



**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: February 24th, for the second time Albanian President Ilir Meta has climbed Prosecution Office stairs today, this time to indict Justice Minister Etilda Gjonaj and two other officials for what he described as “*serious proven falsifications.*” At a time when the deadly coronavirus is the headlines of the day, the President used it as a new epithet for the ruling majority. “*Rilindja is like a plague,*” he said, referring to the socialist majority preferred name for the current mandate in power. The filing of this lawsuit by Meta is a strong test for the SPAK Special Prosecution Office since in addition to the hot files of organized crime, it has to investigate and respond to this lawsuit of strong political coloring, which in turn is a clear and strong clash between the Presidency and the Government. (www.top-channel.tv)

- February 26th, in the joint press conference the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov and the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama during the latter’s visit today in Moscow, Top Channel’s Mohamed Veliu asked the Russian Foreign Minister if there are new reasons why Russia continues to deny Kosovo independence and if Moscow will one day do so. “*You asked if I can think of any date when Russia will recognize Kosovo, but it is as Rama mentioned that there has to be an implementation of what is already agreed upon. There are a series of agreements between the two entities, including the creation of the Serbian Communes’ Association in Kosovo, the establishment of which would be a step forward in securing the rights of Serbs living in Kosovo. The agreement was reached 6 years ago, Pristina refuses to respect it. We promote the dialogue but our colleagues in the EU have failed*

to ensure the implementation of these agreements. We insist, however, that this could be resolved on the basis of mutual agreements,” Lavrov stated. Whereas on the same subject Rama stated “*Yes, we discussed this and we are distant in our stances, because our attitude is clear. I think it is in everyone’s best interest even that of Serbia, to recognize Kosovo as it is. We have supported dialogue and reconciliation in order to achieve this recognition. There have been many aspects of dialogue materialized in agreements that have not seen light. I would tell Minister Lavrov my opinion that the will of people cannot be of double standards when it comes to knowing or not knowing what the will of people brings to life for populations. And for a population, like Kosovo that has lived under the rule of a state that has not elected, I do not see why others have the right to partition and have their own states and not Kosovo. However this is another chapter.*” (www.top-channel.tv)



Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama meets the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov
(Photo source: www.kryeministria.al)

- February 29th, President Ilir Meta appeared again before the media today to denounce what he called another ruling-majority fraud, this time through the Parliamentary Laws’ Commission. “*This Committee did not hold public consultations*

prior to discussing the law on Judges and Prosecutors, a law already voted by Parliament, stipulating that swearing in the constitutional Judges may not necessarily take place before the President of the republic,” the President emphasized, adding that the March 2nd, 2020 would be “a day of triumph over tyranny and fear” but the rally will not cause security concerns. (www.top-channel.tv)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Albania has slipped since 2019 into a deep political, institutional, constitutional and social crisis. Without an independent and functional justice system the country is incompetent to provide the basic constitutional rights to its citizens; they are not able to address the state’s top Courts, the Constitutional and High Court. 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. The Albanian President, Ilir Meta has become the main opponent of the ruling socialists. He pushes opposition for a strong protest against the Government, while he threatens to use his constitutional competences to dissolve the Parliament. Corruption, smuggling (weapons, drugs, people etc), money laundering and link between organized crime and politics are dominating in the country and the state’s authorities are not very keen on fighting them. On October 18th, 2019 the EU rejected the opening of accession negotiations of Albania (and North Macedonia) which actually shocked the Albanian Government and society. But if Albania seeks to get a positive recommendation in 2020 (March or May 2020) it should work intensively to restore a transparent and credible justice system, to

establish rule of law and to strengthen fight against corruption and organized crime. Albania supports Kosovo interests and in this context, the Prime Minister Edi Rama promoted the idea of Kosovo recognition by Russia.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

February 25th, MPs from the strongest Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat parties in the country have on Tuesday submitted to the House of Representatives a proposal for a law that would remove foreign Judges from the country’s Constitutional Court. The adoption of the law is, according to Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik, a condition for ending the latest political crisis that emerged in Bosnia following a Constitutional Court ruling. Last week, the Parliament of the Serb-majority semi-autonomous part of Bosnia, Republika Srpska (RS), instructed RS representatives in state institutions to stop participating in any decision-making processes until a law removing the foreign Judges from the Constitutional Court is adopted. This means that state institutions will effectively be blocked. The move came after the Constitutional Court declared that public agricultural property in Republika Srpska should be owned by the state and not by the RS. According to the Constitution, which is part of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement, the Constitutional Court is composed of nine judges - two Bosniaks (Muslim Bosnians), two Croats, two Serbs and three foreigners. The foreign Judges are named by the President of the European Court of Human Rights. Dodik has been accusing the institution of working against Republika Srpska, arguing that the three foreign Judges frequently side with the Bosniaks and outvote the Croats and the Serbs. According to the

new proposal, the tripartite Presidency would name three Bosnian nationals to serve as judges in the Constitutional Court. Two would come from the Federation (FBiH) and one would come from the Republika Srpska. The three judges would have to be members of different ethnic groups and the House of Peoples would then have to confirm their appointment - with more than half of the MPs in each of the three constituent people's groups voting in favor. *"The mandate of three foreign judges expires on the day this Law enters into force,"* the proposal says. The proposal was signed by MPs from Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and their coalition parties in the RS - the Democratic People's Alliance (DNS), the Socialist Party (SP) and United Srpska - as well as Bosnia's Croat Democratic Union (HDZ BiH). (www.ba.n1info.com)

- February 27th, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik *"crossed the red line"* when he rejected a decision of the Constitutional Court but domestic institutions should first deal with the problem and if that does not work then it will be dealt with at the international community level, Bosnia's international administrator told Al Jazeera Balkans on Thursday. High Representative Valentin Inzko, an Austrian diplomat, is tasked with overseeing the civilian implementation of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement which ended Bosnia's war and contains the Constitution. He made the statement in light of the latest political crisis in Bosnia and calls for him to use the so-called Bonn Powers - a mechanism that allows him to adopt and abolish laws and fire officials. He said he agreed with the leaders of pro-Bosnian parties who said that Dodik had *"crossed the red line"* with his latest activities. Last week, the

Parliament of the semi-autonomous Republika Srpska adopted a set of conclusions including an instruction to all RS representatives in state institutions to stop participating in any decision-making processes until a law that would remove foreign judges from Bosnia's Constitutional Court is adopted. This means that state institutions are blocked. The move was initiated by Dodik and came after the Constitutional Court declared that public agricultural land in Republika Srpska should be owned by the state and not by the RS. The Bosnian Serb leader has been mentioning the secession of the RS from Bosnia as a possible solution for the crisis. He said last weekend that there is no plan for such a move, but that *"we are not excluding that option either."* *"The red line is when someone says that he will not respect the decisions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, specifically, the latest one on agricultural land. Imagine if someone in Corsica said they will not respect decisions of the Constitutional Court in Paris. Macron would immediately send the army there,"* Inzko said, stressing that the Constitutional Court is *"the foundation of every state and its decisions must be implemented. It is due time for domestic institutions to do their job and if they do not, there is always the possibility of us finding a common language on the level of the international community."* He argued that after Yugoslavia disappeared, Slovenia and Serbia inherited the deed on public land and so should Bosnia. *"The owner of state property must be the state,"* he said. The High Representative said he was prepared to use his Bonn Powers only if the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) - the international body composed of 55 countries and agencies supporting Bosnia's peace process - would agree to it. Inzko said that more and more PIC member

