



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

“SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE AT A GLANCE” (ISSN: 2654-0304) 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, Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, 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: April 29th, Albanian President Ilir Meta has asked the High Judicial Council (KLGj) and the High Court to end the mandate of High Court Judge and Chair of the Justice Appointments Council (KED) Ardian Dvorani. In a letter Meta sent to the two institutions, he argued that Dvorani's mandate is up and he has been replaced on the High Court. KLGj has asked Dvorani to give his opinion on the President's request until 4 pm on Wednesday. On July 9th, 2019, KLGj announced three vacant spots on the High Court, one of which was that of Dvorani. On March 10th, 2020, three new Judges were appointed to the High Court, thus replacing Dvorani. The end of Dvorani's term as member of the High Court also implies the end of his term as Chair of KED, since the Constitution and the Law "on governing bodies of the justice system" provides that the KED Chair must be a member of the High Court. The Albanian Constitution provides that "the end of the mandate of a judge is declared by a decision of the High Court." Seeing as Dvorani is currently the Head of the High Court, this is not very likely to happen. Consequently, President Meta requested the interference of the High Judicial Council. Dvorani was appointed to the High Court in 2005. His 9-year term ended in February of 2014. Nonetheless, Dvorani has refused to give up his position, relying on obscure legal loopholes to remain on the High Court, even though the Constitutional Court has determined his term has ended. (www.exit.al)

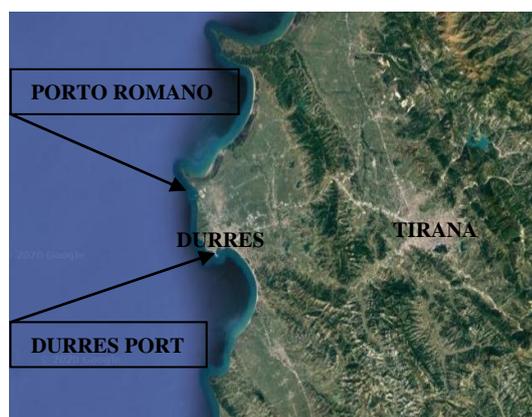
- April 29th, Albania's economy is projected to contract by about 5% under the baseline scenario of how the coronavirus pandemic unfolds in Europe, the World Bank stated on Wednesday.

The baseline scenario assumes that containment measures can be lifted by the end of June and a gradual recovery can begin in the second half of 2020. The downside scenario assumes that the outbreak lingers and containment measures can only be lifted at end of August, with a recovery of economic activity only in final quarter of 2020. As for the entire Western Balkans region, the World Bank foresees that the economies of the 6 countries will contract between 3 to 5.6%. "The magnitude of recession depends on the duration of the pandemic in Europe. While the economic impact of the ongoing pandemic in the region is difficult to forecast, there is little doubt that this pandemic is wreaking havoc on lives around the region - taxing health care systems, paralyzing economic activity, and undermining the wellbeing of people," Linda Van Gelder, World Bank Country Director for the Western Balkans, said. According to the World Bank, recession in all Western Balkan countries will be driven by a significant drop in both domestic and foreign demand during the pandemic. Travel restrictions and social distancing measures have a particularly protracted impact on tourism and services, the latter accounting for around 50% of total employment in five countries in the region and 75% in Montenegro. Albania and Kosovo, the economies of which largely rely on service exports and tourism, will be hit significantly hard as their economies are projected to contract by about 5%, under the baseline scenario. Bosnia, North Macedonia and Serbia which have mostly export-oriented economies are expected to experience a slightly less significant slowdown; their economies may contract by 3.2%, 1.4% and 2.5% respectively. On the other hand, under the downside scenario, Albania's economy is expected to shrink by 6.9% while Kosovo's

economy would shrink by 11.3%. *“Over the medium-term, growth is expected to rebound strongly in the region, as economic activity gradually returns to normal, but this also depends on the length and intensity of the current crisis, as well as what steps policymakers take to address this pandemic,”* Van Gelder added. According to the report, additional support may be necessary to support all vulnerable groups in the region. Policy responses should therefore be calibrated to mitigate the immediate effects, adjust to new realities that may emerge, and to leave space to prepare the economy for a recovery. (www.tiranatimes.com)

- May 1st, the socialist majority passed changes to the Porto Romano seaport’s concessionary contract. The port that was once dedicated exclusively to the oil trade will now also host other freight shipments. The expansion of the concessionary contract will allow the oil terminal operator to anchor and store ships carrying a variety of other trade goods. In June 2015, the Prime Minister Edi Rama’s Government signed a 35-year concessionary contract for the construction and operation of an oil terminal in the Porto Romano area near Durrës. The concessionary company, Multi Buoy Mooring (MBM) Port is owned by the Adriatic Bay Investment Group (SHPK) [Kastrati Group (65%) and Europetrol Group (35%)] (99%), and SALILLARI SHPK (1%). In April 2020, MBM Port asked the Government to expand its concessionary contract beyond exclusively oil shipments. It argued that this was *“an opportunity to maximize the use of the port’s capacities.”* On April 27th, 2020 the Albanian Government announced a tender for the construction of the road that connects the city of

Durrës and the oil terminal in Porto Romano. The 2.1 km road will apparently cost 5.5 million euro, a cost that seems high for a road to be constructed on a flat field, *“with no significant vertical deflections.”* The tender comes at a curious time, seeing as the Government previously blocked all public procurement procedures that do not relate to the coronavirus pandemic or reconstruction efforts after the November 26th, 2019 earthquake. Opposition Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë - PD) has slammed the Parliament’s vote for expanding the contract, denouncing the privatization of the port as a *“flagrant violation of the country’s laws and national security standards.”* PD warned that this private port will weaken Albania’s long fight against drug trafficking and smugglers. The governing Socialist Party of Albania (Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë – PS) maintains that the private MBM Port of Porto Romano will replace the public Port of Durrës, which will now be oriented toward tourism. (www.exit.al)



Map of Porto Romano

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Assessment on Albanian economy after the COVID-19 pandemic is rather disappointing. A 5% shrink of the economy is expected since it is based on service export and tourism. However,

the World Bank expects a recovery on the fourth quarter of 2020. Economic situation will affect the Rama Government and it is assessed protests and political turmoil will come back to Albania in beginning of autumn. Besides, political and constitutional has never ended in the country; the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed in slowing down. The long judicial abnormality continues in the country affecting the Albanian justice system. It is not acceptable for a country which is in the “waiting room” of the EU to maintain malfunctions in the high judicial institutions (High Court, Justice Appointment Council etc). Corruption, accountability and transparency in public administration, fight against organized crime and money laundering and establishment of the rule of law are the major challenges for the Albanian politics. The “Porto Romano” upgrade is a notable geoeconomic development, although the Government’s actions lack transparency. However, it is assessed that it upgrades the city of Durres as a regional port.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

April 27th, the Service of Foreigners Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina has expelled three Serbian citizens from the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including two who have been expelled and banned from entering BiH, because they pose a threat to BiH’s public order and security. The third party is related to the criminal offense of people trafficking from Article 189, Paragraph 2 of the Criminal Code of BiH. These individuals were tested for coronavirus prevention before leaving. All three are negative for the coronavirus, and are submitted to the Serbian authorities for confirmation. In the forthcoming period, the Service will continue to undertake all

necessary operational activities towards all foreign nationals who may in any way pose a threat to the security system of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

- April 28th, during a press conference on April 23rd, 2020, the Minister of Security of Bosnia & Herzegovina (BiH) Fahrudin Radoncic stated that some countries, like Pakistan, will not be cooperative regarding illegal migrants. The Embassy of Pakistan considers his statement as uncalled-for and unwarranted. His blatant remarks that Ambassador of Pakistan Khalid Rao be declared ‘*persona non grata*’ is also deeply disconcerting, is stated in the press release sent by Embassy of Pakistan in Bosnia and Herzegovina on Tuesday. “*The Embassy of Pakistan is well aware of the problem of illegal migrants from Pakistan. We remain in contact with our authorities in Pakistan as well as concerned Bosnian authorities. In fact, the Embassy has always responded to the Service for Foreigners of BiH for verification of the antecedents of Pakistanis and offered services for issuance of Emergency Travel Documents as and when required. As a result, 73 Pakistani migrants, who were willing, have been repatriated from May-2019 till March-2020,*” the statement said. “*On January 30th, 2020, the Ambassador of Pakistan had called on Mr. Radoncic in his office where the issue of illegal migrants was discussed and it was agreed to share information and extend cooperation; however, the topic of deportation of migrants was never discussed during the meeting. Keeping in view of the unwarranted and spurious statement/remarks of Mr. Radoncic, the Ambassador called on Mr. Sefik Dzaferovic, Chairman of the Presidency and Dr. Bisera Turkovic, Foreign Minister of BiH today (April*

24th, 2020) and expressed his concerns. Both dignitaries assured the Ambassador to address situation and that no one will be allowed to create a wedge between the strong friendly relations built over years between Pakistan and Bosnia & Herzegovina. Pakistan attaches great importance to its relation with Bosnia & Herzegovina. Therefore, we are concerned over the unjust statement/remarks of Mr. Radoncic. We hope that the Government of BiH would issue clarification of his unwarranted statement/remarks,” the statement concluded. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

