energy should become a catalyst for peace, prosperity and energy security in the region, the House speakers of Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece said following the first-ever trilateral parliamentary summit. In a joint statement following the summit in Nicosia the parliamentary Presidents of the

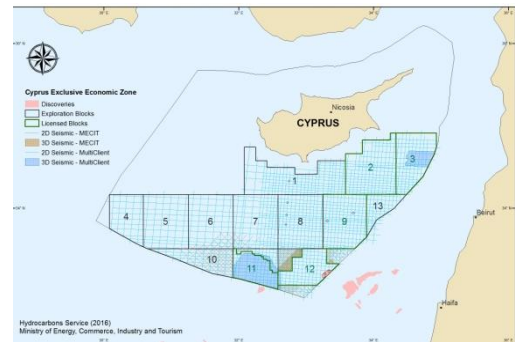
three countries adopted a joint statement agreeing to meet again in Greece next year for the second such meeting and in Egypt for the third one. In the statement Cypriot speaker Demetris Syllouris, Egypt's Ali Abdel Aal and Greece's Nikolaos Voutsis stressed the importance of parliamentary cooperation between the three countries based on shared values and principles. The focus of the summit was on joint initiatives and actions, which aim at further promoting energy saving, energy efficiency and environmental protection and at combating marine pollution. With regard to tourism the joint statement said that ways to further promote cooperation with joint packages was discussed. In education they discussed possible ways to further foster mutual understanding and closer people-to-people relations including promoting and teaching Arabic and Greek. *"It is a cooperation without exclusions, based on a common vision, of peaceful coexistence, good neighborhood relations, international law principles, mutual respect and cooperation for the prosperity of people in the region,"* Syllouris said. In terms of the energy issue, he made reference to Turkey's provocation in Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone and expressed the Cypriot people's thanks to his Greek and Egyptian counterparts for their countries' support. Voutsis spoke of the goal served by trilateral cooperation mechanisms developed by Cyprus, Greece and other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean to promote *"peace, stability and growth."* Egypt's House of Representatives Abdel Aal said the meeting conveyed a message *"to all countries who try to prevent Eastern Mediterranean countries from exploiting natural wealth in the Mediterranean, be it natural gas or other forms of natural wealth, which is huge,"* adding *"The meeting is of particular importance since in reality it is the*

founding meeting of a trilateral cooperation mechanism between the Parliaments of Egypt, Cyprus and Greece. It would become an example for others to follow.” (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- February 11th, the Total is committed to continuing its exploration work in Cyprus, Chief Executive Patrick Pouyanne told Reuters, part of a major exploration campaign for 2019 focused on areas known to contain commercial levels of oil and gas. Speaking on the sidelines of an energy forum in Cairo, Pouyanne said he is discussing “*the extension of our future drillings*” and committed to new exploration. Total operates offshore exploration block 11 southwest of Cyprus; it also holds a 50% stake in block 6. Last November, Total and ENI applied for an exploration licence in block 7 of the island’s Exclusive Economic Zone. Block 7 is adjacent to both blocks 6 and 11. The Government had invited bids on block 7 from companies already licensed to explore offshore Cyprus. Energy Minister Giorgos Lakkotrypīs said at the time that this option had been chosen rather than launching another licensing round because “*there are particular geological reasons related to the Calypso discovery.*” The Calypso field is located in block 6 where Italy’s ENI carried out an exploratory drill last year and is believed to hold between six and eight trillion cubic feet of natural gas. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- February 14th, exploratory drilling for gas by ExxonMobil in offshore block 10 is ongoing, and announcements will be made once the operations have been concluded, the Government said. The Energy Ministry was addressing a number of media reports over the past few days claiming the US oil giant has struck it big at the Glafcos-1 drill site. In a brief statement, the Ministry reiterated

that drilling is still going on and that therefore the results are not known.



Offshore Cyprus Exploration Blocks

(Photo source: www.mcit.gov.cy)

An official announcement would be made once the operations are over, it added. Local media outlets were reporting that ExxonMobil had found a sizeable, though not massive, reserve at their second drilling target in block 10. The reserve was said to hold at least 2.5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas; the minimum amount required making it commercially viable. The reports claimed to be citing “industry sources.” ExxonMobil has a firm policy of not disclosing any information on ongoing operations. (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 which expressed their interest by

joining the latest summit. Drilling activities on behalf of ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum in Cyprus Exclusive Economic Zone are close to the end and the announcement of results will determine further steps. Turkish threats and aggression did not stop the Cypriot energy project so far. It is a fact that Cyprus has a significant deficit of military power which is (externally) balanced by regional cooperation. However, the US administration appears ready to abolish the arms embargo against Cyprus allowing it to improve its military capabilities. Involvement of an American company (ExxonMobil) in the drills it is proved “wise” and “smart.” Turkey escalates tension in the region by sending its drill ship *Barbaros* (accompanied by a Turkish frigate) within Cyprus Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) while a huge aeronautical exercise has been announced for February 27th, 2019. Taking into consideration that Cyprus lacks of military power and especially aeronautical forces it is expected Greece to be engaged more actively in the region. Conduct of aeronautical exercises in cooperation with other countries (Israel, Egypt etc) sends various messages of defense capability, readiness, and determination. Although the UN Secretary General appears optimistic for a new round of talks between the two communities, it is assessed that talks could not be resumed earlier than summer 2019. President Anastasiades promotes the scenario of a “bizonal, bicomunal decentralized federation”; an idea which is in principle accepted by the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and enjoys support from the U.S. However, there are a lot of disputed issues in which both parts should compromise; the most important is considered the decision-making process. Recent close approach between Cyprus and the US provoked Russia’s strong reaction which foresees a possible isolation from its

influence in the Island. It is not a secret that Russia enjoys or used to enjoy a privileged relationship with Cyprus due to the US distance regarding defense and foreign policy neutrality. It is a question how Cyprus will achieve to balance between the US and Russia interests in the region. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



