



**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.

“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE

“HERMES” Institute of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy (“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE) is an independent, non – governmental, non – profit organization, consisting of scholars dedicated in the research and analysis of international affairs in regional and global level. The Institute aims at providing objective, scientific, and reliable research analysis through a variety of studies contributing effectively and constructively in the public dialogue and the evolution of scientific knowledge.

Copyright © 2020

“HERMES” Institute for Foreign Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy

All rights reserved



ALBANIA: April 6th, former Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) MP, Albana Vokshi accused the Prime Minister, Edi Rama of using the country's medical staff for propaganda. According to her, Rama hypocrisy hides the inhuman exploitation of doctors and nurses due to COVID-19 pandemic. Vokshi claimed that the number of medical staff affected by the virus is increasing, while there is lack of COVID-19 tests. She said that dozens of messages are sent to PD office every day by medical staff claiming that they are completely vulnerable to COVID-19 spread. Vokshi underlined that for Rama, doctors and nurses are just numbers useful only for his propaganda. (www.albaniandailynews.com)

- April 10th, Prime Minister, Edi Rama announced on Friday the gradual plan to ease movement restrictions starting from Monday April 13th, 2020 as new COVID-19 infections in Albania decreased significantly. In a message on social media, Rama said that the rigorous implementation of measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 could pave the way for gradual ease of movement. *“Starting next week all groceries, drugstores and banks will work until 17:30 pm. If cases will continue to decrease, citizens could travel to their work by their private cars,”* Rama said. He also said that some other shops such as tailor and barber shops will be allowed also to work, but its staff should wear masks and gloves. The Premier had previously announced that the Government will take new measures against people who defy social distancing, especially in vegetable and fruit markets, while warning that those who break the rules risk imprisonment. Apart from that, Rama announced changes on the

Criminal Code, planned to be voted next week in Parliament, as toughen penalties will be apply for lockdown breach. *“Those borrowing cars from the family members or other people will face prison sentence, revocation of driving license and confiscation of vehicle. Opening of the banned activity will be punishable by imprisonment, revocation of driving license, confiscation of vehicle and of everything inside the premises,”* Rama said. (www.albaniandailynews.com)

- April 10th, Albanian President, Ilir Meta had a telephone talk with Albanian local authorities in Presevo, Bujanovac and Medveja. Meta spoke with the Mayors of Presevo and Bujanovac, Shqiprim Arifi and Shaip Kamberi, respectively and the Chairman of parliamentarians in the Municipality of Medveja Muharrem Salihu. The President expressed his concern over the health condition of the citizens of the Valley underling his solidarity to them. Meta expressed his satisfaction for current situation in Presevo, Bujanovac and Medveja regarding COVID-19 spread. (www.albaniandailynews.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The Prime Minister, Edi Rama announced gradual easing of the restriction measures due to COVID-19 pandemic signaling exit of current emergency situation. Sooner or later, political crisis in Albania will come again in the foreground of public interest. 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. Struggle between the Prime Minister, Edi Rama and the President, Ilir Meta continues affecting state's political stability. Meta keeps on

reacting against governmental law drafts using his constitutional powers to block them. Apart from that there are serious concerns over judicial independence in the country since the “vetting process” has become more or less a measure of pressure against judges. Media freedom is questioned in the country, while Rama himself does not hesitate to attack them.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

April 7th, Croatia's intention to dispose nuclear waste near the border with Bosnia is utterly unacceptable and this is a common stance of all levels of authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Foreign Trade and Economic Minister, Stasa Kosarac, told Croatia's Environment and Energy Minister, Tomislav Coric, on Tuesday, announcing a possibility of initiating an international arbitral dispute. In a phone meeting, Kosarac said he was familiarized with the recent decision of Croatia's competent Ministry to allow the use of former military warehouse Cerkezovac in Dvor municipality for disposal of nuclear power plant Krsko's waste. Bosnian authorities at all levels find Croatia's intention to dispose nuclear waste near the border with Bosnia “*utterly unacceptable*,” Kosarac told the Minister and expressed dissatisfaction over the fact that Croatia is not giving up the idea to assign the military warehouse Cerkezovac as a preferred location for this purpose. The potential construction of the nuclear waste landfill at the site known as Trgovska Gora would jeopardise lives of 250,000 residents of 13 municipalities down the Una river and would have a negative effect on the environment, stressed Kosarac, adding that this would also pose a serious security threat due to the fact that this area is known as an earthquake

zone. He announced that Bosnia would form a team of experts who will be dealing with this open issue and said he would insist on the Espoo Convention, which sets out the obligations to assess the environmental impact of certain activities at an early stage of planning. Kosarac expressed hope the issue would be solved in a diplomatic manner, but if Croatia keeps on insisting on the same location, Bosnia will initiate an international arbitral dispute, he underlined. Minister Coric recalled that Croatia and Slovenia have not to date reached consent on the disposal of radioactive waste in Vrbina, Slovenia, and that if no agreement is reached both countries will have to resolve the disposal of their own quantities of radioactive waste. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- April 9th, Bosnia's top electoral authority asked the State Parliament to amend the Election Law and postpone this year's local election due to COVID-19 pandemic. The Central Election Commission, which calls and oversee election process in Bosnia, convened on Thursday and agreed to launch an initiative towards the change of Bosnia's Election Law, which would postpone the local election that was supposed to take place this year. Proposed changes to the Election Law introduce a term of exceptional circumstances that considers an emergency situation as well as the state of natural disaster declared by competent institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which includes all levels of authority and determines that the Central Election Commission has authority to postpone the calling and holding of elections. According to the same changes, the Commission would be in charge of the assessment of situation and decide on calling the elections even during exceptional circumstances, if conditions and legal

framework were met. The Commission recalled that the state Government, formally called the Council of Ministers, declared the state of natural disaster on March 17th, 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic and passed a decision on the operation of the state institutions towards the protection of health and lives of its employees. In line with current law provisions, the Commission is supposed to call the October local election in early May. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- April 11th, leaders of Bosnia's ruling parties agreed Saturday on how to divide the 330 million euro the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is prepared to lend the country for its fight against the coronavirus, paving the way for the sum to be transferred. The IMF has agreed to double its original sum for Bosnia but said it will only approve the loan after the country's two semi-autonomous regions - the Serb-majority Republika Srpska (RS) and the Bosniak (Muslim Bosnian) - Croat majority Federation (FBiH) - determine how much each entity will get. Leaders of the main ethnic parties, Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH), Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA) and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata - SNSD), met with EU and IMF officials on Saturday to discuss the issue. They concluded that the FBiH will get 62% and the RS 38% of the funds. Both regions will then give half a percent of their share to the Brcko District, which belongs to neither of the two entities. Negotiations regarding the distribution of the money between the ten cantons in FBiH will continue, SDA leader Bakir Izetbegovic said. However, according to HDZ BiH leader Dragan

Covic an agreement has also already been reached on that issue. "As for the Federation, 50% will go to the cantons and 50% will go to the FBiH Government level," he said. (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

COVID-19 forced entities' leaders to reach a fast agreement on allocation of the 330 million euro IMF loan for tackling the pandemic. Bosnia seeks to receive international financial aid from several organizations. Bosnia continues to suffer from political and institutional crisis. Tension may be escalated anytime. In general, current political crisis confirms that the Dayton peace agreement is a problematic one and it is time to be amended. One could claim that "Bosnia is a captured state due to Dayton peace agreement." It should be underlined that Serbia and Croatia play a crucial role in current crisis enjoying the power of influencing situation. Taking this into consideration, situation is sensitive threatening not only Bosnia's peace and stability but of the whole region. 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. Neighboring Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs, while Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran maintain a permanent presence through financial donations and investments. Croatia's plan to store nuclear wastes in a region near to the border with Bosnia

may turn into another dispute between the two countries.