countries are in favor of him using the Bonn powers but that no such decision has been made yet. He explained that except for Russia - which traditionally sides with Bosnian Serb leadership - there are some other countries within the PIC that “believe domestic solutions to be the best,” but he would not name those countries. The “*Quint*” countries (the US, the UK, Italy, France and Germany) have always been in favor of using the Bonn powers, he said. Inzko also argued that Dodik was happy with the work of the Constitutional Court in some particular cases - such as when the names of particular towns were being changed and when it ruled that identification cards should include which entity people are from. “*So it is not true that the Constitutional Court only rules in favor of Bosniaks. Nearly 99% of those decisions were made unanimously,*” he pointed out. He added that the foreign Judges cannot be removed from the Constitutional Court with a new law but only through constitutional changes. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- February 29th, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Petr Ivantsov, believes that the High Representative in BiH, Valentin Inzko, is an obstacle to reaching a compromise and decision-making in the country, and that with his statements he is heating up a rather complicated situation. We believe that all internal issues of Bosnia-Herzegovina, concerning relations between entities, political options and parties in the country, should be resolved between the parties inside the country Ivancov told “*Voice of Srpska,*” commenting on Inzko’s message to Republika Srpska and its officials that they have crossed “*red line*” and that the possibility that he would use the Bonn powers. He believes that

many of today’s problems, as well as those that were and have led to the current situation, need to be addressed through a compromise of internal forces and forces within the country. Ivantsov said that it is only natural and logical that the citizens and people of BiH should solve their problems on their own, without any influence from the outside. Ivantsov said that no one denies that BiH is an independent and sovereign state, a member of a number of key international organizations aspiring to become a member of the EU. “*One of those priorities and criteria necessary for the EU membership is the rule of law. One of the recommendations of the German independent legal expert Wolfgang Priebe in this context is the withdrawal of international Judges from the Constitutional Court of BiH,*” said Ivantsov. Commenting on the fact that an inter-entity line has not been established, Ivancov stated that he does not see anything dramatic in what Republika Srpska is proposing, but that it is also an absolutely technical issue that does not need any politicization, Vijesti.ba news portal reports. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The current political and institutional crisis in Bosnia continues despite Bosnian Serb leader statement that secession is an option but it is not considered as the main political choice. Withdrawal of all Bosnian Serb officials from state bodies blocks decision-making process and consequently it blocks the states’ functionality. High Representative, Valentin Inzko’s statement that he is thinking of using the “Bonn powers” may provoke controversial results since it could escalate tension. In general, current 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 Russia, 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. At 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.



BULGARIA: February 27th, speaking about the Three Seas initiative, Bulgaria has already invested more than 1 billion Bulgarian Leva (more than 500 million euro), Prime Minister Boyko Borissov told reporters after the end of the intergovernmental meeting in Greece. The Prime Minister emphasized the construction of the interconnector with Greece, the partnership of Bulgaria with 20% in the LNG terminal, the new aircraft, the Balkan Stream. *“The investments are entirely Bulgarian. The railway, the Struma highway, what we are talking about today, from Aleksadropulis to the Maritza highway, is all about the Three Seas initiative. Everything is done with Bulgarian money - they are already*

invested. We have already done it, we are doing it,” Borissov commented. The Prime Minister also emphasized the importance of transport corridors 4, 8 and 10. According to him, a third bridge over Silistra is also important. (www.novinite.com)

- February 28th, Bulgaria’s Government has approved a report by an interdepartmental working group recommending handing the tender to supply two naval patrol vessels to German shipbuilding company FR. LÜRSEN WERFT GMBH & CO.KG. A Government media statement said that the offer from the German firm was within the project’s financial framework of 984 million leva, including value-added tax (about 503 million euro). The aim of the project is to acquire two multifunctional modular patrol vessels, capable of participating in a wide range of NATO and EU naval operations, to replace part of the existing Russian-made Navy ships, which are beyond modernization and repair, the statement said. Defense Minister Krassimir Karakachanov was instructed to follow-up on the preparation and signing of the contract with the German company. The company had provided all the necessary documents related to personal status, selection criteria and technical requirements. In April 2019, it was announced that three companies, had submitted bids to supply the Bulgarian Navy with two new multi-purpose patrol vessels. The three companies that met the April 16th, 2019 deadline to submit bids were FR. LÜRSEN WERFT GMBH & CO.KG of Germany, MTG DELFIN AD of Bulgaria, and FINCANTIERI of Italy. The Bulgarian Navy currently has six naval vessels, three dating from the Soviet era and the rest second-hand former Belgian vessels. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- February 28th, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan discussed situation in Syria and the migrant situation in a telephone conversation agreeing to meet on March 2nd, 2020 the Government Information Service in Sofia said. "During the conversation it was clarified that there is currently no direct threat to Bulgaria," the statement said. The phone call took place a few hours after Borissov told a Cabinet meeting that he had ordered border security stepped up following reports that Turkey would not bar the flow of refugees across its borders into Europe. The media statement said that Borissov told Erdogan that Bulgaria highly appreciates Turkey's contribution regarding the migration situation and understood the huge difficulties that Turkey had been experiencing for years. Borissov said that in such a situation, neither Turkey nor any country should be left isolated, but should be supported. He expressed confidence that Bulgaria and Turkey would continue to work together in the interest of dealing with the crisis in Syria and halting migrant flow and pressure. Borissov expressed profound condolences over the Turkish soldiers killed in the Syrian province of Idlib, the statement said. Borissov said that the only solution to the crisis in Syria was a peaceful political one. He said that implementation of the EU - Turkey agreement was key. It was of the utmost importance that the EU has a unified position on the migration issue. Borissov said that he would inform European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel and EU leaders about the conversation with Erdogan and urge the EU to put greater efforts into a diplomatic solution to the crisis. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Bulgaria enjoys political stability despite political struggle between the President, Rumen Radev and the Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov. Migration crisis due to uncontrolled refugee and migrant flows from Turkey is closely monitored by Bulgarian authorities but currently there is no pressure in Bulgarian borders since flows are directed towards Greek 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: February 26th, Croatia has fulfilled almost half of the 19 measures in six different categories required to adopt the euro and join the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM II), Finance Minister Zdravko Maric said on Wednesday. Early in July 2019 Croatia sent a letter of intent to join ERM II, along with an action plan containing reform measures that need to be implemented by May 2020 when the European Central Bank (ECB) is expected to deliver its decision on Croatia joining the banking union, i.e. on establishing close cooperation with the Croatian National Bank (HNB). The fourth meeting of the National Council for the Adoption of the euro as legal tender in Croatia was held on Wednesday. Speaking to the press, Maric said that currently almost half of the 19 measures in 6

different areas that Croatia committed to have been fulfilled. Six have been met entirely, three partially and the remaining nine are underway. He expects that all the remaining measures will have been fulfilled before the end of Croatia's presidency of the EU, or even earlier. After that, depending on the results of the analysis of the quality of the portfolio, further talks will be held with European institutions regarding the next steps in the ERM II process, added Maric. The measures implemented include the law on credit institutions, rules on the register of beneficial owners, amendments to the law on institutions, the law on the rights and duties of state officials, and so on. Among the laws that still need to be adopted are those relating to unassessed construction land, which is currently in procedure, and tenders for the sale of shares in about 90 state-owned companies. HNB Governor Boris Vujcic said that the quality of Croatian banks was being examined as one of the conditions for the ECB's decision on close cooperation and Croatia's admission to the banking union. He said that so far five Croatian banks selected by the ECB had been subjected to a stress test, and an examination of the quality of bank assets was now underway and should be completed soon, said Vujcic. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- February 27th, as his first visit to a foreign country since assuming office, President Zoran Milanovic travelled to neighboring Slovenia on Thursday, where he met with his Slovenian counterpart Borut Pahor. The fifth Croatian President and the fourth Slovenian, both former Social Democrat Prime Ministers, agreed that Croatia and Slovenia are natural partners. However, they did not make any progress in terms of resolving Slovenia's complaint regarding the