GREECE: February 14th, the Defense Ministers of Greece and Turkey, Evangelos Apostolakis and Hulusi Akar, said after talks in Brussels that technical teams from both countries will be tasked with drafting a framework of confidence-building measures in a bid to reduce tensions in the Aegean. The general framework will be based on the confidence-building measures agreed in 1988 by then Greek Foreign Minister Karolos Papoulias and Turkey’s Mesut Yilmaz. “We discussed bilateral issues and the implementation of the Papoulias-Yilmaz memorandum of 1988,” Apostolakis said after his meeting with Akar at Wednesday’s NATO ministerial summit. He added that the technical teams will begin meetings imminently. Apostolakis also met with North Macedonia’s Defense Minister Radmila Sekerinska, who became the country’s first official to attend a NATO summit as an observer. Apart from discussions related to the name agreement recently ratified by the two countries, Apostolakis and Sekerinska also discussed military ties, given that North Macedonia will become a fully fledged NATO member. Apostolakis said he informed Sekerinska that Greece’s Armed Forces can help North Macedonia’s military to adapt to the

Alliance's demands. Speaking to reporters Sekerinska said North Macedonia has "*shown that change is possible if you have the right amount of political leadership.*" The small Balkan country changed its name on Tuesday. It will be accepted as a full NATO member late this year or early in 2020 once Parliaments have endorsed the text. Until then, it can take part in the Alliance's meetings as a guest. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- February 15th, the Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras carried out a light reshuffle as had been long expected, promoting Giorgos Katrougalos to Foreign Minister and bringing in officials who had served under former socialist premier George Papandreou as Deputy Ministers, amid mounting speculation of likely snap polls in May 2019. The appointment of Thanos Moraitis and Angelos Tolkas as Deputy Ministers – the first at the Infrastructure and Transport Ministry and the second at the Migration Ministry – prompted an angry response from the Movement for Change (Κίνημα Αλλαγής - KINAL) as both had served under Papandreou. "*Tsipras's attempt to loot our party will fail,*" KINAL said, adding that the premier's moves recall "*third-division soccer corruption.*" The Government did not respond directly to the criticism but the move did not provoke much surprise as Tsipras recently reached out to the center-left, suggesting that he would seek to create his own "*progressive*" alliances if parties are not open to cooperations. The reshuffle was also an opportunity for Tsipras to hand over the role of Foreign Minister which he assumed last October after Nikos Kotzias quit the cabinet following a clash with Tsipras's then junior coalition partner Panos Kammenos over the Prespes name deal. Sia Anagnostopoulou, a SYRIZA MP and former Deputy Education Minister, is to take Katrougalos's old position as

Alternate Foreign Minister, handling European affairs. Tsipras also replaced two Deputy Ministers who are SYRIZA candidates for mayoral posts in the country's two largest cities ahead of local authority elections scheduled for May along with European Parliament elections. Eleftheria Hatzigeorgiou was appointed Deputy Minister for Macedonia-Thrace Ministry, replacing Katerina Notopoulou, who is to run for Thessaloniki Mayor on the leftists' ticket. Hatzigeorgiou is a close friend of Tsipras who previously headed the office of Government Spokesman Dimitris Tzanakopoulos. Constantinos Barkas, a SYRIZA MP for Preveza, was appointed Deputy Minister for Social Security, taking over from Thanasis Iliopoulos, who is SYRIZA's choice for Athens Mayor. The new ministers are to be sworn in on Friday 18th, 2019. (www.ekathimerini.com)



The new Greek Foreign Minister, Giorgos
Katrougalos

(Photo source: www.mfa.gr)

- February 16th, the land border between Greece and Albania is not among the issues being

discussed between the two countries, sources from the Greek Foreign Ministry said in a statement, in response to suggestions to that effect on Thursday by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama. *“The two countries are not discussing their borders, as those have been determined by international agreements and no negotiation is taking place over them,”* the sources told the state-run Athens-Macedonian News Agency (ANA-MPA). In May 2018, the two countries reopened negotiations to delineate maritime borders in the Ionian Sea and resolve other bilateral issues. The same sources said Athens and Tirana signed a friendship agreement in 1996, in which they proclaimed their respect for the inviolability of existing borders. Speaking during an interview with Albania’s Vizion Plus TV on Thursday, Rama appeared to suggest that Athens and Tirana are in talks over potential border changes. The comment was made in the context of negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo over a land swap as a way of ending a long-running dispute between the two countries. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Giorgos Katrougalos said that Greece is ready to extend its territorial waters in the Ionian Sea in the summer. *“This will help negotiations with Italy and Albania to demarcate our [Exclusive] Economic Zone.”* (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. The country has entered in pre-electoral period; the Government announces social care measures, while opposition announces its candidates for the parliamentary elections. 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 carried out a light reshuffle aiming at approaching the center-left voters and weakening KINAL (former PASOK). Political turmoil emerged in a period where Greece faces several diplomatic, security, and economic challenges. Internal terrorism is considered as a major unresolved problem of national security undermining stability of the state. Tension between Greece and Turkey has been raised not only in rhetoric level. Turkish fighter jets keep violating Greek airspace, while NAVTEXs reserves part of Greek continental shelf and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone. Turkey escalates tension mainly in Cyprus by its drill ship Barbaros which has started entering within Cypriot EEZ. None could exclude Greek Navy intervention in a possible incident with Turkish vessels accompanying Barbaros. It is estimated that next weeks and especially the period from February 27th until March 3rd, 2019 when a major aeronautical exercise will be conducted in the Aegean and East Mediterranean Sea including real fires, virtual naval blockade of eastern Aegean Greek islands, and simulations of landing operations. Following Tsipras visit to Turkey, Ministers of Defense of two countries, Apostolakis and Akar met in an effort to reduce tension and build confidence measures. However, security situation is of high risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident.