BULGARIA: April 8th, President Rumen Radev called on MPs to donate their March salaries for the fight against the coronavirus, and provoked the reaction of Government representatives with his comments in connection with the measures during the state of emergency. The Head of state warned that the measures to protect the country from socio-economic catastrophe are not taken at the appropriate time. *“The Prime Minister must acquaint himself with the laws. The President cannot veto a parliamentary decision. It is better for him to refrain from other comments. Goethe said it best ‘There is nothing more frightful than ignorance in action’.”* This was the President's response to the Prime Minister Borissov, who called him *“an evil mother-in-law who only criticizes”* a few days ago. Radev urged the Government to think about the mental health of the nation. *“The people who make these decisions are well-fed people. Many Bulgarians are already starving. Therefore I say do not wait for the moment when hunger will overcome fear,”* Radev said. The President did not answer the question whether he would veto the budget update and the amendments to the Emergency Act. (www.novinite.com)

- April 8th, the US Department of Defense's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) has written to Bulgaria's Defense Ministry saying that Bulgaria has been included in the list of countries that will be able to pay in installments for new military acquisitions. The letter was the result of the US Department of Defense's Foreign Ministry Sales contracts by which Bulgaria will

acquire F-16 fighter jets and other defense products, the Bulgarian Ministry of Defense announced. It should be borne in mind that DSCA will apply the option of deferred payment depending on the duration of the contract and the volume of defense products delivered, the Ministry said. This will allow the Ministry of Defense to implement a flexible financing scheme for the acquisition of defense products and services and reduce the burden on the defense budget in the coming years. On August 12th, 2019, Bulgaria's Ministry of Defense said that it had transferred to the US the entire amount of 1.2 billion US dollars under international Government procurement contracts to acquire eight F-16 Block 70 aircrafts and related equipment and armaments. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- April 10th, *“I should not have to bend over to the Eurozone waiting room. You see how much money they are allocating. Bulgaria has an excellent financial and economic structure and has to meet only one requirement, in order to join ERM2 and we will do it immediately - we will apply for the Eurozone again. The current crisis showed that the countries part of the ERM2 and the Eurozone will receive millions of Euro while the rest will borrow loans. We will apply for the Eurozone by the end of April. I am sure we will be accepted,”* the Prime Minister Boyko Borissov said after a visit to a sewing shop in Haskovo, which produces protective masks. The Prime Minister was briefed on the production process by the Bulgarian company which products have been approved by the EU. *“I came to thank people because this is the company that offers the best quality. The company did not cut workers, it even raised their salaries; a big market is opening up for them. We are*

transforming the economy,” Borissov explained. (www.novinite.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political rivalry between the President, Rumen Radev and the Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov is in the center of political interest amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the virus spread is under control and is reducing political and public interest is shifting towards the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 measures. Migration problem due to uncontrolled refugee and migrant flows from Turkey is closely monitored by Bulgarian authorities but currently there is no pressure in Bulgarian borders. 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 6th, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic held a second meeting/video conference with prominent Croatia scientists, public health experts, molecular biologists, epidemiologists, infectious diseases experts and virologists from Croatia and abroad. *“We have just held a video conference with experts of various disciplines in the context of fighting the coronavirus epidemic,” Plenkovic said. “We implemented measures on time that were rather*

restrictive and resulted in a significantly slow spread of the virus and a low death rate. It is important that we heard evaluations by scientists in comparison with other countries. We implemented our strategy from when we recognized the problem in China and we reacted well,” the Prime Minister said. “There are three aspects: continuing with a policy that will not lead to any kind of a problem in the healthcare system, in this phase we need to conduct restrictive measures in accordance with the needs of economic and vital activities. Our goal is for the relaxation of measures to be in accordance with recommendations by epidemiologists. The third is the long term aspect in which developed countries either find a cure or a vaccine. That is the most important,” Plenkovic said. “Once again, I call for trust in authorities and experts and when we look at all the measures we can say that we rounded out an entire package, it is in front so that as a society we can be stronger and continue to maintain social distancing,” he said. Scientists noted that the greatest risk is within the family and that the virus spreads within the family. Once again, Plenkovic thanked all experts and everyone in the Civil Defense Headquarters. As far as a relaxation of measures is concerned, the Prime Minister said we will begin relation in manner that follows recommendations by epidemiologists. “Our people are serious and have understood the crisis. This is a signal that the Government is managing the crisis well and caring for citizens, and that is incentive to continue in the same manner,” Plenkovic added. This was the second video conference between Prime Minister Plenković and prominent Croatian experts from home and abroad addressing government activities in preventing the spread of the

coronavirus. The first such meeting was held on March 25th, 2020. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- March 9th, at the today's Government session, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic among others said *"As for the program approved by the European Commission, which is state aid for the program of the Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development ensuring loans for liquidity, I think it's very good."* He also mentioned yesterday's Homeland Security meeting and a video conference held on Monday with scientists from various disciplines on combating the coronavirus epidemic. Although open markets began to operate under limits, and stores were allowed to work longer ahead of Easter than in previous days, the Prime Minister urges all citizens to stick to measures of social distancing in order to curb the coronavirus epidemic as soon as possible. *"More than 10 million kuna has been gathered to fight the coronavirus epidemic, and just over 7 million has been raised for reconstruction following the earthquake,"* the Prime Minister said, adding that the public will regularly informed of collected funds. He also stressed that pensions have been paid and that this will continue to be the case for as long as this coronavirus crisis lasts. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- April 9th, the World Bank (WB) has announced that it estimates Croatia's GDP will fall by as much as 6.2% this year, commenting that Croatia is on a path for deep recession. The WB says Croatia's tourism and export of goods will be hit hard, given travel bans and slowdowns in activities of major trading partners, primarily in Italy but also in the rest of the Eurozone. Workers temporarily working abroad have started returning to Croatia, so the unemployment rate could rise above 9%. The WB expects that the Croatian

budget deficit could reach 8% of the GDP this year, with a share of public debt in the GDP of almost 84%. *"No economic growth can be expected this year in any economy of the world, including Croatia. We hope that crisis will end as soon as possible, the shorter it will be, the smaller the drop will be. We have no drop projections. Croatia can function as much as needed, for us to move a step forward and pull ourselves out of all of this. This is not easy at the moment, but that is why we went with two sets of measures, I hope it will be enough,"* said Minister of Environmental Protection and Energy Tomislav Coric. *"I have nothing special to comment about individual institutions, including the World Bank. They come out with their predictions, and those predictions, like some of ours have a lot of fences. It is not some fantastic science and knowledge. Effects can be seen. As for the budget, the needs for functioning of the whole country are quite high, given the low projected income of revenue. This will have to be offset by borrowing in the domestic and foreign markets, which will have an impact on the public debt. Neither the World Bank nor ratings agencies nor do we have overall presumptions at our disposal. We will inform the public about the income of funds and the execution of the state budget,"* Finance Minister Zdravko Maric said. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