- May 3rd, there was no need for a Russian military medical team to disinfect a hospital in Mostar since Bosnia's Armed Forces can do that job quicker and more efficiently, the Bosniak (Muslim Bosnian) and Bosnian Croat members of the tripartite Presidency said on Sunday. Bosnian authorities did not allow a Russian military-medical team, which was allegedly supposed to perform disinfection of the Mostar University Hospital, to enter Bosnia on Friday. *“Their arrival has been postponed due to procedural issues. Based on positive experiences from the Banja Luka University Hospital where the Russian medical team performed disinfection 10 days ago, we requested that they do the same in Mostar,”* said the Spokesperson of the hospital, Adrijana Pandza. House of People's Speaker Dragan Covic had requested the arrival of a 24-member medical team along with five specialized military vehicles used for disinfection and decontamination. He did not, however, consult Bosnia's tripartite Presidency, which is in charge of Bosnia's foreign policy and the only institution that can send and approve such a request. Bosnia's Security Minister, Fahrudin Radoncic, explained on Saturday why the Russian unit was allowed to

come to Banja Luka but not to Mostar. He said that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had approved the arrival of the Russian medical team in Banja Luka because it was treated as a humanitarian action since it was not clearly stated that those arriving are members of the military. *“The second request, namely the note of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the entry of the same convoy and people across the border, this time contained a much more detailed list of military-technical resources, names and surnames of the medical team, as well as their military ranks!”* the Minister said, explaining that this means it could not be treated as a humanitarian action anymore. In an interview with FENA on Sunday, the Bosniak member of the tripartite Presidency, Sefik Dzaferovic, argued that there is no need for the military of any other country to help disinfect any hospital since Bosnia's Army has a unit trained for the job, adding that he is prepared to approve a request to deploy it at any time. The Presidency could not decide on the arrival since the necessary procedures were not respected, he said, adding that *“there is no stance on it neither from the Council of Ministers, nor from the competent Ministries and other agencies which must be involved in this entire process.”* He thanked all countries which want to help but urged for all the necessary procedures for it to happen to be respected. *“Bosnia's Defense Ministry and the competent Ministries of other countries must first reach a bilateral agreement on cooperation, which is of course coordinated with EUFOR and approved by the Presidency,”* he said. The Bosnian Croat member of the tripartite Presidency, Zeljko Komsic, said on Sunday that every clinical centre across Bosnia and

Herzegovina has the possibility to hire a company to disinfect its premises if it cannot do so alone. “I am certain that the clinical centers in Banja Luka and Mostar have previously engaged such companies which can do this job efficiently,” he said. He added that even if this is not possible, such clinical centers should ask Bosnia’s Armed Forces for help and the Army “can do that job even better than the Russian unit.” “All of this, of course, rise the question what the true goal of the invitation and arrival of the Russian unit in Bosnia and Herzegovina is, specifically in Banja Luka and Mostar,” he said. He argued that the presence of this Russian military unit in Bosnia was “completely unnecessary” and that it was invited out of “completely different reasons than those stated to the public.” He said it represented “a so-called special, psychological activity,” and that the unit should not have come to Bosnia and “should not return here.” (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Bosnia has become a field of geostrategic rivalry between the West (namely the US and NATO) and Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is already known that Bosnia remains (together with Serbia) the vulnerable part of the Western influence in Southeastern Europe and Russia tries to penetrate through various ways. The Bosnian authorities reacted in a possible medical activity of Russian militaries in the state’s territory sending a strong message about the country’s geopolitical and geostrategic orientation. The country remains “captured” by entities’ different interests and internal political games. For instance, the Russian militaries have entered the Bosnian-Serb entity offering their medical support but not in Mostar where the Bosniak (Muslim

Bosnian) and Bosnian-Croat entity refused the entrance. Tension between Bosnia and Pakistan remains regarding the migration issue, although the Pakistani Embassy in Bosnia tried to downsize current situation. It should be underlined that Serbia and Croatia intervene with one way or another in Bosnia’s internal issues enjoying the power of influencing situations. Political instability, poor economic performances, entities’ rivalries, and problematic framework of state’s structure (due to Dayton Accord) have left Bosnia far behind other Western Balkan countries towards the EU. Furthermore, nationalistic rhetoric and actions from the three entities creates certain conditions of mutual mistrust and work as a factor of potential destabilization. Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran maintain a permanent presence through financial donations and investments.



BULGARIA: April 27th, Bulgaria granted protection status to 885 people in 2019, a slight increase compared with 2018, according to figures released on April 27th, 2020 by EU statistics agency Eurostat. Of those granted protection by Bulgaria in 2019, a total of 320 received refugee status and 565 subsidiary protection. Bulgaria received 65 resettled refugees. Of those granted protection status in 2019, 615 (70%) were Syrians, 95 Iraqis (11%) and 60 (7%) were from Afghanistan. In 2018, Bulgaria granted protection status to 760 people. Of these, 625 (83%) were from Syria, 40 (5%) from Afghanistan and 35 (4%) from Iraq. In that year, Bulgaria received 20 resettled refugees. Eurostat said that in 2019, 27 member states of the EU granted protection status to 295,800 asylum seekers. Compared to 2018 (316,200), the

total number of people granted protection status was down by 6%. In addition, the EU received 21,200 resettled refugees in 2019. The total number of asylum seekers granted protection in the EU in 2019 comprised of 141,100 grants of refugee status (48% of all positive decisions), 82,100 grants of subsidiary protection (28%) and 72,700 grants of humanitarian protection (25%). The largest group of beneficiaries of protection status in the EU in 2019 were Syrians (78,600 or 27% of the total number of people granted protection status in the EU), followed by Afghans (40,000 or 14%) and Venezuelans (37,500 or 13%). The number of Venezuelans rose by nearly 40 times in 2019 compared with 2018, when almost 1000 Venezuelans were granted protection status in the EU. Among the Syrians granted protection status in the EU, 71% were recorded in Germany (56,100). For the Afghans, the highest share, 41%, was also recorded in Germany (16,200). Nearly all grants of protection status to Venezuelans were recorded in Spain (35,300), 94% of the EU total, Eurostat said. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- April 28th, Bulgaria has the lowest ratio of people with COVID-19 and third-lowest ratio of deaths from the disease, and this is an indication of how timely and good the country's measures against the spread of the virus have been, Prime Minister Boiko Borissov told the National Assembly on April 28th, 2020. Borissov was citing figures from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, which show Bulgaria as having the lowest number of people ill from COVID-19 per 100,000 population and in third place after Slovakia and Latvia in the number of deaths per 100,000 population. He was addressing a special sitting called at the request of

the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya - BSP), on the Government's measures regarding the COVID-19 crisis. A previous special sitting on the topic that had been scheduled for April 21st, 2020 was cancelled after Borissov's Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Grazhdani za Evropeysko Razvitie na Balgariya – GERB) party denied it a quorum. Borissov said that Bulgaria's measures to curb the spread of coronavirus were relatively liberal. This was in contrast to neighboring countries that had introduced curfews, while in Bulgaria, the construction sector, shops and houses of worship were allowed to keep their doors open. Bulgaria had enough personal protective equipment and tests for COVID-19 and industry had been reorganized very quickly to meet the needs, Borissov said. He thanked those in the front line in the fight against coronavirus. *“Our measures are fully in line with the recommendations of the World Health Organization, every day all media can receive as many answers as they want publicly,”* Borissov said. The BSP's Dragomir Stoynev said *“What you are offering right now does not live up to the expectations of Bulgarian citizens. These measures do not work. Do you have an economic plan for getting out of the crisis?”* Borissov said that it was expected that by the end of the month more than 120,000 jobs would be maintained through the 60:40 measure, whereby the state pays 60% of payroll costs of employers in certain identified sectors, while the employers must pay the other 40%. *“We currently have 7,403 applications submitted, 101,849 employees have benefited from it. Between 7,000 and 10,000 workers retain their jobs every day. At this rate, we will retain over 120,000 jobs by the end of the month. The big, in a sense, concern is how we will*

handle the tourism sector, because there is no prescription in the world yet,” he said. Borissov said that many sectors in Bulgaria continued to operate; agriculture, construction, IT. Motor vehicle factories around the world are expected to start operating next month, he said. BSP leader Kornelia Ninova said that the Government had no plan to deal with the crisis, everyone was scared and while leaders of other European countries long since had implemented plans to help the economy and individuals, in Bulgaria only loans were offered to businesses and people. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- April 30th, Bulgaria’s Finance Ministry said that the consolidated budget surplus for the first three months of 2020 was 1.43 billion leva (730 million euro), exceeding the Ministry’s forecast of 1.28 billion leva (654 million euro) issued last month. This was a significant drop compared to the first quarter of last year, when the country recorded a surplus of 1.81 billion leva (925 million euro). The Ministry said that the latest figures were largely unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted Bulgaria to declare a State of Emergency on March 13th, 2020. The negative impact of the “*measures to fight the pandemic,*” meaning the shutdown of a large section of the economy, on the revenue side of the budget would be felt with a degree of delay, the Finance Ministry said. For April, the Ministry forecast a budget surplus of 1.59 billion leva (813 million euro) at the end of the month, which would represent another large drop-off compared to 2019, when the surplus through the first four months of the year was 2.7 billion leva (1,39 billion euro), the ministry said. The state Budget had a surplus of 1.06 billion leva (542 million euro) and the EU funds surplus was 366.8 million

leva (188 million euro) at the end of March. Bulgaria’s contribution to the EU budget for the first three months of 2019 was 373.6 million leva (191 million euro). Revenue in January - March was 10.98 billion leva (5.6 billion euro), an increase of 119 million leva (61 million euro) compared to the same period of last year. Tax revenues were slightly up at 8.58 billion leva (4.4 billion euro), compared to 8.52 billion leva (4.3 billion euro) in January - March 2018. Budget spending was slightly up at 9.55 billion leva (4.9 billion euro) in the first quarter, compared to 9.05 billion leva (4.6 billion euro) in the same period of 2019. Mainly, that was due to higher pension and health insurance payments resulting from the pension hikes in 2019 and increased wages in the public sector, the Ministry said. It said that additional spending on state of emergency measures during this period was primarily on health care, namely the purchase of personal protective equipment, disinfectant and other medical equipment, the Finance Ministry said. It did not give an estimate for this spending, but said that it was covered under the budgets of individual state institutions. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although the Government claims that the economy has not been affected harshly by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic assessments advocate that Bulgaria may enter in recession. Economic situation may affect not only the Bulgarian effort to enter the ERM2 mechanism; the “waiting room” before the eurozone, but also the political stability of the country. However, Boiko Borissov’s Government is stable ensuring the country’s political stability. Migration poses a national security threat but currently situation is

under control since migrant and refugee flows coming from Turkey are not increased. Nevertheless, situation is closely monitored by Bulgarian authorities. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles for the country's development and should be addressed decisively. The country pays special attention to energy security developing several projects. Modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc). However, military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards.