KOSOVO: February 11th, Kosovo risks losing a 12 million euro aid from the U.S for its newly established army after resisting Washington’s call to suspend 100% tax on goods of Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. US Iowa National Guard Commander, Major General

Timothy Orr, has cancelled a planned visit to Kosovo over refusal to revoke the 100% tariffs on goods from Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Commander of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF), Lieutenant General Rrahman Rama, told Pristina based TV Kohavision that General Orr's visit has been cancelled because of tax, noting that he has already informed the Government and President of the country. Kohavision reports that newly established Ministry of Defense of Kosovo risks losing a 12 million euro aid of the US Military, namely a donation of military vehicles Humvee, if authorities in Pristina resist the US call to suspend the tax on Serbian goods. Rama said he is concerned with the latest development and he is afraid that Kosovo is losing its crucial ally who supported transition of the KSF from a civilian force into a full-fledged army last year. US authorities are asking Kosovo Government to suspend tax and resume dialogue with Serbia, but despite calls Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj reiterated the tax will not be suspended until Serbia recognizes Kosovo. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- February 13th, NATO Secretary General reiterated that the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF) cannot enter the northern part of the country without NATO's permission. Speaking ahead of the NATO member states' Defense Ministers meeting, Stoltenberg said that some "*member states believe the time for Kosovo Security Forces transformation into an army was not right*," and that he expected the agreement to be honored, adding many member states shared that opinion. Kosovo Parliament voted in December last year the process of transition of the KSF into full-fledged Army. "*We have an agreement reached in Brussels in 2013 between Kosovo and Serbia which clearly states that the KSF cannot enter the*

north without KFOR's Commander consent, and we expect this agreement remains into force," said Stoltenberg adding that he expects all parties respect the agreement. Stoltenberg added that the UN defined KFOR's presence in Kosovo and that its existence was necessary not only for Kosovo security but for the whole region safety. On Tuesday Kosovo Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj told media in Pristina that "*Kosovo has offered NATO a new protocol on KSF's operating all over the country without making a distinction between north and south*." Haradinaj said the Kosovo Army is mandated by Kosovo Parliament to operate all over the territory. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- February 15th, Kosovo's state delegation has finalized a platform on dialogue with Serbia which is yet to be confirmed by the Parliament. If endorsed by MPs, the platform excludes negotiations on correction of borders, obliges negotiators to ask Serbia recognize Kosovo, abrogate UN Security Council Resolution 1244, as well as creation of a special war crime tribunal dealing exclusively with crimes committed by Serbia in Kosovo. The Platform which sets principles of dialogue with Serbia stipulates that every agreement reached with Belgrade during EU-facilitated dialogue in Brussels should be in compliance with the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, and excludes discussion on land swap. The platform which has been drafted by Kosovo Government's Negotiation Team proceeded on Friday to Parliament for approval. In this document among other things is stated that the aim of Kosovo is to get recognition from Serbia through a legally-binding agreement. Also one of the principles of the dialogue platform is stated that parties will not enter dialogue to sign partial agreements until reaching a final

comprehensive agreement on all open issues. According to this document the final legally-binding agreement between Kosovo and Serbia enters into force only after Serbia recognizes Kosovo as independent state, after Kosovo organizes a referendum on the agreement and the agreement is ratified by Parliaments of both Kosovo and Serbia. “*The Constitution of Kosovo is not open to negotiations,*” it is stated in the document. Kosovo’s negotiation team also wants advancing of rights of the Albanians living in Serbia in full reciprocity with the rights of Serbian community in Kosovo. The Platform proposes opening of new topics during Pristina - Belgrade dialogue in Brussels, such as war reparations, the issue of missing people, addressing the issue of the war rape victims, and proposes creation of a war crime tribunal on investigating, prosecuting and trying war crimes committed by Serbia in Kosovo during 1998-1999 war. Kosovo wants the final agreement with Serbia be reached with the mediation of the EU and U.S, which should guarantee full implementation of the deal. (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. In a spasmodic reaction Prime Minister Haradinaj stated that the Government has ceased contact with UNMIK. Kosovo reacts more or less as a spoiled child refusing to realize how

international system and institutions works. Cease of communication between Pristina and UNMIK is another sign of isolation. 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. In the meanwhile, Kosovo negotiation team promotes a platform of principles and goals regarding Kosovo – Serbia dialogue. It is a hardline document “seeking to take everything and give nothing”; however it is nothing more than a negotiation base which actually rejects Thaci’s goal for border correction. Thaci keeps on promoting “slight” correction of borders if this would lead to Kosovo recognition by Serbia. 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). Thaci reiterated once again his confidence that dialogue will start again and agreement will be reached. 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: February 13th, Russia's Foreign Ministry accused the U.S of trying to interfere in the domestic affairs of Moldova, where parliamentary elections will take place on February 24th, 2019. Thus, in a comment, those in the Moscow Diplomacy are sure that Moldovans "*are threatened with breaking the ties with the West and even repeating the Ukrainian Maidan.*" "*Interference in the domestic affairs of foreign countries has long become a trademark of Washington's foreign policy. Today, this is obvious in the case of Venezuela, where the U.S is basically trying to make a coup d'état. The same situation is part of Syria's territory, after unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the legitimate Government in Damascus ... A similar fate seems to regard Republic of Moldova,*" the Russian MFA said. Thus, the Russian MFA criticizes the new US Ambassador to Chisinau, Dereck J. Hogan, who – according to Russian diplomacy – "*immediately after taking Office last autumn, began to actively participate in the internal processes of the Republic of Moldova.*" "*Americans plan to assess the democratic nature*

of these elections according to who will win the Moldovan elections. If these winners do not thank Washington, Moldovans will be threatened with breaking the links with the West and even repeating the Ukrainian Maidan," the comment said. The Russian Ministry also mentioned that it would not want Moldova "*to become another scene for such irresponsible experiments that destroyed Iraq and Libya, which sank Syria and Ukraine into the abyss of bloody conflicts.*" (www.moldova.org)