State's economy is coming in the forefront of public interest as COVID-19 pandemic is back down. Messages from abroad are not very encouraging speaking for a deep recession. Such scenario could be detrimental for Croatia (and several other countries around the world)

affecting all social strata. One could be claimed that “the real war starts now.” Croatia currently holds the EU Presidency in a rather difficult period for the cohesion and stability of the organization. Croatia – Slovenia border dispute remains active and it should be noticed that Croatia needs Slovenia’s support regarding its accession in the Schengen Zone and OECD. Croatia implements a hard-line foreign policy with its neighboring countries maintaining open disputes with Bosnia, Slovenia, and Serbia. Top officials do not hesitate to openly interfere in Bosnian domestic affairs in the name of Bosnian Croats. Storing of nuclear wastes in a region near to the Bosnian borders may become a source of harsh dispute not only with the neighboring Bosnia (which strongly reacts in such plans) but also with local community. 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 6th, Yeni Duzen writes that the President of the Republican Turkish Party (Cumhuriyetçi Türk Partisi - CTP), Tufan Erhurman, stated that the occupied “state” must borrow if necessary and stop the “social explosions,” according to the Press & Information office. In a post on social media, Erhurman notes that workers are being fired from workplaces which continue to be activated, depriving them from their income. Erhurman emphasized press workers remained unemployed and in financial

difficulties. He also said that the amount of 1,500 Turkish pounds that the illegal “Government” would give to private sector workers was insufficient and pointed out that it was not known whether any amount would be taken from employers. He noted that he also did not specify how much aid would be given to third-country nationals and whether this would meet their minimum needs. Expressing that the so-called “Ministry of Labor” should meet with employers and find a solution to these problems, Erhurman added “If the state is to borrow, it must borrow, but this problem must be prevented before to turn into a social explosion. Otherwise, the cost of the social explosions we will experience may be much higher than the cost of borrowing and none of us will be able to cope.” (www.sigmalive.com)



Tufan Erhurman, leader of the CTP

(Photo source: www.cumhuriyetciturkpartisi.org)

- April 7th, military authorities are studying various scenarios regarding the summer’s conscription, which will be affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The Defense Ministry and the Army Command have set up a joint Committee to look into all possible scenarios. The Committee is expected to submit a proposal to the Defense Minister later this month. A Ministry

Spokesman said the scenarios take into account the duration of the school year, which has effectively been suspended. The time of conscription in the summer is linked to admission exams for universities in Greece and Cyprus, graduation date, and the school-leaving grade that plays a role in which army branch an individual will be posted. The Spokesman said a lot would depend on situation in Greece since admission exams are contingent on the course of the pandemic there. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- April 8th, “Without resources from the Turkish Republic, we will not be able to succeed,” the Turkish-Cypriot “finance minister,” Olgun Amtziaoglou said emphasizing that under the current circumstances “we have limited capacities after May.” According to CNA information, Amtziaoglou stated that the “Government” of the occupied north had developed a plan for the community’s financial viability, but the current health crisis due to COVID-19 pandemic overturned economic situation. Amtziaoglou added that Turkish-Cypriot officials had carried out some economic studies which were sent to the Turkish Vice President Fuat Oktay. “Under current circumstances, we cannot make it after May.” Asked if aid would not come from Turkey, the pseudo-state would go on loan, the “finance minister” replied “yes”, although - as he said - this is not their choice. It should be noted that a few days ago Amtziaoglou had stated that Turkish-Cypriots would ask Turkey for financial support of 3 billion Turkish Lira concludes the information of CAN. (www.sigmalive.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Cypriot Government and authorities are focused on COVID-19 pandemic. It seems that there is no

other news in the country. Currently, Turkish provocations within the Cypriot territorial waters have been significantly reduced, but Turkey maintains its threats against Cyprus’ sovereignty. It is assessed that soon Turkey will repeat its provocations within the Cypriot EEZ. Turkey has achieved its initial goals so far by establishing its presence within the Cypriot EEZ claiming the Turkish Cypriot community rights. However, the Turkish strategic goal is to deter international energy giants from investing in Cypriot fields and starting research activities. It maintains a significant military force on the island (Army Corps seize) and it reinforce it with modern systems such as UAVs. It is certain that Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. Turkish-Cypriot community has strongly affected by the COVID-19 restriction measures mainly in the economic field and is forced to expect financial aid by Turkey. Of course this dependence may strongly affect the internal politics of the Turkish-Cypriot community. 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 10th, the Greek Government and health authorities should be in a position to start considering relaxation of strict lockdown measures intended to contain the coronavirus epidemic as of mid-May, according to a top official. “We are already analyzing the data and are optimistic. We need to be patient until the end of the month,” the Head of the National Organization for Public Health (EODY),

Panayiotis Arkoumanas, told Skai TV on Friday. Easing restrictions “*will depend on the degree of public compliance*” Arkoumanas said, echoing the official Government position and adding that “*I believe we will be able to start examining which measures to lift by the middle of May.*” The EODY President advised against cultivating “*premature expectations,*” saying that “*I want to hear from the experts and look at our models*” before making any definite comments. He added that EODY is expected to start nationwide epidemiological studies next month, while also testing larger chunks of the population for antibodies to the novel coronavirus. Greece has one of the slowest rates of infection and death in Europe from the novel coronavirus pandemic, which many experts attribute to the early adoption of social-distancing and lockdown measures. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 11th, despite the Government has likened the financial agreement struck by Eurozone Finance Ministers on Thursday in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to a prescription of painkillers when what is really needed is antibiotics. It was nonetheless satisfied overall with the outcome. The package, worth a total of 540 billion euro, includes 240 billion from the Enhanced Conditions Credit Line (ECCL) of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) for Eurozone member-states, 200 billion in business loans – with an emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises – from the European Investment Bank and 100 billion in other loans. Greek Government officials see the agreement as a first step and predict that more financial tools will be made available in the near future to mitigate the unprecedented financial crisis caused by the global pandemic. They also find it encouraging

