



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

“SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE AT A GLANCE” (ISSN: 2654-0304) is a weekly review of the most significant current political, economic, energy, defense, and security news of Southeastern Europe. It covers 14 countries; Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey. However Greece enjoys its own weekly review for a more detailed presentation of its current affairs (GREECE AT A GLANCE).

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

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ALBANIA: January 27th, in their meeting in Berlin, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, told Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama that Germany will be committed to contribute with the fundraising conference in Brussels, which will be held to collect funds for repairing the damage caused by the November 26th, 2019 earthquake. The Albanian Prime Minister declared that for Albania it would be impossible to realize reconstruction alone. *“We are grateful that you found time for this meeting. I have arrived especially to discuss the fundraiser conference and the great need that Albania has to find support of our friends and partners in the difficult process of reconstruction,”* Rama said. *“I am also pleased to discuss Albania’s European integration prospects and its regional cooperation, where Germany’s role and your role, have been extraordinary, helping to open a new chapter of cooperation within the Berlin Process, which needs to be taken further,”* Rama added. *“What you outlined is very important. It is a clearer geopolitical dimension as well, besides the traditional technical dimension of the Commission. It will be a great help to us and the entire region,”* he concluded. The judiciary reform was also part of the meeting with Merkel, who said *“On behalf of the German Government, I underline that we support Albania’s European Perspective, and also for the rest of the Western Balkans. We want these countries to get closer to the EU, and we want first of all to open the EU accession negotiations through the March Council. Both countries have made great achievements, which we discussed in the past Council as well. Let’s hope that we are going to have the desired results in March.”* Once again, Merkel supported the opening of the EU

negotiations for Albania and Northern Macedonia. (www.top-channel.tv)



Meeting of Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama with German Chancellor, Angela Merkel
(Photo source: www.kryeministria.al)

- January 30th, faced with intense local and international pressure, governing Socialist Party of Albania (Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë – PS) MPs in Albania at the last minute have backed away from voting down presidential decrees that blocked laws aiming to place controls on the online media. The Head of the Socialist parliamentary group, Taulant Balla, said the vote would be postponed while the Council of Venice, the advisory body to the Council of Europe, carried out an express evaluation. *“The Venice Commission had notified us that it has agreed to check [the laws] using fast-track procedures on March 21st. The vote on the decree of over audiovisual media will be postponed while we wait for the Venice Commission report,”* he said. A group of Albanian human rights organizations welcomed the decision but said it was insufficient, as it was *“not enough of a step toward the return [the country to its] constitutional foundations.”* Prime Minister Edi Rama first proposed the laws in December 2018, claiming the country needed to discipline the online media, which were allegedly out of control.

Following a yearlong battle and several revisions, Parliament adopted the laws last December despite strong protests from local and international media organizations. President Ilir Meta then stepped in and used his powers to block them. Socialist MPs had appeared poised to overturn his veto by a vote in Parliament. On Thursday, Article19, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, ECPMF, and the European Federation of Journalists, EFJ, all issued final appeals against the laws. “*Our message to Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama; Do not go ahead with these shameful censorship laws in Parliament today,*” Ricardo Gutierrez, General Secretary of EFJ, said on social media. Following the decision to scrap the vote, the ECPMF welcomed the withdrawal, calling it “a small victory.” (www.balkaninsight.com)

- January 31st, the Prime Minister, Edi Rama said that “*mini-Schengen*” is not an alternative but a stage in the path towards approach with the EU aiming only to benefit participants’ economy. In an interview, Rama said that free flow and transfer of goods, services and capitals is needed. In addition, the Premier argued that the time, which people spend waiting in the borders of Western Balkan countries can be calculated as “*1,000 years in one year.*” Previously, on October 11th, 2019, Rama with the Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Zoran Zaev and the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic met in Novi Sad, north Serbia and signed a declaration of intend to establish the free movement of people, goods, services, and capitals between the three countries. (www.albaniandailynews.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Albania is going through a major political crisis which affects its stability. Although we notice some efforts for dialogue it is assessed that there is no common ground for compromise between the ruling Socialists and the opposition. Government’s decision to step back on adopting the law on control over the online media it is considered as a wise action which contributes in media freedom. The EU and US put pressure on political forces to compromise and start dialogue ensuring democratic order in the country. Political instability may have direct impact in investments and opening of EU accession negotiations. Reforms should continue more intensively if the state seeks to get an accession negotiation date with the EU. Corruption, organized crime, money laundering, drug and weapon smuggling and links between politics and organized crime are the main problems Albania should address effectively. The EU top officials keep sending encouraging messages for Albania (and North Macedonia) regarding opening of accession negotiations in coming EU summit in March 2020. Although it is claimed that France and the Netherlands will change their stand, it is still questionable if they will do it finally. Albania keeps acting as the center of Albanians all over the region seeking to influence neighboring countries politics. Relation between Albania and Kosovo with a potential new Government under Albin Kurti as the Prime Minister is a good question.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