two countries internationally recognized shared border. Although it only contested the border demarcation years after it was defined by the Badinter Commission on the basis of the borders between republics within the former Yugoslavia, Slovenia used the issue to block Croatia's EU accession forcing Croatia to agree to an ad hoc arbitration tribunal to resolve the matter. However, in 2015 Slovenia was caught in a material breach of the fundamental principles of the tribunal, specifically engaging in back room deals in order to secure a favorable verdict. This prompted Croatia to withdraw from the proceeding. In spite of this Slovenia decided to proceed with the tribunal process and in 2017 a verdict was issued handing Slovenia large swaths of Croatian territory. And while Croatia does not recognize the ruling Slovenia is insisting that it be implemented. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- February 29th, Croatia is consulting its EU and NATO allies regarding a possible new migrant wave, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said on Saturday after Turkey opened its borders for migrants heading towards Europe. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeated on Saturday that Ankara would no longer prevent migrants from moving on towards Europe, saying the EU has not lived up to its promise to help Turkey deal with new waves of Syrian refugees. *"We have been consulting with all colleagues in the EU and NATO,"* said Plenkovic. Erdogan said on Saturday that Turkey had opened its borders for migrants and that 18,000 were already on their way to Europe. The EU has relied on Turkey to stop the migrant wave since 2015 when more than one million people arrived in Europe from the Middle East, triggering a political and humanitarian crisis in Europe. Plenkovic believes

that “political and diplomatic efforts should be undertaken towards President Erdogan to avert a more serious migration wave towards Europe via the eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes.” Thanks in part to Croatia's preparations for joining the Schengen Area, significant effort and investments, including 271 million euro in EU funds, have gone towards controlling the external EU border. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The new Croatian President, Zoran Milanovic paid his first official visit to neighboring Slovenia in a rather strong symbolic move due to the long border dispute between the two countries. Croatia enjoys political stability in a difficult period due to coronavirus expansion and the threat of new migrant flows. Croatia currently holds the EU Presidency seeking among other to bolster Western Balkans European perspective. 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. Under these circumstances, Croatia is forced to start thinking of dialogue and compromise since its stance has repercussions in state's national interests. 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. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Currently, the Ministry of Defense has restarted its efforts for acquiring 12 modern fighter jets since Croatia is a NATO member without operational Air Force.



CYPRUS: February 24th, President Nicos Anastasiades last week wrote to the leaders of the permanent members of the UN Security Council informing them of Turkey's moves regarding Famagusta, the Government said on Monday. Letters were also sent to the leaders of EU member-states and the EU leadership, Deputy Government Spokesman Panayiotis Sentonas said. The Spokesman said Anastasiades informed the leaders of Turkey's stated intention to open Varosha. Sentonas reiterated that during talks with other EU officials, Anastasiades made it clear that any financial assistance to Turkish Cypriots must be terminated if they go ahead with the opening of Varosha. The President stressed “that he does not oppose the allocation of funds, he could even discuss their increase, provided they served towards the country's reunification,” Sentonas said. Turkey and certain Turkish Cypriot politicians have said they planned to open Varosha for settlement after 46 years. Varosha was abandoned by its inhabitants in August 1974 fearing capture by the advancing Turkish Army, which invaded the island on July 20th, 1974. It has since been a military area and access is prohibited. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- February 25th, Bulgaria wants to be part of the Cyprus – Greece - Israel energy cooperation mechanism in the region its President Rumen Radev said on Tuesday after meeting President Nicos Anastasiades in Sofia, where the latter is on a two-day official visit. “Bulgaria is geographically a natural extension of the three countries,” said Radev in statements after meeting Anastasiades, who confirmed that through dialogue, Bulgaria's presence at future trilateral meetings would be examined. “I have assured

President Radev that it is not the goal of these tripartite partnerships to exclude any country. On the contrary, those who respect international law, independence and sovereignty of other states have a place in these co-operations and therefore no country is excluded,” Anastasiades said. The Cypriot President thanked Bulgaria for its support to the people of Cyprus following Turkey’s military invasion of the country in 1974, as well as for its support for a solution to the Cyprus problem, and reiterated his own readiness to resume negotiations. Anastasiades said that he had also briefed his Bulgarian counterpart on Turkish activities in the island’s Exclusive Economic Zone and with respect to their plans to open the fenced off town of Varosha in Famagusta. He also said the two countries share common positions with regard to matters of EU concern such as migration. *“During our creative consultations, we reaffirmed the joint commitment to further strengthen and expand the mutually beneficial cooperation that we have developed at a bilateral and multilateral level,”* Anastasiades said. Later in the day Anastasiades met Bulgaria’s Prime Minister Boyko Borissov. Borissov also expressed the wish of his Government for further strengthening *“the already excellent relations”* with Cyprus in all fields, including energy. Anastasiades said the existence of more than 30 bilateral agreements and Memorandum of Understanding between the two countries was proof of the strong relations that already existed. The Cypriot delegation escorting the President to Sofia comprises Finance Minister Constantinos Petrides, Government Spokesman Kyriakos Koushos and other state officials. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- February 29th, political parties criticized the Government for the week-long closure of four checkpoints on Saturday as the President refused to budge saying there was *“no other choice.”* Firing back, main opposition Progressive Party of Working People (Ανορθωτικό Κόμμα Εργαζόμενου Λαού - AKEL) called for an end to the *“unilateral decision”* to suspend crossing at the four checkpoints, Spokesman Giorgos Loukaides said. *“AKEL calls on the Government to explain with scientific evidence its decision to temporarily suspend crossing from certain checkpoints,”* he said. They called on the Government to instead make sure all the proper medical checks were conducted at all the checkpoints. Meanwhile the Movement of Ecologists — Citizens' Cooperation (Κίνημα Οικολόγων — Συνεργασία Πολιτών – Green Party), said they did not have enough scientific evidence to comment on the Government’s decision, but that at a first glance it seemed to be an *“overreaction.”* The Citizens' Alliance (Συμμαχία Πολιτών) said the closing of the checkpoints was not an effective measure in dealing with COVID-19. *“We believe what is needed is the application of a strict protocol at the checkpoints,”* the party said. Far-right party National People's Front (Εθνικό Λαϊκό Μέτωπο - ELAM) said they want all the checkpoints to be closed, and the step of closing the four crossings was due to the pressure by the leader of their party on the President. Ruling Democratic Rally (Δημοκρατικός Συναγερμός - DISY) opted out of giving an opinion, saying they were not informed, and were not in a position to comment on the temporary closure. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Turkish provocations continue in Cyprus by research vessels which operate within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) violating Cypriot sovereign rights. Cypriot administration unable to forbid hostile actions in its waters so far, is trying to upgrade its defense capabilities as a top priority of the country. The Cypriot Defense Minister said that the state seeks to purchase weapons from France, Israel and the US. Violation of Cypriot sovereign rights by Turkish research vessels has become “normality” and nobody speaks about it; it is a routine. Only France seeks to get a more active role by sending its aircraft carrier “Charles de Gaulle” but it is rather unlikely to see the French Navy blocking the Turkish drillships from the Cypriot waters. The Turkish goal is to deter international energy giants from investing in Cypriot fields and starting research activities. End of March or beginning of April the ENI – TOTAL consortium schedules a drill in block 6 and this will be a strong test for Cypriot energy plans. Turkey is determined to establish its presence in the region and especially within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claiming the Turkish Cypriot community rights. It maintains a significant military force on the island (Army Corps seize) and it reinforce it with modern systems such as UAVs. As long as tension remains in eastern Mediterranean, there is always a high risk of an armed “hot” incident or a conflict. 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: February 26th, after extensive clashes between officers and islanders that left 62 people injured on the eastern Aegean islands of Lesbos and Chios, the Government announced on Wednesday that it is withdrawing most of the Riot Police Units that were stationed there to counter fierce reaction to the creation of new, closed migrant camps. Speaking to Kathimerini, an official from the Ministry of Citizens’ Protection confirmed what Government Spokesman Stelios Petsas had said earlier on Wednesday to Alpha TV, that decision to withdraw Riot Units was taken after the completion of the first phase of preparatory work for the construction of the centers. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis will meet on Thursday with North Aegean Regional Governor Kostas Moutzouris and the five island Mayors in an effort to de-escalate tensions. During the clashes, locals hurled stones at Police, who responded with tear gas, resulting in the injury of 43 officers and 10 islanders, according to the Hellenic Police (ELAS). On Chios, local residents reportedly barged into a hotel near the construction site of a new camp and injured eight off-duty officers who were staying there. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- February 27th, in a letter to the UN, Greece has protested against Turkey’s “unsubstantiated and legally unfounded claims” in the Eastern Mediterranean saying that they shun “the legitimate sovereign rights of Greece and of other neighboring countries” in the same maritime area. “More specifically, according to a well-established principle of the law of the sea, islands, regardless of their size, have full entitlement to maritime zones (continental

