



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

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

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

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ALBANIA: March 5th, the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, declared in Parliamentary session that the opposition is contesting the elections which their commissioners certified in 2017 without any objection. Rama said that the opposition is seeking power on a discussion table. *“This Parliament is what the majority of Albanians voted, and it has given us the task to run the country until 2021. Our mandate is not a gambling card. We do not play with it. They [the opposition] are demanding what they have always demanded; power on a discussion table, without voting,”* Rama said. *“We will always lay a hand for dialogue, but we will never negotiate the basic rules of democracy, the Parliament and the majority. We will continue the judiciary reform through a new majority,”* Rama said. (www.top-channel.tv)

- March 5th, Albania's main opposition leader Lulzim Basha [Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD)] urged Prime Minister Edi Rama to call a snap election over allegations of corruption and vote fraud, as anti-government protesters rallied outside Parliament. They burned portraits of Rama and threw firecrackers at the building, but the demonstration - the fourth against his administration since mid-February and timed to coincide with parliamentary sessions - was calmer than in previous weeks. PD and its allies gave up their parliamentary seats 12 days ago, saying investigations by Prosecutors into allegations of vote fraud vindicated claims that Rama's Socialists fixed the 2017 national election. Rama, who has rejected the allegations, told lawmakers that democracy is not up for *“negotiation”* and urged the opposition to test its strength at the

ballot box in local elections in June 2019. Basha called Parliament a hotbed of *“crime and corruption.”* He told Tuesday's crowd, which Reuters estimated as numbering more than 5,000, that only *“free and fair elections”* would pave the way for Albania's entry to the EU. The Balkan NATO-member country aims to start accession talks with the EU this year, but the febrile political climate could delay that process. The EU and its member states last month called on all sides to *“do their utmost to avoid violence and further unrest.”* The next protest is scheduled for 11 days' time. (www.nytimes.com)

- March 7th, although the next decision on whether the EU will open negotiations with Albania will be taken in June 2019, EU officials are not yet convinced of the Government's progress regarding the country's fight against crime and corruption, demanding that the process in these areas continues. The EU Enlargement Director General Christian Danielsson urged Prime Minister Edi Rama to pursue reforms in all areas, and in particular in the fight against crime and corruption, for Albania's bid to be convincing in June. *“I had a very open conversation with Prime Minister Edi Rama on the current political situation and reforms. Albania has to continue to deliver in all reform areas, and in particular on fighting crime and corruption, to make a convincing case in June, when EU member states will review the process,”* Danielsson wrote on social media. Under Rama's governance, Albania has been denied the opening of accession negotiations three times so far. During his visit to Albania, Danielsson met with a number of political actors from different sides of the political spectrum, as well as members of the Justice Appointment Council, where full EU support for their independent and impartial work was

reiterated. During his meeting with opposition representatives who have resigned their parliamentary mandates and are holding national anti-government protests for almost three weeks now, Danielsson was in line with previous EU representatives' statements condemning the opposition resignation from Parliament. *"Constructive meeting with representatives from opposition parties on the current political situation. Albania faces challenges but the only democratic way to solve issues remains to engage in Parliament. Incitement to violent actions in protests is absolutely unacceptable,"* he wrote, referring to the last protest the opposition called when the government held an out-of-order parliamentary session. At a press conference Danielsson highlighted that constructive dialogue among all sides is necessary. *"It is a misfortune that Albania is in the trap let's say due to its lack of stability. Political forces must fight for common reforms. Responsible leadership is necessary to bring the country closer to the EU. As far as the opposition is concerned, I have emphasized that the decision of the members to collectively burn their mandates undermines Albania's EU path. Uncertainty must be overcome urgently. The Parliament is the pillar of the state, the engine of every mature democracy,"* he said. (www.tirana.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

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

was strongly criticized by the international community namely the EU (and U.S) putting at risk the opening of accession negotiations in June 2019. The Prime Minister, Edi Rama urged opposition to return in the Parliament starting a constructive dialogue but PD and LSI leaders, Basha and Kryemadhi respectively pushing for the Government topple and snap elections. It is a fact that Albanian politics have reached a stalemate; it is not normal for a stable country seeking to enter the European club to face such situation of political abnormality. Opposition MPs' resignation aiming at forcing the Government in collapse is not a reasonable political strategy for a functional and stable democracy. Further polarization of political atmosphere in Albania by the opposition could not be excluded. However, one could notice that day by the day protests lose momentum. The Government is accused of having links with organized crime and current situation raises questions over the power of "Albanian mafia" in the country and its influence in state's politics. Undoubtedly, corruption and organized crime remains the most significant state's problem undermining its strategic goal of opening accession negotiations with the EU. The EU closely monitors progress of reforms especially in justice sector. Latest European Parliament assessment on Albania accession negotiations is a rather positive sign underlining concerns over specific issues such as corruption, justice reforms, and implementation of rule of law. The final decision for opening Albania's accession negotiations in June 2019 is up to the EU Heads of Governments. One should underline that unofficial concerns have already been raised regarding this date due to current political instability. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a

“mother nation.” It is estimated that Albania will fully comply with the EU and U.S “line” for territorial exchanges or border changes between Serbia and Kosovo if it is necessary for a mutual accepted solution. Albania maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and F.Y.R.O.M. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on promoting Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access. Possible border changes may engage Albania in dangerous situations taking into consideration that it has the role of “protector” of Albanians in the region.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

March 4th, Bosnia's Presidency Chairman Milorad Dodik handed over the country's final answers to the European Commission's Questionnaire in Brussels. He also met the European Union's (EU) top officials to discuss Bosnia's accession path. Before he officially handed the document, Dodik met EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, and Commissioner for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn. Afterwards, he held a meeting with Hahn. *“It would be a mistake to think that nothing has to be done from now on, it is exactly the opposite, essential reforms have to resume,”* said Hahn after the meeting. Addressing a joint press conference with Dodik, Hahn announced a soon visit to Bosnia. *“We must make and take those decisions to have reasonable expectations. With that regard, I am really looking forward to the visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina by the end of this month, to resume our talks and efforts, to work further on joint interests,”* said the EU official

pointing out that the Presidency Chairman has come to Brussels for the second time to demonstrate Bosnia's strong dedication. Dodik, who this time arrived in Brussels without the other two members of Bosnia's tripartite Presidency, said all political stakeholders in Bosnia were committed to accession to the EU. Bosnia formally applied for EU membership in February 2016 and was to provide answers to the 3,242 questions of the EC's Questionnaire within six months as a part of a regular procedure of obtaining the Commission's opinion on its possible candidate status. It took the country a year to provide the initial answers because of internal disagreements that stem from deep political and ethnic divisions. But once the answers were submitted, Brussels sent another 655 follow-up questions that should clarify certain ambiguities. Those were supposed to be answered by September 2018. Most of the follow-up questions Bosnia's institutions received later refer to political criteria, while the rest relates to the economy, social policy, employment, transportation policy, education and culture. *“The work on all reforms, which were in a stalemate for justified reasons, is lying ahead of us but the public administration reform is something that we must put on agenda,”* stressed Dodik. *“The talk with Hahn and Mogherini was very pleasant, we jointly agreed that the answers should have arrived long ago but I am grateful to people in the European Commission for understanding for specific decision making in Bosnia and Herzegovina.”* He said his “true friends” were in both Moscow and Brussels and that he is “representing a people and country which must set good relations.” (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 6th, leaders of the three main national parties in Bosnia who won the election met in

Sarajevo in an effort to resolve a deadlock and finally form a new Government. According to Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik *“things are going smoothly,”* while Bosnian Croat leader Dragan Covic said the job might be done by the end of the month. EU officials have been urging Bosnia to finally form a new Government following the October 2018 General Election so the country can continue implementing the necessary reforms that would bring it closer to EU membership. According to the current Chairman of the tripartite Presidency, Milorad Dodik, there is no disagreement over who the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, effectively Bosnia's Government, should be - Zoran Tegeltija, from Dodik's Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrataor - SNSD) *“But it was put on hold the moment the issue of the Membership Action Plan (MAP) was raised as a priority to the forming of the Council of Ministers.”* The Membership Action Plan is an essential step toward Bosnia's accession to NATO, but politicians of the three majority ethnic groups are divided on the topic. While the Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats want the country to become a member of the alliance, most Bosnian Serb politicians are against it. According to Bosnia's political system, representatives of the three major ethnic groups in the country must reach a consensus in order for any decision to be made. The Bosniak and the Bosnian Croat member of the Presidency, Zeljko Komsic and Sefik Dzaferovic, respectively, said they would not support the naming of Tegeltija if he does not implement earlier decisions which paved Bosnia's way toward NATO. *“We will try to put together a document which will satisfy all three sides, it is up to us to make an effort,”* said Bakir Izetbegovic, the leader of the main Bosniak party that

