



**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.

### **“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE**

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

Copyright © 2019

“HERMES” Institute for Foreign Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy

All rights reserved





**ALBANIA:** February 26<sup>th</sup>, the Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) and Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim - LSI) held a protest in front of the Parliament. Led by the respective leaders, Lulzim Basha and Monika Kryemadhi, protesters burned tires and physically attacked two MPs of the majority who entered the Parliament after the session had begun. In the meanwhile, the ruling majority continued the Parliamentary session. The crowd clashed several times with the Police which threw tear gas to disperse them. ([www.top-channel.tv](http://www.top-channel.tv))

- February 28<sup>th</sup>, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) said in Tirana that they support opening of EU membership negotiations later this year and praised reforms to the judiciary, while sharply criticizing opposition MPs for relinquishing their mandates in Parliament. Knut Fleckenstein, the German rapporteur for Albania, said quitting Parliament was wrong. After meeting opposition leaders, he said *“MEPs stressed unanimously that leaving Parliament is a mistake. We call on the opposition to resume their mandates and ensure a constructive and democratic functioning of Albania’s Parliament.”* Lulzim Basha, head of the main opposition Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD), claimed that their opinion was the result of *“disinformation”* distributed by Socialist Prime Minister Edi Rama all over the world. Petrit Vasili, from the Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim - LSI), called the MEPs’ stance *“an unclear vision.”* *“The rule of law has been destroyed by corruption and this is known by all citizens,”* he said in a statement published shortly after the meeting. *“It is strange that Euro-*

*parliamentarians are not seeing it,”* he added. The Government was delighted by the MEPs words. The Government Spokesperson Elisa Spiropali said *“The Parliament and Government are legitimate and properly elected. Electoral problems do not question their legitimacy. Intercepted conversations should be decided by Courts.”* She was referring to a joint investigation by Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Albania (BIRN) and Voice of America into collusion between organized crime networks and various officials of Rama’s governing Socialist Party of Albania (Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë – PS) in the last parliamentary elections. Opposition MPs relinquished their mandates last week and started a round of street protests, two of which ended in violence. Opposition claims PS majority in Parliament is the result of collusion between the Government and organized crime. It claims electoral fraud is not being properly investigated by Prosecutors. A decision on opening negotiations on Albania’s membership is expected to be made in mid-June 2019 by the European Council. The heads of member states will also decide on whether to open negotiations with North Macedonia. ([www.balkaninsight.com](http://www.balkaninsight.com))



Knut Fleckenstein, German MEP  
(Photo source: [www.knut-fleckenstein.eu](http://www.knut-fleckenstein.eu))

- March 1<sup>st</sup>, Ylli Shehu, Aurora Mara, Enver Roshi, and Edmond Rrushu from the Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim - LSI) are ready to replace their resigned colleagues. The number of undecided MPs is 10, most from the LSI. However, there are more candidates from other parties who are ready to take the mandate replacing the resigned MPs. One of them is Kujtim Gjuzi, leader of the Conservatory Party, who is listed 19th with the Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) in Durres. *“I will not renounce my mandate because it does not belong to me, but to the Conservatory Party. Right now, I am one of the top leaders of the new opposition group,”* Gjuzi said. Basha’s ally said that there are other MPs from PD who are ready to sit in Parliament. *“Sazan Guri and many others are ready. The number could go to 33. The new opposition is just born. It is called National Alliance for Justice. There are 11 political parties involved, which are introduced to the international factor in Tirana through an official document,”* he said. (www.top-channel.tv)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT** ■ :

*Albania has entered in a period of political turmoil and fragile political stability not only because opposition organizes huge massive 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. The Government is accused of having links with organized crime and current situation raises questions over the power of “Albanian mafia” in the country and its influence in state’s politics. Undoubtedly, corruption and organized crime remains the most significant state’s problem undermining its strategic goal of opening accession negotiations with the EU. The EU closely monitors progress of reforms especially in justice sector. Latest European Parliament assessment on Albania accession negotiations is a rather positive sign underlining concerns over specific issues such as corruption, justice reforms, and implementation of rule of law. The final decision for opening Albania’s accession negotiations in June 2019 is up to the EU Heads of Governments. One should underline that unofficial concerns have already been raised regarding this date. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a “mother nation.” It is estimated that Albania will fully comply with the EU and U.S “line” for territorial exchanges or border changes between Serbia and Kosovo if it is necessary for a mutual accepted solution. Albania maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and*

*F.Y.R.O.M. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on promoting Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access. Possible border changes may engage Albania in dangerous situations taking into consideration that it has the role of “protector” of Albanians in the region.*



## **BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:**

February 27<sup>th</sup>, the solution for Kosovo will reflect on Bosnia's Serb-dominated entity Republika Srpska (RS), according to Bosnia's Serb leader Milorad Dodik, who said RS could refer to the same right on secession if Kosovo is allowed to do so. *“If someone's right to do so is accepted, we believe we could refer to that and we will refer to that right,”* Dodik told Serbia's public broadcaster RTS. Bosnia consists of two semi-autonomous regions, Republika Srpska where the Serbs are the majority and the Federation (FBiH), shared by the Bosniaks and the Croats. The three ethnic groups are entitled to equal rights in terms of the power-sharing at the state level, where they also represent the entities they come from. Milorad Dodik is the leader of the strongest Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrataor - SNSD) party in Republika Srpska, having acted as its Prime Minister and President in the previous terms. In the 2018 October election, he ran for the state's tripartite Presidency and won with a significant majority. Speaking for Serbian media, Dodik said that the moment Kosovo declared its independence (in 2008), the RS entity parliament had decided that once Kosovo is admitted to the United Nations this would mean the RS has right to secede. According to him, Bosnian Croats will not miss an opportunity to secede either, while the Bosniaks will understand this is the best option

for them too. The authorities and opposition in the Serb-majority entity will also consider independence if the Republika Srpska's name is challenged before the Constitutional Court, he said. The Bosniak's strongest Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA) announced this initiative last month, arguing that the Republika Srpska's name discriminates other ethnic groups living on its territory. This sparked fierce reactions among the Serb leadership who said the initiative was anti-constitutional. *“We will call a referendum and secede from Bosnia,”* Dodik was quoted as saying. He added that the RS would have the support of at least ten countries in that. ([www.ba.n1info.com](http://www.ba.n1info.com))

- February 28<sup>th</sup>, investigators from Bosnia's state investigation agency SIPA, have filed nine charges of electoral fraud concerning the so-called *“fictitious”* voting in the 2018 elections in the District of Brcko. The charges come after SIPA conducted three related investigations into this offence, which it has submitted to the State Prosecution. *“Appointed by the Election Commission of the Brcko District, they conducted so-called ‘fictitious’ voting, meaning they signed [votes] on behalf of voters who were on the voter lists but did not use their active voting rights,”* the crime report notes. In this way, by voting for somebody else, the nine ultimately falsified the results of the October 2018 elections at polling stations for which they were responsible, the report said. Aleksandra Pandurevic, a former Deputy in the House of Representatives of Bosnia's state Parliament and a member of the board of the opposition Serb Democratic Party (Srpska Demokratska Stranka - SDS), in Bosnia's Serb-dominated entity, Republika Srpska, said her party had reported the irregularities in the elections in Brcko. Bosnia is

divided into two autonomous entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, RS. The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrataor - SNSD) holds power in the RS. The District of Brcko, however, is a small autonomous district whose territory is part of both entities. *“In Brcko, the SNSD was working on this [fraud] and the SDS reported the election irregularities,”* Pandurevic maintained. According to the investigation, one witness, named only as T. S, confirmed that his daughter voted on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018, despite living in the US for two years and not coming to Bosnia for that whole period. The 2018 elections, the eighth election in Bosnia since the 1992-5 war ended, was marked by various allegations of fraud and manipulation of the identities of deceased people. Many of these dead voters remain in the ID system. Other questions concern the imbalance between the number of valid ID cards and the number of registered voters in and outside the country. While these and other allegations are made almost constantly in Bosnia, little has been done to ease concerns. Data on the website of Bosnia’s state court show only one person has been convicted under a first-instance verdict of election fraud, in the 2014 general elections. That verdict came in 2015. ([www.balkaninsight.com](http://www.balkaninsight.com))