CROATIA: April 27th, it is our desire to hold elections when epidemiological circumstances allow it, said Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic today, answering journalists' questions about when elections would take place given the coronavirus situation. *"In accordance with our political evaluation, we will make decisions on when elections will be held. At the moment, no one, not even bodies of the Croatian Democratic Union [Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ], has discussed this in detail,"* Plenkovic said. *"We are in an election year. If elections are held in June, July, August or September - those are all nuances,"* he said. Plenkovic said he did not discuss calling elections with President Zoran Milanovic. He recalled that the last elections were held on September 11th, 2016. *"The Government is currently in its third year and seventh month in office,"* Plenkovic said. Plenkovic said that as a country we can be extremely pleased with the manner in which we prevented the spread of coronavirus in the context

of the global pandemic and epidemic in Croatia. He added that economic and social measures were extremely well received. Commenting on allegations of politicization of the Civil Protection Headquarters, Plenkovic said that the opposition had many reasons to be unhappy and that he understood this. *"The Civil Protection Headquarters of the Republic of Croatia were appointed by the Government, with representatives of Ministries as members; these are people who primarily have a political mandate because it was given to them by the Government. And the thesis about the politicization of the work of the Headquarters simply does not stand, it also contains experts and epidemiological recommendations that they gave, and they have a head and a tail and are not any kind of improvisation, but rather an easing of measures according to circumstances,"* Plenkovic said. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- April 30th, Croatia's GDP will shrink 9.4% in 2020, Government's projections released on Thursday showed, only to bounce back in 2021 and post 6.1% growth. The latest forecast seems even more pessimistic than predictions released earlier this month by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which projected Croatia's GDP to shrink by 6.2% and 9.0% in 2020 respectively. Speaking at a regular cabinet session on Thursday, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said that although the impact of the coronavirus crisis on both the local and global economies would be *"short-term in nature."* The general Government deficit is projected at 6.8% of GDP, or 24.8 billion kuna (3.3 billion euro) in 2020. In 2021, it is expected to drop to 2.4% of GDP. Plenkovic said that the Government is hoping that a series of measures adopted to help

businesses retain jobs - including a state-subsidised 4,000 kuna (530 euro) minimum wage for furloughed workers - would help reduce the likely increase in unemployment rate. The fall in the number of people employed, which was around 1.5 million before the coronavirus crisis, is expected to drop just 3.3% in 2020, and the average surveyed unemployment rate is projected at 9.5% in 2020 and 9.0% in 2021. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- May 1st, the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska Partija Hrvatske - SDP) Vice-President Rajko Ostojic said on Thursday the SDP was ready for this year's parliamentary elections, adding that it would run in a coalition with the Croatian Peasant Party (Hrvatska Seljačka Stranka - HSS), the Croatian Party of Pensioners (Hrvatska stranka umirovljenika or HSU) and the People's and Civic Engagement Party (Stranka Narodnog i Građanskog Aktivizma – SNAGA). “The SDP is ready for the elections. In January and February, we travelled through half of the country presenting our program. The SDP has its program, its team, and its coalition,” Ostojic told the press after a session of the party presidency. Ostojic said the party leadership had unanimously supported the coalition with the three opposition parties, adding that the coalition agreement would be signed on Monday. Asked to comment on HSS Chairman Kreso Beljak's statement that the HSS had not ruled out the possibility of running alone in the election, Ostojic said that Beljak would be at the signing on Monday. SDP presidency member and Croatian MEP Biljana Borzan said European countries had postponed elections indefinitely as they believed it was too risky to hold them during the present pandemic. For his

part, Prime Minister and Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ) leader, Andrej Plenkovic said last week that parliamentary elections would be held as soon as it was safe to do so and certainly prior to the Constitutionally-mandated deadline of mid-December. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Messages for the Croatian economy after COVID-19 pandemic are not encouraging. The country may enter into recession threatening its route towards the eurozone. Public debate on parliamentary elections has emerged with the Government seeking to call for elections as soon as possible. It should be taken into consideration that the Government does not want delays since autumn may become dramatic due to harmed economy. It has been noticed political activity which foretells elections in short time. Croatia – Slovenia border dispute remains active, but COVID-19 pandemic and pre-electoral period in Croatia have downsized current situation. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic may affect the ambitious modernization plans due the economic repercussions in the country. Croatian Air Force is far from NATO standards and actually the country lacks an operational air power.



CYPRUS: April 29th, Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci said on Wednesday that cooperation and understanding were necessary for the reopening of the crossings when the time comes. Akinci discussed the issue during an

interview with a Kanal T television channel in the north. Arguing that it was a mistake that the decisions for the closing of the crossings by the two sides were unilateral ones at the time, he said they should not be reopened unilaterally in the same manner. He said that the prerequisite for the reopening of the crossings should be cooperation and understanding. *“This is a decision to be jointly taken,”* Akinci said, adding however that the time was not right for the crossings to reopen. *“When we reach that point, coordination will be necessary internally, with the UN and the Greek Cypriot side,”* he said. Commenting on the Cyprus problem, the Turkish Cypriot leader said *“When the day comes, I will try to do the best for the interests of our people,”* he said. Akinci had strongly criticized the initial decision by the Republic of Cyprus to temporarily suspend the operations of the Ledra Street, Dherynia, Astromeritis and Lefka crossings at the end of February aimed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus. He had also expressed his opposition, when a couple of weeks later, the Turkish Cypriot *“government”* also announced the temporary closing on their end of the crossings at Limnitis and Strovilia. At the time, the numbers of coronavirus cases on the island were very low as the first cases were detected at the beginning of March. The crossings at Ayios Dhometios, Ledra Palace and Pergamos are still open; however, due to the restrictions currently in place, people cannot cross back and forth since they would have to be placed in a 14-day quarantine when entering either side. Both sides said that the opening of the crossings would come at the later stages of the relaxations of the restrictive measures. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- April 29th, the Greek Cypriot Head of the bicomunal Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage, Takis Hadjidemetriou, said on Wednesday planning of projects is ongoing despite a temporary halt in construction. According to Hadjidemetriou, the Committee is continuing work. *“Amidst restrictions due to the coronavirus, the technical committee, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, continue to work through teleconferences,”* Hadjidemetriou told the Cyprus News Agency. Though conservation and restoration works were halted in March and April due to the restrictive measures, the Committee continues working on documents and tender competitions for a series of projects that are being implemented with the UN Development Program, he said. Among the ongoing projects is the next phase of the restoration of the Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas peninsula, Hadjidemetriou said, for which they have launched a tender bid. The call for tenders concerns the second and third stage of the Apostolos Andreas Monastery restoration. He said that works will now focus on the monastery’s medieval chapel, supporting the nearby building and the surrounding area. At the same time, the Committee plans on starting works for the restoration of eight Churches, eight Mosques and seven Fountains, mostly from the Ottoman era, and has issued a call for tenders for the clearing of the surrounding areas of two cemeteries. He added that the Committee and UNDP are in contact with the EU to promote these projects. The pandemic affected works at the Sourp Magar Armenian Monastery, the Churches of St George and St James in the Nicosia buffer zone, the fence of Panayia Church in Ashia to prevent the area from flooding and the completion of restoration works at the St Sergius and Bacchus Church.

While many projects ceased, others are expected to start, such as the Panayia Kanakaria Church, also in the Karpasia peninsula, he said. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- May 1st, the United States has said it welcomes Cyprus' efforts to fight money laundering but continues to urge the Government to halt regular Navy port calls by Russia. The statement by US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew Palmer was in response to a letter by the President of the American Hellenic Institute (AHI) Nick Larigakis. Both issues were a prerequisite for lifting the 33 year old arms embargo, according to laws signed last December by the US President Donald Trump. The AHI President had sent a letter on April 22nd, 2020 to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, asking the US administration to remove the arms prohibition on Cyprus. Larigakis had written to Pompeo requesting him to utilize the authority delegated to him by Trump under two recently enacted laws to waive the limitations placed on the transfer of arms to Cyprus, and further, to remove Cyprus altogether from the list of countries to which arms sales are prohibited under International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR). In his response Palmer said that the US welcomed Cyprus' "anti-money laundering measures, which showed important progress in strengthening AML [anti-money laundering] efforts and combating illicit financial flows." But, regarding the visits by Russian Navy ships, Palmer said that "the United States continues to urge a halt in Russia's regular Navy port calls to the ROC. There is no doubt these vessels contribute to destabilizing actions in Syria." Larigakis welcomed the letter's reaffirmation of the United States' view of Cyprus as a "valued