Dzaferovic is also a member of, the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA). He added that the *“entity level cannot be above the state, or command whether this can or cannot happen.”* Dodik said he is aware that the SDA, the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine or HDZ BiH) and *“everybody in FBiH thinks they are heading toward NATO.”* He said that his party cannot support Bosnia's path toward NATO due to an array of reasons, but also that it is *“rational”* to know that the issue *“will not just disappear because we from Republika Srpska believe it should be different.”* Setting conditions, in general, is not rational, he said. Forming the Council of Ministers is important *“for sending a message to the EU and European countries,”* he added. *“It is connected to everything that is a priority here, and there are no differing stances about it, and it is the European path of Bosnia and Herzegovina. A consensus on that, as well as the coordination mechanism, is not questionable.”* HDZ leader Dragan Covic said the meeting was *“constructive”* and leads toward *“us having a new Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the end of this month.”* However, no agreement was reached on MAP. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 7th, Bosnia's Federation entity Parliament has approved a resolution allowing the construction on a Chinese-funded thermal power plant - the largest single post-war investment in the country - to go ahead. The House of Representatives in Bosnia's Federation entity adopted a resolution that supports the government's plan for the construction of a thermal power plant in the northeastern Bosnian town of Tuzla. Earlier on Wednesday, state power company Elektroprivreda BiH, which is in charge

of implementing this Bloc 7 project, urged MPs, in an open letter to support this decision, saying the project has no alternative because it ensures the stability and independence of Bosnia's energy sector. *"The project, first adopted in 2010, had support from the beginning because it will ensure the long-term power supply of this Bosnian entity, but also cover its future energy deficit produced by the shutting down of some of the existing, dated, power blocs,"* the open letter from Elektroprivreda BiH noted. Before construction can start, the Federation's House of Peoples needs to adopt two more documents, according to Fadil Novalic, the entity's Prime Minister. After the 16+1 Budapest summit in November 2017, Bosnia's electric power company Elektroprivreda BiH took a 700 million euro loan from China's Exim bank to finish the thermal power plant in Tuzla, the largest single post-war investment in the country. Elektroprivreda then hired three Chinese companies to construct the thermal power plant. After the delay of getting the green light from the Federation's Parliament, three companies from China – Gezhouba Group, Guandong Electric Power Design Institute and Dongfang Electric Corporation Limited – threatened to pull out of the project, as Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) previously reported. In its 2019 report, the Munich Security Conference warned that China's economic outreach in the Western Balkans is a potential risk for the EU, notably in terms of increased reliance on Chinese loans. The report highlights four Balkan countries indebtedness to Beijing; Bosnia is among them, owing 14% of its total foreign debt to China. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Bosnia has not a Government since October 7th, 2018 general elections. It seems that the three main parties representing the three constituent entities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats); HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) are reaching an agreement to cooperate in forming a Government bypassing their different views on main issues. Bosnia's accession process towards NATO is the main disputable issue; Bosnian Serbs insist that the country should remain neutral staying out of NATO while the two other members of the tripartite Presidency set commitment to NATO accession as a precondition for supporting a Government. However, it seems that during last meeting the three leaders decided to put aside the NATO issue in an effort to form a Government bringing the country back to political normality. Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust. Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs destabilizing the state. It is more than impressive that Bosnian Serbs and Croats came very close aiming at achieving their special goals. Of course, both entities take in advantage "Dayton Peace Agreement" weaknesses and malfunctions. Russia pays special attention in Serbia and Bosnia in order to maintain its influence in the region. Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and Montenegro have already entered NATO, while North Macedonia would join the Alliance on June 2019. These two countries (Serbia and Bosnia) are the only "vehicles" for Russia to maintain a narrow influence in Southeastern Europe. Election of ultra nationalist pro-Russian Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia's EU

and NATO (mostly) integration. Dodik is a person who does not actually believe in B&H viability and is expected to promote (actually, he has already started) his own political agenda. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey approach the country mainly through “investments” and/or funding ethnic or religious groups according to their interests.



BULGARIA: March 4th, Russian

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev arrived in Bulgaria on a two-day visit upon invitation of Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. Bulgaria can deepen its strategic partnership with Russia in the field of energy, but to this end, concrete conditions have to be met, among which the projects are profitable for our country. This was stressed by President Rumen Radev at the beginning of his meeting with Medvedev. *“Turkish Stream”* and *“Belene”* are the most important topics of his entire visit to Bulgaria and minutes before he stressed to his Bulgarian counterpart Borisov that the gas project could only be realized with guarantees at the level of the European Commission. *“Russia is a strategic partner in the energy sector, where there is great potential for deepening our relations, but with due regard for expediency, competitiveness, transparency, security of supply and what is particularly important for us at a bargain price,”* Radev said. *“With our efforts, we can change everything, it is important for Governments to work, make the necessary decisions at the company level, have a dialogue,”* Medvedev said. He invited Radev to the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg, and the Bulgarian Head of state stressed that bilateral dialogue could help restore confidence between the EU and Russia. Bulgaria and Russia will cooperate in a number of

areas, including energy, and this does not call into question Bulgaria’s membership of the EU and NATO, but there are still many aspects of bilateral relations that need to be significantly improved. This was made clear by the statements of Borisov and Medvedev during their meeting at the Council of Ministers. Both Prime Ministers were clear that the Belene project have a future and could be implemented with Russian aid. (www.novinite.com)



Meeting of Bulgarian President Rumen Radev and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev

(Photo source: www.president.bg)

- March 5th, after the parliamentary meeting with Dmitry Medvedev, Ataka's leader and Deputy Chairman of the Friendship Group with Russia, Volen Siderov, commented that Bulgaria should not allow *“any foreign finger to intervene again to stop “Turkish Stream.”* According to his words, the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov realizes and works for the realization of the *“Turkish Stream”* and Belene NPP. Volen Siderov, Chairman of Ataka said *“Belene NPP is Russian high technology, it is being built in Hungary, a member of NATO and the EU, so there is nothing terrible. Let's start acting wisely and develop normal economic relations. We can only take benefits from this.”* (www.novinite.com)

- March 6th, Bulgarian MPs as expected rejected the veto of President Rumen Radev on the controversial changes in the Electoral Code. The

law will be sent to the President for promulgation in the State Gazette within seven days, National Assembly President Tsveta Karayancheva announced. The debates surrounding the majority vote and the machine vote continued for nearly three hours, despite the lack of opposition in the hall. After all, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Граждани за европейско развитие на България – GERB), Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Движение за права и свободи - DPS), United Patriots, and Volya unanimously rejected the veto with 154 votes for and none against. Although the dramatic increase in the preferential threshold, according to the leader of the Volya party, Veselin Mareshki, was a “murder” of preferences, he said he and his colleagues would vote against the veto. Among the most controversial changes in the Electoral Code were the increased threshold for the preferential vote, the postponed introduction of machine vote in all sections, and the possibility for the CEC to adopt decisions by a simple majority. In the end, GERB promised that after the veto would be reversed, the threshold for the preferential vote would be postponed. Despite the Head of state's call to Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya - BSP), to participate in the debate, left-wing MPs continued their boycott and stayed outside the plenary for a third week. The reason for leaving was precisely the new electoral rules against which this part of the opposition objected. (www.novinite.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots looks like the vulnerable piece of the Governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus,

Bulgaria has entered in a period of rather stable political situation. The President Radev grabs every opportunity to criticize the Government (and the Prime Minister Borissov) highlighting his different political affiliation (Radev is backed by the opposition Socialists). Opposition BSP tries to push further Borisov and his Government by strengthening its rhetoric and having tabled three motions of no confidence so far. It decided to abstain from Parliament sessions setting specific terms to the ruling coalition. It is not clear yet which are the goals of such an initiative except of disturbing Parliaments works. It is estimated that such actions are pre-electoral reactions regarding the EP election on May 26th, 2019. The country strengthened its efforts towards entering the Eurozone achieving a positive decision of the Eurogroup. However, the EC made clear that Bulgaria could not enter the Eurozone before 2022. Apart from that the European Parliament adopted a resolution for the accession of Bulgaria (and Romania) in Schengen Zone. However, it is questioned if the European Council will receive a unanimous final decision for Bulgaria under the current migration pressure. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles and should be addressed decisively. Russian prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev visit to Bulgaria highlighted the ongoing energy projects. Although modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc) military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards. Security situation stable; no major threats.



CROATIA: March 6th, the Croatian Journalist's Association has issued a statement condemning an incident of what appears to be intimidation of a reporter by Police. Journalist Jurcica Klancir was confronted by Police Officers at the offices of Net.hr, the on-line news outlet where she works. They asked to see her identification and left, according to reports. The Croatian Journalists Association (HND) said the Officers were sent at the request of a lawyer representing Sisak-Moslavina County Prefect Ivo Zinic, who is suing her because of her reporting on county politics. Echoing the Prime Minister's recent remarks, Administration Minister **Lovro Kuscevic** said he does not believe Croatia has a problem with media freedom. *"The Police are doing their job and the journalists are doing theirs. I believe freedom of the press in Croatia is on an enviable level in Europe."* Croatia's Government has come under scrutiny following a protest by hundreds of journalists who rallied against censorship and the intimidation of journalists through lawsuits. Public broadcaster HRT has filed more than 30 lawsuits against reporters, including HND President Hrvoje Zovko. Zovko said he was fired by HRT after he complained about censorship. Both the European and International Federation of Journalists have urged HRT to drop the lawsuits. Regarding Klancir's case, the Interior Ministry said that the conduct of Police was in compliance with the law. The Ministry said the plaintiff's lawyer had requested identification information for the purpose of initiating a civil suit against Klancir and had the right to establish the exact identity of the person being sued *"because there were several people with the same name as that particular reporter living in Croatia."* Police said that the only reliable information they had was

that the reporter worked for Net.hr and officers were dispatched to establish the accurate identity of the party being named in the lawsuit. (www.glashrvatske.hr.hr)