- February 28<sup>th</sup>, the three main nationalist parties in Bosnia have taken the top three positions in the Upper House of the country’s Parliament that was formed nearly four months after elections. The House of Peoples is composed of 15 representatives, with five representing each of the three majority ‘constitutive’ ethnic groups - the Bosniaks (Muslim Bosnians), the Croats and the Serbs. The new Chairman of the Upper House is Bakir Izetbegovic, the leader of the strongest

Bosniak party, the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA). Dragan Covic, the leader of the strongest Croat party, the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine or HDZ BiH), is one of his Deputies while the other is Nikola Spiric, from the Serb Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrataor - SNSD). The vote was preceded by the voting on the Presidents of the national clubs for the three groups in the HoP. The President of the Bosniak club is Asim Sarajlic, SDA, while his deputy is Denis Becirovic, from the Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Socijaldemokratska Partija Bosne i Hercegovine - SDP BiH). Both President and Deputy of the Croat club are from the HDZ, Lidija Bradara and Barisa Colak, respectively. It is the same case with the Serb club, with both President Sredoje Novic and Deputy Dusanka Majkic being SNSD members. ([www.n1info.com](http://www.n1info.com))

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT  :

*Bosnia has not a Government since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018 general elections. It seems that the three main parties representing the three constituent entities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats); HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) are reaching an agreement to cooperate in forming a Government bypassing their different views on main issues. Bosnia’s accession process towards NATO is the main disputable issue; Bosnian Serbs insist that the country should remain neutral staying out of NATO while the two other members of the tripartite Presidency set commitment to NATO accession as a precondition*



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



**BULGARIA:** February 25<sup>th</sup>, President Rumen Radev announced that he vetoed the changes in the Electoral Code and returned the bill for a new discussion in the National Assembly, reports Darik. Apart from the changes in the preferences that put the party's will over voters, there are other problems in the adopted changes, Radev said. According to the Head of state, unforgivable acts related to the electoral process remain unacceptable. Thus the basic constitutional right of the Bulgarian citizens remains without judicial protection. President Rumen Radev called on the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya - BSP) opposition to return to Parliament to re-debate and vote on the Electoral Code. Prime Minister Boyko Borissov refused to comment on the President's criticism of the Electoral Code, saying he was not confused in the political decisions of the political leaders, and "when you repeatedly take the side of one party against another, you are becoming a political leader." (www.novinite.com)

- February 27<sup>th</sup>, at a regular meeting Bulgaria's Cabinet approved a report by the Defense Minister, Krasimir Karakachanov on a payment of up to 42 million euro for the renovation of the Air Force's Su-25 aircraft, the Government announced. In November 2018, the Government approved additional costs of up to 42 million euro in the Defense Ministry budget to conclude the Su-25 airworthiness restoration contract. The statement said that the project would restore the airworthiness of the Su-25s and the maintenance of defense capabilities while the acquisition of a new type of fighter aircraft was pending. The Sukhoi Su-25 made its first flight in 1975 and went into production in 1978. It was designed for Close Air Support (CAS) missions. More than



1,000 have been produced. The Bulgarian Air Force is said to have 12. Bulgaria is currently spending millions keeping its ageing Soviet-made military aircraft in service. The country's Government and Parliament have approved the conducting of negotiations with the US on the acquisition of F-16 fighter jets as part of a military modernization project to meet Bulgaria's commitments to NATO, of which it has been a member since 2004. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- March 1<sup>st</sup>, Bulgaria is a highly valued ally of NATO, it plays an important strategic role in the Black Sea, Kosovo and Afghanistan NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg told journalists at the Council of Ministers after meeting with Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. After the talks, there was an extended meeting between the two delegations, on which cooperation on security and defense and the stability of the Western Balkans and the region was discussed. *"You said that you are willing to count all defense spending,"* because that is how you get a full picture of what is being invested in this area, the NATO Secretary General said. Borisov gave a detailed account of the participation of Bulgarian military in NATO's trainings in recent years, as well as of the Alliance's trainings on Bulgarian territory. He said energy projects were not discussed today, and Stoltenberg's visit is at his invitation and planned many months ago before it is known that Dmitry Medvedev, the Prime Minister of Russia, arrives in Bulgaria on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Borisov voiced concern over the possibility of escalation in the arms race between NATO and Russia. *"Bulgaria is not the Trojan horse of Russia in NATO, we are one of the most disciplined and loyal members of the Alliance,"* the Prime Minister said. He added that *"Bulgaria is looking*

*for dialogue with Russia, but at the same time we have to be strong enough to be in good position for dialogue."* The Prime Minister reminded that he has always been against the military exercises in the Black Sea, because Bulgaria is one of the countries in the EU with developed tourism, which carries over 12% of the revenues. That is why it is not profitable for Bulgaria ships and boats to pass through the harbors near the tourists. That is why diplomacy must be used to avoid a new arms race due to the existence of many conflicts, Borisov said. Borisov and Stoltenberg spoke about Serbia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, and other conflict points where the Bulgarian military is present. Borisov thanked NATO's Secretary General for the visit and support reminding him that the Government has decided to modernize the Armed Forces with the new multipurpose planes and 150 armored vehicles, which we will strengthen operational capabilities of Bulgaria. (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 Borisov) highlighting his different political affiliation (Radev is backed by the opposition Socialists). Opposition BSP tries to push further Borisov and his Government by strengthening its rhetoric and having tabled three motions of no confidence so far. It decided last week 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 26<sup>th</sup>, 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. Although modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc) military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards. Security situation stable; no major threats.*



**CROATIA:** February 27<sup>th</sup>, the Vice-President of the European Commission tasked with the Euro and Social Dialogue, Valdis Dombrovskis, applauded Croatia for its progress in terms of structural reforms and exit from excessive macroeconomic imbalances. *“Although Croatia continues to have imbalances, they are not excessive. This is good news for Croatia, especially in the light of preparations for participating in the European exchange mechanism and in the end for membership in the Eurozone,”* said Dombrovskis at a news conference presenting the winter package for the European semester. In its regular annual report for Croatia, which is adopted within the framework

of the European semester for 2019, the European Commission confirmed Croatia’s progress in implementing structural reforms. Although Croatia after five years still has macroeconomic imbalances it has moved out of the category of excessive macroeconomic imbalances. ([www.glashrvatske.hr/hr](http://www.glashrvatske.hr/hr))

- February 27<sup>th</sup>, the Croatian Bureau of Statistics has released the first projections for GDP growth in the last quarter of 2018. At the same time the European Commission has released its winter package for the European semester. Analysts initially projected a growth of 2.6%, however it seems this is not the case. *“The Gross Domestic Product, in the fourth quarter last year, realistically increased by 2.3% in comparison to the same period 2017. This is the 18th continuous quarter in which the GDP has seen growth from the third quarter in 2014. When we compare data at the annual level with the European Union, we continue to see quicker growth than the average in the 28 EU member states. The main reason for this continues is the fact that the biggest European economies saw below average growth rates in the fourth quarter,”* said the Director of the Croatian Bureau of Statistics, Marko Kristof. Meanwhile, the European Commission has released its winter package for the European semester. The commission applauded Croatia for the budgetary surplus in 2017, the decrease in public debt and good fiscal policy. The highest risks are related to public, private and foreign debt which is still too high, a high percentage of so called bad loans and exposure to foreign currencies. The Commission also called upon the Government to implement reforms in a stronger manner. ([www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr](http://www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr))