partner and friend in the Eastern Mediterranean" and assessment that US cooperation with the Republic of Cyprus is at a "historic high." But he expressed his disappointment that several of AHI's points made to remove the arms prohibition were not addressed. "The letter does not address the issue of removing the Republic of Cyprus from the ITAR list and did not acknowledge AHI's points related to the issue of access of Russian military vessels to Cypriot ports," Larigakis said. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Turkish drills in the Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) continue to worry the island's authorities. Cyprus cannot to stop the Turkish activity so far, failing to protect its sovereign rights. Turkey has simply refused to withdraw from a region that it is considered as its strategic extension where vital geostrategic and geoeconomic interests are at stake. On the other hand, Cyprus has failed to demonstrate that Eastern Mediterranean is a secure place for hydrocarbon exploitation and economic investments. Taking into consideration current situation and the collapse of oil market globally, it can be explained why the oil companies withdraw or cancel their activities in the Cypriot water. Turkey maintains a significant military force on the island (Army Corps seize). It is certain that Turkey will not accept "fait accompli" in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. 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 29th, following a visit to the Aegean island of Samos in the wake of rioting and a spate of fires at the Vathy reception center for migrants, Migration Minister Notis Mitarakis on Tuesday described situation there as “*extremely difficult.*” Mitarakis said that 22 migrants would face criminal charges over the upheaval. “*It is clear that those who come to our country and apply for asylum are obliged by the Geneva Convention to respect Greek law,*” he said. Mitarakis did not comment on the Government’s plans to decongest overcrowded facilities on the islands, which have been postponed amid the coronavirus pandemic. He noted, however, that progress has been made, with 12,000 migrants moved from island camps to the mainland this year. He added that his aim was for the Vathy facility to close. Meanwhile tensions have erupted between the Ministry and the Greek chapter of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which operates most of the accommodation facilities for migrants on the Greek mainland, following outbreaks of COVID-19 at three centers. In an announcement on Tuesday, the IOM said it cooperates with Greek authorities but stressed that the facilities are “*the full responsibility of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum, including safety and security issues.*” IOM staff, who works five days a week at the facilities, “*cannot be held responsible for illegal acts that hosted migrants may commit,*” it said. It was unclear whether the IOM was referring to the decision by five migrants to leave a camp in Malakasa despite a quarantine. The statement followed a letter sent by the Ministry to the European Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs on Tuesday, noting that 202 coronavirus

cases have been recorded at facilities on the island which are managed by the IOM. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 30th, Party leaders debated the Government's response to the coronavirus outbreak in Parliament Thursday. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis lauded his Government's response, saying it was the only one that outlawed layoffs. He said the Government spent 17.5 billion euro to prop up incomes and companies and will spend more, when European funds are available. Mitsotakis said further steps will be taken to help employers and employees. State will subsidize salaries of those furloughed or forced to work part-time. Home ownership will continue to be protected from foreclosures. Mitsotakis criticized opposition proposals for even more money to be poured into the economy, accusing the formerly governing Coalition of Radical Left (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – SYRIZA) of still promoting the idea that money grows on trees. Opposition leader Alexis Tsipras said Government response to crisis was belated and inadequate; added that a recession deeper than 4% this year, as forecast weeks ago by Bank of Greece Governor Yiannis Stournaras, will be the result of Mitsotakis' “*inertia, timidity and inability to anticipate the real needs of the economy.*” Tsipras accused the Government of using the crisis as an excuse to benefit its friends and to weed out “*unfit*” businesses, especially small and medium ones. Tsipras criticized the decision to re-open schools, other than for high school seniors, as unnecessarily risky and part of a Government Public Relations strategy to show that it is “*winning.*” He added that testing is badly lagging. Tsipras ended by calling for a “*broad progressive coalition*” in Government. Socialist

leader Fofi Gennimata applauded the “medical experts” for their handling of the pandemic, but added that the Government is moving ahead without a plan and with its main concern being how it will communicate its policies for its benefit. Gennimata challenged Mitsotakis to be bolder in demanding that EU aid its poorer members and “*not hide behind*” French President Emmanuel Macron and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez. She demanded that such aid be made through money transfers, not loans. She also proposed a 3-year suspension of the Stability Pact imposing limits on budget deficits. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- May 1st, officials in Athens are trying to make sense of what they see as erratic behavior emanating from Ankara, which on the one hand is requesting a moratorium on military exercises in the Aegean due to the coronavirus pandemic and on the other is continuing its tactic of low-level tensions regarding the Greek islands. Turkey’s behavior was also raised on Wednesday by Alternate Migration Minister Giorgos Koumoutsakos during talks with FRONTEX Chief Fabrice Leggeri. Koumoutsakos stressed the issue of Turkish Coast Guard vessels escorting boats with refugees toward Greek territorial waters. The latest incident was Wednesday morning, when the Hellenic Coast Guard spotted a boat with migrants northeast of the island of Lesbos which unsuccessfully tried to enter Greek territorial waters with the help of the Turkish Coast Guard. Also on Wednesday, Turkish F-16 jets entered the Athens Flight Information Region (FIR) and flew over Psara and Antipsara, the Hellenic National Defense General Staff said. Defense Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos reportedly told Turkish

counterpart Hulusi Akar recently that Ankara’s stance was to blame for the lack of agreement in recent talks on confidence-building measures. However, despite Ankara’s tactic of maintaining low-intensity tensions, it has effectively suspended the promotion of its “Blue Homeland” project, which envisions an extension of its influence over large areas of the Mediterranean. Moreover, apart from its warships off the coast of Libya and its Air Force, which remains active, though in smaller numbers, Turkey’s military is relatively subdued, which is thought to be due to the pandemic and the dire state of the Turkish economy. (www.ekathimerini.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

The Greek Government enjoys its successful tackling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the opposition is concerned on the economic repercussions of the Government’s measures and its after pandemic economic plan, it is widely accepted that the Government has reacted timely and adequate. However and taking into consideration that one of the main pillars of the Greek economy is tourism which has been strongly affected by COVID-19, there are concerns for the Greek economy route. As the Government enjoys citizen’s trust due to its tackling of COVID-19 and the migration flows and the country may enter in economic recession in coming autumn, one could not exclude early elections during summer or beginning of autumn. Greek administration is following closely Turkish provocations in Evros borderline and the Aegean Sea. Greek top-officials and military leadership are concerned due to upgrade of Turkish actions which include firings of light weapons in Evros and support of migrants to enter Greek territory.

Although, incidents are of low scale tension, situation could be turned into a “hot” incident or an armed conflict. Under current situation in Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea Greece, Greece is obliged to strengthen and modernize its Armed Forces operational capability.



KOSOVO: April 27th, Kosovo’s caretaker Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, speaking to Director General for Political Affairs at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Richard Moore, said that he expressed his concerns regarding the constitutionality of steps taken by Kosovo President following the no-confidence vote in Government last month. Kurti in a statement posted on social media, said the formation of new Government must be transparent and in line with election results of October 6th, 2020. *“Friendly discussion today with Richard Moore. We discussed the COVID-19 situation in both countries and political situation in Kosovo. I expressed my concerns regarding the constitutionality of steps taken by the President following the motion of no-confidence,”* Kurti said. *“I stressed that the process must be transparent and in line with election results of October 6th and we must not forget we are a democracy where transfer of power is legitimate only if it is legal and constitutional,”* Kurti stated adding that he thanked Moore for UK’s invaluable contribution to Kosovo. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- April 29th, Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK) signed an agreement with the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës - AAK), on Wednesday in its efforts to form a multi-party coalition to lead Kosovo’s next

Government. LDK leader Isa Mustafa announced last week the party’s intention to lead a coalition of parties that would form the next Government. LDK nominated former deputy Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti as its prime ministerial candidate after Kosovo President Hashim Thaci confirmed that he would offer a mandate to any coalition capable of establishing a parliamentary majority. AAK’s leader Ramush Haradinaj confirmed to the media on Wednesday that an agreement had been reached with LDK after a meeting between party representatives. *“Today I met with the leader of LDK, Isa Mustafa, and their nomination for Prime Minister, Avdullah Hoti, and we signed the agreement,”* Haradinaj told the press. Haradinaj was the country’s Prime Minister until July 2019, when he reportedly resigned in response to an interview summons from the Hague-based Kosovo Specialist Chambers, triggering new elections. The former Prime Minister’s party won 13 seats in the Kosovo Assembly at the October 2019 parliamentary elections. Haradinaj revealed on Wednesday that his party will take control of some of the Kosovo executive’s key Ministries in the next Government. *“The first Deputy Prime Minister will be Mr Besnik Tahiri, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Meliza Haradinaj-Stublla, Minister of Justice Selim Selimi, Minister of Economy Blerim Kuqi and Minister of Education will be Rame Lika,”* Haradinaj announced. One section of the AAK - LDK agreement, which was published by news outlet Telegrafi, identifies the key objective of the coalition as *“re-starting dialogue with Serbia to reach a comprehensive deal that needs to result with mutual recognition of existing borders.”* The complete structure of the new Cabinet is not yet known, as a comprehensive governing agreement cannot be reached until LDK has entered into partnership

with several other parties that would secure a coalition of at least 61 of the 120 MPs sitting in the Assembly. In order to secure this majority, LDK, which holds 28 seats in Parliament, is expected to also sign a deal with the Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA Social Demokrate - NISMA) and New Kosovo Alliance (Aleanca Kosova e Re - AKR) coalition, who have six seats in the Kosovo Assembly, and Serbian List (Lista Srpska), which holds all ten seats reserved for Kosovo Serb representatives. LDK will also require the approval of representatives holding the ten seats reserved for Turkish, Bosniak, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. Officials of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës - PDK), have rejected any possibility that they would join a new LDK-led coalition, despite the party's MPs voting in favor of the motion of no confidence that passed against the Vetevendosje-led Government on March 25th, 2020. *"No PDK MP votes for a Government of deceit,"* said party leader Kadri Veseli on Tuesday. *"LDK and Vetevendosje are responsible for this and they should find the solution. We demand early elections after the pandemic,"* Veseli said. However, during a meeting of political party representatives held by Kosovo President Hashim Thaci on April 22nd, 2020 participants representing PDK voted in favor of Thaci's proposal to form a new Government without resorting to fresh elections. The incumbent Government headed by Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) leader Albin Kurti has repeatedly demanded that elections be held as soon as the current public health emergency caused by the coronavirus pandemic comes to an end. Acting Justice Minister Albulena Haxhiu noted during the April 22nd, 2020 meeting that Vetevendosje intends to

challenge any attempt to form a Government without elections taking place in Court, labelling such attempts as *"unconstitutional."* Hoti rejected the idea of early elections being held after the pandemic. *"As long as there is a majority in the Kosovo Assembly, there is no need for early elections,"* said Hoti in a press conference on Wednesday, adding that coalition agreements with other political parties will be finalized *"very soon."* (www.prishtinainsight.com)