- March 7th, the U.S Ambassador to Croatia W. Robert Kohorst has once again commented on the Government's failed deal to purchase a dozen revamped F-16 multi-purpose Barak fighter jets from Israel. Kohorst attended a regional conference in Zagreb on economic strategies for a better future, where he briefly answered questions regarding Croatia's pursuit of fighter aircraft. *"We are fully supportive of whatever Croatia decides regarding F-16's. We do not have a position as to what that decision should be. We are waiting for the Government to make their position clear, and we are happy to be supportive. We are a good military ally with Croatia, just as Croatia is with us, and we want to be fully supportive of what they do,"* Kohorst said. Meanwhile, Defense Minister Damir Krsticevic responded to the Ambassador's comments from Zadar. *"As you know, the United States is a key strategic partner in defense and security. It is clear that we enjoy very good relations. We continue to talk with all sides and make the necessary preparations. And afterward, once we analyze the entire situation, we will make the next step. It is clear that the Government is decisive in the pursuit of multi-purpose fighter aircraft. Once we have all the relevant information, we will inform the Croatian public,"* Krsticevic said. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- March 8th, after Police entered a media office and asked journalist Jurcica Klancir to provide identification, the GONG NGO has called upon the President to call an urgent session of the National Security Council and demand political

responsibility for the actions of the repressive system. Interior Minister Drazen Bosnjakovic has called a meeting of the Police Directorate in order to review regulations and see what needs to be changed – so that citizens, but also Police officials do not find themselves in such situations. The President of the Parliamentary Committee for National Security Ranko Ostojic said at a news conference that the problem is not in regulations on Police procedures that were adopted in 2010, but rather the habit of “*this being normal*.” “*The problem is in the habit of the Prime Minister actually thinking he can do whatever he wants to do, that Ministers can minimize problems in this manner. What I believe is most important is that pressure on freedom of the press continues*,” Ostojic said adding that “*according to this logic the Minister could also demand changes to the Croatian constitution*.” “*I do not think this is heading towards protection of human rights, professional dignity, and above all equality of all before the law*,” said Ostojic. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Croatia follows a tough regional policy with neighboring countries. It is openly intervene in Bosnia's internal affairs, while it maintains open disputes with Slovenia, Serbia, and Bosnia. It is estimated Croatia tries to establish a leading role in Western Balkans not only as an EU and NATO member state but also as a rising “local” (Western Balkans) power. One should take into consideration that Croatia shows its military strength and capabilities quite often not only in international, but also in national level sending strong messages to neighboring countries. Apart from that, Croatia pays special attention in energy strategy and security announcing

ambitious projects. Although the President is a member of the ruling party, it is estimated that there is some kind of political distance between the President and Government. However, the state enjoys political stability. Latest incidents with journalists' persecutions by the national broadcaster HRT has raised concerns over media freedom in Croatia and one should focus on the Government's action on this matter. Border dispute on Piran Bay remains active and Slovenia's initiative to file a lawsuit against Croatia adds a new chapter between the two countries conflict. The state accelerates its efforts towards accession in Schengen zone, while the EC sends good news regarding Croatia's fiscal policy. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Failure to complete successfully the purchase of a modern fighter jet maintains a long period of an ineffective and weak Croatian Air Force.



CYPRUS: March 5th, British Prime Minister Theresa May repeated that Britain is not interested in continuing its role as a guarantor power for Cyprus, President Nikos Anastasiades said after meeting her at Downing Street. Following the meeting, Anastasiades said that he had “*a very constructive meeting with Prime Minister May, which focused on matters concerning the Cyprus problem, bilateral relations and of course Brexit*.” The two leaders discussed the development of relations between the two countries in the undesirable event of an exit without a deal. “*I hope that by the next European Council, on March 21, ways will be found to secure, in one way or another, a smooth exit for Britain*,” Anastasiades added. Regarding

the Cyprus problem, Anastasiades said that May reiterated Britain's unchanging position, namely the support for a solution based on UN resolutions, as well as on EU principles and values. *"Most importantly, however, she reiterated the position that Britain would not wish to continue its role as a guarantor power."* (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 5th, Cyprus aspires to see the Eastern Mediterranean transformed from an area of instability and geopolitical uncertainty into a region of stability and prosperity, Defense Minister Savvas Angelides said. Speaking after talks with Germany's Federal Minister of Defense, Ursula von der Leyen, in Nicosia on an official visit, Angelides said the latest international developments and geopolitical changes in the wider region have created a political situation that is particularly unpredictable and fluid, making the security environment more complex. The two countries agreed on Tuesday to enhance their cooperation concerning projects in the framework of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The Ministers underlined their willingness to strengthen relations in the fields of security and defense. The German minister said that Cyprus is a valuable partner for Berlin. Cyprus, she said, *"is a very active country in PESCO"* adding that both countries are participating in projects, mainly concerning military mobility and a network of logistics hubs. *"Cyprus has a unique selling point of capabilities here and a unique geostrategic location. Both of them make it very valuable to have you as a project partner in PESCO,"* von der Leyen stated. She added that the two sides are also discussing other geostrategic projects in the area. Angelides noted that von der Leyen's visit is particularly important and takes place at a very crucial period

for Cyprus and the wider region. *"Taking particularly into account that conditions of stability, growth and prosperity in the wider region are directly linked to the security of the member states of the EU itself, Cyprus is choosing to be actively present in this new security and defense architecture of Europe,"* Angelides said. He said an agreement with France for it to use Cyprus' naval base in Mari does not provide for setting up bases on the island but for upgrading of existing infrastructure. Angelides added that Cyprus' defense agreements with other EU countries have to do with the security of Europe and not aggression against anyone. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 8th, cracks seem to be forming among the countries participating in the EastMed gas pipeline, raising questions over the project's feasibility, if media reports are to be believed. Earlier this week Italy's La Stampa newspaper suggested Rome is having second thoughts over the proposed subsea pipeline, which has already received funding from the EU as a "Project of Common Interest." In December 2018, the four countries involved – Israel, Cyprus, Greece and Italy – signed a framework agreement to provide Europe with natural gas via the EastMed. According to La Stampa, the definitive agreement was expected to be concluded by the end of March – but Italy now says it wants to put the brakes on the project. Apparently under pressure from environmental activists, the Italian Government has decided to order a new environmental impact assessment. The publication cited a diplomat of one of the other three countries as saying *"The Italian Government has not given us concrete reasons [for the pause]."* *"Our impression is that there are electoral reasons behind this stop and*

reconsideration of the merits. But we do not know yet if after the elections something will be unblocked.” Work on the pipeline was expected to begin this year and conclude in five years. The project is opposed by Turkey, seeing its regional influence and role as an energy hub diminish and also by Egypt, which aims to sign an agreement with Nicosia to transfer the natural gas extracted off the island to its own shores. Meanwhile, Lebanon has warned its Mediterranean neighbors that it would not allow the mooted pipeline to violate its maritime borders. Reuters said Beirut has an unresolved maritime border dispute with Israel – which it regards as an enemy country – over a sea area of about 860 square kilometers extending along the edge of three of Lebanon’s southern energy blocks. Lebanon’s Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, said he has written to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, EU foreign policy Head Federica Mogherini and the Foreign Ministers of Cyprus, Greece and Italy to request that the pipeline does not infringe on Lebanon’s rights within what it claims as its Exclusive Economic Zone. In a copy of the letter sent to Greece’s Foreign Ministry seen by Reuters, Bassil said Lebanon would not allow its sovereignty to be breached, “*especially when it comes to any eventual attempt from Israel to encroach on Lebanon’s sovereign rights and jurisdiction over its EEZ.*” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will visit Israel within the next few days to help with its plan to export natural gas to Europe. “*In a few days, the leaders of Cyprus and Greece will come here, together with... Pompeo, to advance a gas pipeline from Israel to Europe via these countries,*” Netanyahu said on social media. “*The navy will also protect this pipeline,*” he concluded. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Cyprus works systematically in order to become a major part of the East Mediterranean energy hub. Its natural gas deposits affect not only its economy but also its security. The strategy of multilateral cooperation seems to be fruitful. At the moment, Cyprus is engaged in three different trilateral formations which also include strong features of strategic cooperation and alliance; Cyprus – Egypt – Greece, Cyprus – Israel – Greece, and Cyprus – Jordan – Greece. The last two are highly improved due to the US engagement. ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum concluded their drill activities within the Cyprus EEZ, block 10 announcing a finding of 5 to 8 tcf. Although it is a significant announcement there are concerns over its commercial viability. Taking into consideration that a commercially accepted well has 10 to 15 tcf it is under question how the energy consortium will exploit the well. It is assessed that the Cypriot gas will be linked to further gas findings in eastern Mediterranean and that is why region’s states develop close regional cooperation in energy sector. Apart from that problems have started to emerge regarding the construction of EASTMED pipeline. Italy presents second thoughts of withdrawing from the project, while Lebanon strongly reacts in the use of its EEZ. Turkey is isolated from the energy game and it is a good question how it will react since it is certain that it will not accept “fait accompli” in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. It is assessed that Turkish provocative actions may be intensified either by Turkish gas and oil drills within the Cypriot EEZ, or by military actions. It is a fact that Cyprus has a significant deficit of military power which is (externally) balanced by regional cooperation. Furthermore Cyprus improved its bilateral relations with the

U.S, strengthened its defense cooperation with France, and lately develops its defense and security relations with Germany. The US administration appears ready to abolish the arms embargo against Cyprus allowing it to improve its military capabilities. Involvement of an American company (ExxonMobil) in the drills it is proved “wise” and “smart.” Conduct of aeronautical exercises in cooperation with other countries (Israel, Egypt etc) sends various messages of defense capability, readiness, and determination. Although the UN Secretary General appears optimistic for a new round of talks between the two communities, it is assessed that talks could not be resumed earlier than summer 2019. President Anastasiades promotes the scenario of a “bizonal, bicomunal decentralized federation”; an idea which is in principle accepted by the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and enjoys support from the U.S. However, there are a lot of disputed issues in which both parts should compromise; the most important is considered the decision-making process. Recent close approach between Cyprus and the US provoked Russia’s strong reaction which foresees a possible isolation from its influence in the Island. It is not a secret that Russia enjoys or used to enjoy a privileged relationship with Cyprus due to the US distance regarding defense and foreign policy neutrality. It is a question how Cyprus will achieve to balance between the US and Russia interests in the region. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