that there is a consensus among eurozone countries that bold and radical decisions are needed. Finance Minister Christos Staikouras described the decision shortly after Thursday’s video conference as a “*satisfactory agreement*” – a phrase that is clearly not as enthusiastic as “*good,*” which was chosen by some of his eurozone counterparts. His remarks were also seen to reflect his anticipation of even more forceful decisions, which, he said, should serve as “*the springboard for even more ambitious European initiatives – in the future.*” Government sources, however, see the decision regarding the creation of a recovery fund as a positive move, as it will serve as an extra tool to combat the crisis. According to experienced analysts who spoke with Kathimerini, this fund may eventually be incorporated into the EU budget, avoiding the creation of a so-called “*corona bond,*” which was requested by nine countries, including Greece, but no mention was made of it at Thursday’s conference. At the same time, there are Government concerns about whether the strengthening of the European mechanisms will be geared to include broader economic recovery or will only aim to cover increased spending on healthcare, with the Dutch Finance Minister saying the ESM can provide unconditional financial assistance to countries for healthcare costs. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 11th, Greek authorities have found out that numerous migrants in Turkey have been concentrating in the country’s western seaside towns, as if ready to cross into neighboring Greece’s islands in the Aegean Sea. More worrying, sources that cannot be named but are considered reliable believe that Turkey has a plan to push migrants infected with the coronavirus to

cross into Greece and other parts of Europe in the midst of the virus pandemic. According to the sources, these migrants, many of whom were also at the Pazarkule, or Kastanies, border crossing, have been transported from migrant camps in the hinterland. Migrants' movement towards the Turkish shore is being facilitated and regulated by the Turkish Police and Gendarmerie. The same Greek sources are calling Turkish flights over the islands of Lesbos and Chios and the land border in Thrace, a diversionary tactic. Greek authorities have collected much of the information from open sources, such as NGOs which are active in helping migrants in Turkey enter Greece. Turkey recorded 5,138 new coronavirus cases on Saturday, pushing the total to above 50,000 (52,167) since recording its first confirmed infection exactly a month earlier. There were an additional 95 fatalities raising the death toll to 1,101. (www.ekathimerini.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Greek authorities assess current situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic as satisfying announcing that after Easter holidays they will start thinking of softening the restriction measures. However, the economic aspect of the measures has started to become a “headache” for the governmental officials since the state’s economy has been paralyzed last two months. Greece as most EU countries seeks to get a strong financial support by the EU in order to avoid a new deep economic crisis. In political level, the Government enjoys citizens’ confidence due to its policy and reaction in migrant issue and COVID-19. In other words, the center-right Government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis is absolutely successful in “hot” issues such as the refugee case and

COVID-19. It is assessed that it is very possible Mitsotakis to call for early parliamentary elections in early autumn trying to capitalize his success. Greek security forces are on high alert regarding possible new migrant waves in land borders or the Aegean Sea. Turkey insists on provoking the Greek forces in the Aegean Sea, both in the air and in the sea. There is always a significant possibility of an armed incident which could be escalated into a crisis. Under the current situation in Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea Greece is obliged to strengthen and modernize its Armed Forces operational capability.



KOSOVO: April 6th, the EU has renewed its efforts to resume Kosovo -Serbia dialogue, after a long pause. With Miroslav Lajcak’s appointment as Special Representative, the EU wants the dialogue to start immediately. Kosovo is requested to return at the negotiation table with a caretaker Government and amidst coronavirus crisis. Lajcak is planning to start consultations on dialogue this week, whereas the caretaker Prime Minister Albin Kurti and President Hashim Thaci’s have not commented on who should be leading the EU-facilitated dialogue. Lajcak, in his first week of work will start consultations on reviving the dialogue which was stalled in November 2018 after Kosovo introduced 100% tariffs on Serbian goods. This was stated on Monday by Peter Stano, lead Spokesperson of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. “He [Lajcak] will start consultations during this week focusing on Pristina - Belgrade dialogue,” Stano said during a press conference in Brussels without elaborating further. Heads of the EU in a joint press release

issued on Monday urged resumption of Kosovo - Serbia dialogue without further delays, now that Lajcak has officially assumed his duties. Gazeta Express has asked the Office of the EU Foreign Policy Chief, Josep Borrell, on the resumption of the dialogue after Monday's press statement, considering circumstances created with the spread of COVID-19, and toppling of Government in a no-confidence vote on March 25th, 2020. *"The message from the EU as expressed today in the statement by the Heads of Missions of the EU and member states in Pristina is in line with the previous calls by the EU from different levels including by the High Representative Josep Borrell on various occasions – to re-start the dialogue without any delay because the status quo is untenable,"* Stano said. The Prime Minister's Office and President of Kosovo has not commented the EU's call to resume the dialogue with Serbia. Also, the Office of the US special envoy on Kosovo - Serbia dialogue, Richard Grenell, has not commented on today's EU statement, after Lajcak's appointment. *"We have no comment on this issue, at this time,"* said Dick Custin, Spokesperson to Grenell's Office. Former Slovakian Foreign Minister, Lajcak, has been appointed as EU's Special Representative on Kosovo - Serbia dialogue, at the proposal of Borrell. Kosovo leaders, including Thaci are sceptical on Lajcak's role considering that he comes from a country which has not recognized Kosovo's independence. Thaci said that he would refuse meeting Lajcak mandated by the EU if he comes with a status-neutral attitude. Thaci expressed his readiness to engage in a US-brokered dialogue and has continuously criticized the EU. Kurti said that he will be part of the dialogue with Serbia under the EU facilitation, but his authority has been shaken after the

Parliament toppled his Government. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- April 10th, Kosovo President Hashim Thaci, sent Friday a second letter to the Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) leader, Albin Kurti asking him to propose a new candidate to form the Government, after no-confidence motion in Kurti's Government on March 25th, 2020. Thaci said that he is waiting for Kurti's answer at the request he sent in the first letter, dated April 2nd, 2020 to propose a candidate for the Prime Minister and form the Government of Kosovo. *"As you know, after no-confidence motion in Government on 25.03.2020, I had consultative meetings with all political parties represented in Parliament to assess whether it is in the interest of political parties to form a new Government or dissolve the Parliament. Majority of political parties are in favor of forming a new Government. Therefore, considering the abovementioned acts I gave the Vetevendosje Movement the chance to propose a candidate for Prime Minister. Citizens of the Republic of Kosovo and political parties represented in Parliament are justly expecting establishment of the new Government and expect me to decree a proposed candidate for Prime Minister,"* Thaci wrote in his letter sent to Kurti. In his letter Thaci reminded to Kurti that it is his constitutional mandate to guarantee democratic functioning of institutions, including assurance on nomination of a candidate for Prime Minister to form the Government. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- April 10th, the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved on Friday 51.6 million euro, in emergency support for the Republic of Kosovo under the Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI) to meet urgent balance of payment needs stemming from the

outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The IMF said in a statement that the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated containment measures have severely weakened Kosovo's economic outlook. *"The economy is expected to contract by 5% in 2020 as tourism receipts, remittances, exports of goods, and FDI will decrease due to travel restrictions and the effect of COVID-19 in trading partners and remittance-originating countries. The deteriorated economic outlook is expected to result in external and fiscal financing gaps,"* according to the press release. IMF said that Kosovo authorities' policy response to the shocks has been timely and appropriate, with a temporary loosening of fiscal and financial policies. Fiscal actions so far target the sectors most affected by the shock and aim at supporting social and health spending. Following the Executive Board discussion, Tao Zhang, Deputy Managing Director and Acting Chair, issued the following statement *"The global COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected Kosovo, creating an urgent balance of payments need. Externally, travel restrictions and the global recession have imposed a heavy toll on tourism, export of goods, remittances, and FDI. Domestically, heightened uncertainty and movement restrictions have disrupted supply and further constrained demand. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities reacted quickly and put in place strict containment and mitigation measures to provide relief to the most impacted businesses and households, as well as created room in the budget for increased health spending. The Central Bank of Kosovo suspended loan repayments through end-April for sectors and individuals most affected by the crisis."* (www.gazetaexpress.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT  :