January 29th, there are no differences between Serbs living in Bosnia and those living in Serbia, the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic and the Serb member of Bosnia’s tripartite Presidency,

Milorad Dodik said in the central town of Mrkonjic Grad on Wednesday as they revealed that Serbia has secured 600,000 Bosnian Marks for the local Gymnasium and the Mechanical Engineering School. *“There is nothing more beautiful for me than seeing how much you love Serbia. As much as you love Serbia, we love Republika Srpska,”* Vucic told the crowd, referring to the Serb-majority semi-autonomous entity within the country. *“There are no differences between a Serb from Pirot and a Serb in Mrkonjic Grad, we belong to the same people, we share the same fate. We belong to the same Church. We Serbs are not known for being too religious, but our Church did not only protect spirituality, our Church is the Serbian Church, and our people must not be eradicated. Our people are not ashamed of their Serb name,”* he said. Vucic also thanked Dodik for showing up at the event since the Bosnian Serb leader’s father died the previous evening. Dodik said that only those with bad intentions could perceive Vucic’s visit as a bad thing. *“We are no Bosnian Serbs, we must remain united as a people as we are now in our intention to affirm our rights, without endangering anyone else,”* Dodik said. *“Long live Republika Srpska, long live Serbia and may the Serbian Orthodox Church remain and live forever,”* he added. Vucic said Serbia will continue investing in the infrastructure of Republika Srpska and work toward creating more jobs in Mrkonjic Grad. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- January 30th, a shortage of border guards may be hampering Bosnia’s ability to stop migrants from illegally entering the country, officials say. The rulebook on its internal organization says the Border Police of Bosnia and Herzegovina should have 2,426 officers, but currently has only 2,038,

which is 388 less, Franka Vican, a Spokeswoman for the state Border Police, told Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). The most problematic area is the eastern border with Serbia and Montenegro, where most illegal migrants cross over. *“There is evident pressure ... from the direction of Serbia and Montenegro to the Bosnian border, which is still a very complex situation that cannot be solved by existing material and technical capacities and human resources,”* Vican said. According to Vican, another 1,000 Policemen are needed to adequately guard those 600 kilometers of the border. Besides a lack of manpower, the Border Police lack specialist equipment, Vican said, adding that more sophisticated equipment is needed for a serious response. Currently, Officers from other agencies, the State Investigation and Protection Agency, SIPA, the Directorate for Coordination of Police Bodies and the Interior Ministry of Republika Srpska, have been hired to assist the Border Police. But the 72 Police Officers from Republika Srpska, the mainly Serbian entity in Bosnia, will remain on the border for only two more months. Their engagement on the border is partly funded by the IOM, the International Organization for Migration, a department of the United Nations, which first announced funding would end on January 31st, 2020 when the project was completed, but later extended funding until the end of March. Republika Srpska Interior Minister Dragan Lukac said that if the IOM refuses to finance accommodation and food for the RS Officers engaged in securing the border, they will have to be withdrawn. But he warned that this would worsen problems with controlling the flow of illegal migrants into Bosnia. According to the IOM and Bosnian authorities, in 2019, some 24,000 migrants entered Bosnia, most

of them fleeing conflict or poverty in Afghanistan, Iraq, Morocco and Pakistan. *“It is the only route currently open if you want to get from Greece to the other parts of the EU,”* said Peter Van Der Auweraert, Head of mission for the IOM. According to IOM data, from June 2018 to 2020, Bosnia received a total of 40.9 million euro in donor funding to address the migrant crisis. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- January 31st, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of North Macedonia are current participants in the Membership Action Plan (MAP), NATO said on its website on Friday, adding that *“participation in the MAP does not prejudice any decision by the Alliance on future membership.”* *“Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to continue pursuing democratic and defense reforms to fulfill its NATO and EU aspirations and to become a well-functioning independent democratic state,”* the Alliance said. Bosnia’s cooperation with NATO is defined in the Reform Program the country sent to the Alliance in December 2019, which includes *“the reforms the Government intends to undertake and facilitates the provision of support by NATO toward these efforts.”* The country was invited to join the MAP in 2010, as Allied Foreign Ministers called on Bosnian authorities to resolve its key issue regarding the matter - to register its immovable defense property to the state. The Ministers decided that NATO is ready to accept Bosnia’s Annual National Program in December 2018. *“Registration of immovable defense property to the state remains essential,”* the NATO website said. The countries participating in the MAP submit their annual national programs on their preparations for possible future membership in the Alliance, which cover *“political, economic,*