GREECE: March 4th, Greece is making a concerted effort to react calmly to “dangerous incidents” in the Aegean, where Turkish violations “are reaching very high levels,” Defense Minister Evangelos Apostolakis told a meeting of visiting sub-committees of NATO’s Parliamentary Assembly in the Greek Parliament in Athens. “We always react to the provocations in the Aegean area, where the number of violations of national air space and national waters are unfortunately reaching very high levels, with prudence and strategic restraint,” Apostolakis said. “Despite existing problems and dangerous incidents in the air and sea which can lead to a serious accident, we are constantly trying to smooth things out and de-escalate tension,” the former Armed Forces Chief, who was appointed Defense Minister in January after former coalition partner Panos Kammenos stepped down, told the sub-committees. Apostolakis added that a meeting between Greek and Turkish “technical teams” is being planned in the “immediate future” to discuss a series of actions within the context of confidence-building measures agreed by the two Governments. He said this meeting was discussed during Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’s talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan when the former visited Turkey last month, as well as during contacts between Apostolakis and his Turkish counterpart, Hulusi Akar, on the sidelines of a meeting of NATO Defense Ministers, also in February. “I hope that we will soon have tangible results from the decisions that were made, thus contributing to building a relationship of trust for international law,” Apostolakis told the sub-committees in Athens. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 5th, Greece and China are “*seriously investing in their bilateral strategic partnership*” and enjoy a “*significant alignment of interests*,” Greek Foreign Minister Giorgos Katrougalos said in a statement. The Greek Minister's comments referred to the first day of his visit to Beijing, where he met with China's Ministers of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi and Commerce Zhong Shan, as well the Chief of the Development Commission, He Lifeng. “*From all these contacts... we can conclude two things. First of all that Greece and China are seriously investing in their bilateral strategic partnership*,” Katrougalos said, citing China's One Belt One Road initiative, in which Greece is set to play a “*constructive role in promoting bilateral relations and Europe-China cooperation*.” There is also “*a significant alignment of interests, precisely because we too endeavor that our country becomes a bridge between Europe, Asia, and Africa*,” he said. The second conclusion, added Katrougalos, is that “*Greece has exited the economic crisis and offers significant opportunities for investment to the Chinese side*.” “*We discussed how this possibility will be reflected realistically in practice, and for the contacts to continue both in the private sector, and chiefly for this momentum to pay off in practice*,” the Foreign Ministry quoted him as saying. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 6th, the Russian Embassy in Greece rejected allegations of meddling in Greece's domestic affairs, raised by the U.S Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt during an event on disinformation campaigns, describing it as “*fake news*.” “*Allegations of a supposedly Russian involvement in [Greece's] domestic affairs and manipulation of information are not even worth a comment. They belong to the well-known category of ‘highly likely’ which is synonymous with fake news*,” the

Embassy said in social media. The Russian embassy described Greek-Russian relations as “*honest, open and able to withstand any external pressures and interventions*.” In a previous social media message, the Embassy quoted President Vladimir Putin as saying that no “*reasonable person*” in Greece or Russia would think that Moscow is “*planning conspiracies*” against Athens. “*It's just nonsense, rubbish*,” he reportedly said. It was not clear where Putin made these remarks. Speaking to TV channel Antenna on the sidelines of the disinformation event in Athens on Monday, Pyatt said that all open societies are vulnerable to those campaigns. “*We've seen evidence of this kind of manipulation of information in Greece. We've seen Russian efforts in the Church, the efforts to undermine the role of the Ecumenical Patriarch*,” he said. “*I cannot tell you that I have seen evidence of efforts in order to meddle in Greece's upcoming elections, but the purpose of this event tonight is to raise awareness so that Greece's democratic institutions, Greece's free press — which are all quite strong — can be alert and able to respond*.” The event was organized by the Atlantic Council, together with the US Embassy to Greece and Greek think tank diaNEOsis. (www.ekathimerini.gr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political situation in the country is rapidly evolving and it is assessed that early parliamentary elections will be held on May 2019. The country has entered in pre-electoral period. A long pre-electoral period first of all may polarize society with unpredictable results and secondly it hurts national economy. The Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras focuses on approaching the center-left voters and weakening KINAL

(former PASOK). Political turmoil emerged in a period where Greece faces several diplomatic, security, and economic challenges. Internal terrorism is considered as a major unresolved problem of national security undermining stability of the state. Greek Defense Minister announced mutual efforts with his Turkish counterpart for confidence-building measures. Turkish fighter jets keep violating Greek airspace, while NAVTEXs reserves part of Greek continental shelf and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone. None could exclude Greek Navy intervention in a possible incident with Turkish vessels accompanying Turkish drill ships. Security situation is of significant risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident.



KOSOVO: March 8th, Kosovo's biggest opposition party said they will challenge at the Constitutional Court the Law on dialogue with Belgrade which was approved Thursday by Kosovo Parliament. The Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK) considers the Law as unconstitutional. Chief of Parliamentary Group of LDK, Avdullah Hoti, said the LDK is ready to address the Constitutional Court for an interpretation, whether the Law on dialogue, approved Thursday by Kosovo Parliament is in line with the Constitution of Kosovo. Hoti made the comments during an interview with RTV21. He said the approach of Kosovo institutions towards dialogue with Serbia is harming Kosovo's statehood, accusing the Government and other state institutions of acting like in times when Kosovo was not independent. The LDK and the other opposition party – Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) boycotted Thursday's session of Parliament dissatisfied with the Government's sponsored Law on dialogue

with Serbia. Opposition parties consider that Kosovo needs no special law for dialogue, adding that state institutions should only respect the Constitution and applicable laws of Kosovo. The Parliament approved on Thursday the Law on dialogue and a Platform on a comprehensive legally-binding agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. Belgrade has also criticized Kosovo's Parliament decision saying that adoption of platform shows Pristina is not interested in continuation of the EU-facilitated dialogue in Brussels. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 8th, a report obtained by Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) says the then Head of the Kosovo Intelligence Agency, (AKI), Driton Gashi, was present at the VIP zone of Pristina airport when six Turkish nationals were controversially deported in March last year. The report, showing a timeline of the procedural steps taken in the deportation case, shows Gashi, who was the Head of AKI, was there when checks on the six Turkish nationals' IDs were completed at 10:09 on March 29th, 2018. "At this time, the Head of the Immigration Unit of the Airport, the Director and Officers from Directorate of Migration and Foreigners and the Director and Officers of the AKI [were all present]," it reads. The report says "At 10:25, Kosovo Police began transporting the Turkish nationals to the airplane of the Turkish authorities ... at 10:42, handover of the six Turkish national was completed." The plane took off for Turkey eight minutes later. The six Turkish citizens, who all had permits to be in Kosovo, were wanted by Ankara over their alleged links to a movement led by the exiled Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen. Turkey calls this alleged movement the "Fethullahist Terror Organisation", or FETO, and blames it for the failed coup in Turkey in 2016. Gulen, based in

Pennsylvania in the US, insists he had nothing to do with it. Kosovo officials have long claimed the deportation caught them by surprise, claiming they were not informed about it. On the day of the operation, Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj said the Turkish citizens had been deported without his knowledge. *“As Prime Minister, I was not informed about this operation,”* he wrote on social media. Claiming that misuse of the Police and Intelligence Agency had taken place, Haradinaj demanded the removal of the Head of the AKI, Driton Gashi, and the Interior Minister, Flamur Sefaj. President Hashim Thaci also claimed he had not been informed about such an operation taking place. But the report reveals that the plans started 17 days before the operation took place, and that the Interior Ministry was well briefed. *“On 12 and 19 March, 2018, a senior official from the AKI went personally to the Department for Citizenship, Asylum and Migration [DCAM] of the Ministry of Interior to review the records of six Turkish nationals; Hasan Huseyin Demir, Kahraman Demirez, Mustafa Erdem, Yusuf Karabina, Osman Karakaya and Cihan Ozkan,”* the report, by a US human rights law expert, Tienmu Ma, says. The report says the AKI officially informed the DCAM officials that the Intelligence Agency had the Turkish nationals *“under its surveillance.”* When a Parliamentary Committee investigating the controversial expulsions interviewed Shpend Maxhuni, then Head of Kosovo Police, he denied having any information about the matter until the Turkish citizens were already back in Turkey. *“Driton Gashi, who then was the Head of AKI, told us that he had notified Police Director [Maxhuni] three days ahead of it. So one of them is lying,”* Driton Selmanaj, Deputy Head of the Parliamentary Committee, told BIRN on Thursday. BIRN has contacted Driton Gashi, the

AKI and the Police service about the claims made in the report. No answer was received by the time of publication. BIRN reported on Thursday that the AKI’s officers *“took over”* Kosovo Police Offices in order to completely lead the operation, giving orders to police Officers via the telephone *“every two or three minutes.”* (www.balkaninsight.com)