- February 15th, the voting bloc ACUM, uniting two right-wing opposition parties; the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnităte și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS) has accused the ruling Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova – PDM) of waging a large-scale "*information warfare,*" and is preparing to officially demand de-registration of PDM as an election contestant. ACUM Deputy Chairperson Maya Sandu stated at a news conference that PDM and its satellites resort daily to all sorts of law violations by using administrative resources, bribing voters, and concealing real expenditures. "*But the biggest one of their violations is misinformation. The country's largest media belonging to the regime spends millions stolen from citizens in order to confuse citizens before the voting day. The Democrats have flooded also online resources by waging a well-staged campaign to discredit the opposition and to praise authorities,*" Sandu said. In her words, the PDM-led regime "*derives inspiration from the Kremlin*" by having created a whole factory of trolls, which uses the same methods as those which had an influence on the presidential elections in the United States. She reminded to the ruling regime representatives that

the more violations it makes the higher risk of non-recognition of election procedure by the international community. ACUM parliamentary candidate Sergiu Litvinenco said that the Bloc is going to submit to the Central Election Commission 7 complaints against PDM, including one concerning the participation of Ministries' state Secretaries in Vlad Plahotniuc's campaign. ACUM is going to demand de-registration of PDM from the parliamentary campaign on the basis of social media data. (www.infotag.md.md)

- February 15th, situation around the Moldovan helicopter pilots, liberated from captivity in Afghanistan on February 9th, 2019 and remaining in Moscow since February 11th, 2019, will be discussed at the next week's meeting of the Supreme Security Council of Moldova, President Igor Dodon announced. *"I have already sent official inquiries to all Moldovan relevant power structures. I want the heads of each of them to answer what they were doing last three and a half years to liberate our pilots from the Taliban captivity. All of them – the Information and Security Service (ISS), the Ministry of the Interior, the Prosecutor General's Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration – were sitting as if in the underground all these years, though it was their direct duty to act to save our citizens. Now I want them to come and report the truth to the Head of State,"* Dodon said. The President presumed that budget means could have been allocated for pilot's liberation measures. *"I have information that the Cabinet allocated a huge sum for this from the Governmental Reserve Fund by issuing a secret Resolution in 2017. Well, let's see where the money has gone. I have information that several tens of millions lei went to Qatar or Dubai. We must clarify everything,"*

Dodon stressed. Earlier, the President reproached the Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova – PDM) country leadership for their taking no attempts to release the two pilots. (www.infotag.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political life is "hostage" of the pro-Russian President Igor Dodon and pro-Western Government rivalry which undermines the institutional function of the country. In the wider framework Moldova is between the Euro-Atlantic structures on the one hand and the Russian influence on the other. Political situation in the country is alarming and the EU has hardened its policy towards Moldova pushing for more reforms which will strengthen state's transparency, accountability and democratic values. Coming parliamentary elections scheduled for February 24th, 2019 will be closely monitored by the international community and especially the US and EU as a "democratic stress test." Pre-electoral campaign is a struggle between pro-western and pro-russian political powers amid complaints for the U.S or Russian intervention in the elections. Opposition accuses the ruling PDM for non-transparency and illegal electoral procedures. The Government is sliding into dangerous paths which support corruption and organized crime and deep and determined justice reforms are needed. The U.S, EU and IMF express their major concerns. 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: February 12th, according to the 2018 available data, there are 2,097 enterprises in Montenegro established by Turkish citizens, while 2,863 physical and legal people being the citizens of Turkey are registered as owners regardless of their share in the ownership, the Tax Administration clarified for CdM. The largest number of business organizations set up by the Turks operates in Budva (1,048) and Podgorica (609). In 2018 there were registered 1,545 Turkish enterprises. The Turkish investors are interested in the construction of a water park, shopping mall and a sport building in the capital, while it is planned one of Podgorica's streets to be named as "Ankara"; the Turkish capital. (www.cdm.me)

- February 15th, Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic said he did not intend to resign, after the accusation against him made by the fugitive businessman Dusko Knezevic. Djukanovic assessed Knezevic as unworthy opponent, a liar and a deceiver, exploited by those who want to change power in Montenegro. During the TV show "Crosswords" last night at the channel Prva, Djukanovic said that "Atlas" affair has two goals- the first to protect the tycoon from obvious criminal liability. *"He sought protection at various addresses, he even asked it from me, but I responded that I could not help him,"* the President said. The second, and more important goal, is to try to use the affair, says Djukanovic, to disturb public and provoke street protests, precisely to enable power shift on the street. *"Knezevic has been used only as a cause in first couple of days, but afterwards party, media, and NGO machinery has taken over and tried to achieve their goal - to*

change power in Montenegro," Djukanovic said. The Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS) leader said that there is no possibility that Dusko Knezevic has a recording of giving him money. (www.rtcg.me)