- March 2<sup>nd</sup>, hundreds of Croatian journalists rallied in Zagreb against media censorship and what they call “systematic pressure on journalists.” The group, led by the Croatian Journalists' Association (HND), presented a list of eight demands to the Government urging for better protection of journalists. The issue came into focus after Croatia's public broadcaster, HRT, filed more than 30 lawsuits against several journalists, including their own. Hrvoje Zovko, the President of the HND, said that while Croatia is “a country governed by a parliamentary democracy,” the power and decision-making belongs, in fact, to the Government. He added that, unfortunately, “Parliament is too weak and the Government too powerful.” Zovko is adamant that the Government change its behavior towards journalists and the media adding that journalists merely want freedom to do their jobs. Meanwhile, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), the world's leading alliance of public service media, released a statement calling for a swift resolution to the dispute between HRT - a member of the EBU - and the HND. They noted that a strong public service media is essential to a healthy democracy and anything that deprives audiences of access to it is damaging to all of society. (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 assessed that Croatia's strategic goal is to amend “Dayton Peace Agreement” achieving to recognize Bosnian Croats as a third entity in the country. It is more than obvious that Croatia tries to establish a leading role in Western Balkans not*

*only as an EU and NATO member state but also as a rising “local” (Western Balkans) power. One should take into consideration that Croatia shows its military strength and capabilities quite often not only in international, but also in national level sending strong messages to neighboring countries. Apart from that, Croatia pays special attention in energy strategy and security announcing ambitious projects. Although the President is a member of the ruling party, it is estimated that there is some kind of political distance between the President and Government. However, the state enjoys political stability. 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. It is still a question how Croatia will react. 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:** February 28<sup>th</sup>, Cyprus and ExxonMobil announced a natural gas find estimated at between 5-8 trillion cubic feet (tcf) in an offshore field inside the island's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The discovery was made in the Glafcos-1 well in Block 10 of the EEZ. “Based on preliminary interpretation of the well

*data, the discovery could represent an in-place natural gas resource of approximately 5 trillion to 8 trillion cubic feet (142 billion to 227 billion cubic meters). Further analysis in the coming months will be required to better determine the resource potential,”* the company said in a statement. “These are encouraging results in a frontier exploration area,” said Steve Greenlee, President of ExxonMobil Exploration Company. “*The potential for this newly discovered resource to serve as an energy source for regional and global markets will be evaluated further.*” Glafcos was the second of a two-well drilling program in Block 10. The first well, Delphine-1, did not encounter commercial quantities of hydrocarbons, the company said. It is the second big find following Noble Energy’s discovery of 4.5 tcf in 2011 in the Aphrodite field in Block 12. Speaking at a press conference in Nicosia, Energy Minister Giorgos Lakkotrypis said Glafcos is the largest discovery so far in the EEZ and according to official data one of the greatest discoveries in the world in the past two years. “*The results,*” he added, “*demonstrate the potential of our EEZ because it is a high-quality reservoir.*” ExxonMobil’s Vice-President for Europe, Russia, Asia, the Pacific and the Middle East, Tristan Aspray said he is very encouraged by the discovery and added that in the coming months, there would be an appraisal drilling, in order to determine the full potential of the field. Exxon is operator in Block 10 and holds a 60% interest in the licensed acreage, with Qatar Petroleum International Upstream holding the rest. Aspray sounded upbeat on the block’s prospects, noting that one commercial discovery in two attempts is highly encouraging, considering the average success rate worldwide is one in four. Responding to questions, the Exxon executive hinted the company is eyeing further explorations offshore

Cyprus, adding that these would likely take place next year. Exxon is interested in “*other opportunities*” in Cyprus as well as the broader eastern Mediterranean, he added. The US energy giant has publicly stated its interest in building a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) plant on the island should enough quantities be discovered. Gas from reservoirs is piped onshore to an LNG facility where the gas is liquefied so that it can be re-exported via tanker. Asked if the Glafcos find puts the LNG option in play, Aspray said it is too early to tell as additional quantities would need to be discovered. The capacity of an LNG plant typically ranges from 10 to 15 tcf; the Glafcos reservoir falls well short of that. Aspray said his company is fully aware of political tensions in the region when they were bidding for Block 10. He noted that Block 10 does not in any case lie within a “*disputed*” area in the eastern Mediterranean. Regardless, Exxon would fulfill its program in Cyprus and meet all its contractual obligations. By comparison, Zohr, a supergiant gas field discovered by ENI in 2015 in adjacent Egyptian waters, holds an estimated 30 tcf of resources in place. Israel’s two largest discoveries – Leviathan and Tamar – hold 22 tcf and 10 tcf, respectively. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will be taking part in the next trilateral meeting between Cyprus, Greece, and Israel, Foreign Minister Nikos Christodoulides said. “*US interest in taking part in the trilateral summit between Cyprus, Greece, and Israel was conveyed to us some time ago and we were in constant contact to set a specific date,*” Christodoulides told the Cyprus News Agency. “*It so happens that the meeting in question with the USA represented at Foreign Minister level can take place on March 20th in Israel.*” One of the main issues to

be discussed is energy security, the minister added. The meeting comes in the wake of ExxonMobil's discovery of 5-8 trillion cubic feet in an offshore field inside the island's exclusive economic zone. Announcement of the find this week coincided with a largescale naval exercise by Turkey, which disputes Cyprus' right to explore for hydrocarbons and has repeatedly disrupted operations. Turkish warships stopped last year, a drillship belonging to ENI from approaching an offshore block. Turkey's claims on the island's EEZ partly overlap with Cyprus' blocks 1, 4, 6 and 7. Ankara also supports the breakaway Turkish Cypriot north's claims on blocks 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 12 and 13, including within few kilometers from the Aphrodite gas field in block 12. Turkey meanwhile, has been carrying its own drilling in the region. In October, Ankara sent its first-ever drillship Fatih to explore off the coast of Turkey as a counter-measure to planned drilling by Cyprus, which it has threatened to disrupt foreign energy companies drilling in the island's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Christodoulides said consultations were also at an advanced stage for a meeting between Cyprus, Greece, Egypt and France. The four countries were currently finalizing the date and the agenda of the meeting. Meetings have also been scheduled with Lebanon, at Foreign Ministry level, with Jordan, Heads of state, and Armenia, Foreign Ministers. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 3<sup>rd</sup>, Defense Minister, Savvas Angelides, said that France is an ally of Cyprus and steps are being taken, on a constant basis, with a view to upgrade the two countries' military relations. Invited to comment on information published in daily "Politis" and weekly "Kathimerini" newspapers, saying that defense cooperation between Cyprus and France is being upgraded, a

dockyard in the naval base at Mari is under construction, Andreas Papandreou air force base in Pahos is modernized, while Nicosia and Paris will soon sign an important defense agreement, the Minister said that "*France is our ally and in this framework we are constantly acting with a view to upgrade our relations, either this concerns [the naval base in] Mari, the air force base or anything else.*" "*This has to do clearly with the upgrading of our military relations with France,*" he added. Replying to a remark by a journalist that Cyprus is becoming a regional power in the Eastern Mediterranean, Angelides said that "*if we work in a serious way I believe that we can achieve, through this kind of cooperation, what we have been continuously saying, that Cyprus has a role to play as regards security in our region.*" He noted that this concerns both the bilateral cooperation which Cyprus has with European countries, and the trilateral cooperation schemes in which the country participates, noting that tangible work is being done towards this direction. Commenting on a remark by a journalist that powerful countries have shown trust in Cyprus, the Defense Minister said that this is a result of Cyprus' reliability on these issues. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT** ■ :