- March 9th, Igor Simic, Deputy Head of Srpska List, representing Serbs in Kosovo, said that his party will coordinate with Belgrade and decide whether to withdraw from all institutions of Kosovo. Simic made the statements in an interview with Serbia’s public broadcaster, RTS, adding that they will consult with Belgrade on to further proceed. According to Simic authorities in Pristina took many decisions which have affected lives of Serbs in Kosovo, mentioning arrests, assaults against Serb returnees and the tax that the Government of Kosovo introduced in all Serbian products last year. Simic also criticized the Platform on dialogue with Serbia which was approved on Friday by Kosovo Parliament, saying that this document is a final blow to the continuation of Pristina-Belgrade dialogue facilitated by the EU. *“Adoption of the platform makes the dialogue meaningless. It’s an attempt to take over control of economic potential, and sends a clear message to Kosovo Serbs. Therefore, we are asking withdrawal from institutions, because of these meaningless actions which made our lives difficult,”* Simic said. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Haradinaj’s decision to impose 100% tax on Serbian and Bosnian products provoked major problems in Kosovo affecting Governments

stability. The international community namely the EU and the U.S put a lot of pressure on the Government to suspend taxes. The UN Secretary General confirmed that tax is the major problem regarding dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. The US has started sending officials in Pristina in an effort to convince Kosovo leaders to restart dialogue with Serbia. Although Kosovo still enjoys the EU and U.S support none could avoid recognizing that the state acts beyond European standards violating international agreements such as CEFTA. On the other hand dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has reached a deadlock trapping mostly Pristina in an endless conflict. Only through normalization of relations with Serbia it will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. However, the state's authorities show a tendency of escalating tension with Serbia undermining a peaceful resolution of the case. By imposing 100% tariff on Serbian (and Bosnian products), establishing Kosovo army, executing Special Forces operation in northern Kosovo, arresting Serbs, and requesting special court for Serbs it is created a climate which does not facilitate dialogue and the establishment of confidence between the two parties. In the meanwhile, Kosovo negotiation team promotes a platform of principles and goals regarding Kosovo – Serbia dialogue. It is a hardline document “seeking to take everything and give nothing”; however it is nothing more than a negotiation base which actually rejects Thaci's goal for border correction. Thaci changed last week his position claiming that he is not in favor of border correction. It is estimated that internal politics affect political leaders stance in Kosovo – Serbia issue. The question of border exchange or simply change continues to divide Kosovo political forces and population. It

seems that the U.S (and the EU) has a leading role in the background pushing for the idea of territorial change (or exchange). Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish in the country rule of law and modern functional administration. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard. Establishment of Kosovo Army is also a factor of destabilization since there is always a possibility of Police or military engagement with Serbian forces. Kosovo seeks KSF to be operating all over the country pushing NATO towards such direction. The presence of Kosovo Army in the north it is assessed of high security risk which may lead in armed violence. One should take into consideration that the Serb President has already ordered all defense and security stakeholders to take all necessary measures for protecting Serbian population in Kosovo.



MOLDOVA: March 5th, the Popular Assembly of the southern Moldovan autonomous region of Gagauzia has put up for public consideration draft amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova. The amendment document is aimed at fixing in the Moldovan Constitution the autonomy's right to self-determination in case Moldova loses its current status of an independent state. Presently, such a possibility is stipulated only in the 1994 Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia. In particular, the Gagauzia Deputies are proposing to include the following provision into constitutional Article 111 “*The Administrative-Territorial Unit of Gagauzia: In case of a change of the Republic of Moldova's status of an independent state, the people of Gagauzia have the right to external self-determination.*” For the adoption of constitutional amendments, it is necessary to undergo a law-

stipulated procedure of amending the Main Law and to enlist the support of minimum two-thirds of Parliament Members [67-of-101]. Besides this, it is necessary to make changes in the above-mentioned 1994 Law. Article 111 of the Constitution stipulates that such amendments are approved by the votes of minimum three-fifths of Parliament deputies [61-of-101]. As was already reported by Infotag, on February 2nd, 2014 the Gagauzia autonomy held two referendums on one day – a legislative and a consultative one. At the former referendum, over 98% voters spoke out for Gagauzia's integration into the Russia-led Customs Union, which included Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan then. And at the latter referendum, 96% people voted for Gagauzia's right to external self-determination if the Republic of Moldova ceases to be an independent and sovereign state. The central Moldovan authorities regard the referendum to be illegitimate ones because such questions may not be tackled by regional authorities. (www.infotag.md)

- March 7th, the leadership of the Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) reiterated the call for talks to the parties that entered the Parliament. PDM leader Vlad Plahotniuc announced in a press briefing that the main concern of the Democrats is to make a coalition with the citizens. Plahotniuc said he still expects some politicians to come back after the elections and understand why the citizens chose them. *"If you expect me to speak to you today about political coalitions, I will disappoint you - we have no news, we still expect some politicians to wake up to reality after the elections and to understand why they were voted. Until some parties count their mandates and think about what to do with them, we continue to work, think about the present and the future of the*

country. That is why we held a working meeting at the party, and we decided the government would take responsibility for several projects that will bring significant benefits to people," he said. According to Plahotniuc, by assuming responsibility by the Government, the pension indexation decision will be approved starting from April 1st, 2019. Also, the Ministers are going to approve granting of one-off aid before Easter for about 600,000 retired and disabled people. (www.moldpres.md)

- March 9th, the Constitutional Court (CCM) validated the February 24th, 2019 parliamentary elections. CCM President Mihai Poalelungi has announced the ruling. At the same time, the Court validated the mandates of the MPs elected and confirmed the lists of the alternate candidates. CCM also turned down a demand by the ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] electoral bloc on declaring null the polls in five uninominal electoral districts and invalidating the mandates of several elected lawmakers. A representative of the Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM), Sergiu Sarbu, unveiled to CCM a petition on the re-numbering of the legislative periods, so that the new Parliament is of the tenth legislative period. *"I asked the Court to accept my petition to re-number the legislative periods. Thus, since the Independence, this will be the Parliament of the tenth legislative period. Let's leave the numbering from the times of the USSR in history,"* Sarbu said. *"Taking into account the fact that, since the election of Moldova's first parliament, which worked on the period 1990-1994, and till the expiration of the mandate of the last parliament, elected on 30 November 2014,*

parliaments of nine convocations have been elected, the Constitutional Court confirms the results of the elections to the parliament of the tenth legislative period from 24 February 2019 in the national districts and in the uninominal districts,” President of the Constitutional Court Mihai Poalelungi said. According to the results got in the elections in the national electoral district, Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) got 35 seats, ACUM 26, PDM 30, Republican Socio-Political Movement Equality (Mișcare Social-Politică Republicană Ravnopravie - SOR) 7, while 3 independents MPs entered the Parliament. The new Parliament is to hold its first meeting, upon being summoned by Moldova’s President, 30 days following the elections at the latest. (www.moldpres.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Parliamentary elections in Moldova were hiding surprises and ACUM achieved to get the 2nd place, but due to the new electoral system got only 26 seats. ACUM looks reluctant to negotiate a possible coalition with PDM. At the moment the most possible scenario is a ruling coalition of PSRM – PDM. On the other hand, the US and EU it might push for a PDM – ACUM cooperation aiming at interdicting the pro-russian PSRM from entering a Government. New elections could not be excluded. Moldova is between the Euro-Atlantic structures on the one hand and the Russian influence on the other. Political situation in the country is alarming and the EU has hardened its policy towards Moldova pushing for more reforms which will strengthen state’s transparency, accountability and democratic values. The current Government has walked into dangerous paths which support corruption and

organized crime and deep and determined justice reforms are needed. The U.S, EU and IMF express their major concerns. The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Moldova; First of all Russia maintains military forces in Transnistrian ground and secondly it shares common borders with Ukraine which cannot go unnoticed by international stakeholders. The “Transnistria case” is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: March 4th,

Defense and Security Council has laid down the proposal for the decision on referral of the members of the Armed Forces of Montenegro to NATO mission in Iraq. “*The proposal decision envisages recruitment of two members of the Armed Forces of Montenegro who would perform staff activities in the Mission. This way, Montenegro would give its contribution to the establishment of stability and security of the Republic of Iraq. The Council decided that the decisions on the recruitment of soldiers in international forces be prepared, harmonized and implemented carefully,*” announced by the Council after the meeting chaired by the President of Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic. The Council also took into consideration the integration of national system of the airspace protection into NATO integrated system, as well as the information about the National authority that will decide on the use of force in the airspace of Montenegro. “*Report on the participation of the members of the Armed Forces of Montenegro in the international training in 2018 was presented at the meeting today. Members of the Council have been informed about the participation of the units of the Army in international training, with*

special emphasis on the most important NATO training in 2018, TRIDENT JUNCTURE,” reads the report. Minister of Defense, Predrag Boskovic, informed the members of the Council about the great response to the voluntary military service. “The conclusion is that we must reinforce capacities in order to create possibilities for young people with motives to prove themselves, conspicuous patriotism and loyalty, to acquire basic military skills. Such kind of training will have far-reaching importance in the affirmation of the Armed Forces of Montenegro and the overall defense system,” Boskovic said. (www.cdm.me)

- March 5th, opposition Deputies were not present at a second regular session of Parliament on which the proposed laws on academic integrity and state awards will be considered. President of the Assembly Ivan Brajovic said he regretted that there were no opposition representatives in the hall, the Mina agency reports. *“My appeal to them, and I suppose colleagues from the ruling majority would agree with it, is to come and join us as soon as possible,”* Brajovic said. The Social Democratic Party of Montenegro (Socijaldemokratska Partija Crne Gore - SDP) delegates’ caucus announced that they would not attend the session. *“Strongly supporting the legitimate revolt of Montenegrin citizens after the Koverta affair, as well as the daily degradation of their social position, we consider justified the request that the opposition publicly renounces participation at any future elections, until fair and democratic conditions and ambience are created.”* said the SDP. Supporting the efforts of the organizers of civil protest to, as they say, *“help to create fair and democratic conditions through a caretaker Government”* the SDP declares itself aware that

“any change and creation of a decent and democratic society has to have the support of European and Euro-Atlantic partners, while respecting their assessments in their desire to help the necessary changes.” (www.rtcg.me)