The President Hashim Thaci pushes the caretaker Prime Minister, Albin Kurti to nominate a new candidate from his party for the Prime Minister but the latter delays in his answer since he knows that he will not be able to form a Government. On the other hand, Thaci seeks to overcome Kurti and give a new mandate to somebody else; most probably the LDK leader, Isa Mustafa. The newly appointed EU Special Representative, Miroslav Lajcak looks very active but it is doubtful if he will achieve tangible results regarding Kosovo – Serbia dialogue. Kosovo is not ready for dialogue as long as it faces political uncertainty and instability. Besides, Thaci and several Kosovo political forces see with skepticism Lajcak since he comes from a country (Slovakia) which has not recognized Kosovo independence. 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 7th, President Igor Dodon said that the state must change its approach on the health system and informed about a new strategy of development of Moldova's medical system. After a today's meeting of the Supreme Security Council (CSS), the Head of state said that he understood the patients who presently criticize the bad conditions in hospitals. According to him, the present situation in the system is due to the heritage left by the Governments in power in the last ten years and the reforms which had a noxious effect on this sector, such as the liquidation of district hospitals and the merger of some medical and sanitary institutions. *"We manage to cope even in such*

conditions, maybe better than some countries which are above Moldova in world rankings,” Dodon said. The President asked the Government to work out a new strategy of development of Moldova’s medical system, beginning from first-aid posts in villages and ending with the republican hospitals. *“We will reallocate also additional financial means for the medical sector in the long run. We must change the priorities and emphasis should be put on the health sector. We assure you that it will be one of the state’s priorities and on the CSS’ permanent agenda,”* Dodon added. (www.moldpres.md)

- April 10th, Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration Cristina Lesnic told a today’s news briefing that she had demanded urgent holding of a meeting in the 5+2 format, in order to discuss aspects on the coronavirus pandemic in the Transnistrian region. The Deputy Prime Minister for reintegration said that the reason for summoning the emergency meeting was dealing with the unjustified limiting by the Transnistrian side of access of Moldovan physicians and medical staff to the breakaway region. According to the official, 95 medical employees notified the Reintegration Policies Bureau about the fact that they were not able to move to the Transnistrian region to provide medical assistance to citizens living on the left bank of Dniester. *“We took efforts to summon the joint healthcare group on April 9th; yet, the Transnistrian side did not participate in it,”* Lesnic stressed. Lesnic noted that, according to data held by the Reintegration Policies Bureau, there are 78 cases of infection with COVID-19 in the Transnistrian region, of which 74 ones with local transmission. At the same time, Lesnic also said that all teachers from those eight Latin-script education institutions

from the Transnistrian region had received their salaries for last March. (www.moldpres.md)

- April 13th, Head of the Transnistrian Foreign Office Vitaly Ignatiev maintains that the Moldovan side keeps using the coronavirus pandemic for its political ends. Speaking on local television, he said that Moldova is demanding to urgently hold a meeting in the 5+2 format to discuss how Transnistria is combating the COVID-19. Meanwhile, Ignatiev maintains that the real goal of his Moldovan colleagues is to distract the attention of international observers from their own reprehensible acts in relation to Transnistria. *“Over recent time, the Moldovan side is applying anti-humanitarian approaches: blocks the supplying of medicines and medical equipment to Transnistria, including spare parts for the artificial lung ventilation machines, creates problems for other cargoes. All this is happening against the background of combating the pandemic, when medicines are critical, when the elderly are in the group of risk. In our view, by means of such extreme statements and speculations the Moldovan side is trying to distract the attention from the problem it has created by itself,”* he said. Transnistria’s Chief Negotiator maintains that in conditions of quarantine it is unacceptable to talk about holding of sitting in 5+2 format. *“Our colleagues has a certain level of unprofessionalism, they do not understand that the 5+2 format is clearly established by principles and procedures. This is a special mechanism. Thus, today we can hold only consultations. We have a wide agenda and of course we are ready to work on this agenda,”* Ignatiev said. (www.infotag.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Dispute has emerged between Moldova and Transnistria due to the latter's measures against COVID-19. However, the dispute has its roots in the long "frozen conflict" due to Transnistrian secession. The Government is accused of lack of transparency regarding information on COVID-19 and it is true that there is no clear picture on the country's spread. The President Igor Dodon has consolidated his political power in the country, while PDM achieved to come back in power with little casualties since last elections. Under these circumstances, the country enjoys relative political stability. The country follows a pro-Russian orientation, although it declares that it seeks to join the EU. Due to its strategic geographic position, Moldova has become a field of rivalry between Russia and the US and NATO. The country lacks economic growth, while corruption is in high rates. 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.



MONTENEGRO: April 8th, medical equipment, prepared by the Ministry of Health of Turkey, has been sent to Montenegro and another four countries battling with coronavirus epidemic. *"Montenegro and Turkey together in fight against COVID-19. Thanks to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan,"* Montenegro's President, Milo Djukanovic wrote on social media. The equipment encompasses 50.000 medical masks, 1.000 protective suits and 1.000 tests. *"After the despair, hopes blossom. After darkness, sun always comes. To Montenegrin people, with love,"* it was written on packages.