defense, resource, security and legal aspects.” The MAP provides *“focused and candid feedback mechanism on aspirant countries’ progress on their programs.”* *“This includes both political and technical advice, as well as annual meetings between all NATO members and individual aspirants at the level of the North Atlantic Council to assess progress, on the basis of an annual progress report. A key element is the defense planning approach for aspirants which includes elaboration and review of agreed planning targets,”* the website said. Meetings and workshops with NATO civilian and military experts take place throughout the year, allowing for discussion regarding the *“spectrum of issues relevant to membership,”* it said. (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Rhetoric over the amendment of Dayton peace agreement is increasing in Bosnia and more politicians and analysts admit that in fact that the accord is rather a source of problems than a source of stability establishing a complicated political system and state’s decision making process. Besides, the Dyaton accord violates basic human rights principles by several Bosnian citizens from accessing state institution’s positions. For instance a Bosnian Roma cannot become member of the country’s tripartite Presidency. However, talks of reforming Dayton Agreement may destabilize not only Bosnia, but the entire region. Political instability, poor economic performances, entities’ rivalries, and problematic framework of state’s structure (due to Dayton Accord) have left Bosnia far behind other Western Balkan countries towards the EU. NATO is a feasible goal but only due to

geopolitical and geostrategic reasons (mainly because of the Russian threat of penetration in the region) and not because of achieving the Alliance's standards. Nevertheless, Bosnian Serbs strongly reject the idea of NATO accession and this is a significant obstacle towards Bosnia's full accession in the Alliance. Despite the Council of Ministers establishment political situation in the country remains unstable due to the complicated decision-making and governance system, which blocks almost every political action due to entity's special interests. Furthermore, nationalistic rhetoric and actions from the three entities creates certain conditions of mutual mistrust and work as a factor of potential destabilization. At the moment Bosnia is considered as a potential source of instability in the whole region of Southeast Europe. Neighboring Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs, while Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran maintain a permanent presence through financial donations and investments.



BULGARIA: January 29th, the Prosecutor's Office has published recordings in which the Commander of the Air Force and a man suspected to be the Bulgarian President, Rumen Radev commented on a check by the CACIAF for the President's wife Desislava Radeva appointment as an Air Force PR years ago. The Prosecutor's Office suspects that the collected data has a high degree of probability of President Rumen Radev's involvement in criminal activity, the press center of the institution has announced. Earlier, Bulgaria's Chief Prosecutor, Ivan Geshev, has asked the Constitutional Court to interpret the constitution's provision on the immunity of the

President and Vice President. Article 103 of the Constitution states that the President and the Vice President shall not incur liability for any actions performed in the discharge of the functions thereof, with the exception of high treason and violation of the Constitution. According to it, they also cannot be detained and cannot be prosecuted. The Chief Prosecutor said that the interpretation of the meaning of the provision of Article 103 is necessary because the norm is laconic and does not give an unambiguous answer to the question posed by this request, the Prosecutor's Office said. Radev also commented the situation “Attacks against me and my family are not stopping, instead they are taking on grotesque dimensions, without regard for the means used.” (www.novinite.com),) Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Dvizhenie za Prava i Svobodi - DPS) Ataka (Attack) party

- January 29th, the no-confidence motion against Bulgaria's Government has been defeated by 124 to 102 votes, with 9 abstentions, Focus News Agency reported. In order for a no-confidence vote to be successful it must be supported by more than half of all MPs. In case of rejection, a new vote of no confidence cannot be brought in the next 6 months. The motion was tabled on January 20th, 2020 by 78 signatures of MPs by the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya - BSP) on the grounds of “failure in environment and water policy.” It was the fourth vote of no-confidence on Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's third Government. The previous three were over corruption, health care and security. (www.novinite.com)

- January 31st, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova has slammed as “unfriendly steps” and a “PR campaign, a show”