*Cyprus works systematically in order to become a major part of the East Mediterranean energy hub. Its natural gas deposits affect not only its economy but also its security. The strategy of multilateral cooperation seems to be fruitful. At the moment, Cyprus is engaged in three different trilateral formations which also include strong features of strategic cooperation and alliance; Cyprus – Egypt – Greece, Cyprus – Israel –*

*Greece, and Cyprus – Jordan – Greece. The last two are highly improved due to the US engagement which expressed their interest by joining the latest summit. 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. 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 and strengthening its defense cooperation with France. 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, bicommunal decentralized federation"; an idea which is in principle accepted by the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and enjoys support from the U.S. However, there are a lot of disputed issues in which both parts should compromise; the most important is considered the decision-making process. Recent close approach between Cyprus and the US provoked Russia's strong reaction which foresees a possible isolation from its influence in the Island. It is not a secret that Russia enjoys or used to enjoy a privileged relationship with Cyprus due to the US distance regarding defense and foreign policy neutrality. It is a question how Cyprus will achieve to balance between the US and Russia interests in the region. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.*



**GREECE:** February 27<sup>th</sup>, US Ambassador to Athens Geoffrey Pyatt has hailed the launching of the Strategic Dialogue between the United States and Greece as capping a year of historic progress in relations between the two NATO allies, while emphasizing that the strengthening of bilateral ties enjoys cross-party support. "Deepening the US-Greece relationship has strong bipartisan support in the United States," Pyatt said during a late Tuesday event on Greece's geopolitical role and Greek-American relations that was hosted by the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). Speaking of the US-Greece Strategic Dialogue, which was launched by (then alternate) Foreign Minister Giorgos Katrougalos



and US Secretary Michael Pompeo, Pyatt said that the process “*elevated and institutionalized our relationship in a manner consistent with how many of the embassy’s long-time friends have viewed the US-Greece alliance.*” The US Ambassador stressed that there is “*strong appreciation*” in Washington for Greece’s role as a pillar of stability in the wider region, the country’s “*impressive contributions*” during the migration crisis, as well as the implementation of the so-called Prespes accord. “*In Washington, the stock of the US-Greece relationship today is higher than it has been for many years,*” Pyatt said, adding that it is reflected in the unprecedentedly large American delegation that will be at the Delphi Forum this weekend. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- February 28<sup>th</sup>, Greece needs to deliver on its reforms to send a positive signal to debt markets before a meeting of euro zone finance Ministers next month, European Union Commissioner Pierre Moscovici said. The European Commission said that Greece has made progress on reforms but not enough to get 750 million euro of profits from Greek bonds held by euro zone central banks. Athens now needs to complete the 16 reforms promised to its euro zone partners before a March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019 Eurogroup meeting. “*I hope and I expect that there will be significant results in the (next) Eurogroup which will send a crystal-clear message to markets that Greece is credible,*” Moscovici told Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras in Athens. Moscovici said open issues discussed with Tsipras included the sale of coal-fired plants, a plan to reduce bad loans at Greek banks and a replacement for a current law that protects borrowers from home foreclosures. “*Criteria must focus to those who really need it, not to strategic defaulters who could exploit it,*”

Moscovici told reporters. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- February 28<sup>th</sup>, Russia can depend on Greece as a reliable partner, conservative opposition leader Kyriakos Mitsotakis said Thursday, adding that a New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία – ND) Government would work toward strengthening bilateral ties between Athens and Moscow. Speaking after a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow, Mitsotakis stressed that “*Greece is an inalienable part of the western security and value system. This, however, does not mean that it cannot improve bilateral relations with Russia. We are developing a broad and deep network of international contacts for the benefit of the country and its national interests.*” Earlier on Thursday, the conservative chief also met with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and the Speaker of Russia’s lower house of Parliament Vyacheslav Volodin. (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. Although he tried to downgrade next week's Turkish aeronautical exercise "Blue Motherland" one should note that such an activity it is not "a usual armed forces training." Such training including real fires, virtual naval blockade of eastern Aegean Greek islands, and simulations of landing operations definitely it does not work towards confidence-building measures. On the contrary, it raises tension in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean Sea and it is assessed of high risk activity. 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 high risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident.*



**KOSOVO:** February 28<sup>th</sup>, US national security officials during their visit to Kosovo have threatened with withdrawal of military presence if leaders in Pristina keep resisting their appeal on suspension of tax on Serbian and Bosnia-Herzegovina goods. Currently the US have 650 troops stationed in Kosovo, mainly in the US military base of Bondsteel, which is the biggest US military base in Europe. Reliable sources told Gazeta Express that the US Principal Director for European Affairs at the National Security Council John Erath and Director for European Affairs at National Security Council William Berkley, during their meetings with Kosovo institutional leaders have threatened with withdrawal of US troops from Kosovo. *"They threatened that the US might withdraw its troops from Kosovo as they did in Syria,"* a source who attended the

meetings said. The two envoys of the US President, Donald Trump, held a record number of meetings on Wednesday and Thursday with all Kosovo political leaders, and in all meetings urged Pristina officials to suspend a 100% tax imposed on all Serbian and Bosnia-Herzegovina goods. The US national security officials met on Wednesday Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj and President Hashim Thaci. Haradinaj was seen leaving the meeting earlier and in a social media post he said that the tax will not be suspended. The President issued a press release confirming that the US senior officials asked suspension of tax and urged on Kosovo Government to revoke the decision which was introduced in November last year. The President Thaci has paid a surprise visit to the private house of the opposition leader, Isa Mustafa, to discuss the tax issue. Thaci met the US national security officials also on Thursday morning and in a press release after the meeting said that all members of the Negotiation Team in dialogue with Serbia have agreed *"to listen the US advice and suspend the tax."* But co-head of Negotiation Team and head of opposition party of Social Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Socialdemokrate e Kosovës - PSD), Shpend Ahmeti, refuted Thaci's claims saying that he disagrees with suspension of tax. *"The state delegation made no comments on suspension of tax. There are stances of political entities which are already known to public opinion. Furthermore, I have not made any comment during today's or other meetings. We just explained to to the US officials on why the tax was imposed,"* Ahmeti said. The other co-head of the state delegation and head of junior coalition partner, Fatmir Limaj, has softened his stance on the tax after meeting the US officials, who until now supported Haradinaj in keeping the tax despite the US and EU advice to do the opposite.

Limaj said that the US advice on resumption of dialogue with Serbia should be taken seriously. On Thursday the US delegation met some members of Parliament of the opposition parties, and ignored the representatives of the opposition party of Vetevendosje (Self-determination). (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 1<sup>st</sup>, Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci said in the Albanian capital Tirana that a land swap with Serbia would never occur. Thaci had proposed last year a "border correction" with Kosovo getting Serbia's southern Presevo Valley and giving nothing in exchange, without explaining how Serbia would accept that. But on Friday Thaci changed his mind and addressing at the Diaspora Summit which took place in Tirana, said that there will be no land swap or partition of Kosovo, Gazeta Express reports. Thaci said that partition and territory swap in Kosovo can only happen "over his dead body." Talking on correction of borders idea, Thaci said that he supports such an idea, namely unification of Presevo Valley with Kosovo, without giving nothing in return. "The correction of borders, Yes. Because no one can deny my idea on unification of the Presevo Valley with Kosovo, without giving away a millimetre of territory of the Republic of Kosovo," Thaci said. Kosovo President made the statements a day after meeting two US senior officials of Donald Trumps' administration. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 1<sup>st</sup>, US top foreign service official, David Hale, is set to visit Kosovo on March 8<sup>th</sup> -9<sup>th</sup>, 2019 when he will meet Kosovo state leaders, US Embassy to Pristina confirmed. Hale who is Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, the third-highest ranking position in the State Department, comes to Pristina at the time when