shelf/exclusive economic zone), as other land territory,” said the letter, adding that the rule is clearly stipulated in article 121 (2) of the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea which reflects customary international law as confirmed by international jurisprudence. *“This is also confirmed by international practice, including existing delimitation agreements in the Eastern Mediterranean,”* it added. The letter, dated February 19th, 2020 was sent by Greece’s Permanent Representative to the UN and it was addressed to the Secretary General. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 1st, migrants amassed at the Greek - Turkish border made about 9,600 attempts to enter Greece overnight, Deputy Defense Minister Alkiviadis Stefanis said Sunday. All attempts were successfully thwarted, Stefanis said before leaving for the border area. At the border crossing of Kastanies, there are at least 3,000 migrants waiting to cross into Greece, authorities estimate. There was tension throughout the night, culminating at about 2 a.m. when numerous young migrants tried to enter Greece from a point just north of the border crossing where there is no fence. Greek Army and Police got wind of the attempt almost half an hour before it took place and prevented the crowd from crossing. Also, about 220 migrants and refugees arrived during the night on the island of Lesbos by boats. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in Istanbul on Saturday that 18,000 migrants had crossed the border, without providing evidence, adding that the number could rise to 25,000-30,000 on Saturday. *“We will not close these doors in the coming period and this will continue. Why? The European Union needs to keep its promises. We don’t have to take care of this many*

refugees, to feed them,” he said. In Athens, government spokesman Stelios Petsas said that more than 4,000 migrants have been prevented from crossing into Greece from Turkey and there have been 66 arrests. *“Greece was the target of an organized. mass, illegal attempt to violate its borders and has withstood it,”* Petsas told reporters Saturday after an emergency meeting of ministers at the Prime Minister's office. Those attending the meeting presided by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis included the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense and Citizens' Protection, the Chief of the National Defense Staff, and other civilian, security and Armed Forces' officials. While beefed up Military and Police Units are guarding the land border with Turkey, 52 Navy and Coast Guard vessels are patrolling the seas off the Eastern Aegen islands, Greece's most likely to be breached border areas, Petsas said. Petsas added that none of the 66 arrested come from anywhere near the Idlib area in Syria, where Turkish forces have engaged in battle. (www.ekathimerini.com)



Hellenic Army patrol surveils the Greek – Turkish border

(Photo source: www.geetha.mil.gr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Greece faces direct threat against its national security due to uncontrolled refugee and migrant flows from Turkey. The Army and Police are engaged in a “strange” operation in Greek – Turkish border in the north (the land border between the two countries) against migrants. The Greek security forces aim to forbid migrants from entering the country. Turkey encourages or even helps migrants to cross the Greek borders. Under these circumstances, the Greek state has closed the borders with Turkey and deployed additional forces in the region. Current situation is tense and there is always a possibility of an armed incident between the two countries security forces. On the other hand, tension remains in Eastern Aegean Sea with Turkish fighter jets keep on violating Greek airspace and flying low over Greek islets. On rhetoric level, Turkish top-officials continue to challenge Greece by provocative statements against its sovereign rights. Greece is implementing a strategy of military deterrence and intensive diplomatic action against Turkish behavior. In Eastern Aegean islands there were harsh confrontation between local citizens and Riot Police forces which was sent by the Government to force local communities to accept the establishment of new closed reception centers for migrants and refugees in an effort to control the entrance of thousands of people in the Greek territory. Citizens of Lesbos and Chios strongly reacted and protested in such plans claiming that their islands cannot afford new waves of migrants. Greece cannot address the problem alone and seeks to gain the EU countries support. Migration problem is a complicated situation that it cannot be solved within the Greek capabilities. Migrants will continue to enter Europe through the Greek sea borders and Greece will continue to remain the main gate from Middle East to

Europe. Under the current situation in Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea Greece is obliged to strengthen and modernize its Armed Forces operational capability. Currently, Greece focuses on naval units, upgrade of fighter jets, UAVs and follow on support agreements.



KOSOVO: February 27th, Kosovo Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, in a press conference on Thursday evening said the Government of Kosovo has decided that as of March 15th, 2020 to lift tariffs on raw materials imported from Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. “As of March 15th, 2020 tariffs on raw materials imported from Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina will be lifted,” Kurti said. “This is a goodwill sign and readiness for signing a trade and economic agreement with Serbia. We urge Serbia to stop its campaign on revoking recognition of Kosovo’s independence,” Kurti said. Kurti warned that if Serbia stops its campaign against Kosovo, on April 1st, 2020 the 100% tax on Serbian imports will be completely lifted for up to 90 days. Kurti also “conditioned” the EU and the US. “The EU should highly value our action, by liberalizing visas. In case Serbia disregards the goodwill of the Government of Kosovo on eliminating trade barriers, then the Government of Kosovo on April 1st will start implementation of the reciprocity, initially in trade and to be followed with the economy and politics,” Kurti said. “If Serbian side does not reflect, then the Government of Kosovo starting from June 15th will reintroduce the tariffs,” Kurti stated. “The full trade reciprocity will be installed before June 15th,” Kurti said. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- February 27th, the US President Donald Trump’s Special Envoy on Kosovo - Serbia dialogue,