- February 17th, an attempted Russia-backed coup in Montenegro was not successful but this does not mean there are no other such attempts, as the "Atlas" affair looks exactly like that, Nenad Canak, leader of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (Liga Socijaldemokrata Vojvodine - LSV), told in an interview with Pobjeda daily. According to him it would be much better for Serbia to use Montenegrin experience on its European path, as Montenegro made real progress compared to Serbia. *"Political experience of the President of Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic, is extremely precious of a living politician in Europe. I think relations between Serbia and Montenegro are good but it could be much better,"* Canak said. On the rumors that Dusko Knezevic really interfered in setting up the coalition between the Socialist Party of Serbia (Socijalistička Partija Srbije - SPS) and the Democratic Party (Demokratska Stranka – DS) he said he had nothing to add on the matter. Canak also touched on dissatisfied people who have been walking down the Serbian streets for over two and a half months, emphasizing that their dissatisfaction might overthrow the Government without elections. (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although the country enjoys a period of "euphoria", major reforms should be implemented in order the country to come closer to the EU. The EP assessment is positive praising

the state's efforts to implement major reforms, but on the other hand it underlines the problems of the rule of law, media freedom, corruption, money laundering, and organized crime. However, the EP expressly states that Montenegro under certain conditions may be able to access the EU by 2025. The Government promotes state's political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. Although the Government takes concrete measures against corruption, organized crime, and money laundering it is assessed that a lot should be done to reach such a level of economic activity; mainly in the field of public administration, public sector corruption, and money laundering. In this context, accusations against the country's President for bribery by a fugitive businessman should be investigated with transparency and into depth. 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:

February 13th, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија - SDSM) Executive Board has decided not to call for snap parliamentary elections along with the forthcoming presidential elections, as the opposition demanded. The

Spokesperson Kostadin Kostadinov said that the citizens' request is to see the results in the fields of economy and reforms. *"A party to which the interest of the citizens and the state comes first does not consider the early elections even when the ratings and the support from the citizens are much higher than the opposition's ratings. As a responsible Government, we announced the creation of a strong economy which will provide opportunities for everyone. The economy has stabilized and it is functional, investments are on the rise, new jobs are opening, and people earn more money,"* Kostadinov said. Regarding the presidential elections, he said that they will be transparent, fair and democratic with SDSM and the citizens being the winners. (www.meta.mk)

- February 13th, the "Prespa Agreement" officially came into force and the implementation of its provisions began, with which F.Y.R.O.M has changed its name to North Macedonia. The Government also changed its name to the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia. The Government announced that the "Prespa Agreement" was published in the "Official Gazette" yesterday, while constitutional amendments came into force. (www.meta.mk)

- February 15th, North Macedonian officials said they have carried out a series of raids in an operation against suspected radical Islamic terrorists. The Interior Ministry said that searches were conducted at several locations in the country targeting suspects. It was said Police confiscated *"objects and devices related to the possible attack."* No arrests were announced. The announcement followed a warning from the U.S. Embassy in Skopje saying that there was a *"heightened risk of terrorist attacks inspired by extremist ideology in North Macedonia."* The

Embassy also warned U.S. citizens in North Macedonia to maintain a high level of vigilance. The Ministry's announcement said the investigations related to "potential plans and intentions to commit a terrorist act in the territory of our country by members of radical structures supporting of ISIS." (www.nationalpost.com, www.ap.org)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

"Prespa Agreement" came into force and F.Y.R.O.M changed its constitutional name into North Macedonia. Ratification of NATO accession protocol by the member states proceeds rapidly. The country's Defense Minister joined the first NATO Defense Minister's summit as a monitor. The ruling SDSM announced that it will not call for early parliamentary elections along with the presidential one. As it was assessed, the Government seeks to fully capitalize its gains from NATO accession (scheduled for June 2019) and a possible opening of accession negotiations with the EU (also for June 2019). VMRO-DPMNE will strengthen its nationalistic rhetoric due to the coming presidential elections seeking to elect its own presidential candidate. Polarization of state's political life including low scale violent incidents could not be excluded during the pre-electoral campaign especially if VMRO-DPMNE realizes that it is not going to elect its own President. The fact is, the country is more stable and more coherent watching its future in a more optimistic way. However, the country should focus on its economy and major administrative reforms aiming at reaching the EU standards. The U.S and EU enjoy their success since F.Y.R.O.M moves in their paths far from Russia's influence. Needless to say that in a period where border questions are raised again in

the Balkans F.Y.R.O.M achieved to strengthen its political stability and growth prospects.



ROMANIA: February 11th, a Vice-President of Romania's main opposition party, the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal - PNL), Florin Roman, reiterated the criticism against former Prime Minister Dacian Ciolos, who now is the President of the Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party (PLUS) and part of a major opposition coalition formed with the Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România - USR). Ciolos is "as arrogant as Dragnea [the Head of senior ruling Social Democratic Party], in his attacks against PNL," Roman stated. Ciolos cheated PNL, which supported him first for a Minister position, then for the position of European Commissioner, he claimed. There are no grounds for Ciolos to condition an electoral alliance with PNL, he concluded, hinting to a statement of Dacian Ciolos about PNL joining the USR-PLUS alliance (coined as Alianta 2020), "only conditional to sharing the same values, principles, and projects." In a separate statement supporting the rising tensions between USR-PLUS on a side and PNL on the other, USR leader Dan Barna stated that he would rather support Dacian Ciolos for the presidential elections than incumbent President Klaus Iohannis (most likely to get PNL's endorsement for another term), Mediafax reported. (www.romania-insider.com)

- February 14th, Romania's senior ruling party, the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD), headed by Liviu Dragnea, announced plans to abandon further confrontations with President Klaus Iohannis on the matter of the new Ministries of development and transport. PSD said it would no longer notify

the Constitutional Court about the President's refusal to appoint the two Ministers and it would also waive the adoption of an emergency ordinance setting firm deadline for the revocation and appointment of Ministers by the Presidency. PSD's candidate for the Development Ministry and Deputy Prime Minister post, Lia-Olguta Vasilescu, announced she withdrew her application. PSD officials told Hotnews.ro that a meeting of the PSD leadership will take over the weekend, in which new candidates for the Transport and Development portfolios will be decided. According to rumors quoted by Hotnews.ro, Vasilescu abandoned her plans to pursue a career within the cabinet of Prime Minister Viorica Dancila in exchange for her fiancé, MP Claudiu Manda, getting a top position on the PSD's ticket for the European elections. (www.romania-insider.com)