Kosovo-Serbia dialogue has stalled and the US are trying to revive the EU-brokered dialogue in Brussels. Hale comes to Kosovo days after two US national security officials visited Pristina urging Kosovo leaders to resume dialogue with Serbia. The US diplomat is expected to meet Kosovo state leaders. "He will meet with various state leaders," the US Embassy confirms. US President Donald Trump appointed David Hale as Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018. He served as US Envoy to Pakistan, Lebanon, and was special envoy on peace talks at the Middle East. (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 pristine 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:** February 26<sup>th</sup>, The Central Electoral Commission has received and processed all reports from the polling stations in the country. CEC data show that the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) got 31.15% of votes, the ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] bloc 26.84%, the Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) 23.62% and the Republican Socio-Political Movement Equality (Mișcare Social-Politică Republicană Ravnopravie - SOR) 8,32%. According to CEC data, 1,453,013 citizens of Moldova participated on the February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2019 polls, which represent 49.22% of the total number of voters on the electoral rolls. According to the provisions of the electoral legislation, the electoral bureaus have 48 hours from the closure of the polling stations to submit to the CEC the reports on the voting results. Subsequently, the CEC will make summing up within 5 days, and will submit the documents to the Constitutional Court that will confirm or deny the legality of elections. ([www.moldpres.md](http://www.moldpres.md))

- February 28<sup>th</sup>, “The US State Department has congratulated the citizens of Moldova, the Central Electoral Commission and the winners of the February 24<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections,” a press release said. However, the State Department mentioned that it shares OSCE concerns about allegations of bribery and abusive use of administrative resources, and urges the authorities of Moldova to investigate these claims. In addition, the authorities should seriously consider the recommendations of the OSCE, the Venice

Commission and other international organizations in organizing future elections. *“The US urges Moldovan leaders to act as quickly as possible to form a new Government that respects the will of Moldovan voters and serves the Moldovan people by fighting corruption, promoting judicial reforms and ensuring Moldova’s progress in its democratic trajectory. The future of Moldova belongs to its people,”* the press release said. On Wednesday evening at TVR’s show *“Today’s point,”* the Head of the Promo-LEX Observers Mission, Pavel Postica, said that the report presented by the OSCE Mission on February 24<sup>th</sup> is a tough one. According to him, it is for the first time that an international mission under the aegis of OSCE mentions directly in his preliminary reports credible information on vote buying, the use of administrative resources, and many others. *“The role of these reports is to offer both the public and the people concerned – especially the electoral bodies, the public authorities, in this case the Parliament and the Government – suggestions to take measures so that such negative situations will no longer be admitted,”* Pavel Postica stated. (www.moldova.org)

- March 1<sup>st</sup>, The Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) has submitted letters to representatives of the ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] bloc, to start negotiations on the creation of a new ruling coalition. The PDM deputy leader, Vladimir Cebotari, made statements to this effect at a news briefing. According to Cebotari, PDM informed, just after the closing of the polling stations, that it was ready to start the process of talks for the setting up of a new ruling coalition.

*“We do not want snap elections; this is our option. Snap polls mean a brake for the economic development; they would mean ceasing the projects underway, would lead Moldova to chaos,”* Vladimir Cebotari said. Cebotari noted that the formation he represented had submitted letters with urge to negotiations only to the representatives of the ACUM bloc, with other scenarios excluded for the moment. *“We rely on maturity and responsibility, as the society needs such a political class,”* Cebotari said. Also today, the PDM management made public the principles due to stay at the basis of the negotiations, as well as of the future governance. (www.moldpres.md)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT     :

*Parliamentary elections in Moldova were hiding surprises and ACUM achieved to get the 2nd place in Parliament. PDM is calling ACUM to cooperate forming a Government enjoying slight majority. ACUM’s main goal before the elections was to kick out PDM from power, so it is a good question if it will negotiate a ruling coalition. On the other hand, the US and EU it might push for such a 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:** February 26<sup>th</sup>, Montenegro’s full membership in NATO has made positive impact on the whole region, whereas Montenegro, representing the regional factor of stability, significantly contributes to stability at the global level as well, noted Anders Christian Hougard, Ambassador of Denmark to Montenegro, at the meeting with the General Director of the Defense Policy Directorate, Ivica Ivanovic. Hougard stressed that Montenegro represents a positive example in the region when it comes to the Euro-Atlantic integration, and also a reliable partner in the international community. Denmark will be fully committed to strengthening cooperation in the area of defense and providing support to Montenegro on its road to the European Union (EU), according to the Ambassador. Ivanovic pointed out the importance of cooperation between Montenegro and the Kingdom of Denmark in the area of defense, through successful implementation of projects related to information and communication infrastructure, with a focus on donations of funds and equipment, as well as on education. (www.cdm.me)

- February 27<sup>th</sup>, before the first regular session of the Montenegrin Assembly the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS) Deputy Andrija Nikolic called the opposition that is boycotting

Parliament to return to the regular commitments. He said that, before the first regular parliamentary session in Cetinje, they had the ambition to warn the voters in Montenegro and opposition counterparts who boycotted the Montenegrin assembly “*that the Parliament itself, and not street, is the institution where the responsibility of elected representatives of the people is being checked.*” “*So once again as authorized representatives of the majority political public in Montenegro, we have the obligation to repeat already repeated calls to return to their regular obligations. Please come and talk about all important and open issues,*” Nikolic said. Nikolic also pointed out that the ambition of a part of the opposition, who is trying to present itself as a pro-European alternative of power, is to seek political gain from protesting by waiting for the Democratic Front (Demokratski Front - DF) to break apart, and then taking over its electorate. Nikolic believes that boycott cannot be a solution to the problem, as it lives in “*the dialogue that takes place under the umbrella of the institutions.*” (www.rtcg.me)

- March 1<sup>st</sup>, Parliament of Montenegro, ratified the Protocol for the accession of North Macedonia to NATO. Forty four members voted; all of them in favor ratification of the Protocol. Before voting began, members of Democratic Front (Demokratski Front - DF) left the hall where the session took place. Head of diplomacy Srdjan Darmanovic said at the Parliament that MPs are about to make historic decision, because it is the first time that Montenegro approves accession of another state to NATO. He also said that North Macedonia’s accession to NATO is good news for the whole region. “*Support to [North] Macedonia is high on Montenegrin agendas. As a NATO member Montenegro is an*



*active promoter of further NATO expansion,” Darmanovic said. He added that this is the only way to achieve the Western Balkans progress. “The mission of the Alliance is more relevant than ever,” Darmanovic said. He believes that the entry of Northern Macedonia into NATO will have a positive impact on stability and security of that country, but also for the security of the region. (www.cdm.me, www.rtcg.me)*

## **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. 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:**

February 26<sup>th</sup>, Parliament’s failure to revoke the immunity of Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity’s (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) lawmaker and former parliamentary Speaker, Trajko Veljanovski has sparked disaccords within governing coalition. Veljanovski is suspected of being one of the organizers of the violent events had taken place in Parliament two years ago. For this, a court in Skopje demanded Parliament to lift his immunity. After MPs failed to remove Veljanovski’s immunity, parliamentary Speaker, Talat Xhaferi blamed ruling party’s lawmaker, Muhamet Zekiri for this. Xhaferi denied the fact that he may have intentionally delayed the process, stating that he does not protect anyone, even less those who break the law. On his part, Zekiri denied Xhaferi’s accusations and hinted at a possible collusion between the Speaker of Parliament and VMRO-DPMNE. Social Democratic Union of Macedonia’s (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) MP, Pavle Bogoevski has also suggested the possibility of a secret deal between Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (Demokratska Unija za Integracija - DUI) and VMRO-DPMNE as former coalition partners in order not to lift Veljanovski’s

immunity. SDSM's lawmakers are boycotting parliamentary proceedings until Xhaferi clarifies the issue regarding Veljanovski's immunity. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has also demanded explanations, but he has not signaled a possible crisis within the coalition. Alliance for Albanians, which is an opposition party, said that after MPs failed to revoke Veljanovski's immunity, the Government was defeated in its battle for the rule of law. The leader of this party, Ziadin Sela said that early elections are the only way out in this case. (www.balkaneu.com)