Richard Grenell reacted to Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti's plan to partially abolish 100% tax on Serbian imports. Grenell in social media said the US do not support Kurti's half measures. *"Our position is quite clear; the tariffs must be completely dropped. Mr Kurti is making a serious mistake – and that was made clear to President Thaci at the White House today,"* Grenell said in social media. Ahead of first reaction from Washington, Kosovo's First Deputy Prime Minister, Avdullah Hoti, who is member of the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK) a coalition partners with Kurti's Vetevendosje (Self-Determination), talking to T7 broadcaster revealed increased pressure of the US and other international partners towards Kosovo to rescind 100% tax. Hoti said what Kurti proposed on Thursday is insufficient to please international community demands. *"No time has left for solution. There is no in-between way of maintaining partnership with the US,"* Hoti said appearing in T7 program Pressing. Hoti said Kosovo should abolish tariffs unconditionally and said that the LDK will not endorse his proposal in the Government. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 1st, the Kosovo President Hashim Thaci called on the EU to engage a new envoy to Pristina - Belgrade dialogue, which is facilitated by the EU. *"The EU should give political weight to its involvement in Kosovo - Serbia dialogue. Reducing the level of responsibility of a non-reliable emissary does not help this goal. The EU should support all efforts that lead to the historic agreement and work with partners that give results,"* Thaci wrote on social media. Thaci commended the US representatives as the partners who provide results, while he criticized the EU's

engagement in Kosovo - Serbia dialogue, mostly due to the failure to meet the promise on visa-free regime for Kosovo citizens. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The Prime Minister, Albin Kurti announced the partial abolishment of 100% taxes on Serbian and Bosnian products. It was a controversial decision which frustrated the US administration which sent a clear message that Kosovo should "abolish 100% taxes unconditionally." On the other hand, the President, Hashim Thaci is working to promote himself as a credible partner of the EU and US who should lead negotiations with Belgrade. It is a fact that the US administration is reluctant with Kurti who is considered as not being in full line with the US policy in the region. It is assessed that the "underground war" between Kurti and Thaci will undermine Kosovo national interests. It should be underlined that Kurti seeks to restore constitutional order by exercising his legal competencies restricting the President in his duties, mostly ceremonial. On the other hand, it should be underlined that Kurti's coalition partner, the LDK does not fully agree with the Prime Minister's decision on tax abolishment. However, expectations for a spectacular progress on Kosovo – Serbia dialogue should not be expected. Besides, Serbia is entering in pre-electoral campaign and elections are scheduled for April, 26th, 2020. 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: February 25th, the President Igor Dodon had discussed with the MPs of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) the implementation of the justice reform in line with the Venice Commission’s recommendations. The Head of state said on social networks that he had exchanged opinions on situation in Moldova, the parliamentary agenda and the need to adopt draft laws of major interest for the citizens. *“In particular, we spoke about the importance of implementation of the justice sector’s reform in accordance with the recommendations of the Venice Commission’s experts, as well as of the adoption of the needed normative framework to this end,”* Dodon wrote. (www.moldpres.md)

- February 26th, Moldovan Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration Aurel Ciocoi has called the world community to create an efficient mechanism for monitoring the human right situation in the Transnistrian region of the Republic of Moldova. On Tuesday, the Moldovan Minister took the floor during the sitting of the High Level Segment of the 43rd Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) held in Geneva, and stressed that in the most serious instances of such violations the international community’s interference is just necessary. In his address to the forum, the Moldovan Foreign Minister spoke about the particular importance the Moldovan Government attaches to the protection and promotion of human rights and to the judiciary reform implementation. He underlined that a full realization of each citizen’s rights is impossible without an independent, integral and professional justice that

guarantees main rights and freedoms. On the sidelines of the forum, Ciocoi met with Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov and discussed with him a range of essential questions on the countries’ bilateral agenda. The parties confirmed preparedness to continue dialogue in various spheres, discussed the bilateral actions scheduled for the current year, including inter-ministerial consultations and a number of high-level meetings. Ciocoi once again invited Lavrov to pay a visit to Chisinau. (www.infotag.md)

- February 28th, ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] bloc submitted today a simple motion on policies made by the Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure. MPs say that the management of the Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure would have violated the law on public procurement in tenders for the road rehabilitation works in Moldova. They say that the announcements on the tenders aimed at the repair of four major sections, with the value of the contracts exceeding 90 million lei, have not been published in the Official Journal of the EU, as provided by legislation. Members of the ACUM bloc demand cancellation of tenders on road repair in Moldova, the warnings of MEI regarding these irregularities, the presentation in Parliament of the strategy on rehabilitation of roads for 2020-2030, as well as the resignation of Minister of Economy and Infrastructure Anatol Usati. The text of the simple motion was submitted to the speaker and it is to be debated within 14 days in Parliament. The simple motion is submitted to the debate and is accompanied by the approval of the standing committee. The approval is made within

7 working days from the date of the motion submission. (www.moldpres.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The country enjoys relative political stability since the President Igor Dodon achieved to establish his own Government putting aside the pro-western ACUM bloc. The latter keeps on filing simple motions against Ministries policies, but without any practical result. The country definitely 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: February 24th, “We are subject to multiple attacks, from within and from the outside, through an open coupling of the Church and nationalistic actions outside of the system aimed at destroying the legal order and denying the civic and multi-ethnic character of Montenegrin state,” the President of Montenegro Milo Djukanovic said during his visit to Geneva. In his speech at the 43rd session of the Human Rights Council which was held at the Palais des Nations, Djukanovic emphasized to situation in Montenegro after adoption of law on Religious Freedoms. “I would like to use this opportunity to speak also about an internal issue important for Montenegro. It is related to the

recently adopted Law on Religious Freedoms. In a liberal way and in line with the most modern legislative standards, this Law upholds freedom of confession, regulates legal position of religious communities and guarantees the constitutional principle of separation between church and state,” Djukanovic said. He reiterated that the drafting procedure took 5 years and included an inclusive dialogue with all stakeholders, including all the religious communities in the country and relevant international organizations, primarily the Venice Commission which recommendations were fully accepted. “This law replaced the law from 1977 – from the period of communist Yugoslavia. However, already in the preparation stage, and particularly after this law was adopted, Montenegro faced accusations of one religious community only and brutal media campaign led dominantly from the close neighborhood containing skillful manipulations and attempts to accuse the state of Montenegro of trying to usurp church property and change the centuries-long purpose it was used for. In addition to this, in international forums, including this one here, we could hear accusations that Montenegro was implementing discrimination policy and violating religious freedoms,” Djukanovic concluded. (www.rtcg.me)

- February 24th, President of Democratic Montenegro (Demokratska Crna Gora – DCG), Aleksa Becic, said in the interview for Dan he thought the essence of the success of the opposition was in mutual respect, absence of conflict and solidarity. He pointed out that for the overcoming of political crisis it was necessary that the Law on Freedom of Religion was withdrawn first. According to him Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska

Partija Socijalista Crne - DPS), headed by Milo Djukanovic, is a burden for all while Dusko Markovic – “*the bluffer*” - has shown many times how democracy is simulated and how reforms are made-up. “*The classic example of that is the fact that after five years they pulled out of the drawer proposal for the law on freedom of religion and this blocked electoral reforms and pushed the country into the deepest crisis in the past 20 years. Therefore, their calls for dialogue are just an advertisement,*” Becic said. He claimed that Djukanovic and Markovic should resolve current crisis with the Church taking into consideration all proposals submitted by religious communities. “*Since that problem is solved, international community must actively be involved in resolving many other problems of the Montenegrin society. DPS has shown it is afraid of fair elections. Unlike them, we are going to welcome any improvement in the election process,*” Becic said. Speaking for fair and free elections, Becic said “*We have proposed an efficient and reliable way of refining the electoral roll, which is completely unlawful now and does not correspond to the actual state of affairs. I’ll remind you of the B.B. affair, in which it was discovered that more than a half of voters lived on the addresses with no number. In other words, the country does not know where over a half of its citizens live. We proposed solutions suggesting photos in color as mandatory part of the electoral roll, elimination of no number addresses, pairing key registers and databases.*” Finally, Becic added that “*As for Tivat, I will say it again – a unique boycott is the most effective means against democratic pressure. Unfortunately, part of the opposition does not think so.*” (www.cdm.me)