- February 15th, President Klaus Iohannis has reacted on the recently adopted budget law for 2019, stating that it "shows the ruling coalition's total disregard for the Romanians expectations" and that "it represents the most eloquent proof of a Government that is pawning the Romanians' future." "President Klaus Iohannis warns that the budget is superficially drafted, based on overestimated figures as against the economic realities, it neglects investments and jeopardizes Romanians' real needs to benefit of infrastructure, highways, schools, hospitals, kindergartens, meaning all that PSD has promised and is not doing. It is unacceptable to sell illusions to the Romanians and to present the 2019 budget as a budget of investments, when actually the budget envisages the significant cut of national fund investments at local level," a Presidency press release said. The Head of state hails the increased child allowances, as "an

amendment that brings real benefits for millions of families in Romania" and "as an important victory of the Opposition," but he slams the fact that the budget "neglects disabled people and orphan children." "PSD and ALDE have taken populism and demagogy to the area of serious irresponsibility by jeopardizing the economic stability and the predictability," the press release concluded. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political struggle between the President Klaus Iohannis and Government has been transformed into an "open battle" leading the political functionality in a deadlock. The President rejects the Government's proposals one after another leading in institutional and constitutional deadlock. Apart from that the state looks divided in major institutional issues such as national defense, justice, and security. Under the EU strong criticism the Government decided to step back looking for compromise with the President. Taking a look in the current political situation in Romania, which affects also the EU (due to Romania's Presidency) it is assessed as a Government's "wise" strategic retreat in order to overcome the political deadlock. Romania took over the Presidency of the Council of EU facing criticism and non-confidence by the EU member states' high officials. 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). MPs and executives of the ruling PSD – ALDE keep on resigning and joining the newly established party PRO putting at risk majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Iohannis strongly opposes in Government's plans

to intervene in judicial system while there are specific signs that the Government works towards controlling state's justice. The state faces political abnormality in many levels which at the moment could be resolved only by early parliamentary elections. Romania according to NATO strategic and operational planning has become an advanced base close to Russia. Its strategic importance and role has been upgraded and high level NATO exercises take place in its territory. Consequently, Russia reacts mainly against the NATO military base in Deveselu where anti-missile defense systems have been deployed.



SERBIA: February 11th, several tens of thousands of citizens gathered on February 9th, 2019 at the 10th consecutive protest under the slogan “*One of Five Million*” in Belgrade. The protest wrapped up outside the Serbian Government building after a march down the central city streets, Beta agency reported. Addressing the crowd outside the Government building, protest coordinator Jelena Anasonovic told Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic that he would “*learn like the alphabet the names of all the free cities in Serbia that are marching.*” She also said that through a field campaign called “*The Future of Serbia*” Vucic is “*trying to calm the people of Serbia who will no longer be silent.*” She called on the citizens to gather again next Saturday outside the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade for a new protest, while the protesters lit several flares outside the Government building, the entrance to which they covered in tape reading “*One of Five Million.*” The protest march passed without incident and traffic through the main city streets was blocked during the passage of the column. On February 8th, 2019 protests took place in Nis, Smederevo, Novi Sad, Subotica, Krusevac,

Sabac, Pancevo, Uzice, Kraljevo, Loznica, Kikinda, Valjevo, Leskovac, Zajecar, Pozarevac and Cacak. (www.b92.net)

- February 11th, opposition Alliance for Serbia parties and some independent members of the National Assembly (Deputies) have announced “*an active boycott*” of the Parliament. They said that starting on Monday they would be present in the Parliament building and hold press conferences but would not participate in the plenum debate. At the first such press conference (and they announced new ones “*every half an hour*”) these Deputies unfurled a banner reading “*One of Five Million*” (a slogan used in weekly protests) and called on Minister of Education Mladen Sarcevic to resign, because he, as they said, insulted and humiliated Professors. People's Party (Narodna Stranka - NS) Vice President Miroslav Aleksic, however, urged “*everyone from the authorities*” to resign, because, according to him, they violate the laws and the Constitution. Bosko Obradovic of the Serbian Movement Dveri (Srpski Pokret Dveri) explained that the boycott of the Parliament meant implementing a recently published document, dubbed, “*An agreement with the people.*” “*In Serbia, nothing works, from the Constitutional Court to other institutions. We will hold press conferences every half an hour and this will be the continuation of the open Parliament from December,*” Obradovic said, recalling the event when the opposition stayed all night in the Assembly building. (www.b92.net)

- February 15th, Marko Djuric said that the document adopted by Pristina is not a platform for the dialogue with Belgrade, but against it. The Head of the Serbian Office for Kosovo and Metohija added that the document's goal is to

“collapse the dialogue.” “What they have adopted has nothing to do with intent to reach an agreement. This is a wish-list of the separatists in Pristina, an unrealistic document aimed at bringing down the dialogue and ruining it,” Djuric told a press conference. He stressed that if they wanted dialogue in Pristina, they should abolish the *“anti-civilized taxes”* and stop trampling on the rights of Serbs in Kosovo. Djuric pointed out that in the first point of Pristina's platform, Kosovo independence is treated as *“a done deal.”* He pointed out that the whole document speaks about Pristina not wanting to come to an agreement with Belgrade, because it refers to *“territorial integrity and sovereignty”* of the so-called Kosovo. *“If for them is 10,887 square kilometers of the so-called independent Kosovo, for us it is not. That is no way to reach a compromise,”* Djuric said. Djuric also said that alongside the platform, a false claim was made that Kosovo has been recognized by 115 countries when this is now in fact a two-digit number, thanks to the efforts of President Aleksandar Vucic, Minister Ivica Dacic, and all of our diplomacy. (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. Vucic is thinking of snap elections, but he has to balance a lot of things before his final decision. It is assessed that he will try to avoid early elections but it is likely to be forced to conduct them. Serbia has followed so far a successful diplomatic strategy regarding Kosovo achieving to be appeared in the