- March 1<sup>st</sup>, North Macedonia's ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) named the country's coordinator for NATO accession, Stevo Pendarovski, as its candidate for President in the upcoming election. The election, in April and May 2019, will mark Pendarovski's second run for the job, having lost in 2014 by the incumbent Gjorge Ivanov. With the backing of the country's strongest political party, plus its junior partner in Government, the ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (Demokratska Unija za Integracija - DUI), Pendarovski enters the race this time as favorite. The main opposition party, the conservative Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) has already chosen the University Professor Gordana Siljanovska, as its pick. The election marks the first test of the ruling coalition since passage of an historic deal with neighboring Greece under which North Macedonia changed its constitutional name from “Macedonia” and Athens agreed to

drop its veto on the country's NATO and European Union integration. Born in 1963, Pendarovski is a veteran political operator, having served as national security adviser to late President Boris Trajkovski from 2001 to 2004, then as Head of the State Electoral Commission for a year before becoming foreign policy adviser to former President Branko Crvenkovski. He holds degrees in law and political sciences. The first round of the election is scheduled for April 21<sup>st</sup> 2019 and if no candidate wins more than 50% of the vote, the two with the most votes will enter a run-off on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019. In the second round, turnout must be at least 40% for the result to be valid. (www.balkaninsight.com)



Presidential election candidate Stevo Pendarovski  
(Photo source: www.sobranie.mk)

- March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the BBC article on the existence of a “Macedonian minority” in Greece is a Greek “internal affair and subject of Greek debate,” Nikola Dimitrov said in an interview with the Greek TV SKAI. “I live and breathe the Prespa Agreement for months... I also sometimes see it in my dreams. That is how I see Article 4 (3) of the agreement, saying that we have agreed not to



*interfere with the other country's internal affairs. The BBC article and the issues it raised are something for the Greek internal political dialogue, maybe it is a matter of international obligations, it should be a subject of Greek debate,"* North Macedonia's Foreign Minister said. Asked whether *"North Macedonia feels that there is a North Macedonian minority" in Greece and is bound to protect it, Dimitrov insisted that "the two sides, Athens and Skopje, agreed that there would be no interventions on these issues."* (www.republica.mk)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT** :

*Ratification of NATO accession protocol by the member states proceeds rapidly. Zaeu 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:** February 25<sup>th</sup>, the political adviser of the US Embassy in Bucharest, David Schläfer told an interview to Digi24 that the USA are concerned about Russia's attempts to create division at the level of the Romanian society, through propaganda, to weaken the country and the relation with the USA and the European partners. *"Russia is one of the US concerns in Romania and in this part of the world. It is certainly a major concern for our embassy in Bucharest and we believe what we have seen over the course of the recent years is a very strategic attempt by Russia to influence both contemporary politics in eastern Europe, or in Europe as a whole, and not only to influence, but also to weaken countries in certain ways, in a longer term,"* the US diplomat said. He added that *"We are very concerned about Russia's attempts in Romania, to create a type of narrative through propaganda, through traditional platforms, like Sputnik or something like that, also by unattributed viral videos, viral postings on social media that are really designed to weaken Romania as a country, to create divisions within Romanian society and especially to create divisions at the perceptions between Romania and its partners, allies in the West, to weaken the transatlantic relationship in ties between Romania and USA, as well as to weaken Romania's affiliation with other members of the EU and maybe with NATO, and to do all these things in the foreign policy's interest of Moscow,*

*as opposed to the legitimate interest that Romania might have.*” The US diplomat warned that Russia may try to interfere in future electoral processes and approaching the Romanian society through a well coordinated propaganda campaign highlighting the old cultural and religious bonds between Russia and Romania. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- February 25<sup>th</sup>, the European Commission (EC) will use with great care all the procedures at its disposal to address the concerns related to the independence of justice in Romania and will respect its mandate to the letter, according to the Head of the EC Representation in Bucharest, Angela Cristea. *“There is the infringement procedure, there is also the ‘nuclear option’ [of activating Article 7 of the Treaty of the EU], but we hope we will not get there,”* she said in an interview for Radio France International (RFI) quoted by Hotnews.ro. Romania’s Government endorsed last week, by two emergency ordinances, controversial amendments to the justice laws, prompting protests of magistrates and civic organizations concerned with the rule of law. *“We are not convinced by the arguments that come from Romanian counterparts and who say that the independence of the judiciary will not be affected,”* Angela Cristea stressed. Regarding the newly established Special Section for the Investigation of Magistrates, Cristea said that the emergence of this structure, despite the recommendations of the Venice Commission, raises big questions and its first steps are far from easing the concerns. (www.romania-insider.com)

- February 28<sup>th</sup>, ten European Foreign Ministers, among them Romanian Head of diplomacy Teodor Melescanu, have signed a joint statement

condemning the illegal annexation of Crimea, The Guardian informs. *“Five years ago, Russia gravely challenged the idea of a peaceful and free Europe. With its aggression against Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia openly demonstrated its contempt for the principles of international law, and presented a serious threat to European security,”* the statement said. *“The illegal annexation of Crimea – an act condemned by the international community – has jeopardized the international rules-based system. The illegitimate ‘referendum’ in Crimea on 16 March 2014 was judged illegal and invalid by the international community. During these past five years that community has called, in the strongest terms, for Ukraine’s territorial integrity to be restored. Sanctions and the non-recognition policy pursued by the EU, Nato and G7 member states reflect our common efforts, and our refusal to accept that the illegal occupation of any territory of a sovereign country can become the norm in the 21st century,”* it further reads. The letter is signed by the Foreign Affairs Ministers of Latvia, Ukraine, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, Canada, UK, and Czech Republic. (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 southeastern wave of protests hit Romania too; citizens protested due to the Government's intervention to justice independence. 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:** February 26<sup>th</sup>, the Serbian Air Force has received four MiG-29 warplanes, this time from Belarus. A delegation of the Serbian Ministry of Defense, led by Minister Aleksandar Vulin, attended on Monday a takeover ceremony in Baranovichy, Belarus. Although these aircraft are now formally owned by Serbia, they will arrive here only after their overhaul that started in Belarus on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019.

Maintenance and overhaul work to be funded by Serbia, along with the replacement of some avionics and the installation of new navigation and communication equipment, will take up to 18 months to complete, with Belgrade expecting its first modified aircraft to be available before year-end. In preparation for the fighters' availability, five Serbian pilots have undergone conversion training in Russia, with another two having received instruction at its Batajnica air base. Having had almost no serviceability less than two years ago, Serbia's operational MiG-29 fleet currently totals 10 aircraft. This includes four airframes in its inventory at the time of NATO's Operation Allied Force against the nation in 1999, and six donated by Russia in October 2017. The last of these was made available in January 2019. "We can say that starting today, we have 14 MiG-29s in our fleet - a number we could only dream about in 2012 when (now) President Vucic became Defense Minister," Vulin said. He added that this new batch of warplanes came as a result of "personal relations between Vucic and Belarus President Lukashenko" and as part of the agreement on military-technical cooperation and assistance between the two countries. Vulin said that the 14 MiG-29s are at the 4+ generation level, "which means they are among the most modern aircrafts in the world." (www.b92.net)

- February 28<sup>th</sup>, our forces are disproportionately strong in relation to the need to prevent any possibility of anyone carrying out any attack or action against Serbia President Aleksandar Vucic said while touring the Jablanica District. "They are so much so superior and convincing in every sense, professionally and in numbers," he stressed, adding that there were "more than enough of them" on the administrative line (with Kosovo), that they could intervene "at any