- February 29th, Montenegro’s President, Milo Djukanovic, accused Serbia and Russia of using the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) to undermine the Montenegrin pro-Western Government, as it seeks the EU membership, reported Reuters. Djukanovic, who has been in power for over three decades, said that a series of rallies against a religion law which have been led by the SPC were intended to question Montenegro’s independence. “*If you are asking whether this is a continuity of the (attempted) destruction of Montenegro and obstruction of its intention to continue with its path to European and Euro-Atlantic integrations, there is no doubt in that,*” he told Reuters. Djukanovic continued “*Moscow was unequivocal in expressing its interests in the ongoing (religion) problem in Montenegro.*” He accused Belgrade of reviving the nationalistic concept of a Greater Serbia that contributed to the Balkan wars of the 1990s and former Yugoslavia’s collapse. “*We have no doubt that all the mechanisms of the implementation of the Greater Serbian state project have been put into motion, and that Montenegro is also a target,*” he said. Maria Zakharova, a Spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, dismissed Djukanovic’s statements, saying that “*Nobody could possibly undermine his own doings more than himself.*” (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Controversial law on religious freedom continues to be a source of political tension in Montenegro. The Government claims that tension is the result of external activity namely Serbia and Russia which seek to destabilize the country. On the other hand, opposition accuses the President, Milo Djoukanovic and the Prime Minister, Dusko

Markovic of authoritarian behavior claiming that religious law should be withdrawn in order to restore political stability in the country. Djukanovic considers the Church as a threat against the state's national identity and independence acting as the "long hand" of Serbia. It is true that Serbia interferes in the Montenegrin politics using the Serbian population in Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church influence. It is assessed that Serbia has never gave up the idea that Montenegro is the "natural extension of Serbia" and its (smooth) independence is nothing more than an abnormality. Besides, Serbia enjoys support in Montenegro by a strong pro-Serbian opposition. In this context, the Serbian factor could be under certain conditions to act destabilizing. 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:

February 27th, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija – SDSM) and Besa Movement's (Lëvizja Besa) party leaders, Zoran Zaev and

Biljal Kasami have signed a pre-election agreement for a joint participation at the snap parliamentary elections that will take place on April 12th, 2020. Both political parties have agreed to work together at the forthcoming elections with an inclusive pre-election program. The SDSM's party leader said that the agreement for a coalition with Besa represents a new historical moment for the country's democracy and pluralism. The rule of law, human rights and freedom, economic progress, solidarity and tolerance are the pillars upon which the modern North Macedonian state is based upon. This coalition sits on these values but also on the need for the implementation of the "Ohrid" framework agreement, the "Prespa" agreement with Greece and the Good Neighborly agreement with Bulgaria. There is room for talks with all of those that adhere to these principles, Zaev said. He stressed that at the forthcoming elections, SDSM will come out with "the biggest, most diverse and most powerful coalition ever." Zaev also appealed to other Albanian parties and coalitions that they will not allow to be blackmailed and will not accept unprincipled negotiations and agreements in order to take part in the Government's coalition. (www.meta.mk)

- February 27th, the Euro-Atlantic integration info center informed that the Spanish Congress of Deputies ratified North Macedonia's NATO accession protocol. "The Spanish Congress of Deputies in Madrid, this morning ratified the NATO accession protocol with 279 votes in favor of and one vote against! The next step will be the voting at the Senate and as soon as the King signs the protocol, what will follow will be to deposit the accession protocol in the USA" wrote the Info Center. The Foreign Affairs Minister Nikola

Dimitrov, during his visit to Spain last week, was informed that the ratification of the accession protocol has already started at the Spanish Parliament. It is expected that the whole procedure should be finished by the end of March. (www.meta.mk)

- March 1st, North Macedonia's Interior Ministry reported that situation at the southern border with Greece remains unchanged, with no increased pressure due to the migrant crisis in Greece. Spokesman Toni Angelovski said that the numbers of illegal entries are "normal" and that citizens have no reason to be concerned. International Police forces which have been deployed there since 2016 are also active and patrolling along with the North Macedonia's forces. North Macedonia is an important part of the Balkan migrant route and was crucial in ending the 2015 - 2016 crisis by closing the border with Greece, which had an open borders attitude at the time. (www.republika.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political situation is calm so far although it is expected a polarization of the atmosphere during the pre-electoral campaign. Nationalistic rhetoric is expected to dominate during the parties' rallies. At the moment, North Macedonia has political uncertainty and next day of election it needs a strong Government to proceed with necessary reforms and securing opening of accession negotiations with the EU within 2020. 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: February 26th, Ludovic Orban has resigned as Prime Minister-designate, President Klaus Iohannis announced on Tuesday evening. "This evening, Mr Ludovic Orban resigned as Prime Minister-designate," Iohannis said in a press statement. The Head of state also said that he had convened the parliamentary parties on Wednesday for consultations after accepting Orban's resignation. "Motivation is as simple as clear. The regulations of the Parliament's joint activities stipulate a time frame of 15 days when the joint chambers should give an opinion on the proposed Cabinet. These 15 days have passed without any vote. Basically, this situation was prompted by PSD. Because of PSD, which boycotted the plenary session on Monday, no vote could be cast. We risk a deadlock and this is the last thing we want," Iohannis said. Asked who might be nominated as Prime Minister and if the current Defense Minister Nicolae Ciuca could be an option, Iohannis replied "You will find out on Wednesday after consultations." Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) interim Chairman Marcel Ciolacu stated it was normal for Orban to resign as interim Prime Minister, since there was a decision of the Constitutional Court in this regard. Ciolacu said that PSD would most probably not come up with a Prime Minister proposal, arguing the Head of state "has already said he will not consider any proposal coming from the PSD" and that Social Democrats would favor a technocrat Cabinet until the elections. Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România - USR) Chairman Dan Barna said that their proposal for the Prime Minister seat is Dacian Cioloș. "We also asked for these consultations, we consider them natural to take the first steps to get out of the current political

crisis,” Barna said. *“The solution is early elections, but if we cannot reach this goal we voiced out availability to join ruling. We are ready to assume the important projects Romania needs,”* he added. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- February 25th, the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) has managed to form a “toxic majority” in Parliament and overthrow the Government of Prime Minister Ludovic Orban, the President Klaus Iohannis said in a press conference adding that he would not designate a Prime Minister proposed by the Social Democrats because the majority does not reflect the electorate’s will, Hotnews.ro reported. Iohannis held the press conference after the Constitutional Court found an institutional conflict between the Presidency and Parliament, asking Iohannis to come up with a genuine designate Prime Minister able to form a parliamentary majority. Iohannis refused to provide a hint into his further decisions, saying that he is still waiting for the reasoning of the Constitutional Court. However, he admitted that it is more likely not to have early elections. Odds for early elections have just dropped under 50%, Iohannis admitted answering a journalist. The President and Orban agreed in January to pursue the objective of having early elections organized in the first half of this year, hoping to form a solid majority in the Parliament for a Liberal-led Government. The first part of their plan, which was to have the Government of Orban dismissed, worked. The second one, which required that the Parliament rejects two new cabinets, has not worked as smoothly as they expected, as PSD and other smaller parties, which hold a majority of seats in the Parliament, do not want early elections. (www.romania-insider.com)