"The packages of equipment are on its way to Montenegro," Ministry of Health of Turkey reported. Turkey donated earlier 1.000 tests and provided transport of Montenegrin nationals. (www.cdm.me)

- April 11th, the coronavirus pandemic has brought in fake news and misinformation. And Montenegro was targeted by fake news campaigns as well. In times of isolation, when one can easily get all the information he/she wishes for, it is difficult to get the relevant information and at the same time be 'immune' to fake news. How to reach the ultimate truth? Whom can you trust? Where can you get the right information? A political observer, Ljubo Filipovic explains CdM that many pieces of fake news somehow reach the mainstream media thus causing considerable damage. *"As for Montenegro, a destructive and subversive narrative of a part of the Serbian public keeps spreading misinformation about Montenegro. Once the litanies have ceased, they found the new way of spreading hatred towards the minority ethnic groups, and started spreading false information about the Government trying to hide infection rates,"* Filipovic was adamant. He also mentioned another kind of false information – the treatment for coronavirus disease, protective measures and coronavirus disease itself. For this type of the 'infodemic', it is rather easy to find the cure – official websites of the Public Health Institute and the World Health Organization. However, according to him, we must be aware that Montenegro is not an exception, as reasons for spreading misinformation are numerous. (www.cdm.me)

- April 12th, the proposal of economic measures, presented by the Prime Minister, several days ago

is an aid package for stabilization and protection of our employees and industry in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, Economy Minister, Dragica Sekulic, told in an interview for TV Montenegro. According to her, the Government then intends to present a range of measures for the development, as it has already started talks with social partners, MPs and economic experts to find the best possible solution. In addition, the budget revision will most probably happen in May, Sekulic said. “Right now, we have to take into account the sustainability of public finances. Therefore, the first thing that we have to bear in our minds is the fact that we will not generate revenues as we used to do during previous months or last year. It means that we are going to have somewhat lower budget revenues, that is, a certain deficit,” she noted. The first 100 million euro Government’s aid package, passed on March 19th, 2020 was just a rapid response to emergency financing of the industry. Sekulic continued “The aim of the second one, which has already been proposed, is to protect the industry now in order to be able to start with the development as of May or June.” The coronavirus affected the world’s largest economies, the Minister concluded. (www.cdm.me)



Montenegro’s Economy Minister
(Photo source: www.mek.gov.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

State’s authorities continue to receive measures against COVID-19 pandemic, while the Government is worried about the economic aspects of the pandemic. 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 6th, several journalists used the opportunity during the delivery of Hungarian medical assistance to Macedonia today to press both Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto and Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) President, Hristijan Mickoski on political issues. Some tried to get Szijjarto to discuss the fact that Hungary gave asylum to politically persecuted former VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski, while others objected to his decision to give a joint press conference with the opposition party leader, and not with the (currently) left aligned

Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov. *“I had an official press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs which is very normal and I have a press conference with the representatives of the opposition who are by the way representatives of our sister party. I wonder whether you would raise the same question if situation was vice versa and social-democratic leader would come here and have a common press conference with the social-democratic opposition. It is very normal, we never feel frustrated or insulted if foreign guests do the same in Hungary,”* Szijjarto said. The Hungarian Minister was also asked about the frequent allegations on the part of the ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijal-demokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) party led by Zoran Zaev, that Hungary under Viktor Orban is a dictatorship or autocracy. *“You know, it does not really matter what Mr. Zaev thinks about the internal situation in Hungary because he is not Hungarian. For us what matters is what the Hungarian people feel about the internal situation in Hungary. We won the last three elections with a two-thirds majority, which shows very well what the Hungarian people think about our performance. For us this is what matters and now what external actors think about us. It does not matter. My principle when it comes to foreign policy is mutual respect. And mutual respect means that you try to avoid commenting on domestic internal situation in other countries. You never hear me commenting about the social-democratic Government here. And when it was about Hungary supporting the EU and NATO integration of your country we were not really faced with this opinion from him,”* Szijjarto shot back. Mickoski added that he is proud of all friendly ties with foreign countries, and that Hungary has provided brotherly help in this crisis,

and in the EU and NATO accession process. (www.republica.mk)

- April 8th, North Macedonia received the most medical assistance from its friends such as Slovenia, Hungary, the US and Turkey, said Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) official Timco Mucunski. These countries organized air shipments of medical assistance, or provided financial aid to North Macedonia to fight the epidemic. *“In these difficult and uncertain times, the most bilateral help came from the Governments of Jansa, Orban, Trump and Erdogan. It is no coincidence, because a conservative outlook includes a sense of responsibility, empathy and a humanitarian approach. We are especially grateful to our friends in our sister parties who have shared their attention and their medical resources to help us,”* Mucunski said. (www.republika.mk)

- April 8th, decision of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijal-demokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM)-led Government to impose sanctions on Turkey was wrong, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) lawmaker and former Foreign Minister Antonio Milososki wrote on social media, pointing out to three examples that led the Government to make a big mistake with this decision. *“1. Friendships between countries are a long-term investment, and Turkey has been*

providing unreserved support to Macedonia [North] for 30 years, even in times of blockades and sanctions that have undermined the country's stability. 2. Macedonia [North] and Turkey signed a Strategic Partnership in 2008, and diplomacy means continuity and respect for agreements, especially now that both countries are NATO allies. 3. A significant number of Macedonian expats live in Turkey, as the Turkish community is important in Macedonia [North], and these are people who deserve more respect and their use as a potential for economic cooperation in favor of both countries," Milososki wrote. (www.republika.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

COVID-19 affects state politics and highlights political alliances with external stakeholders. Opposition VMRO-DPMNE is taking advantage of the aid the country received by the "brother" politically affiliated Governments of Hungary, Slovenia (also Turkey and the US) claiming that the party secures aid amid the pandemic. The country lacks political stability since a caretaker Government is running the state affairs, while elections have not been rescheduled yet. The country 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 6th, President Klaus Iohannis has announced that "the state of emergency needs to be extended." In this regard, the head of state said that the text of the decree will be drawn up this week, and next week, he will decree a state of emergency for another

month. "Drawing the line and adding up, we have come to the conclusion that the state of emergency needs to be extended. This way, we have asked the Government to come up with proposals to be included in this decree. This week, we will draw up the text of the decree and, in the beginning of next week, I will issue a new decree to extend the state of emergency for another month," the Head of state said. He added that "this period is absolutely necessary in order to keep the development of the epidemic under control. Iohannis had a meeting to evaluate the measures for managing the COVID-19 epidemic with the Prime Minister Ludovic Orban, Finance Minister Florin Citu, Interior Minister Marcel Vela, Defense Minister Nicolae Ciuca, Economy Minister Virgil Popa, Health Minister Nelu Tataru, Minister of Labour and Social Protection Violeta Alexandru, Minister of Justice Catalin Predoiu, and Head of the Emergency Department Raed Arafat. He also stated that the Government will have to make a "comprehensive analysis" and reassess all expenditures and revenues, in the context in which situation with the state budget is "complicated." (www.nineoclock.ro)

- April 7th, the local elections in Romania, initially scheduled for June, will be deferred to a date to be later decided - but before the end of this year, according to an emergency ordinance draft adopted by the Government in its April 6th, 2020 meeting. Reportedly, September and October are considered for the date of the local elections, while the parliamentary elections might be held at the same time or at a close date. "It is obvious that electoral campaign activities cannot be carried out and the elections must be organized in a safe context. Three institutions have drafted a OUG to extend the term of the local elected public

servants by December 31st, 2020,” announced the Deputy Prime Minister Raluca Turcan before the Government meeting. *“At the same time, procedure for preparing the elections must be simplified. The parties will have to submit a single list of supporters including 25,000 signatures, of which at least 500 voters in each county and 1,000 in the municipality of Bucharest,”* added Turcan. Under a rather unusual provision, the list of supporters in a county can be replaced by the proof that an amount of 50 minimum gross wages has been deposited for the electoral campaign, according to Hotnews.ro. (www.romania-insider.com)