Bulgaria's expulsion of two staff of the Russian Embassy in Sofia that Bulgarian Prosecutors identified as spies. *"There is a large number of questions why this was necessary, in the way it was done; what was the purpose of such actions,"* Zakharova told in a briefing in Moscow, according to a transcript posted on the Russian Foreign Ministry website. On January 24th, 2020 Bulgarian authorities declared the First Secretary of the Russian Federation Embassy in Bulgaria as persona non grata and a member of the Russian trade mission in Sofia as *"unwanted person,"* she said. *"Going against the usual practice in such cases, the event was turned into an informational campaign, a media stunt. We have the main proof of that. The Russian Embassy was notified about this decision only after the information was reported by the media. No proof of guilt of our diplomats, materials or grounds that were the cause of these decisions, was presented."* Zakharova said the reasons for the expulsion that one of the diplomats had been studying Bulgaria's electoral system and the other had been showing interest in energy projects did not stand up to any scrutiny. *"What should diplomats engage in, according to Bulgarian representatives that were behind this decision? What do diplomats sent abroad do? They study legislation, opportunities for co-operation, they contact representatives of the authorities, NGOs, the civil society, the diplomatic corps, they organize events, talks, receptions, business forums, open exhibitions. If there are issues, they are solved diplomatically. In this case, there is a PR campaign, a show,"* Zakharova said. She noted that earlier, on January 23rd, 2020 Bulgaria's Prosecutor's Office pressed charges against three Russian nationals in relation to the suspected poisoning, in 2015, of businessman Emilian Gebrev and two other

Bulgarian nationals. *"With a very ambiguous so-called 'evidence base' and conclusions in the 'highly likely' spirit, this tale can be seen as nothing but another element of the anti-Russian campaign, behind which, apparently, are representatives of the political establishment of this country, despite the fact that we are developing mutually beneficial relations,"* she said. *"We see in the sequence of recent events a directed desire and intention to derail the bilateral agreements reached in the recent period and plainly poison the atmosphere of friendship, mutually beneficial and mutually respectful co-operation that must prevail in the relations between our countries and peoples. We maintain the right to retaliate. All the responsibility for the groundless provocation measures is on the Bulgarian side,"* Zakharova concluded. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Boyko Borissov's Government is stable and this fact was proved during the no-confidence motion filed by the opposition BSP. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles for the country's development and should be addressed decisively. The country pays special attention to energy security developing several projects. Expulsion of two Russian diplomats by Bulgarian authorities put at risk bilateral relations between the two countries. It is the second expulsion of diplomats by the Bulgarian side showing that Bulgaria is reacting on the activity of Russian diplomats in the country. It could be assessed that such expulsions are part of a wider "anti-russian" plan regarding its penetration and influence in Southeast Europe. Modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are

ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc). However, military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards.



CROATIA: January 31st, Vili Beros is the new Minister of Health in Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic's Government. The Parliament confirmed his appointment with 81 votes in favor and 43 against, with one vote sustained. The new Minister took an oath before the Parliament. Beros was chosen after the Prime Minister dismissed his predecessor Milan Kujundzic after journalists discovered irregularities in his asset card. Already on his first day in office Beros announced there would be a meeting of the crisis headquarters due to the corona virus epidemic. He added that in the little time left to the end of his mandate he will focus on payment of overtime hours for medical staff as well as the departure of doctors and nurses from the country. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- January 31st, Croatia regrets the United Kingdom's departure from the EU, but the Union remains strong even without it, the Croatian Government said in a statement on Friday, the last day of the UK's EU membership. While regretting the departure of one member state from our European family, *"we are heartened by the reinforced unity that the 27 of us have demonstrated in the past three years,"* the statement said. *"The EU will be smaller in numbers, but remains strong and unified as ever,"* it added. Croatia, which currently holds the rotating EU Presidency, sees Brexit as an opportunity for *"an ambitious and long-lasting"* new partnership with the UK, the first country to

leave the bloc. *"The UK's departure from the EU is also a new beginning in our relationship. Both as the Council Presidency and bilaterally, Croatia remains determined to invest all its efforts to keep the United Kingdom as one of our closest partners,"* the Croatian Government said. Zagreb believes that efforts should be made during the transitional period until the end of the year to facilitate the transition for citizens and businesses on both sides. *"Croatia highly appreciates the hitherto tireless work of EU Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier and his team. They have our full support and confidence in the forthcoming negotiations about the future relationship with the United Kingdom as well,"* the statement said. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- February 2nd, Croatia's President-elect Zoran Milanovic said that Slovenia is Croatia's most natural ally and that relations will go forward after completion of the proceedings before the Court of Justice of the EU. In his comment on Friday's judgment by the Luxembourg-based Court on its non-jurisdiction over an action Slovenia brought against Croatia due to their border dispute, Milanovic said in Rijeka on Saturday, that for the sake of its general public, the Slovenian side had to use all means at its disposal which it found reasonable when it came to the border dispute and Croatia's rejection to implement the 2017 border arbitration award. The action brought by Slovenia did not succeed, as this matter really does not fall within the jurisdiction of the Court in Luxembourg. Otherwise, it would have received similar actions from many countries, Milanovic said, noting that there are still cases that the arrangements of border delimitation and demarcation between some EU member-states are not completed yet.