- May 1st, the Constitutional Court of Kosovo issued a provisional measure preventing the Kosovo Assembly from making any decisions on the new Government, pending the decision on Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) request for a review of the constitutionality of the decree of the Kosovo President, Hashim Thaci who appointed Avdullah Hoti as the new Prime Minister-designate. The implementation of the Kosovo President's decree has been suspended until May 29th, 2020, when the Constitutional Court will declare whether this decision is constitutional or not. Ahead of tomorrow's assembly session at which, at the request of the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK), a new Government of Kosovo was to be voted in – another debate was raised on whether the Kosovo President's decision to give the mandate to form a new Government to LDK, instead of Vetevendosje, the party which won the most votes in the last elections, was in accordance with the Constitution. Thaci made this decision yesterday, after repeatedly urging the Vetevendosje to propose a new Prime Minister-designate after a no-confidence motion against the coalition Government with the LDK was adopted. Vetevendosje, however, failed to do so, citing the public health crisis caused by the COVID-19

pandemic. A constitutional law Professor and former President of the Kosovo Constitutional Court, Enver Hasani told KoSSev back in March that in the event of a vote of no confidence, Thaci is required to give a mandate to the party that won the most votes in the last elections. Hasani, however, also revealed that the same decision does not define the deadline by which that party must propose a Prime Minister-designate. Thus, immediately after a mandate was granted to LDK, Vetevendosje addressed the Constitutional Court of Kosovo, requesting a review of the constitutionality of Thaci's decision. The Constitutional Court of Kosovo will present its final judgment on the constitutionality of the decree of the Kosovo President, with which LDK senior official, Avdullah Hoti was appointed as the new Prime Minister-designate by the end of the month. Until then, however, the Kosovo Assembly will not be able to vote on the LDK's proposal for a new Government composition. LDK leader, Isa Mustafa announced earlier today, following a session of the party's presidency, that there was no reason for the Constitutional Court to issue an interim measure, adding that the party would respect any decision reached by this court. "If the Constitutional Court reaches such a decision, we will not hold any assembly sessions, but we will wait for a final decision. We will not violate the Constitutional Court's procedures in any way," Mustafa said, Pristina-based Koha reported. Lawyer Kushtrim Palushi told KoSSev earlier today that there is a possibility that the Constitutional Court could suspend the decision of the Kosovo President to appoint a Prime Minister-designate either later in the day or early next week. The Ambassador of the United Kingdom to Pristina, Nicholas Abbot also urged political actors to respect the decision of the

Constitutional Court. The LDK, a former coalition partner of the Vetevendosje and runner-up in the last parliamentary elections, negotiated with representatives of Kosovo parliamentary parties earlier this week and reached a coalition agreement with Ramush Haradinaj's Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës – AAK), Fatmir Limaj's Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA Social Demokrate - NISMA), Serbian List (Srpska Lista) and other minority parties. The LDK Government's proposal will also receive the support of Behgjet Pacolli's New Kosovo Alliance (Aleanca Kosova e Re - AKR) party. According to Pacolli, however, AKR will not be part of that Government. (www.kossev.info)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political instability and uncertainty remain in Kosovo amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Internal politics are developed in the edge of constitutional order amid a harsh political struggle. Although LDK and AAK have reached an agreement on forming a new Government, the Constitutional Court prohibited any further progress until May 29th, 2020 when it will announce its decision on President Hashim Thaci's decree to overcome the winner (Vetevendosje) of the last elections giving the mandate to LDK. Under these circumstances it is almost impossible to talk for progress in the Kosovo – Serbia dialogue and negotiation for normalizing mutual relations. Fight against corruption, organized crime, money laundering and trafficking, establishment of rule of law, accountable and transparent state institutions, and functional public administration are the main challenges for Kosovo towards its European path.



MOLDOVA: April 28th, Moldova's Constitutional Court (CCM) urges political parties, civil society and information institutions to calm, to show mutual respect, to engage in a constructive dialogue and to show goodwill. A statement made public today reads that the call was made after statements had been launched in the media space *“able to create a negative public atmosphere around the Constitutional Court and discredit the constitutional Judges.”* *“Such statements trigger an uncontrolled public hysteria and pose danger for the functionality of the democracy and the rule of law state. They hit not only the authority of the Constitutional Court, but undermine also Moldova's authority as state entity before its own people and before the international partners,”* the CCM statement reads. The statement, signed by all Judges of the High Court, Domnica Manole, Vladimir Turcan, Eduard Ababei, Nicolae Rosca, Liuba Sova, Serghei Turcan, reads that *“we swore before the entire people on August 16th, 2019 to honestly and conscientiously fulfill the obligations of Judge of the Constitutional Court, to defend the constitutional order of Moldova, to comply while exercising the duties only and only with the Constitution. Today, we state with every responsibility that we have fulfilled and we are determined to further fulfill the constitutional powers with honor and dignity.”* The constitutional Judges gave assurances that *“the entire work and all rulings of the Constitutional Court will be based exclusively on the Constitution's norms. Pressure of any kind on the Constitutional Court Judges are unacceptable in a democratic state based on the supremacy of law.”* (www.moldpres.md)

- April 28th, the Constitutional Court (CCM) on May 7th, 2020 will give its ruling on the appealing of the Law No 57 from April, 23rd, 2020 concerning the agreement between the Governments of Moldova and Russia on the 200 million euro worth loan. According to a press release spread today, all notifications submitted by Moldovan MPs were declared admissible and connected in a single file. The CCM Judges on April 23rd, 2020 suspended the action of the law on the ratification of the agreement on loan with Russia. The Constitutional Court's action took place, after the Parliament had passed the document's ratification in two readings. Three lawmakers submitted notifications, considering that the agreement would contain disadvantageous conditions for the Moldovan state. Also on May 7th, 2020 the Constitutional Court will pronounce the operative part of the judgement on the electoral system based on which eventual snap parliamentary elections are to be held. The notification was submitted by MPs Sergiu Litvinenco, Alexandru Slusari and Vasile Bolea in October 2019, after the return from the mixed voting system to the proportional voting system. (www.moldpres.md)

- April 29th, an important new gas pipeline from Iasi in Romania to Chisinau in Moldova, which will link Moldova to the European energy system via Romania and reduce its energy dependence on Russia, is now 90% finished, the Moldovan Economy and Infrastructure Minister, Serghei Raileanu, said on Tuesday. *“It is in our best interest to ensure our energy security, but also that of the region, by diversifying natural gas supply routes. By interconnecting with the transport networks in Romania and by integrating Moldova into the European energy system, we*

will be able to do this,” Raileanu said. “We are closely monitoring the progress of this strategic project in order to ensure its construction in the established terms and to benefit from the pipeline by the end of the current year,” Raileanu added. The pipeline is being built by VESTMOLDTRANSGAZ, which is owned by the Romanian energy company TRANSGAZ, and 106 of the 120 km have now been completed. Since early 2019, construction is being carried out on all seven sectors of the pipeline on Moldovan territory. The deadline announced by the investor to finish the pipeline is the second half of 2020. The estimated cost of the project is 76 million euro, according to draft estimates done within the project documentation developed by TRANSGAZ. The pipeline is designed to be a major alternative to Russian gas delivered by Russian energy giant GAZPROM, which is currently responsible for 99% of gas used by the country. As a result, Russian gas deliveries play a very important role in political decisions in Chisinau. GAZPROM owns also 51% of MOLDOVAGAZ, the main gas company in the country. The administrator of VESTMOLDTRANSGAZ, Iulian Butnaru, stated on Tuesday that the work is being carried out within the planned deadlines. Romanian Prime Minister Ludovic Orban on Tuesday said that Romania would continue its investments in the energy sector as planned. “TRANSGAZ must be fully involved in the [energy] network expansion process, in the completion of the BRUA gas pipeline [running from Bulgaria to Romania, Hungary and Austria], and in the completion of the Iasi-Chisinau gas pipeline and other investment projects,” Orban said. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The loan from Russia continues to trigger questions in Moldova as it is considered as a harmful one due to burdensome terms. The Constitutional Court has blocked any further progress in the issue and it is going to announce its ruling on May 7th, 2020. The Iasi – Chisinau gas pipeline is about to complete including Moldova in the European energy network. Taking into consideration that Moldova is supplied with gas by Russia in 99% it is understood that the pipeline has significant geoeconomic and geostrategic importance in the effort of the country and pro-western forces to diversify the energy supplier of Moldova. In fact all the aforementioned actions are parts of the ongoing rivalry between the West (namely the EU and NATO) and Russia for influence in Moldova. The country is considered by the US and EU of great strategic importance being in the soft underbelly of Russia. On the other hand, Moldova is considered by Russia as an important region for its national security belonging by principle to its sphere of influence. Russia maintains troops in Transnistria which are considered by pro-western forces as violating Moldovan sovereignty. The frozen conflict of Transnistria is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization. The country enjoys relative political stability. However, corruption, lack of transparency and accountability reign in public administration and state’s politics.