*moment.*” Vucic was in the town of Lebane when he responded to journalists asking him “*how to preventing (Kosovo) Albanian incursions (into central Serbia), such as recently happened in Kursumljia area villages.*” He also said he thinks the reaction after that event was exaggerated. “*We are talking about thieves who went in to steal in empty houses. They knew the houses were empty, they went in to steal, and that's all,*” the President stressed. Vucic also said that “*a road should be built across the Radan Mountain, in order to increase the number of Serb population in the zone toward the administrative line, because there are almost only Albanians living there.*” “*As far as our forces are concerned, they are more than sufficiently represented to intervene at all times. They are disproportionately large in relation to the need. People should not worry,*” he underlined. He added that “*thievery is happening everywhere, and Serbs rob jewelry stores, houses of other Serbs.*” “*As far as the Albanian-Serb relationship is concerned, there is no need for concern,*” Vucic stressed. Vucic, reacting against threats from Pristina, said that “*Medvedja and Sijarinska Banja*” which he will visit during on Thursday, “*will remain Serbia.*” (www.b92.net)

- March 1<sup>st</sup>, representatives of the opposition have met with the European Parliament's rapporteur for Serbia, David McAllister. They said that the opposition was united in the protests dubbed, “*One in five million,*” and in demands concerning the freedom of the media, the rule of law and fair elections. The representatives of the Democratic Party of Serbia (Demokratska Stranka Srbije - DSS) and the Liberal Democratic Party (Liberalno Demokratska Partija - LDP) did not receive the invitation to attend the meeting, the movement DJB told Fonet agency. (www.b92.net)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

*Serbia has entered in a period of fragile political stability due to citizens' reactions against governmental practices regarding human rights, media freedom, and elections transparency. People protest in the streets, while opposition starts to take action. Vucic is thinking of snap elections, but he has to balance a lot of things before his final decision. It is assessed that he will try to avoid early elections but it is likely to be forced to conduct them. Serbia has followed so far a successful diplomatic strategy regarding Kosovo achieving to be appeared in the international community as a reasonable voice seeking a compromise resolution via dialogue. Serbia realizes that time runs in favor of it and knows that Kosovo will become more and more nervous as long as it cannot get Serbia's recognition. On the other hand Serbia strengthens its relations with Russia (and China) seeking stronger support regarding Kosovo case. Security situation is complex and uncertain since Serbia apart from political and diplomatic means has engaged its military and security forces. The Armed Forces are in high readiness alert but Vucic tried to de-escalate situation by stating that war is not a possible solution. However, none could predict Serbia's reaction in a possible accidental or pre-planned (provocation included) incident in Northern Kosovo against local Serbs. One should have in mind that top state officials have said in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. At the moment, Serbia looks like acting in accordance with the international law aiming at reducing tension in the region. In other words state's leadership is acting in a “reasonable” and “wise” way avoiding mistakes of the past which have isolated Serbia from the*

*international community. Of course, under these circumstances none could speak for restarting of Belgrade – Pristina dialogue. There are certain analysts who claim that such situation will inevitably lead in Kosovo partition with the north part going to Serbia. Some of them claim that this scenario has already agreed by Vucic and Thaci. Serbian repayment will be Kosovo recognition. By expressing neutrality and maintaining equal distance from the U.S.A and Russia it moves in an environment of fragile balance.*



**SLOVENIA:** February 26<sup>th</sup>, the Slovenia-Croatia border dispute is a bilateral issue, and the European Commission (EC) was “*crystal clear*” in its decision not to get involved in it, the Vice-President of the EC, Frans Timmermans, told Slovenia's state agency STA. Timmermans is the lead candidate of the Party of European Socialists (PES) to replace the current EC President, Jean-Claude Juncker, following the European elections in May 2019. The Dutch politician and diplomat said that the Slovenia-Croatia border row is a bilateral issue to be solved by the two EU member countries, and that the arbitration border ruling should be implemented by both parties. “*The Commission was crystal clear about that, and I cannot see why someone does not want to understand that,*” Timmermans was quoted as saying before his official visit to Ljubljana, scheduled for Thursday. He went on to say that the two parties involved in the case “*cannot absolve themselves from the responsibility for the matter*” by passing the problem to the EC. The Commission refused last year to join Slovenia's complaint which it had lodged against Croatia, accusing it of violating European laws by refusing to implement the 2017 arbitration ruling which defined the two countries'

land and sea border. Zagreb continues to refuse the arbitration ruling, insisting that the arbitration process had been compromised by Slovenia. Although Croatia had agreed to settle the dispute by international arbitration before it joined the EU in 2013, Zagreb walked out of the proceedings in 2015 following a scandal in which leaked tape recordings showed that Ljubljana officials had inappropriate contact with an arbitration Judge. Although the Judge was later replaced, Croatia refused to get back to the table. Zagreb officially rejects the 2017 ruling, and has repeatedly invited Ljubljana to negotiate the dispute bilaterally again. Ljubljana, in turn, rejects any more negotiations, considers the arbitration ruling final, and claims that by refusing to implement the border as defined by arbitration Croatia is violating EU law. ([www.n1info.com](http://www.n1info.com), [www.sta.si](http://www.sta.si))

- February 27<sup>th</sup>, a debate on the draft resolution on the new national security strategy was held in the National Council with the debaters pointing to certain dilemmas and proposing a more concrete definition of threats and risks. Presenting the document drafted by the Defense Ministry, State Secretary Klemen Groselj said that the 2010 national security strategy had to be updated so that Slovenia could successfully address modern security threats and risks. Groselj, who coordinated the drafting of the document, told in the upper Chamber of Parliament that these included hybrid and cyber threats, terrorism and violent extremism and illegal migration. The State Secretary noted that the new strategy re-defined the geo-political and geo-strategic position of Slovenia and defined how the country should respond to various threats. Tensions are increasing and the international environment is changing quickly and thoroughly, he said, adding that Slovenia faces “*new forms of threats and a*



*higher degree of uncertainty and unpredictability.*” The resolution proposes that the Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency (Slovenska Obveščevalno-Varnostna Agencija – SOVA) is given greater powers focused on early detection of violent extremism, which would then be prevented and investigated by the Police. Marjetka Krasek, the Deputy Director of SOVA, added that a body would be established at the same time to prevent abuses of these powers, based on the practice by numerous comparable agencies. Tomaz Cas, the Head of the Sever union of police veteran associations, said that Slovenia had somewhat forgotten about the concept of protection of constitutional order after independence. This affected the powers of SOVA and resulted in the agency and Police failing to detect in time that a para-military unit was being formed, he said in reference to the controversial Stajerska Guard. The debaters called for a realistic definition of the geo-political and geo-strategic position of Slovenia, and a more detailed definition of threats and risks, in particular hybrid threats and financial terrorism. It was also proposed that more attention should be paid in the document to the protection of drinking water sources. Asked why the resolution did not address the staff shortage in the Slovenian Armed Forces, Grosej said that a task force is working for attracting recruits for the defense system. Interior Ministry State Secretary Sandi Curin noted that the new resolution also provided starting points for the planned national program for the prevention of crime for 2019-2023 and the strategy for management of migration. (www.sta.si)

- February 27<sup>th</sup>, Slovenia has not seen yet progress in healthcare, long-term care, and the pension system the European Commission (EC)

said as part of its European semester winter package and country reports released on Wednesday. It also assessed the updated draft budget plan for 2019 remains at risk of non-compliance with the requirements of EU budget rules. The EC argues that Slovenia’s economy currently experiencing strong growth could become even more resistant to future shocks by strengthening investment and resolving challenges related to the ageing population. The report features mixed findings as regards progress in the implementation of recommendations issued in 2018. Progress is for instance acknowledged in privatization, alternative financing sources for fast growing companies, while limited progress was established in public procurement and the employment of older and low-skilled workers. Regarding budget plans for 2019 the EC said that the last draft remains at risk of non-compliance with the requirements of the preventive arm of the Stability and Growth Pact. The EC claimed that the draft could lead to a substantial deviation from the adjustment path towards reaching medium-term budgetary objectives. (www.sta.si)