- April 8th, all political parties in Romania’s Parliament, except for the ruling National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal - PNL) have sent a letter to the Prime Minister, Ludovic Orban asking him that the Government works together with the Parliament to draft a national plan to help Romanians and companies affected by the new coronavirus pandemic. *“All parties, except PNL, have agreed to unite in the Parliament and speak with one voice when it comes to urgent measures that are required in support of Romanians and the business environment,”* Marcel Ciolacu, the leader of the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) – the biggest party in the Parliament – wrote on social media, local Hotnews.ro reported. *“I do not think the Government should continue to fight the Parliament! I think, more than ever, that the Government and Parliament need to work together on a national plan that is supported by all political forces,”* Ciolacu added after an online meeting with the leaders of the other parties represented in the Parliament. Dan Barna, the leader of Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați

România - USR) – the third-biggest party in the Parliament, also wrote on social media about this meeting, saying that the discussion touched the public health crisis, the economic and social effects it implies and the measures that can be taken at parliamentary level. *“We have agreed to ask the Prime Minister Orban for a weekly meeting with the parliamentary parties about the measures to exit the crisis. We also ask the Prime Minister to send to the Parliament all the measures he is considering during this period. We think a serious debate on these measures can contribute to their improvement for the benefit of the whole society,”* Barna wrote. (www.romania-journal.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The Romanian President, Klaus Iohannis announced the need for extension of the state of emergency due to COVID-19. However, extension should provoke reactions by the opposition which accuses the Government of abusing its power. The country enjoys relative political stability after the new PNL Government has been established. 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 6th, the Serbian Finance Ministry said on Monday that the budget deficit at the end of February stood at 600 million Dinars (5 million euro). Budget income stood at 204.7 billion and expenses at 205.3 billion Dinars,

it said. The fiscal deficit at national level stood at 6.6 billion Dinars in the first two months of the year and the primary fiscal surplus at 27.6 billion Dinars. The planned fiscal deficit was 20.6 billion Dinars. The country's public debt stood at 24.36 billion Dinars at the end of February which is 49.1% of this year's planned GDP, the Finance Ministry said and added that the public debt stood at 48.9% of the GDP at the end of January. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- April 8th, Serbian Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin said on Wednesday that the coronavirus pandemic has not diminished the combat capabilities of the Army of Serbia (VS). *"We prepare, train and work every day and when this blight is over we will be fully prepared to defend our country. The combat capabilities of the VS have not been diminished,"* Vulin said after observing a training exercise for snipers out of the 72nd Special Operations Brigade. He said that the military is helping fight the coronavirus pandemic but *"we are not forgetting that our basic function is the keep the country safe and our combat readiness is at the highest possible level,"* the Defense Ministry said in a statement. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- April 11th, leader of the Social Democratic Party (Socijaldemokratska Stranka - SDS) and former President of Serbia, Boris Tadic, expressed concern that the measures the Government introduced are not only aimed at protecting citizens and the health system from the coronavirus but also serve as a tool for President Aleksandar Vucic to abuse the state of emergency for political purposes. *"I am afraid that during the state of emergency, the authoritarian course of Vucic's Government is strengthened step by step,"* Tadic said. According to the SDS, Tadic told the

German *'Der Tagesspiegel'* that there is a possibility Serbia might abandon its EU-oriented atmosphere and that it could get used to a completely different one during the state of emergency. He warned that the situation is turning into one suitable for authoritarian regimes which abuse the crisis in order to ban public debate. *"In Serbia, a journalist was arrested only because she reported on the bad conditions in a hospital in Novi Sad. The intention of the Government is clear - who reports on problems will be sanctioned,"* the SDS leader said. Tadic argued that there are only a handful of independent media outlets in Serbia but none with a national frequency, but he also indirectly blamed some heads of European countries for such a state of democracy. *"A lot of them support Vucic because of his promise that he will be servile with regard to solving the problem of Kosovo, as he is doing what the former democratically-elected Government did not want to do regarding Kosovo out of conviction,"* Tadic said. *"At the same time, Vucic used this position to abolish media freedom and democratic standards. We do not live in the same democracy we lived in before 2012,"* he concluded. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Serbia remains under the state of emergency due to COVID-19 pandemic most probably until the end of April. Opposition and international organizations continue to keep an eye on media freedom and human rights in Serbia. Restart of dialogue with Kosovo is far since the newly elected Government collapsed and political uncertainty reigns in Pristina. Although, Kosovo announced revoke of 100% tax on Serbian goods,

Serbian authorities are not satisfied due to reciprocity measures have been introduced by Pristina. Montenegro – Serbia relations are in low level lately due to the Montenegrin law on religious freedom which is considered by Belgrade as a direct attack on Serbian Orthodox Church and consequently on Serbian population in Montenegro. Serbia is considered by Montenegro as a direct threat of destabilizing the country. The country maintains very close relations with Russia, especially in the field of defense. 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 7th, as Slovenia preserved a flat curve of new coronavirus cases - reports for Monday said confirmed cases were up by 35 to 1,055 and the death toll rose by 6 to 36 – Prime Minister Janez Jansa announced that some of the restrictive measures could perhaps be eased as early as next Tuesday, provided that certain conditions, including the stability of the healthcare system, are met. He said the Government was examining the possibility of relaunching manufacturing, part of the services sector, commerce and transport if protective measures are implemented. Jansa was critical of developments in the EU, saying solidarity in the procurement of protective gear was non-existent and suggesting a failure to support corona bonds

could imperil the future of the common currency and even of the bloc. (www.sta.si)

- April 7th, Parliament backed a coalition proposal to postpone a debate on granting the Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF) limited Police powers to help patrol the border to contain illegal migration while many Policemen are helping in the country's anti-Covid 19 efforts. The coalition gave no formal reason for the postponement of the debate, which was meant to end without a vote, angering the opposition, which opposes giving the SAF police powers for up to three months. But the idea is to consult constitutional jurists on whether Parliament can vote on giving the SAF Police powers even if a Government motion to do so failed to win the required two-thirds majority on the parliamentary Defense Committee last week. (www.sta.si)

- April 7th, President Borut Pahor thinks a reform of electoral law in accordance with a 2018 Constitutional Court decision should return to the political agenda as soon as the situation permits. *“This issue affects democracy in Slovenia. Elections are not everything, but without elections there is no democracy,”* he told the STA. *“Of course we cannot press ahead with this now, but as soon as we find the opportune time allowing us to dedicate ourselves to this matter, we have to focus on it. We cannot afford a shadow of constitutional doubt hanging over the next election,”* he said. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Slovenia has strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic but situation is still controlled. New Government of Janez Jansa implements a new policy more strict approaching the Hungarian

model of governance. The Slovenian Government has to address major challenges such as migration, social care, and defense capabilities. On Slovenia – Croatia dispute the latter has started on calling for dialogue but it is doubtful what Slovenia will finally decide to do. Besides, Slovenia could push Croatia on this case taking into consideration that Croatia needs Slovenia's support to enter the Schengen zone and OECD. 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. The White Book on Defense presented a rather ambitious program of improving operational capabilities of the Armed Forces. It foresees an 8,000-strong professional military force and a 2000-strong standing reserve by 2035, up from 6,400 and 700, respectively. Slovenia's defense budget will finally reach 2% of GDP (a NATO requirement) by 2035.