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



SLOVENIA: February 11th, during a speech in Italy, the President of the European Parliament made clear overtures to an Italian land-grab of Croatian and Slovenian territory. Slovenian high officials called Tajani's words unacceptable and concerning. Slovenian President Borut Pahor wrote to his Italian counterpart, Sergio Mattarella, voicing deep concern and saying it was not the first time that similar claims were voiced in Italy, while Foreign Minister Miro Cerar said the words were an unacceptable *"falsification of our common history,"* adding they incited fear. Slovenian Prime Minister Marjan Sarec said on Twitter that Tajani's statements represented unheard-of historical revisionism. *"Fascism is a historical fact and its objective was also the destruction of the Slovenian people,"* he wrote on social media. Tajani, has issued an apology to Foreign Minister Miro Cerar and the people of Slovenia on February 14th, 2019 for his statement at Sunday's ceremony in Basovizza marking the day of remembrance for Italian victims of post WWII-executions. (www.sta.si, www.dnevnik.si)

- February 14th, Defense Minister, Karl Erjavec expects Slovenia to increase defense budget in 2020 and 2021. "A step forward have been made, but I have high expectations when it comes to the for 2020 and 2021. That one will define how serious we are about modernizing the Slovenian Armed Forces," he said. Erjavec made his comments after the two day NATO ministerial summit discussing the implementation of three key goals; increase of defense spending to 2% of GDP by 2024, allocation of 20% of the defense budget for capability development, and increase of state's contribution to missions and operations. The plan submitted by Slovenia to NATO does

not increase defense expenditure to 2% of GDP by 2024. Slovenia's defense budget for 2019 is planned to reach 1.1% of GDP and it will be increased to 1.5% of GDP by 2024. When it comes to the defense budget allocation, Slovenia currently allocates 4.5% for investment, far from the 20% target. According to Erjavec, it is important to increase defense spending, but it is more important to boost defense capabilities so the state be more resilient to new security challenges and to buy dual-use equipment. He mentioned the planned purchase of helicopters that would be used also for emergency aid. The Minister also commented on Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff, Major General Alenka Ermenc's comment that the increase of funding in the supplementary budget for 2019 would not allow for the Army's development breakthrough or for marked improvement in its readiness. Erjavec said the Army's readiness assessment for wartime action in 2018 would likely be negative again, because it could not be otherwise as things did not change overnight. (www.sta.si)

- February 17th, seven Slovenian companies and two institutions are featured at the International Defense Exhibition (IDEX), a biennial arms and defense technology sales exhibition, which opened in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on Sunday. Slovenian Ministry of Defense and Slovenian Defense Industry Cluster are the two institutions joining the event, while AREX d.o.o. (ammounitions), ARMAS d.o.o. (armored vehicles, armor system, artillery weapon parts), C – ASTRAL d.o.o. [unmanned systems, fixed wing small Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) manufacturing], DAT-CON d.o.o. (system integration, electronics, special electronics, measuring and multimedia and multimedia equipment), PREVENT&DELOZA

d.o.o. (uniforms and ballistic protection with zero energy cooling), TIMTEC d.o.o. (design, verification, testing and production of intelligent mechanical systems for naval, vehicle and land base applications), and VALHALLA TURRETS d.o.o. (engineering company in the field of Weapon Stations and Turrets) are the seven companies participating in the exhibition. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc) which may test governmental cohesion. Border dispute with Croatia is still ongoing and former Government of Miro Cerar filed a lawsuit against Croatia over its refusal to implement the border arbitration. Although the Prime Minister Marjan Sarec announced that his Government will follow the same policy in the issue, he showed up with an attitude of compromise by claiming that his country will not stop Croatia's accession in the Schengen zone. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The med-term 2018 – 2023 defense program it could improve situation, but under current political situation it is doubtful if it will be implemented to the end.



TURKEY: February 14th, President

Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with his Iranian and Russian counterpart Hassan Rouhani and Vladimir Putin in the Russian Black Sea port city of Sochi ahead of a trilateral summit on Syria. Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavusoglu, Treasury and Finance Minister Berat Albayrak, Defense

Minister Hulusi Akar, Presidential Communications Director Fahrettin Altun, National Intelligence Organization (MIT) Chief Hakan Fidan, Presidency of Defense Industry (SSB) Head Ismail Demir and Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin accompanied Erdogan in the meetings. Prior to the meeting with Putin, Erdogan said that in order to protect Syria's territorial integrity, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed group of the Syrian Kurd Democratic Union Party (PYD), must be swept away from areas where it persists near the Turkish border. “*Syria's territorial integrity will not be ensured unless the PYD/YPG terror group is cleared away from Manbij, (and) east of the Euphrates,*” Erdogan told before the Russian delegation in the beginning section of the process open to the press. Erdogan also said Turkey welcomes Russia's positive attitude towards a proposed safe zone in northern Syria, adding that Turkey also supports the idea as long as it serves to address Turkey's national security concerns. He said they may soon conclude the formation of Syrian constitutional committee, taking into account reservations expressed by the UN. The President said Turkey put intensive effort to solve the problem related to the radical groups in Idlib, northwestern Syria. “*We are pleased that our military officials have reached an agreement over joint patrols in the area,*” Erdogan said. He added that Turkey did not spot any elements with heavy weapons during its drone-backed search over the demilitarized zone. After a meeting in Sochi last September between Erdogan and Putin, the two sides agreed to set up a demilitarized zone -- in which acts of aggression are expressly prohibited -- in Idlib. The following month saw all heavy weapons withdrawn from the de-escalation zone by Syrian opposition and anti-regime groups. The leaders of Turkey, Russia and Iran, known as the

guarantor states of the Astana peace process named after the Kazakh capital where efforts to find a lasting solution in Syria were first launched, will later convene for their fourth leaders' summit. Situation around the de-escalation zone around the northern Syrian province of Idlib and the pending withdrawal of U.S. troops from the war-torn country are among the topics which were expected to be discussed. The three Presidents are also expected to exchange opinions on the joint fight against terrorism in the region, restoring calm to Syria, stabilizing the country and returning the displaced Syrians. (www.dailysabah.com)