## **COUNTRY ASSESSMENT**   :

*Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc) which may test governmental cohesion. Border dispute with Croatia is still ongoing and former Government of Miro Cerar filed a lawsuit against Croatia over its refusal to implement the border arbitration. Although the Prime Minister Marjan Sarec announced that his Government will follow the same policy in the issue, he showed up with an attitude of compromise by claiming that his country will not stop Croatia’s accession in the Schengen zone.*

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



**TURKEY:** February 27<sup>th</sup>, the Turkish Navy conducts massive drills called “*Mavi Vatan*” (“*Blue Homeland*”) between February 27<sup>th</sup> and March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019. For the first time in the republic’s history, Turkey’s Armed Forces test their operational capabilities in the Black, Aegean, and Mediterranean Sea at the same time. “*Blue Homeland*” is not merely an exercise codename; it is also a geopolitical concept that manifests Ankara’s political-military agenda in the coming decade. The exercise is centered on a trilateral basis. Firstly, the concept has a pronounced power projection aspect. Coupled with Turkey’s burgeoning forward-basing posture across the horn of Africa and the Gulf, Turkey aims at pursuing its national interests in an enhanced zone of influence. Secondly, this understanding adopts a more active role for the Turkish Navy in energy geopolitics competition, coercive efforts, and naval diplomacy. Thirdly and finally, the sustainability of the concept depends on maintaining the uptrend in Turkey’s indigenous defense industry. The Turkish media say the exercise is actually a message to the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), a coalition formed recently by Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. The alliance plans to explore energy sources in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, including disputed areas. This show of force on the maritime domain will surely be closely watched by these countries. 96 (13

frigates, 6 corvettes, 16 fast attack crafts, 7 mine hunters, 17 auxiliary ships, 14 patrol boats, 22 LST and LCT, and 1 training ship) ships and 7 submarines participate in the exercise together with helicopters, planes and Special Forces teams of Turkish Navy, attack and transport helicopters from Turkish Land Forces, fighter and early warning planes from Turkish Air Force, and boats and helicopters from Turkish Coast Guard. Turkish Navy usually conducts its spring exercise a few weeks later, usually in late March, early April or in May when the seas are less demanding and the winds are fairer. These wargames are more compact in size and in their scopes. In many aspects, this is not a standard annual wargame played by the Turkish Naval Forces. During the exercise Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs such as the short-ranged BAYRAKTAR and longer range ANKA), and Command, Control, and Intelligence systems will be tested. Moreover, “*Blue Homeland*” will be a confirmation test for the operational readiness of the 2018 established Naval Warfare Center (consisted of 165 staff officers) which will run the exercise. Between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of March 67 ships will visit 67 ports including 7 ports abroad; Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia and the occupied part of Cyprus. (www.aa.com.tr)

- February 28<sup>th</sup>, if the EU insists on its two-faced actions, Turkey might have to go its own way, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, referring to the union's silence over the death penalty in Egypt. “*Although they claim that they are against the death penalty, they do not hesitate to come side to side with a man who put 42 people to death,*” the President said during a televised interview on Tuesday, pointing to Egyptian leader Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi's actions. He added that as a result of these actions Turkey may part its ways



with the union. Last Wednesday, Egypt executed nine men convicted of carrying out a car bomb attack in 2015 that killed the country's Chief Prosecutor. Six other people were also executed earlier this month. Three of them were convicted of assassinating a Police Officer and three others in connection with the murder of the son of a Judge. Despite ongoing international condemnation, the Governments of the U.S., Germany, France, Italy and the U.K., aiming to maintain close relations with Egypt in order to protect their interests in the region, have refrained from making any statements about the executions. In addition, while the executions were causing uproar, European leaders gathered for a two-day summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, focused mainly on Egypt's *"fight against terrorism"* rather than the unjust sentences and its worsening human rights record. Erdogan also bashed the European Parliament's decision to accept a draft advisory report on Turkey, which called for the suspension of EU accession negotiations with the country. *"These decisions have no valuable meaning for us,"* Erdogan underlined. The report is expected to be voted on by the entire European Parliament in mid-March. *"The call in the draft report, which is not legally binding and bears only the status of an advisory decision, to officially suspend our country's accession negotiations with the EU is absolutely unacceptable,"* Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hami Aksoy said last week. In October, Erdogan said he would consider putting Turkey's long-stalled bid to join the European Union to a referendum, signaling exasperation with a process he says has been waylaid by prejudice against Muslims. Turkey says EU membership remains one of its top strategic goals even though the accession talks, formally launched in 2004, have been stalled for years due to the objections of the Greek Cypriot

administration on the divided island of Cyprus as well as opposition from Germany and France. (www.dailysabah.com)

- March 2<sup>nd</sup>, Turkey completed preparations to hit terrorist targets in Syria's Manbij and east of Euphrates, Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said. Turkey will defeat terrorism both inside the country and abroad, he said. Terrorists inside the country were largely neutralized Akar told a group of veterans and martyrs' families in the eastern Agri province, adding that Turkey is committed to putting an end to them. *"We will not allow any terrorist corridor in northern Syria,"* Akar added, referring to the People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey has promised to mount an operation against. *"The whole world knows that."* There must be Turkish soldiers in this corridor for the nation's security, he said. *"Turkish army will not endanger our country in any case,"* Akar added. Turkey has vowed to carry out a counter-terrorist operation in Manbij, Syria and east of Euphrates following two similar successful operations since 2016. In December 2018, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that Ankara is in preparations for a third offensive in northern Syria, this time east of the Euphrates, which is dominated by the YPG. Turkey recognizes the PKK and the YPG as organically linked terrorist groups. The U.S., however, while listing the PKK as a terrorist group, has supported the YPG militarily under the pretext of fighting DAESH. The U.S., despite Ankara's warnings, previously supplied truckloads of military support to the YPG, which functions under the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Previously, Turkey conducted two offensives in northern Syria, Operation *"Olive Branch"* and Operation *"Euphrates Shield."* The first was launched by

Ankara to clear its borders of DAESH terrorists while the second was to prevent the YPG's ultimate plan of establishing an autonomous region in northern Syria by connecting Afrin to Kobani and Jazeera. Following the operations, Turkey has also been involved in efforts to rebuild the towns' infrastructure, as well as health and educational institutions. Schools are being renovated and a hospital is being built. Turkey has also helped local people build olive oil facilities in the town, where agriculture is the main source of income for residents. Thanks to the success of both operations and the post-operation developments in the liberated areas, the numbers of refugees returning to their hometowns have increased in recent months. (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. President Erdogan expressed once again his anxiety to start a new military operation in Syria. Turkey has been developed into a “regional power” engaged in military operations in the territory of two other countries, it threatens to start a new operation in Syria, maintains a significant military force in North Cyprus, and threatens a NATO ally – Greece – with an armed conflict. Apart from the use or the threat of use of direct armed violence Turkey participates actively in diplomatic processes in the region (Syria negotiations, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Cyprus question, Qatar crisis etc). The state demonstrates decisively its leading role in the wider region of the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and Southeast Mediterranean 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. The exercise may raise tension with Cyprus and Greece. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Regarding Turkish interests in East Mediterranean Sea it seems that they are reaching a critical point since Cypriots 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. Besides, taking into consideration that “Blue Homeland” is ongoing it is not unlikely an accident or pre-planned incident in the Aegean or Cyprus EEZ which may lead to tension or crisis.*

[www.hermesresearch.eu](http://www.hermesresearch.eu)

email: [info@hermesresearch.eu](mailto:info@hermesresearch.eu)

Editor in Chief: Ioannis Karampelas

#### **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