- February 27th, Romania’s President Klaus Iohannis appointed acting Finance Minister Florin Citu, a member of the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal - PNL), as Prime Minister-designate to form a new Government, after consultations with the parliamentary parties on February 26th, 2020. The President’s decision came after Romania’s Constitutional Court (CCR) ruled that the appointment of dismissed Prime Minister Ludovic Orban to form a new cabinet and go to the Parliament, only to fail in getting the vote of a majority, generated a constitutional conflict between the Parliament and Presidency. CCR also requested that the President nominates a Prime Minister who will try to coagulate a majority in the Parliament. Iohannis once again blamed the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) for the political deadlock. Unofficial sources quoted by G4media.ro suggested that, if the lawmakers reject the cabinet proposed by Florin Citu, the Liberals and Iohannis will once again nominate Orban, in an attempt to force early elections. (www.romania-insider.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political instability and uncertainty continue in Romania due to strategies and tactics of the parties in the struggle for power. PNL seeks to call for early parliamentary elections, while PSD works on delaying snap elections. Due to these tactics the country does not have a strong Government to forward the necessary reforms regarding fight against corruption and modernizing public administration. President, Klaus Iohannis gave a new mandate to the Finance Minister, Florin Citu since proposal of former Prime Minister, Ludovic Orban to form a new Government was rejected by the

Constitutional Court. The plan of Iohannis and PNL to call for early elections is very close to be implemented. However, there is still the question if the country deserves such a long political instability for Iohannis political games. The country 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: February 25th, the second part of the Pantsir-S1E air defense missile system which Serbia procured from Russia, has arrived at the Batajnica military airport. The system was delivered with an An-124 “Ruslan” aircraft, the same type of cargo plane as with the first part of the delivery, which was transported on Saturday, the Russian outlet “Sputnik” reported. The first part of a total of six Russian anti-aircraft systems Pantsir-S1 Serbia ordered from Moscow arrived on Saturday at the “Colonel-pilot Milenko Pavlovic” airport near Belgrade. This has made Serbia the only country in the region to have this modern air defense system. Serbia and Russia signed an agreement last year on delivery of one Pantsir set which consists of six systems. (www.b92.net)

- February 26th, the Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Bocan - Harchenko has said that the strategic partnership between Moscow and Belgrade is rising to the highest level and that military cooperation between the two countries contributes to the preservation of Serbia’s independence, the Beta news agency has reported.

“Development of the military and military-technical cooperation, under the two Presidents’ supervision, aims to keep Serbia independent, to autonomously decide about its fate and exists in a stable region,” the Ambassador said at the ceremony marking the Fatherland Defender Day, the Russian state holiday. His words came after both the US and European Union expressed concern about the increasingly close link between Belgrade and Moscow, especially after Serbia purchased the Russian-made anti-aircraft defense Pantsir S1 system. Bocan-Harchenko added that the last week’s meeting of the Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu and Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic and Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin gave a new incentive to cooperation between the two countries. *“The modern Russian Army carefully nourishes the tradition of the country’s military; it is equipped in a most modern way and ready to help its friends,”* Bocan – Harchenko said. The ceremony was attended by Vucic and other Serbia's top officials. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- February 29th, President Aleksandar Vucic said he would call parliamentary elections on March 4th, 2020 immediately upon his return from Washington, where he is attending a meeting of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Vucic said the election campaign will last over 50 days. *“When the campaigns last for that long, it is necessary not to rush, you cannot reach the campaign peak if you do not have a strategy for that, everyone will have time to prepare one. I hope that the list I am leading will make a good result,”* he said. The President also noted it was an honor for Serbia to be at the gathering he is going to attend in Washington. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

President, Aleksandar Vucic announced that he will call for parliamentary and local elections on March 4th, 2020 scheduled for April 26th, 2020. It is expected a polarized pre-electoral period with opposition seeking to boycott the elections. Serbia needs political stability since it has a lot of diplomatic, security and economic challenges ahead. Kosovo new Government has a lot of internal problems to resolve before becomes ready for dialogue with Serbia. However, the new Prime Minister, Albin Kurti announced a partial lifting of 100% taxes on Serbian goods which a good step for Serbia to come back to dialogue. Nevertheless, no progress is expected until the Serbian elections in late April. 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. Finally, Serbia is engaged with one way or another to the latest crisis in Bosnia where Bosnian Serbs claim that secession may become a possible choice for the entity. Officially, Serbia has called Republika Srpska to follow the legitimate and institutional procedures but it is certain that Bosnian Serbs are in full coordination with Serbian administration. The country has developed very close relations with Russia, especially in the field of defense. Russia keeps supplying Serbia with weapons, while both countries conduct common military exercises. Serbia is trying to balance between the west, namely the EU and the US on one side and Russia on the other implementing the doctrine of “neutrality.” 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: February 25th, the top bodies of the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska Demokratska Stranka - SDS), the Modern Center Party (Stranka Modernega Centra - SMC), New Slovenia – Christian Democrats (Nova Slovenija – Krščanski Demokrati - NSi) and Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (Demokratska Stranka Upokojencev Slovenije - DeSUS) confirmed entry in a coalition led by SDS Head Janez Jansa. The SDS's proposal to appoint Jansa as the Prime Minister was submitted to President Borut Pahor, who makes the formal nomination. Outgoing Prime Minister Marjan Šarec said he was not surprised at the prospect of a new Jansa Government, which he saw from the start as one of the possible outcomes of his resignation. (www.sta.si)

- February 26th, President Borut Pahor formally nominated Janez Jansa, the leader of the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska Demokratska Stranka - SDS), for Prime Minister after four parties reached an agreement to form a centre-right coalition. Having joined forces with the Modern Center Party (Stranka Modernega Centra - SMC), New Slovenia – Christian Democrats (Nova Slovenija – Krščanski

Demokrati - NSi) and Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (Demokratična Stranka Upokojencev Slovenije - DeSUS), Jansa can count on a slim but comfortable majority in the 90-member Parliament, which has to vote on the nomination in seven days at the latest. Jansa said the coalition agreement showed the four parties were willing to seek compromise solutions and would work to tackle the most pressing issues that Slovenia faces, even as he noted that only two and a half years remained until the next scheduled election. (www.sta.si)

- February 26th, the new coalition Government that is being formed by Janez Jansa is planning to reintroduce military conscription, effectively secure the border, decentralize the country and increase local Government funding, as well as introduce a general child benefit. This follows from a 13-page draft coalition agreement obtained by the STA. Unofficial information indicates the four coalition parties have already signed the agreement. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

SDS achieved to form a majority coalition with SMC, NSi, and DeSUS ending the political deadlock after Marjan Sarec resignation as the Prime Minister. Political stability returns to Slovenia which 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 issue of illegal migrants entering Slovenia mainly from Croatia is high in the

agenda lately. 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: February 28th, dozens of Turkish troops have been killed in Syrian Government air raids, marking a dramatic escalation in the conflict between Ankara and Moscow-backed forces in northwestern Syria. The 33 deaths followed an attack in Idlib late on Thursday and come as Syrian Government forces, backed by Russian air power, are attempting to seize the last remaining territory held by Turkey-backed Syrian opposition forces. The toll is the deadliest suffered by the Turkish Army since it intervened in Syria in 2016 and is raising fears of a confrontation between Turkey and Russia on the battlefield. Today, one Turkish soldier was killed and two others wounded in a fresh round of artillery fire by the Syrian forces in northwestern Syria, according to Turkey's Defense Ministry. The Defense Ministry also said on social media that 19 military equipment including eight tanks and four armored combat vehicles, were destroyed. Earlier today, Turkish officials met

with a Russian delegation in Ankara and said a sustainable ceasefire in Idlib region must be established immediately. *“We stressed to the Russian side the necessity of declaration of a sustainable truce, de-escalation [of the situation on the field], and withdrawal of the regime forces to the borders agreed in the Sochi deal,”* Turkish Foreign Minister Spokesman Hami Aksoy said in a statement.