MONTENEGRO: April 27th, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said today that Russophobic attitudes of Montenegrin

politicians, including President Milo Djukanovic, could be considered as treason. Answering a question during a video conversation with students of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Lavrov said that he was *“convinced that the vast majority of people in Montenegro do not share those feelings”* and that Montenegrin *“temporary leaders will lose their significance,”* TASS reports. *“When you are betrayed not by a person, but by the state that stood by you, it is sad,”* said the Head of Russian diplomacy. Lavrov said he regrets for current situation in relations between the two countries because he feels sympathy for Montenegro. *“Unfortunately, its current leader Milo Djukanovic, who has ruled the country for almost 20 years, has adopted an unequivocally Russophobic stance, which is against common sense and everything he previously supported in relations with Russia,”* Lavrov said. He added that Djukanovic, as far as he remembers, *“had problems with the law in the West”* and that he was *“accused of smuggling and other things in some European countries.”* *“I do not rule out that this was the reason for a complete reversal in his policy. Of course, if politicians are so vulnerable, they can be easily manipulated,”* Lavrov said. (www.vijesti.me)

- May 2nd, parties are in principle ready to give up part of the money they receive from the budget in order to increase salaries of health workers. However, opposition believes that before that, the Government should provide money from those who got rich enjoying the privilege of being close to the Government, while the ruling coalition sets as its priority to reduce the income of parties that boycott the Assembly. The proposal to redirect parties' money to medics was made by the Prime

Minister Dusko Markovic during the Prime Minister's hour, arguing with Social Democratic Party of Montenegro (Socijaldemokratska Partija Crne Gore - SDP) MP Rasko Konjevic, who proposed that the salary increase shows gratitude to health workers, Police and the Army. Yesterday, SDP President and MP Draginja Vuksanovic-Stankovic announced that the party would formally propose an increase in salaries for the health, police, army and education *“We expect that the Prime Minister will support the special taxation of tycoons who looted the country for hundreds of millions of euro; we expect that they will also sell official expensive vehicles, so there will be money in the coffers to increase salaries,”* Vuksanovic-Stankovic said. A few hours after the SDP's announcement, the Government announced that the April salary for health and Police employees would be increased by 15%. Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS) MP and Spokesman Milos Nikolic told Vijesti that the Prime Minister's proposal is of high quality. *“Nevertheless, for its realization, I believe that a consensus of all political actors is needed,”* he said. Members of the ruling coalition, the Bosniak Party (Bošnjačka Stranka), Social Democrats (Socijaldemokrate - SD) and the Liberal Party of Montenegro (Liberalna Partija Crne Gore - LP), also praised the Prime Minister's proposal, although the LP, as well as the DPS, had previously abstained when opposition demanded higher salaries for medics. The LP President, Andrija Popovic, said that they would support the proposal of the Government, but at the same time he will ask the money of the parties that have been boycotting the Parliament for last four years to be directed to health sector. DPS MP Milos

Nikolic has similar arguments *“I think that political parties that boycott the work of the Assembly and thus show disrespect to the highest legislative house, should suffer sanctions, primarily financial ones through reduced budget allocations.”* This year, parties have received around 10 million euro from the state budget. About 7.3 million euro have been allocated to parliamentary parties at the state and local level, which is 870 thousand more than last year. Given that this year is an election year, the parties are entitled to additional funds from the budget, namely from the permanent budget reserve, which amounts to 2.5 million euro. (www.vijesti.me)

- May 3rd, *“the final deadline for holding elections has been defined by law and I am sure the legal system will be observed, i.e. parliamentary elections will be held before the due date,”* Head of the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS) caucus, Nikola Rakocevic, noted. In an interview for Dan daily, he said that the opposition has been making unreasonable requests. When asked whether the DPS is ready to discuss the election reform after the epidemic passes, Rakocevic said that the existing electoral legislation has been aligned with the most important international standards. On the opposition’s request for the postponement of elections due in autumn, he said *“That will not happen. There is a determined final deadline for holding elections and I am sure the legal system will be observed, that is, parliamentary elections will be held before the due date.”* (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

While the COVID-19 pandemic spread is reducing, the country enters in pre-electoral

mood. The ruling DPS is seeking to call for parliamentary elections as soon as possible, while opposition asks for a delay until the autumn. Opposition looks divided without a common stance but there are several parties which will boycott the elections protesting for lack of democratic values, media freedom and establishment of an authoritarian regime by the ruling DPS. Corruption, smuggling (especially cigarettes) and money laundering are dominated in the country setting significant obstacles and risks for every investor. Such situation has strongly affected progress of accession negotiations with the EU. Montenegro needs more concrete reforms in the field of justice, rule of law, fight against corruption, money laundering, and organized crime, public administration transparency and accountability in order to become a stable and attractive investment environment. The coming elections in the country should be seen as a democratic stress test. The country focuses on strengthening its Armed Forces by purchasing modern equipment.



NORTH MACEDONIA: April 27th, the Government in North Macedonia has rejected opposition accusations that has downplayed the tough preconditions that Bulgaria has set on the expected launch of EU membership talks and on the gradual solving of open issues. The EU General Affairs Council unanimously decided to start accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania on March 24th, 2020. The EU Council of Ministers unanimously confirmed this on Sunday April 26th, 2020. However, the Council of Ministers also included in its summary a separate statement submitted by the Bulgarian delegation which, among other things, insisted on

scrapping references to the Macedonian language and to the existence of an ethnic Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. The conditions reflect Bulgaria's historic view that Macedonian is not a distinct language from Bulgarian, or Macedonians from Bulgarians. North Macedonia's Foreign Affairs Ministry condemned the Bulgarian statement. *"The statement, submitted in the summary after the adoption of the conclusions [endorsing the start of accession talks], is a strictly one-sided interpretative statement, which cannot exclude or change the legal effect of the decision for the start of negotiations, nor the meaning and the scope of conclusions,"* it said. Authorities in Skopje denied hiding the document from the public, noting that it is already publicly available, adding that they hope that, during talks, Bulgaria and North Macedonia will be able to settle their open issues through *"active cooperation and good will."* Skopje and some EU officials have meanwhile said they expect the negotiating framework with the EU to be finished during May, allowing formal talks to start possibly in June. But the Bulgarian document remains a contested issue within North Macedonia. On Sunday, the main opposition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) party accused the main ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija – SDSM), of downplaying and hiding the document – and the fact that talks with the EU will not be unconditional. On Monday, VMRO-DPMNE's Vice-President, Aleksandar Nikolovski, urged the country's political leaders, at their next meeting,

which is expected sometime in May, to firmly defend the national interest against the Bulgarian demands by adopting a common declaration. *"The Government is trying to relativize this document ... and this document directly undermines the foundations of Macedonian statehood – the Macedonian language, Macedonian history and the Macedonian nation,"* Nikolovski said. In a response, the same day, the Social Democrats replied that now was not the time for such disputes, when the country was still battling the coronavirus pandemic. The Bulgarian statement submitted to Brussels warns that Bulgaria will retain its right as an EU member country to condition the negotiations with North Macedonia with the latter's implementation of the historic 2017 bilateral friendship agreement. Bulgaria further stated that it wants to see the EU use the same *"language clause"* that has been part of the 2017 Skopje - Sofia friendship agreement in which, instead of *"Macedonian language,"* both sides as a compromise solution agreed to use the term, *"Official language of the Republic of North Macedonia."* *"No Document / Statement / Position by the EU and its institutions can be interpreted as recognition of the existence of a separate so-called 'Macedonian language',"* the Bulgarian statement reads. The Bulgarian statement is, in essence, nor more than a repeat of Sofia's demands from long before. In October last year, Bulgaria adopted a long, tough set of conditions for the North Macedonia's progress towards EU membership talks. North Macedonia then remained largely silent, reiterating that it wanted to solve open issues in the spirit of the friendship agreement and that it was already engaged in it. Meanwhile, the signing of the agreement contributed to a relaxation of bilateral relations, the two countries launched joint

commissions to settle open issues which are still working, and the political leaders of both countries as a sign of good will began jointly paying respects to historical dignitaries celebrated by both countries. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- April 28th, Oliver Derkovski, President of the State Electoral Commission, said that cannot just resume work on preparing elections. The SEC was preparing a vote on April 12th, 2020 but they were ordered to stop preparations due to coronavirus spread. But the elections were never officially called off, the Parliament is dissolved and it is unclear who can set a new date. *“The campaign cannot just resume. We cannot even finalize the voter rolls, which is a pre-condition for holding the elections, a serious election. We need to conduct a number of actions and to have a date when the campaign will officially begin. The SEC does not have the authority to set a new election date,”* Derkovski told Alsat TV in an interview. The ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemo-kratski Sojuz na Makedonija – SDSM) party is calling for the Parliament to simply re-convene, which was rejected by the opposition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) party, Democratic Union for Integration (Demokratska Unija za Integracija - DUI) and many legal experts as a precedent that is not possible under the Constitution. The push by SDSM has prompted concerns that they want to have the Parliament set an election date before the crisis has been completely resolved. (www.republika.mk)

- April 28th, Parliament Speaker Talat Xhaferi insists that the Parliament can only convene after an election was held. *“Anything else would be a coup attempt,”* Xhaferi told TV21, when asked about the request by the ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemo-kratski Sojuz na Makedonija – SDSM) party to re-convene the Parliament that was dissolved in mid February. *“All representatives voted on February 16th to dissolve the Parliament. The Parliament will convene after the next elections,”* Xhaferi said. His Democratic Union for Integration (Demokratska Unija za Integracija - DUI) party rejected the SDSM request to recall the dissolved Parliament, as did the main opposition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) party. (www.republika.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread is downsized, politics comes in the forefront. The country actually lacks an elected Government since a caretaker one is running the state affairs. Moreover the Parliament has been dissolved since early elections have been called for April 12th, 2020 but never happened due to COVID-19. In other words, the country does not have parliamentary activity and control and state affairs are arranged by decrees. SDSM pushes for re-convene of the Parliament and parliamentary elections as soon as possible seeking to exit the country from political deadlock. On the other hand, main opposition parties request elections after the certified end of COVID-19 pandemic.

Re-convene of the Parliament is unlikely to happen since the Constitution does not foresee such an option. As a conclusion, the country lacks political stability, while uncertainty is on the foreground in a rather challenging period for the North Macedonia. Bulgaria's conditions for starting the EU – North Macedonia talks was a "shock" for the country since are evaluated as too harsh. Bulgaria was absolutely clear that North Macedonia should abolish its ideas for "Macedonian language" and "Macedonian minority" in Bulgaria if it really seeks to start accession negotiations. Bulgaria's demands, once again confirms that North Macedonia's "Macedonian identity" (language, identity, name, history) as its founding base acts destabilizing for the country creating problems with neighbors. Situation is more complicated due to coming elections where nationalistic rhetoric is expected to prevail. North Macedonia should focus on reforms regarding justice, rule of law, fight against corruption and money laundering, public administration, and respect of human rights in order to accelerate its European integration process.