TURKEY: April 7th, former Diyarbakır Mayor Adnan Selcuk Mızraklı of the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi - HDP), has been sentenced for participating in illegal activities by the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella body of the PKK terrorist group, according to a court decision. Dismissed from his mayoral duties on August 19th, 2019 due to an ongoing terrorism investigation launched by the Interior Ministry, Mızraklı was imprisoned on October 22nd, 2019. During his trial on March 3rd, 2020, Mızraklı was

sentenced to nine years, four months and 15 days in prison for “membership to an armed terror group.” Prosecutors said he had attended the funerals of PKK militants, as well as meetings that were used as propaganda for the group. According to a recent Court decision, Mızraklı performed surgery on an injured PKK terrorist in a private hospital where he worked before being elected as Mayor. The surgical operation was carried out without a record of the patient having been lodged in the system. It was also revealed that Mızraklı carried out frequent meetings with senior PKK figures and illegal activities within the KCK structure, being a delegate in the organization's so-called Turkey Assembly. Mızraklı was also a member of the health committee formed within the group's structure. KCK serves as an umbrella body of the PKK terrorist group and its Syrian and Iranian offshoots, the PYD and PJAK, in addition to various armed, youth and women's organizations. Mızraklı was sentenced for membership to a terrorist group and spreading terrorist propaganda. The sentence was upheld by the Diyarbakır ninth Heavy Penal Court on the conviction of “being a member of an armed terrorist organization.” One of the witnesses included a suspected terrorist with the code name “Bermal,” also known by the initials H.B.A., who had surrendered to security forces in the southeastern province of Mardin. Statements from H.B.A. were included in the testimony. According to his statement, Mızraklı had visited the Democratic Society Congress (DTK), the PKK's legislative body. “Mızraklı brought a terrorist named ‘Hogır’ to a private hospital in Diyarbakır late at night. Mızraklı ensured that the terrorist would be discharged and released without being delivered to security forces,” H.B.A. said. “Apart from this surgery, I

often heard that patients and injured members of the organization were secretly brought to the hospital at night, all controlled by Mızraklı,” he added. According to H.B.A., Mızraklı went to Iraq and Europe to meet with high-ranking PKK figures to discuss their support of his parliamentary and mayoral candidacy. H.B.A. claimed that some of those trips were disguised as “*medical congresses*” and “*symposiums*” but were actually meetings with senior figures in the terror organization. The Government has repeatedly claimed that the HDP has links to the PKK, which has fought a bloody insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984 and is listed as a terror group by Ankara and its Western allies, including the US and the European Union. (www.dailysabah.com)

- April 10th, the Greek Coast Guards harassing a Turkish-flagged merchant ship which was traveling in line with the international maritime law south of the Samos Island of the Aegean Sea immediately left the area following arrival of the Turkish Armed Forces, security sources said Thursday. The Turkish vessel “*Akınturk-2*” was harassed by the Greek guard boats near Samos Island last week as it was traveling using its right to freedom of navigation in compliance with the international maritime law, the sources said. Turkish Air and Naval forces and Coast Guard units stepped into action upon hearing the distress call of the ship and moved towards the scene while maritime surveillance command repeatedly warned the Greek Coastal Guard units. The Greek elements left the scene following the arrival of Navy forces and Coast Guard units, and the merchant ship continued its course later on. Security sources said the Turkish Armed Forces are determined to protect Turkish rights and

interests under the international law in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. This is not the first time the Aegean Sea witnesses Greek aggression as during Turkey's military exercise Sea Wolf in 2019 it had maneuvered very close to a Turkish corvette endangering navigational safety in violation of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea. Turkish authorities had said Ankara administration was in favor of settling regional issues through peace and negotiations, but it was ready to take necessary measures in cases of violations. (www.dailysabah.com)

- April 12th, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan rejected on Sunday night Interior Minister *Suleyman Soylu's* resignation, praising the long-serving Minister's dedication to his country. The Presidential Communications Directorate issued a statement following Soylu's resignation, indicating that the President did not accept the resignation, and therefore, Soylu will continue his duties. “*Suleyman Soylu, who was appointed as the Minister of the Interior immediately after the July 15th coup attempt, has gained the appreciation of our nation with his successful work so far,*” the statement said. The statement praised Soylu for his role in significantly reducing the capacities of terrorist organizations in Turkey, as well as his work coordinating response efforts to natural disasters such as earthquakes. It also noted the success of the Interior Minister over the last month in managing the coronavirus outbreak, ensuring that there were no problems with public security and that anti-virus efforts were carried out successfully. Many Turkish citizens also took to social media following the resignation announcement to express their strong support for Soylu and request that he continue his duties.

Soylu resigned Sunday evening over an announcement Friday night of a weekend curfew, after which about 250,000 people flooded shops and bakeries across Turkey. “All responsibility regarding the implementation of the curfew lies on me,” he said regarding the incident. Turkey has imposed restrictions on daily life in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. Though an early response to the crisis has stemmed the number of those infected, the country has had mixed success in limiting public mobility, especially on weekends and given rising temperatures. With this in mind, a weekend curfew declared Friday in over 31 mainly urban provinces came as no surprise for many, despite having been announced only two hours before implementation. Streets, avenues and main squares across the country have been void of activity this weekend in the wake of the curfew imposed by the Interior Ministry. (www.dailysabah.com)



Turkish Minister of Interior, Suleyman Soylu
(Photo source: www.mia.gov.tr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

COVID-19 pandemic continues to hit Turkey while its economy is on the edge of a strong recession. Agreement with Russia on the Syrian front stabilizes situation in the region securing

Turkish national interests. Turkey works on improving relations with the US and a negotiation is underway which may lead in improvement of bilateral relations which have reached the zero point last months. Turkey continues to support actively the UN recognized Libyan Government aiming to maintain a permanent influence and presence in the Mediterranean Sea. Turkish military support is crucial for Fayed Al-Sarraj who enjoys the UN recognition in his fight against Field Marshall, Halifa Haftar. It seems that Haftar is losing ground by the Sarraj forces. Turkey, enjoying a pivotal geographic location is engaged in several regional challenges. Despite that, enjoys special relationship with great powers such as the US and Russia. Erdogan made clear publically that “Turkish security is beyond its borders.” This statement summarizes the security doctrine of Turkey; Turkey will be engaged in regional challenges, conflicts and cooperation to ensure its security. Turkish engagement in Syria, Libya, Cyprus, Somalia is explained by this doctrine. The country combines both diplomatic means and “hard” power aiming to achieve its goals. In Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea Turkey presents its aeronautical power against Greece and Cyprus questioning 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.


www.hermesresearch.eu


email: info@hermesresearch.eu


Editor in Chief: Ioannis Karamelas


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.*