Turkish UAV is targeting a Syrian Army Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS)
(Photo source: www.msb.gov.tr)

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's phone call with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, on the situation in Idlib, today indicates Ankara is seeking to avoid conflict with Moscow, according to an analyst. *“Any Turkish response against Russia will factor in the US and NATO's responses. Unless Turkey gets a really strong commitment from the US and NATO - such as imposing a no-fly zone arrangement over Idlib - then its response towards Russia will be physically raising the cost of the war for Russia in terms of targeting Syrian regime forces, and making a distinction between the regime and Russia. Turkey will continue to target the Syrian regime but will be very careful in terms of targeting Russia. Turkey will most likely increase its geographic scope when it comes to targeting Syrian regime forces beyond Idlib, which may expand to Aleppo and east of the Euphrates. But it*

will do so in a way that will not completely destroy its relations with Russia,” Galip Dalay, fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, said. (www.aljazeera.com)

- February 29th, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his Government had begun to allow refugees to travel on to Europe from Turkey, which he said can no longer handle new waves of people fleeing war-torn Syria. *“What did we do yesterday? We opened the doors,”* Erdogan told the Turkish Parliament on Saturday, in his first comments since 33 Turkish troops were killed in northern Syria on Thursday. *“We will not close those doors ... Why? Because the European Union should keep its promises,”* he added. In 2016, Turkey signed a deal with the EU to stop refugees crossing from its borders after the 2015 migrant crisis that saw one million crossed the Aegean into Europe. Erdogan also said 18,000 refugees had gathered on the Turkish borders with Europe since Friday, adding that the number could reach as many as 30,000 on Saturday. Turkey, which is already home to the world's largest number of refugees - around 3.6 million Syrians, has repeatedly warned that is overburdened. *“We are not in a situation to handle a new wave of refugees”* from Syria, Erdogan said. Erdogan has previously threatened to *“open the gates”* unless more international support was provided, particularly at times of tension with European countries. Al Jazeera's Natasha Ghoneim, reporting from Istanbul, said *“We are waiting to find out if this is a temporary measure to send a message to NATO and Europe or if this may be something more.”* The killing of Turkish troops has increased tensions with Russia, which backs the Syrian regime's offensive to take back the remaining chunks of the northwestern Idlib

region. Turkey backs Syrian rebels. Meanwhile, thousands of refugees stuck on the Turkey - Greece border clashed with Greek Police on Saturday. Greek riot Police fired tear gas at the refugees at a border crossing in the western Turkish province of Edirne, some of whom responded by hurling stones. *“What you have right now is a tense situation,”* said Al Jazeera's Ghoneim, adding that women and children were among the refugees. *“They are in a kind of no man's land, trapped between the official borders of Turkey and Greece,”* she said. On Saturday, small groups managed to get across into Greece without documentation. Most were from Afghanistan, including some families with young children. (www.aljazeera.com)

- March 1st, after weeks of unheeded warnings to the Bashar Assad Government to stop its expansionist policies in Idlib by the end of February, Turkey declared the launch of its latest operation in the region yesterday. The official announcement came from the Defense Minister Hulusi Akar, who said the Turkish military launched Operation *“Spring Shield”* in response to a brutal Assad Army attack on February 27th, 2020. Akar noted that the only goal of the operation is self-defense against the Syrian soldiers and units that have attacked Turkish troops in the area. *“Some 2,200 Syrian regime troops, a drone, eight helicopters, 103 tanks, tens of howitzers and three air defense systems have been neutralized,”* Akar said. The operation was launched after regime forces carried out airstrikes, killing 34 Turkish soldiers and injuring tens of others in the area. It has been weeks since Turkey first announced that the end of February was the deadline for Syrian Government forces to withdraw from Turkish observation posts which

were determined by the Sochi deal. Officials made it clear that unless the Syrian forces retreated, a Turkish military operation was in store. *“The solution in Idlib is the (Syrian) regime withdrawing to the borders in the agreements. Otherwise, we will handle this before the end of February,”* President Recep Tayyip Erdogan previously said. *“Until we clear Syria of terrorist organizations and the cruelty of the (Syrian) regime, we will not rest easy,”* he added. The Turkish military has 12 observation posts in Idlib, the last opposition-held bastion in Syria. The posts were set up after a 2018 Russia - Turkey deal reached in Sochi to prevent a regime offensive, but in recent months, Assad has pressed on with an assault supported by Russian airstrikes. Thursday's attack was one of a series since January targeting Turkish troops, with Turkish officials maintaining a pledge that such assaults would not go unanswered. Highlighting that Turkey does not aim to face off against Russia, Akar said Turkey only wants to stop the Assad forces' massacres, radicalization and migration, though he added that Ankara expects Russia to use its power to end the Assad regime's aggression and persuade him to withdraw its forces to the borders outlined in the Sochi deal. Erdogan recently told his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin that Russia should stay out of Turkey's way in the fight against Assad forces. The President will be traveling to Moscow on March 5th, 2020 to discuss the crisis with Putin. Operation *“Spring Shield”* is the fourth Turkish military operation in northern Syria. Backed by heavy Russian airstrikes, Syrian regime forces have been fighting since the start of the year to recapture the Aleppo countryside and parts of neighboring Idlib, the last opposition stronghold in the country. The advances have sent hundreds

of thousands of Syrian civilians fleeing toward the border with Turkey in the biggest single displacement of the nine-year war. In September 2018, Turkey and Russia agreed to turn Idlib into a de-escalation zone, in which acts of aggression are expressly prohibited. But more than 1,300 civilians have been killed in attacks by the regime and Russian forces in the de-escalation zone since then, as the cease-fire continues to be violated. More than 1 million Syrians have moved near the Turkish border due to the intense attacks. So far in this latest operation, three senior Assad regime officers were killed in Turkish drone strikes in Idlib, local sources confirmed Saturday. Brigadier General Burhan Ramoun, Brigadier General Ismael Ali and Colonel Mazar Farwati were killed in an airstrike carried out by unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) in the Jabal al-Zawiya region. The Turkish army killed more than 2,100 Syrian targets, the National Defense Ministry also said on social media. (www.dailysabah.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Tension has dramatically increased between Turkey and Syria after the killing of 33 Turkish soldiers by Syrian Army fires. It was an unprecedented casualty for Turkish Army; the worst since 2016 when Turkey was engaged in the Syrian front. The engagement of the Russian forces backing the Syrian troops makes situation complicated for Turkey. The latter seeks to respond to Syria but in does not want to exchange fires with Russian troops in any way. The strategic goal of Turkey is to reach a deal with Russia for implementing the Sochi agreement securing the Turkish presence in Syria. Consultations are ongoing and on March 5th, 2020 President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin.

Undoubtedly, latest developments in Syrian Idlib have exercised pressure on Turkey threatening its security and national interests. Furthermore, Turkey is threatened by almost a million of Syrian refugees to enter its territory; hosting already almost 3.6 million refugees Turkey will not afford more refugees in its soil. In this context, Turkey facilitates refugees and migrants to reach the Turkish – Greek borders to enter Europe. Turkey feels “betrayed” by the EU and pushes Europe with new waves of migrants. Situation is tense in the borders and there is always the threat of an armed incident between Turkish and Greek forces. The continuous military campaigns in several fronts have a direct impact in the already “wounded” economy. Due to the latest situation in Idlib, Turkish Lira faces pressure and it has weakened while inflation is rising. In general, Turkey exercises a multilateral, multifaceted, dynamic external policy ensuring its national interests. 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. It has conducted hydrocarbon drills in Mediterranean Sea within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and 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. It is assessed that Turkey's relations with the US will never reach a "zero point" since Turkey is an integral and critical part of the western security architecture. 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.

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

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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.*