- February 15th, Turkey will defend its sovereign rights in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, the country's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said. *"We protect our rights in the Eastern Mediterranean, Cyprus and the Aegean in a dynamic way,"* Erdogan told a rally in Bursa, northwest Turkey. *"If we fail to do so, we know very well what we will face in the future,"* he added. Turkey is gearing up for local elections on March 31st, 2019. In the meanwhile, Turkish Armed Forces are preparing to hold its biggest ever aeronautical exercises according to Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency. The *"Blue Homeland"* exercise, with the participation of frigates, destroyers and fighter jets, will take place in the Black Sea, the Aegean and the Mediterranean between February 27th and March 8th, 2019. News of the exercise came on the heels of unconfirmed reports that the U.S energy giant ExxonMobil, which is licensed to explore hydrocarbon reserves in Cyprus's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), will announce the discovery of a significant reserve in Block 10. Turkey has objected to Nicosia's search for gas without the consent of Turkish Cypriots in the

occupied north of the island, and a Turkish-Cypriot energy official told Anadolu that Turkish ships will soon begin offshore drilling activities around the island. *"We will protect the rights and interests of the Turkish Cypriots and take the necessary steps on the issue of natural gas, just as we do on other issues,"* he said. (www.ekathimerini.com, www.aa.com.tr)

- February 16th, the deal with Russia over the S-400 missile defense systems has been completed and their delivery is scheduled for July 2019, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said adding that Turkey is also open to negotiations for the purchase of the U.S. Patriot systems as long as Ankara's interests are served. *"We have made the S-400 deal with Russia, so it is out of question to take a step back. The job is done. When it comes to the Patriots, we are open to buying them. However, this purchase needs to serve the interests of our country,"* Erdogan told journalists. Erdogan added that in the case of an agreement with the U.S. over the sale of the Patriot systems, their joint production, how they will be financed and the timing of their delivery would be issues needing further discussion. *"Even though the U.S. administration is positive on the early delivery, they still do not have a clear position on joint production and financing,"* he added. Turkey's deal with Russia over the purchase of the S-400 defense missile systems has caused discomfort in Washington, claiming that the Russian-made systems could risk the security of some U.S.-made weapons and other technology used by NATO, including the F-35 fighter jets. The Ankara-Moscow S-400 deal was inked in December 2017, when the parties signed a 2.5 billion dollars agreement for two batteries of the systems - Russia's most advanced long-range anti-aircraft missile system. Turkey will be the first

NATO member country to acquire the system. Moreover, Turkey seeks to build its own missile defense systems as the deal also involves the transfer of technology and know-how. In December last year, the U.S. State Department approved the possible sale of the Patriot air and missile defense system, saying that Turkey continues to be an essential element of national security and defense strategy. This was regarded as a breakthrough move after Washington's delay of the F-35 jets to Turkey due to its purchase of the Russian-made S-400 defense system. Ankara says, however, the two deals are not alternates to one another and the conditions attached to their sale agreements must be dealt with separately. "We are continuing our work based on the deal that the S-400s will be delivered in July," the President added. (www.daily-sabah.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Turkey faces several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs and journalists are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Turkish – U.S relations have strongly been harmed forcing Ankara to approach new allies such as Russia. Although Turkey re-examines its relations with the EU in an effort to avoid international and regional isolation, the EU sends messages of terminating the EU – Turkey accession talks. Turkish Armed Forces have been engaged in military operations against Kurds and PKK in Northern Iraq and against YPG Kurds in Syria as well. The U.S reconsiders its unconditional withdrawal from Syria after domestic and international critics. Protection of Syrian Kurds and YPG forces is a priority for the


U.S troops which will remain in Syria as long as it is necessary. In this context, dialogue between Turkey and the U.S is ongoing aiming at reaching a common point of understanding. Turkey is waiting for the "green light" for establishing a safe zone in Syria but it is doubtful if it will ever get it. President Erdogan expressed once again his anxiety to start a new military operation in Syria. Turkey has been developed into a "regional power" engaged in military operations in the territory of two other countries, it threatens to start a new operation in Syria, maintains a significant military force in North Cyprus, and threatens a NATO ally – Greece – with an armed conflict. Apart from the use or the threat of use of direct armed violence Turkey participates actively in diplomatic processes in the region (Syria negotiations, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Cyprus question, Qatar crisis etc). The state demonstrates decisively its leading role in the wider region of the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and Southeast Mediterranean. Announcement of a huge navy drill in the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea may raise tension with Cyprus and Greece. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Regarding Turkish interests in East Mediterranean Sea it seems that they are reaching a critical point since Cypriots have already started hydrocarbon drills in their Exclusive Economic Zone via the US energy giant ExxonMobil. Turkey has sent its drill ship Barbaros in the EEZ of Cyprus escalating tension in Eastern Mediterranean. Taking into consideration that a huge aeronautical exercise has been announced by the Turkish Armed Forces in the end of February one should keep an eye on possible incidents in the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea.


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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