- March 6th, before the first regular session of the Montenegrin Assembly the second counting of votes at the local elections held in Tuzi finished last night and it finally put an end to the election result; Albanian Forum won 16 mandates, the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS) 10, Bosnian party 4, Social Democratic Party of Montenegro (Socijaldemokratska Partija Crne Gore - SDP), and Democratic Montenegro (Demokratska Crna Gora - DCG) won one mandate each. Albanian forum will form the municipal Government with the Democrats, because, together, they have 17 mandates. DPS will be sent to the opposition. President of the Albanian forum, Nik Djeljosaj wrote on social media *“Despite the fact that various structures tried to sabotage and alter the result of the elections, it remained the same.”* The Albanian Forum, an alliance of ethnic Albanian parties, won a victory in Sunday’s historic first local elections in Tuzi, a newly formed municipality in Montenegro. Supporters of the forum celebrated on the streets with Albanian flags and national songs. *“We have shown that united Albanians can do a lot. We united the diaspora and the Albanians in Montenegro,”* the first man of the Albanian coalition, Nik Djeljosaj said. The Tuzi area borders the capital, Podgorica, on one side and stretches to the border with Albania on the other. It is also known as Malesia. Sunday’s elections saw a high turnout, due to the many members of the diaspora who came back from US

and from Europe to vote and support the Albanian coalition. Montenegro is a multi-ethnic state and is highly unusual in having no overwhelming community that makes up over half of its population. About 45% of the population identify as Montenegrins and about 29% as Serbs. Albanians make up about 5% of the population. During the election campaign, the Albanian parties enjoyed open assistance from officials from neighboring Kosovo and Albania. Flamur Gashi, advisor to President Ilir Meta of Albania, visited Tuzi on the eve of the election and invited citizens to vote for the Albanian coalition. Kosovo President Hashim Thaci and Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama made similar calls for Albanian unity at a Diaspora Summit in Tirana last week. "Where Albanians get together, they get better and win," Rama said at the summit in Tirana. Albania's Foreign Ministry also provided support calling people to vote for Albanian forum. (www.cdm.me, www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Massive protests against the President and high officials disturbed a period of "euphoria", emerging state's problems such as corruption, media freedom, and nepotism. In this context, accusations against the country's President for bribery by a fugitive businessman should be investigated with transparency and into depth. The EP assessment is positive praising the state's efforts to implement major reforms, but on the other hand it underlines the problems of the rule of law, media freedom, corruption, money laundering, and organized crime. However, the EP expressly states that Montenegro under certain conditions may be able to access the EU by 2025. It is assessed that the EU and U.S strongly supports the President Djukanovic and

the Montenegrin Government despite corruption accusations as being the only loyal partner committed to the Western orientation of the state. In other words the west is closing its eyes in lack of democratic values and rule of law due to geopolitical interests namely Russian influence. The Government promotes state's political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. Although the Government takes concrete measures against corruption, organized crime, and money laundering it is assessed that a lot should be done to reach such a level of economic activity; mainly in the field of public administration, public sector corruption, and money laundering. Imprisonment of opposition MPs is a worrying and alarming sign regarding rule of law and democratic values in the country. Montenegro shows activity within NATO trying to prove that it is an equal partner of the alliance with military capacity according to NATO standards. Moreover, it tries to modernize and strengthen its operational capabilities and in this context it raised its defense budget aiming at purchasing new assets such as armored vehicles. Establishment of a credible and effective system of Armed Forces reservists will strengthen defense capabilities of its Armed Forces.



NORTH MACEDONIA: March 6th, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) presidential nominee Gordana Siljanovska told the citizens of Radovis that she will not be using the name "Republic of North Macedonia," imposed on country with the Prespa agreement. The opposition presidential nominee

is a critic of the deal, which was rejected by the voters who largely boycotted the referendum to approve it, and was later approved by the Parliament. *“You can take my word for it; I will not be using that name. Our grandmothers and grandfathers were being forced to change their names, and they were prepared to endure torture, but would not give up. We have inherited our name and we have a centuries old obligation to preserve it and hand it down to the next generations,”* Siljanovska said.

- March 7th, the Anti-Corruption Commission in North Macedonia has opened an investigation into the recent decisions of the country’s President, Gjorge Ivanov regarding the promotions within the Army, which are considered to be against the law. The commission has requested additional documents from Ivanov’s cabinet. According to members of this Commission, the latest promotions taken place within the army have raised suspicions. The Ministry of Defense has also been requested to provide documents in order to assess the lawfulness of these decisions. However, the President’s cabinet has dismissed accusations made against him by claiming that the President’s actions were in accordance with the law. (www.balkaneu.com, www.mia.mk)

- March 10th, the Prime Minister and Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) leader Zoran Zaev will meet with Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) leader Hristijan Mickoski, at 8 pm in the Government building. The forthcoming

presidential elections, the reform laws and everything in the interest of the state, as Zaev announced, will be topics for discussion at the meeting. It is very important, underlined Zaev to discuss the upcoming presidential elections, the state’s European integration process, and even NATO because nothing has finished yet. *“Let’s do our best so in June to get the date for the opening of accession negotiations with the EU,”* Zaev said adding that he will talk as Prime Minister and President of the main political party with the Head of the opposition on those topics, because he believes in joint responsibility before the historic decisions that North Macedonia needs to bring. The leader of VMRO-DPMNE has previously confirmed that he will join the meeting. (www.novamakedonija.com.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Ratification of NATO accession protocol by the member states proceeds rapidly. Zaev and his Government focus on domestic affairs trying to benefit by the successful name agreement. The ruling SDSM announced that it will not call for early parliamentary elections along with the presidential one. As it was assessed, the Government seeks to fully capitalize its gains from NATO accession (scheduled for June 2019) and a possible opening of accession negotiations with the EU (also for June 2019). VMRO-DPMNE will strengthen its nationalistic rhetoric due to the coming presidential elections seeking to elect its own presidential candidate. However, the ruling coalition SDSM-DUI presented its own common candidate, Stevo Pendarovski. Polarization of state’s political life including low scale violent incidents could not be excluded during the pre-electoral campaign especially if VMRO-DPMNE realizes that it is not going to

elect its own President. The fact is the country is more stable and more coherent watching its future in a more optimistic way. However, the country should focus on its economy and major administrative reforms aiming at reaching the EU standards. The U.S and EU enjoy their success since F.Y.R.O.M moves in their paths far from Russia's influence. Needless to say that in a period where border questions are raised again in the Balkans F.Y.R.O.M achieved to strengthen its political stability and growth prospects.



ROMANIA: March 6th, during their second meeting in the past month, First Vice-President of the European Commission (EC), Frans Timmermans told Romanian Prime Minister Viorica Dancila that there are growing concerns regarding the latest developments in the judiciary system in Romania. According to an EC statement, Timmermans and Dancila had an open and honest discussion, tackling the topic of the Mechanism of Verification and Cooperation, with the First Vice-President of the European Commission voicing growing concerns regarding the current situation and the latest developments on justice. EC said that the European top official told Dancila that it is a matter of urgency and that a progress is needed on the issues raised in the upcoming weeks. The two officials agreed that Romanian and EC experts should have another meeting next week to discuss the concerned matters. Dancila told Antena 3 private broadcaster that she had a constructive dialogue with Frans Timmermans. *"I met Frans Timmermans today. We had a constructive dialogue. We'll also meet during the visit he will pay in Romania. He voiced appreciation for Romania's performance at the helm of the EU Council,"* the Premier stated. (www.romaniajournal.ro)



Romanian Prime Minister Viorica Dancila with the EC First Vice President Frans Timmermans

(Photo source: www.gov.ro)

- March 7th, Romania's National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA) said that the data presented by Justice Minister Tudorel Toader in a letter published in the Financial Times (FT) were false. DNA sent to the FT an official statement with the correct data, the institution informed. Toader has published a letter in the Financial Times in which he argues against the appointment of Laura Codruta Kovesi, the former DNA Chief Prosecutor, as Head of the newly established European Public Prosecutor's Office. Toader claimed that, during Kovesi's terms as Head of DNA, the institution opened investigations targeting over 3,400 Judges and Prosecutors in Romania and allegedly used these files to pressure Magistrates into supporting its cases. Moreover, Toader claimed that the new section for investigating Magistrates, created last year, took over from DNA more than 1,400 case files involving Magistrates and found that 70% of them were initiated by DNA itself (ex officio). He also alleged that some of these files included forged evidence. DNA reacted saying that the data on which the Justice Minister founded his argumentation is *"not real,"* which affects the truth of his conclusion related to DNA's activity. DNA stated that the new section for investigating Magistrates only took over 275 ongoing investigations targeting Magistrates, of which

only 34 (12%) were initiated by the DNA itself (ex officio), while the rest were based on complaints or denouncements. DNA also said that the total number of investigations related to Magistrates registered from January 1st, 2014, until July 30th, 2018, was close to 2,400, of which 1,922 were closed because the complaints were unfounded. Of the 2,400 files, only 10% were initiated ex officio, while most of them were based on denouncements and complaints. DNA also points out that the law in Romania obliges Prosecutors to open criminal files following every complaint or denouncement filed according to procedures, which could explain the high number of case files. (www.romania-insider.com)

- March 9th, Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România - USR) and PLUS will be able to run together as “Alliance 2020” in the European elections after the High Court of Cassation and Justice (Romania’s Supreme Court) has accepted the claim of the two parties against the Central Electoral Bureau’s decision that banned the alliance to run in the European ballot in May 2019. The High Court’s ruling, which is final, is practically invalidating the BEC’s decision. “They tried to stop us and we won. It is the first victory in this campaign. And it is not only our victory, of the Alliance, but it is the victory of all those who want to live in a civilized country, where the law is the same for all. We get back to the street now, to raise signatures,” said USR Chairman Dan Barna. “Justice was served. We’ll run together for the elections and we’ll win, for the voters need a real alternative. We saw together what bureaucracy and an inoperative Romania mean. Our mission is to change this state of affairs for the Romanians are asking for it. We’ll fight and we will be fully committed. We thank all those who believe in democracy and in a European