ROMANIA: April 28th, the interim Chair of the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) Marcel Ciolacu, stated on Tuesday that the MPs of the party he runs will submit two simple motions, one in the Senate, one in the Chamber of Deputies, against the Finance and the Agriculture Ministers. *"We will submit two simple motions. One against the Finance Minister, Florin Citu, in the Chamber of Deputies, and one against the Agriculture Minister, Adrian Oros, in the Senate,"* said Ciolacu, at a press conference, at the end of the

party's National Executive Committee meeting. According to Ciolacu, the county Councils and the Mayoralties of large cities, starting by June 1st, 2020 will enter financial collapse, because the Government has not allotted the money necessary for the functioning of hospitals in the period of the coronavirus epidemic. (www.nineoclock.ro)

- April 29th, Romania's Government is preparing an economic recovery plan, but must find the financial resources for this, Prime Minister Ludovic Orban said at Digi 24 TV channel on April 27th, 2020 News.ro reported. He implied that Romania expects the EU to go ahead with the issuing of joint Eurobonds. This scenario would allow the country to borrow money at a lower cost compared to the cost of sovereign borrowing, particularly after the outlook downgrade operated by the rating agencies. Until then, the resources that Romania has are rather scarce, and the Government has already used them, Orban implied. He mentioned the 750 million euro for technical unemployment benefits subsidies and 350 million euro - both sums, money redirected under the same multiannual budget of the EU. As for the national budget, the public deficit in Romania hit 0.9% of GDP in March, when the budget revenues plunged by 25% year-on-year during the first month of the COVID-19 epidemic. (www.romania-insider.com)

- April 29th, Romania's Senate rejected the bill on Szeklerland's autonomy in a special session one day after the deadline for a vote in the Chamber of Deputies had passed. A total of 126 Senators voted against the bill. Only nine senators of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România - UDMR) voted for this law. Romania's

Chamber of Deputies has passed tacitly, without debate, a draft bill that offers administrative autonomy to Szeklerland, a region in the center of the country inhabited mainly by Hungarian ethnics. The tacit adoption of the bill came after the legal deadline for a vote in the Chamber passed on Tuesday, without the vote taking place. It does not mean that the Deputies have actually voted in favor of this bill. The project will now go to the Senate, which has the final vote. The tacit adoption of this draft bill has sparked another political scandal in Romania. The Liberal Government and the Social Democrats, who have the majority in Parliament, have blamed each other for this “*slippage*,” which risks reigniting ethnic tensions in Romania. Romania’s President Klaus Iohannis accused the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) of helping the ethnic Hungarian party UDMR to pass this law. He even suggested that PSD and its leader Marcel Ciolacu had a secret deal with Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban to “*hand over Transylvania to the Hungarians*.” The statement, for which the President brought no arguments or proofs, has brought him a lot of criticism. Meanwhile, Ciolacu, who is also the Chamber’s Speaker, said his party would call for a special session of the Senate on Wednesday to reject the bill, according to Mediafax. Ciolacu argued that the Liberal Government was late in submitting a point of view on this draft bill and that the Chamber’s Committee for Administration, also led by the Liberals, delayed its report on this legislative initiative, which is why the Chamber of Deputies could not vote the bill in due time. The draft law, initiated by MPs of the ethnic Hungarians’ party UDMR just before Christmas in 2019, grants Szeklerland the autonomous region status, with local leadership and a

President elected for a period of four years. It also makes the Hungarian language an official language in public institutions, alongside Romanian. The project also mentions that Szeklerland can only lose its autonomy following a referendum among its citizens. The autonomous region would include the Covasna and Harghita counties as well as part of Mures county, where the majority of inhabitants are Hungarian ethnics. The bill’s initiators argued that Szeklerland’s autonomy would be an expression of its historical identity, ensuring equal opportunities for citizens and the protection of the Hungarian national identity, according to Hotnews.ro. Over 600,000 Hungarian ethnics live in the Covasna, Harghita, and Mures counties, according to the results of the 2011 census. In Harghita and Covasna, they represent the majority. After the Romanian Revolution in December 1989, the ethnic Hungarians in this region have made several attempts to get more autonomy through legislative initiatives promoted by UDMR. However, the Romanian Parliament has rejected all the bills in this sense. (www.romania-insider.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Ruling PNL and opposition PSD have engaged in a conflict which undermines good neighborly relations and provokes national tension. The Hungarian minority party in Romania UDMR has brought in Parliament a law for providing excessive autonomy to Szeklerland, which is mostly inhabited by Hungarian ethnics. Although the bill passed the Parliament it was rejected by the Senate. However, PNL and PSD has started accusing each other, while the President Klaus Iohannis made an inexplicable statement claiming that PSD seeks to give Transylvania to Hungary. His statement provoke

the reaction of the Hungarian Prime Minister, Victor Orban. It is still not clear why Iohannis decided to trigger tension in the region, but it is a fact that Hungary lately is provoking its neighbors regarding territorial issues. PSD is very active as the leading opposition seeking to overturn political balances within the Parliament and a dynamic comeback. It has been already assessed that time is in favor of PSD and that is why PNL was seeking to call early elections. Political developments should be expected starting from mid June. However, all political forces are concerned for the state's economic situation after the COVID-19 pandemic. Romania enjoys advanced upgrade in US and NATO strategic plans due to its geographical position located close to Russia. Consequently, Russia reacts in this close military cooperation between the two countries and the Alliance perceiving it as a threat against its national security. Romania keeps strengthening its Armed Forces seeking to achieve NATO standards.



SERBIA: April 27th, Serbia recorded the biggest expenditure for its military among the countries of the Western Balkans in 2019, Radio Free Europe reported on Monday quoting a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Serbia's military spending in 2019 stood at 1.14 billion dollars or 43% higher than a year earlier, SIPRI said specifying that the increase amounted to 326 million dollars. SIPRI ranked Serbia 5th on the list of 15 countries with the biggest annual increase in spending on the military. RFE recalled that Serbia has been arming itself intensely over the past few years, relying heavily on Russia for its purchases, with a lack of transparency in financing those purchases.

RFE said that it sent the Serbian Defense Ministry a number of questions about the details of weapons procurement from Russia but received no reply. According to RFE, the Serbian authorities have increased the military budget by 199 million euro in 2019, bringing that budget to 796 million euro. It added that the way the money was being spent could not be determined from the data published by the Defense Ministry. The report said that all countries of the Western Balkans increased their military expenditures with Serbia and Croatia (1.009 billion dollars) leading the field. The SIPRI report said that Albania's military spending stood at 189 million dollars in 2019, Bosnia-Herzegovina's 183, North Macedonia 151 million, Montenegro 89.3 million and Kosovo 65.7 million dollars. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- April 27th, two major Serbian opposition parties said they will not take part in the session of Parliament scheduled to debate and vote on the state of emergency and measures introduced by the Government to combat the coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout. Democratic Party (Demokratska Stranka – DS) MP and Parliament Group Chief Goran Ciric said on Monday that the party had not changed its decision to boycott Parliament and elections. *“Have the circumstances for the elections changed? The state of the freedom of the media is worse than it was before the state of emergency was declared and that has been confirmed by Reporters Without Borders, the German ZDF and European Union representatives,”* he said. The Presidency of the People's Party (Narodna Stranka - NS) said in a press release that its MPs will not take part in the session of Parliament and added that the decision was taken in line with its view

that institutions taken away from the people should not be given false legitimacy.

- April 28th, Serbian Parliament Speaker Maja Gojkovic said the Constitution does not envisage elections in Serbia to be held in the fall, as part of the opposition demands. “How to hold the elections in the fall when the Constitution does not allow it? We would have to introduce another state of emergency, to extend it for another 90 days,” Gojkovic told TV Pink. She said that the end of the state of emergency had not yet been seen and that the last word on when it will be lifted would give the Health Crisis Staff. “When they say we are safe, the Assembly will be summoned and the state of emergency will be lifted. After that, the Republic Electoral Commission can resume its election activities. The deadlines are in accordance with the Constitution and law will be respected,” she said. She pointed out that according to the Constitution, a state of emergency cannot be prolonged, “even if Djilas and Obradovic were lying in front of the Assembly at curfew.” “Serbia is moving forward and we want to go to the polls as soon as the Constitution and law allow and see which political option the citizens of Serbia support,” she concluded. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political tension emerged again after the COVID-19 pandemic decreased. Opposition has started again its protests claiming that SNS ruling and President Aleksandar Vucic have established an authoritarian regime with limited democratic values and freedoms. Lately, the anti-Vucic campaign aims to highlight the President as a “dictator.” However, opposition seeks to cancel elections until autumn claiming that elections

during summer may be dangerous due to COVID-19. The Government has rejected such an option due to the Constitution provisions. It is assessed that elections will be called soon; most likely in June. Further escalation is expected during the pre-electoral campaign, although opposition appears divided and it is not clear which parties will boycott elections. Serbia is in the “microscope” of Western powers (namely the US and EU) due to increased activity of China and Russia which are seeking to put the country under their own sphere of influence. It is a fact that Serbia and Russia have developed very close relations, especially in the defense sector which concerns the EU and US. Serbia and Bosnia are the “vulnerable” and “fragile” links in the “security chain” of Southeast Europe since they do not belong to the Euro-Atlantic structures. Restart of dialogue with Kosovo is far since its newly elected Government collapsed and political uncertainty reigns in Pristina. Although the EU and US push for dialogue restart it is assessed that it is very difficult to see tangible results within the 2020 due to Kosovo political uncertainty and Serbian electoral period. The EU has raised serious concerns over Serbia’s effectiveness on independence and accountability of the judiciary, freedom of expression, prevention of corruption and the fight against organized crime. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its Armed Forces declaring towards all sides that they are the power of the state. It implements an ambitious armament program mainly supported by Russia.