Romania,” said in his turn PLUS Chairman Dacian Cioloș. The Central Electoral Bureau (BEC) decided few days ago to reject the Alliance 2020 USR-PLUS’s bid to run together for the EP elections in May this year, and USR-PLUS have filed an appeal to the Supreme Court. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political struggle between the President Klaus Iohannis and Government has been transformed into an “open battle” leading the political functionality in a deadlock. However, it seems that both parts reached a compromise giving an end to the almost 4 month political crisis after Iohannis refusal to decree two Ministers proposed by the Government. Taking a look in the current political situation in Romania, which affects also the EU (due to Romania’s Presidency) it is assessed as a Government’s “wise” strategic retreat in order to overcome the political deadlock. Romania took over the Presidency of the Council of EU facing criticism and non-confidence by the EU member states’ high officials. The state looks divided in major institutional issues such as national defense, justice, and security. In this context, one should add the direct European Parliament warning for activating article 7 of the EU Treaty (suspending certain rights of an EU member state when a country is considered at risk of breaching the EU’s core values). Iohannis strongly opposes in Government’s plans to intervene in judicial system while there are specific signs that the Government works towards controlling state’s justice. The state faces political abnormality in many levels which at the moment could be resolved only by early parliamentary elections. Romania according to NATO strategic and

operational planning has become an advanced base close to Russia. Its strategic importance and role has been upgraded and high level NATO exercises take place in its territory. Consequently, Russia reacts mainly against the NATO military base in Deveselu where anti-missile defense systems have been deployed.



SERBIA: March 8th, the session of the Serbian Council for National Security, convened by President Aleksandar Vucic, was held in Belgrade. The meeting was attended by Prime Minister Ana Brnabic, Security Agency BIA Chief Bratislav Gasic, First Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic, Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic, Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin, Army Chief Lieutenant General Milan Mojsilovic, Director of the Police Vladimir Rebic, and other officials. The President of an association gathering families of those killed or kidnapped in Kosovo and Metohija, Simo Spasic, placed a banner this morning near the Presidency, where the meeting was held, urging the Serbian authorities to abandon the dialogue *“with KLA ('Kosovo Liberation Army') leaders.”* The Kosovo Assembly previously adopted its platform for negotiations with Belgrade, with Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj's message that *“the borders of Kosovo are untouchable”* meaning, *“preserving Kosovo as it was on February 17th, 2008 (the date of unilateral declaration of independence made by ethnic Albanians, that Serbia rejects as a violation of its territorial integrity - ed.)”* For Belgrade, this document, from the moment when its first version surfaced, was a sign that Pristina does not actually want a compromise, nor dialogue, or any kind of agreement - except simply Serbia's recognition, and within the

borders that it has set for itself, within the territory of Serbia. Vucic recently spoke at the Munich Security Forum to say that what the Kosovo Albanians delivered to the Assembly as a platform for continuing the dialogue with Belgrade was in fact a platform against dialogue. The previous session of the Serbian Council for National Security was held at the end of November last year, when Pristina increased by 100% taxes on goods from central Serbia. Kosovo and Metohija Office Director Marko Djuric said on Thursday that Pristina's adoption of a platform for the dialogue with Serbia in the Kosovo Assembly was *“a clear message to the entire world that this is the end of the dialogue. Serbia will know how to protect its national and state interests,”* Djuric said. (www.b92.net)

- March 8th, The KFS (Kosovo Security Force) Commander Lieutenant General Rahman Rama submitted a report to a relevant Parliamentary Committee and said that the focus of the KSF was on *“including members of minority communities, but under pressure from Belgrade 70 people have left the KSF, and there are 37 left.”* Currently, the KSF has 10% of members of minority communities and 8% women. *“Under the pressure and blackmail that came from Serbia, more than 70 members left the KSF and now we have 37,”* Rama claims, Albanian daily Lajmi is reporting. He added that the KSF *“has permanent cooperation with the United States, and have had 120 joint activities.”* *“Especially with the U.S, we have achieved professional development and equipment. We had a program with over 120 joint activities with the United States, and now we have built a bilateral plan with all countries,”* he said, adding that *“everything that is done is in accordance with NATO standards.”* (www.b92.net)

- March 8th, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic told the Prva TV Serbia has been “driven into the corner, and is in a difficult position.” He commented on the moves from Prishtina, and he spoke about a meeting with the U.S State Department official David Hale. “I said, people, you cannot say we will not fulfill anything from the Brussels agreement, there is no Community of Serb Municipalities, and then you, I do not know who you are to say, we are introducing a 100% tax, we undermine the CEFTA agreement, we destroy the Stabilization and Association Agreement... Then they say they may return (to previous position) and be heroes, and you have to fulfill something new. I said, you return that, then we will see how much damage you have done to us and how you will answer for it,” Vucic said. As stated, instead, Pristina has passed the “worst platform,” which actually is a platform against dialogue. “No problem, we have been driven into the corner, our position is difficult. We have always been for dialogue, we did not undertake reciprocal measures, but we do not have place else to go. We are here where we are, we will protect and guard our country. Serbia's position will be responsible and firm. I've never made any decision overnight, no matter how much I may look to you to be emotional or with a temper. In my case, though it seems so, this is not the case. It is not a problem, we will wait 10 - 15 days, but our decisions will be in line with the interests of Serbia,” Vucic said. (www.b92.net)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Serbia has entered in a period of fragile political stability due to citizens' reactions against governmental practices regarding human rights, media freedom, and elections transparency. People protest in the streets, while opposition

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

Serbian repayment will be Kosovo recognition. By expressing neutrality and maintaining equal distance from the U.S.A and Russia it moves in an environment of fragile balance.



SLOVENIA: March 4th, the President Borut Pahor paid a two day official visit to Albania where his counterpart Ilir Meta. Pahor declared Slovenia's commitment to support Albania's effort to join the EU. Both Presidents confirmed also the mutual interest of both countries to expand political and business cooperation. The two men agreed that bilateral political cooperation is good and that bilateral relations are friendly without open issues, Pahor's office said in a press release. The Slovenian President said that there are numerous opportunities for further cooperation especially in business where it has been relatively modest so far. Albania is the 58th Slovenian trade partner in 2017 with the countries exchanging 53.1 million euro in goods. Pahor stressed that the EU enlargement to the western Balkans process should be seen through its geopolitical aspect and not through its technical one. The two Presidents also discussed Albania's preparations for hosting a meeting of the Brdo-Brijuni summit on May 8th-9th, 2019. Both men agreed that regional cooperation initiative has resulted in numerous positive shifts. Pahor met also with the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, the main opposition leader Lulzim Basha, the Speaker of the Parliament Gramoz Ruci, and the Mayor of Tirana Erion Veliaj. (www.sta.si)

- March 6th, the Government managed to get the revised budget for 2019 through the Parliament by the support of the opposition Left (Levica). However, the vote does not end uncertainty over this year's spending, as the Upper Chamber has

indicated a veto is possible and the Left may make its support conditional in a re-vote of additional spending. The fiscal adjustments increase funding for almost all Ministries despite warnings from the center-right opposition and the Fiscal Council that such spending risk setting up Slovenia for trouble in a period that economic growth has started to cool down. The Government has rejected criticism by the argument that spending blueprint is treading a middle path between exclusive focus on welfare and excessive austerity. It insists that the budget is sustainable. The budget was rejected by the opposition Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska Demokratska Stranka - SDS) and New Slovenia – Christian Democrats (Nova Slovenija – Krščanski demokrati - NSi). The former argued that the Government ignored warnings of the Fiscal Council, while the latter reacted by the rejection of the proposed amendments filed by SDS, NSi, and the Slovenian National Party (Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka - SNS). Nevertheless, SNS supported the budget with its leader Zmago Jelenc claiming that “*this was only to see how the European Commission will react.*” To secure acceptance of the budget, the Government reached an agreement with the Left party that entails additional spending potentially running into several hundred million euro on policies including precarious work forms, housing, corporate tax, wages, pensions, and healthcare. The National Council recently denied support to the budget with its members voicing complaints about Governments plans in the area of local Government and regional development. Any vetoed legislation would require confirmation by 46 MPs in the 90 seats National Assembly. The ruling coalition currently enjoys support of 43 MPs. The Prime Minister, Marjan Sarec said that he is not surprised by the threat of veto. “*I only*

hope to hear some solid arguments, because the ones I heard today are very shaky considering the wishes of those presenting them and are reminiscent of horse-trading,” Sarec said. (www.sta.si)