SLOVENIA: April 29th, the Prime Minister Janez Jansa and his state Secretary for National Security Zan Mahnic visited the Interior

Ministry to discuss illegal migrations. Minister Ales Hojs expects migrations to rise again in the near future, so he announced that more Police officers would be deployed on the southern border as soon as the COVID-19 epidemic eases. *“A rise in the number of illegal migrants can be expected in the Western Balkans in the coming months. There are already between 9,000 and 10,000 migrants in Bosnia and some 9,000 in Serbia waiting to proceed towards the EU,”* the Ministry said. (www.sta.si)

- April 29th, the Slovenian Armed Forces' (SAF) state of readiness for peacetime action has improved, while there has been no progress in its capacity for wartime action which thus remains unsatisfactory for the sixth straight year, President Borut Pahor said as he received the annual report for 2019. The key reasons for the negative assessment are staff and funding shortages as well as outdated equipment, suggests the report presented to Pahor by the Chief of the General Staff Brigadier General Robert Glavas, and Defense Minister Matej Tonin. Pahor said he fully trusted that Army will professionally and faithfully fulfill the public's expectations as regards security. (www.sta.si)

- April 30th, President Borut Pahor discussed Slovenia's cooperation with the group, the COVID-19 pandemic and the EU's future as he received the Ambassadors of the Visegrad Group accredited to Slovenia. Pahor, who described Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland as Slovenia's *“natural allies,”* stressed Slovenia was part of the core EU countries but would in these times like to see more French - German cooperation. As for Visegrad, he said *“the fact that we do not see eye to eye on everything does not mean we do not advocate the same goal - a*

stronger and more closely united EU which should not witness new divisions between its west and east.” (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Jansa Government had a good performance so far and could be assessed that it is stable. Migration is considered as a major threat against the country and additional measures will be taken for strengthening border control. Slovenia is concerned since almost 20,000 migrants from Serbia and Bosnia may try to enter the country in near future seeking to reach EU soil. Slovenia – Croatia dispute regarding the Piran Bay is still active but without tension or escalation due to COVID-19 pandemic. 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 they cannot accomplish their mission.



TURKEY: April 27th, seven countries are expected to join the Turkish Naval Forces' international drill in the Eastern Mediterranean, where Turkey faces multiple security threats, especially toward its oil and gas exploration attempts, a report said Monday. The exercise called *“Mediterranean Shield”* had already become an international drill with the participation of Pakistani and Jordanian navies and Turkey aims to expand the scope of the operation with more countries, including Algeria, Georgia, Albania, Azerbaijan, Libya, Lebanon and Tunisia joining, Yeni Safak daily reported.

“Mediterranean Shield” conducted every year since 2006, aims to boost preparedness to maritime security threats. According to the report, the Turkish Defense Ministry has been carrying out work in this regard, and Minister Hulusi Akar held a phone conversation with his Tunisian counterpart Imed Hazgui to discuss this on Tuesday. Turkey initially launched talks with nine countries two years ago, with the goal of expanding the operation at an international level. Participants will contribute by information sharing and other means of assistance to enhance cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean to secure peace in the region. In November 2019, the drill involved 40 countries, including Azerbaijan, Brazil, Georgia, Italy, Kuwait, Lebanon and Qatar. Frigates and other naval crafts from Pakistan, Bulgaria, Romania, the US and Jordan also participated in the drill. Pakistan was a prominent participant, contributing the PNS Alamgir (F260), an Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigate, as well as a maritime patrol aircraft and a naval Special Forces team. On November 11th, 2020 the Turkish Defense Ministry announced on social media that the exercise represented the *“largest ever in terms of the number of participants,”* adding *“The 2019 Eastern Mediterranean Exercise is ongoing, with the participation of almost 4,700 personnel and 48 ships from 15 nations.”* Turkey has given weight to naval exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially given the Greek Cypriot administration's unilateral attempts to drill in the region and accommodate a total of 13 would-be parcels within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), inviting international oil and drilling companies to operate in these areas, which are anticipated to hold rich hydrocarbon reserves. As a guarantor state to the island of Cyprus, Ankara

has consistently asserted the rights of the so-called *“Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)”* to resources in the area. Turkey is looking to expand its naval drills in order to boost its presence in the Black Sea, Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. (www.dailysabah.com)

- April 30th, Turkey's planned deployment of Russian S-400 missile defenses has been delayed due to the COVID-19 outbreak but will ultimately go ahead, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Spokesman İbrahim Kalın said on Thursday. *“There has been a delay because of the coronavirus but it will move forward as it was planned,”* Kalın told an online meeting hosted by the Atlantic Council, adding that Erdogan had told US President Donald Trump several times that he was also interested in purchasing Patriot missiles. Ties between NATO allies were severely strained last year over Turkey's acquisition of the advanced S-400 Russian air defense system, prompting Washington to remove Turkey from its F-35 Lightning II jet program in July. The US argued that the system could be used by Russia to covertly obtain classified details on the Lockheed Martin F-35 jets and that it is incompatible with NATO systems. Turkey, however, insists that the S-400 would not be integrated into NATO systems and would not pose a threat to the Alliance. Erdogan previously said the S-400s would be activated in April, yet the coronavirus pandemic has shifted Turkey's attention to combating the outbreak and supporting the economy. Previous talks between Turkey and the US on the purchase of the Patriot missile system had collapsed over a host of issues, from the availability of S-400s to Ankara's dissatisfaction with Washington's terms. Turkey has said it will only agree to an offer if it includes a technology

transfer and joint production terms. Ankara has repeatedly stressed it was the US' refusal to sell it Patriots that led it to seek out other sellers, adding that Russia offered a better deal, including technology transfers. Turkey even proposed setting up a commission to clarify any technical issues, but the US has so far not responded to this proposal. During a visit to Washington last November, Erdogan met US President Donald Trump and agreed with him on setting up a working group. The Ankara - Moscow S-400 deal was inked back in April 2017, when the parties signed a 2.5 billion US dollars agreement for two S-400 batteries. The S-400 is Russia's most advanced long-range anti-aircraft missile defense system in use since 2007. (www.dailysabah.com)

- May 1st, diplomatic tensions between Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have resurfaced once again after the two sides were engaged in a war of words over the crisis in Libya. In a statement issued on Thursday, the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation expressed its concern over Turkish interference in Libya through the alleged deployment of fighters and smuggling of arms. The UAE Ministry also praised the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by renegade military commander Khalifa Haftar, and rejected Turkish military intervention on behalf of Libya's UN-recognized Government. Responding to the criticism, Hami Aksoy, the Turkish Foreign Ministry Spokesman, accused the UAE of pursuing “destructive” and “two-faced” policies in the region and called on Abu Dhabi to stop its “hostile attitude” towards Ankara. Aksoy said the UAE was backing “putschists” in Libya - a reference to the LNA - by providing them with arms and mercenaries. He called on the Gulf state

to “stop funding forces against the international peace, security and stability” in places such as Yemen, Syria and the Horn of Africa. Turkey supports the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and has signed a military cooperation agreement with it to help the fight against Haftar's LNA, backed by the UAE and its ally, Saudi Arabia. Last year, the LNA started a military operation to remove the GNA from capital Tripoli but has not made much progress till now. In Egypt, Turkey supported the democratically-elected President Mohamed Morsi, backed by the Muslim Brotherhood before and during the coup in Egypt. Ankara also backed the anti-Government protests and later the rebel movements against President Basher al-Assad in the Syrian crisis. The UAE, together with Saudi Arabia, have supported al-Assad in Syria and Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who overthrew Morsi in 2014 and has been an ally of the two Gulf states since then. “*The rivalry between the two sides mainly stems from Turkey's support for Arab Spring uprisings and the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which were viewed as threats by the UAE and Saudi Arabia,*” Sinan Ulgen, former diplomat and Chairman of Istanbul-based Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM) think-tank, told Al Jazeera. “*But the problems between the sides have gradually grown through a series of issues of disagreement over the years,*” he said. “*As time passed and issues piled, Turkey and the UAE engaged in a regional power struggle. They see it as a zero-sum game, in which there is no way for both sides to win. If one wins, other one loses,*” he added. (www.aljazeera.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Economic situation is still not encouraging, although the Central Bank is working in protecting national currency, lira. Economy has already entered into recession and the main goal of the Government is Turkey to avoid default. In the field of external policy, it seems that Turkey has stabilized the Syrian front and is paying special attention to Libya. Its military support in the UN recognized Government of Fayeز Mustafa al-Sarraj is crucial for the civil armed conflict with forces of the Libyan field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Turkey invests significant national interests in Libyan soil and its strategic alliance with Sarraj strengthens Turkish presence in Eastern Mediterranean Sea providing strategic depth in the country. Besides, Turkey is trying to establish significant alliances with regional actors such as Tunisia, Algeria, Albania, Bosnia, Georgia, Lebanon which are added to the traditional very close allies of Azerbaijan and Pakistan. Of course, Turkey maintains its claims in the Aegean Sea and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone violating constantly their sovereign rights. In the east Mediterranean front, Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in the region and is expected to react violently if balance of power is jeopardized. The country continues to face several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs, Mayors, journalists and thousands of citizens 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. Turkey develops an ambitious armament project aiming at becoming self-sufficient in defense sector; if it succeeds it will set the base to become a regional military super power. Without any question,

Turkey has the characteristics of a regional superpower and it tries to act like one.

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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. Low tension incidents.

 Imminent major incidents regarding stability and security. Violent incidents or armed violence in specific regions. Ongoing tension or crisis. High security risk.

 Evolving or ongoing crisis including major armed violence or violent/armed conflict. Civil, inter-state or non –state actors war.