- March 8th, Slovenia has received from the European Commission official notices for failing to fully transpose anti-money laundering and terrorist financing rules and for not complying with harmonized product rules. Moreover, the country was also issued a reasoned opinion for failing to implement in full rules on the recognition of professional qualifications. Apart from Slovenia, infringement proceedings over money laundering rules were also launched against the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, and the UK. Meanwhile, reasoned opinions were issued on Thursday to Austria and the Netherlands over the same issue. While official notices mark the launch of infringement procedures, reasoned opinions are the second step that follows if member states fail to provide a satisfactory response within two months. Unless sufficient action is taken within two months after that, the European Commission may take a member state to the EU Court of Justice. While all of the member states informed the Commission that they transposed the money laundering and terrorism rules in full, the Commission determined that the legislation adopted did not cover all provisions, the Commission said in a press release. Slovenia's Finance Ministry responded by reiterating the position that Slovenia transposed the rules in full. However, the Ministry will address the issues pointed out by the Commission in legislative changes that are already in the works. *“The shortcomings... do not in any way limit the implementation of relevant measures in Slovenia*

or elsewhere in the EU,” the Ministry said. The other two warnings from the Commission both apply to the single market regulation. The Commission issued reasoned opinions to Slovenia and 23 other member states to ensure the full implementation of EU rules on the recognition of professional qualifications. Moreover, Slovenia is also one of 15 member states to face infringement proceeding for not complying with EU harmonized product rules by failing to transpose harmonized rules for cableway installations, personal protective equipment and appliances burning gaseous fuels. Member states had to set up penalty systems to deter businesses from violating the harmonized rules, the Commission noted. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. Adoption and implementation of the 2019 budget has tested (and still is testing) governmental stability but the minority Government of Marjan Sarec enjoys support of certain opposition parties (the Left, SNS) allowing it to pass its bills in the Parliament. Sarec has been proved of being flexible in Slovenia's politics achieving to balance adequately between different political trends. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc) which may further test governmental cohesion. Border dispute with Croatia is still ongoing and former Government of Miro Cerar filed a lawsuit against Croatia over its refusal to implement the border arbitration. Although the Prime Minister Marjan Sarec announced that his Government will follow the same policy in the issue, he showed up with an attitude of compromise by claiming that his country will not stop Croatia's accession in the

Schengen zone. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The med-term 2018 – 2023 defense program it could improve situation, but under current political situation it is doubtful if it will be implemented to the end.



TURKEY: March 5th, Donald

Trump set to open a new front in trade wars with a plan to end preferential trade treatment for India and Turkey. At Trump's direction, the US intends to scrap the preferential trade status granted to India and Turkey, the US Trade Chief's Office has said. Washington *"intends to terminate India's and Turkey's designations as beneficiary developing countries under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program because they no longer comply with the statutory eligibility criteria,"* the Office of the US Trade Representative said in a statement. India has failed to provide assurances that it would allow required market access, while Turkey is *"sufficiently economically developed"* that it no longer qualifies, the statement said. Under the GSP program, *"certain products"* can enter the US duty-free if countries meet eligibility criteria including *"providing the US with equitable and reasonable market access."* It said Turkey, after being designated a GSP beneficiary in 1975, has meanwhile demonstrated a *"higher level of economic development,"* meaning that it can be *"graduated"* from the program. The changes cannot take effect for at least 60 days following the notification of the US Congress as well as the countries affected - a process Trump began on Monday with letters to the speaker of the House of Representatives and the president of the Senate. In his letter on Turkey, Trump said the country's economy *"has grown and diversified,"*

and noted that Istanbul has already *"graduated from other developed countries' GSP programs."* (www.aljazeera.com)

- March 6th, Turkey and Iran are discussing mounting a cross-border operation targeting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the near future, Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said. Soylu told the Anadolu Agency's (AA) Editors Desk that the two countries will conduct an operation, but did not give further details. *"In recent days, some Iranian officials came to Turkey to discuss regional issues. We mulled over the steps to be taken in relation to the joint operation,"* Soylu said. Pointing out that Iran does not have any discomfort over the border security walls built due to the PKK threat in Iraq, Soylu stressed the importance of keeping open communication channels between the intelligence agencies of Ankara and Tehran on the issue. He also condemned the PKK for recruiting child soldiers as young as 14-years-old. Soylu said there are about 700 militants in the country, noting that Turkey has taken intensive measures to prevent the entry of PKK rebels. *"Only 12 [PKK members] entered Turkey since January,"* he added. PKK and its Iranian affiliate, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) use the Qandil mountains, located roughly 40 kilometers southeast of the Turkish border in Iraq's Irbil province, as headquarters for PKK. Although the PKK was headquartered in Syria until 1998, currently, the organization is controlled from its headquarters in northern Iraq's Qandil Mountains. The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) serves as an umbrella group for groups functioning under the names of the PKK in Turkey, the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PÇDK) in Iraq, the PJAK in Iran and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria and its armed wing the People's

Protection Units (YPG), which currently control some one-third of the Syrian territory and dominate the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) group. (www.dailysabah.com, www.aa.com.tr)

- March 9th, Turkey launched joint military patrols with Russia in Idlib in northwestern Syria to maintain stability in the region and prevent the activities of radical groups. *“We see joint patrols carried out by Turkey and Russia in Syria's Idlib as an important step for the continuation of the cease-fire and ensuring stability,”* Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said Friday at Anadolu Agency's Editor's Desk meeting. He also announced the lifting of all airspace restrictions in Idlib and Afrin as of Friday. The patrols will stretch from northern Idlib city to southern Aleppo. The route of the patrol includes six points; Kafr Lusin and Al-Dana, districts north of Idlib; Atarib town west of Aleppo city; and Qamhari, Qanater and Al-Eiss towns southwest of Aleppo city. Within the framework of the Astana agreement, Turkey currently holds 12 cease-fire observatory points in Idlib's de-escalation zone while Russia has 10 points. A cooperation platform launched in December 2016, by Turkey, Russia and Iran, laid down the grounds for their tripartite cooperation on a peace settlement in Syria known as the Astana process. Turkey and Russia also signed the Sochi agreement in September of last year to decrease tensions and avoid new conflicts in Idlib province. While the existence of the former al-Qaida affiliated terrorist group, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib, currently remain a vexing problem, Ankara has been pushing intense efforts for dissolving or demilitarization the HTS. On the other hand, Bashar Assad regime's frequent attacks on the de-escalation zones in Idlib remain

another factor undermining the cease-fire efforts. Responding to a question on claims of Turkey's direct communication with the Syrian regime, Akar said such contacts are out of the question, adding that Turkey has had talks with Russia, and occasionally with Iran, when needed. In February, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Turkey and the Assad regime have only been conducting low profile contacts through their intelligence agencies. Stressing that Turkey has never had any problems with the Kurdish population or other ethnicities in Syria, Akar emphasized that the Turkish military only strikes at *“terrorist nests in northern Syria to eliminate the terrorists of the PKK-affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG).”* Turkish officials have been signaling an expansion of Ankara's military campaign into the much larger YPG territory east of the Euphrates if the threat continues. High-level officials in Ankara have also been discussing plans to establish a safe zone in northern Syria free from YPG militants to ensure national security. Akar added that more than 300,000 Syrians returned to their homeland after Turkey's two cross-border military operations in northern Syria, emphasizing Turkey is the only state fighting DAESH on the ground and eliminating radical terrorists. He added that the existence of the YPG in Syria hinders the resettlement process of the refugees. *“The YPG's persecutions have been highlighted in United Nation reports. We are objecting the presence of the YPG in the region, which has no difference from the PKK, and pose a threat to security in Manbij,”* he said. (www.dailysabah.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Turkey faces several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs and

journalists are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Turkish – U.S relations have strongly been harmed forcing Ankara to approach new allies such as Russia. Although Turkey re-examines its relations with the EU in an effort to avoid international and regional isolation, the EU sends messages of terminating the EU – Turkey accession talks. Turkish Armed Forces have been engaged in military operations against Kurds and PKK in Northern Iraq and against YPG Kurds in Syria as well. Turkey declares its readiness to intervene militarily in Syria, eastern of Euphrates river but the U.S does not give the “green light” aiming at protecting Syrian Kurds and YPG. In this context, dialogue between Turkey and the U.S is ongoing aiming at reaching a common point of understanding. Turkey is waiting for the “green light” for establishing a safe zone in Syria but it is doubtful if it will ever get it. However, Turkey strengthening its cooperation with Russia and Iran announced the beginning of joint military patrols with Russia in Syrian Idlib, while it plans together with Iran a joint military operation against PKK in North Iraq. Moreover, Turkish officials do not hesitate to express publically that Turkish Armed Forces seeking a new military operation against Syrian Kurds located eastern of Euphrates river aiming at eliminating the Kurdish danger. Turkey has been developed into a “regional power” engaged actively in regional conflicts seeking to expand its influence and secure its interests. In this context, Turkey is conducting military operations in the territory of two other countries, it threatens to start a new operation in Syria, maintains a significant military force in North Cyprus, and threatens a NATO ally – Greece – with an armed conflict.


Apart from the use or the threat of use of direct armed violence Turkey participates actively in diplomatic processes in the region (Syria negotiations, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Cyprus question, Qatar crisis etc). The state demonstrates decisively its leading role in the wider region of the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and East Mediterranean implementing its doctrine for a diligent capability development effort to be able to fight two multi-front, inter-state armed conflicts while being able to simultaneously carry on large-scale counterterrorism operations at home and beyond borders. Conduct of a huge aeronautical drill in the Black, Aegean and Mediterranean Sea is strong demonstration of power which shows the state’s commitment in defending its interests wherever it is necessary. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Regarding Turkish interests in East Mediterranean Sea it seems that they are reaching a critical point since Cypriots announced last week the discovery of a significant natural gas field in their Exclusive Economic Zone via the US energy giant ExxonMobi, while Cyprus, Egypt Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority have established an energy coalition promoting their interests and isolating Turkey. Turkey has proved so far its decisiveness in protecting its interests and it assessed that it will not give up its role in the “energy game” in Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Turkey is ready to start oil and gas drills within the Cypriot EEZ escalating tension which could not exclude an accidental or pre-planned “hot incident”.


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NOTE

 Stable situation. No security risk

 Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored

 Major concerns over stability and security. significant security risk in specific regions

 Imminent major incidents regarding stability and security. High security risk

 Evolving or ongoing crisis or violent/armed conflict