“Now, when these proceedings (initiated by Slovenia) are over, I can see only good relations and even better relations with Slovenia, because it is closest to us politically,” the newly elected Croatian President said. Asked whether the arbitration award could be the starting point for the talks, Milanovic answered in the affirmative. Asked by the press where he would first travel abroad after taking oath as the president, Milanovic said that he still did not know. *“There may be Slovenia, Austria. Those are possible variants, however, it is not necessary to be so,”* Milanovic said in Rijeka where he was attending the opening ceremonies for the inauguration of that coastal Croatian city as the European Capital of Culture in 2020. (www.hr.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Despite the Health Minister scandal and his dismissal, Croatia enjoys political stability. It should be noted that it is the 14th dismissal of Minister of the current Government which is an alarming sign for corruption and abuse of power in the Government. Croatia, holding the EU Presidency, released a strong message of the EU unity in the occasion of UK's withdrawal from the European family. After the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) decision that it has no jurisdiction on Croatia – Slovenia border dispute the newly elected Croatian President, Zoran Milanovic signaled a new era on bilateral relations between the two countries by stating that “Slovenia is Croatia's most natural ally.” When he will take Office it is expected an initiative for starting dialogue based on the arbitration award. Besides, Croatia needs Slovenia's support regarding its accession in the Schengen Zone and OECD. Under these circumstances, Croatia is

forced to start thinking of dialogue and compromise since its stance has repercussions in state's national interests. Croatia implements a hard-line foreign policy with its neighboring countries maintaining open disputes with Bosnia, Slovenia, and Serbia. Top officials do not hesitate to openly interfere in Bosnian domestic affairs in the name of Bosnian Croats. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Currently, the Ministry of Defense has restarted its efforts for acquiring 12 modern fighter jets since Croatia is a NATO member without operational Air Force.



CYPRUS: January 28th, the EU added seven Russian-backed officials in Crimea to its sanctions blacklist on Tuesday for organizing local elections in the peninsula last year. The decision came after Cyprus came on board, as any EU move on sanctions requires unanimity. Nicosia had stalled the process in recent weeks, diplomats said, trying to push the bloc towards separate sanctions against Turkey for hydrocarbons drilling in eastern Mediterranean. The EU has maintained sanctions against Russia since Moscow seized and annexed the Crimea peninsula from Ukraine in 2014. They include a blacklist of firms and individuals associated with Russia's administration of Crimea. The seven people added to the blacklist on Tuesday include Yuri Gotsanyuk, named Prime Minister of Crimea's pro-Russian regional Government after the 2019 election. Tuesday's move raises the number of individuals on the blacklist to 177, along with 44 firms or other entities. Blacklisted people and firms have their assets in the EU frozen and individuals are barred from travel

there. The bloc's main economic sanctions targeting Russia's energy, financial and arms industries are currently in place until the end of July, while a ban on doing business with Crimea holds until the end of June. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- January 31st, the UN intends to ask both sides in Cyprus for ideas towards establishing an effective mechanism for direct military contacts between the Republic and the north, a UN source has told the Cyprus News Agency, but added such contacts would not be tantamount to recognition. The source was referring to the relevant reference in the UNFICYP resolution passed by the UN Security Council on Thursday. The resolution extending the mandate of the UN peacekeeping force until July 31st, 2020, notes in paragraph 6 that the Security Council "*calls for the establishment of an effective mechanism for direct military contacts between the sides and the relevant involved parties, and urges UNFICYP, as facilitator through its liaison role, to submit proposals in this regard.*" It was the original version of this paragraph which upset Nicosia as it reportedly called on the two sides to create a mechanism for direct contact between the two communities to resolve military and other matters without the mediation of the UN peacekeeping force, UNFICYP. The Government had argued such direct contact would have normalized relations and implied recognition. The same source told CNA that under the version passed it is up to the two sides to decide at which level they want to engage on this dialogue, with the UN preferring to involve them at every level, both military and political. No direct military contacts currently exist between the opposing forces in Cyprus and the UN source said there would "*be*

no direct contact while these proposals are being discussed." The intention of the UN is to talk to the two sides separately, listen to their ideas about these military mechanisms, the source said, noting that the UN would then add in its own experiences and ideas of how this might work. The understanding within the UN is that the two sides are not being asked to talk to each other without UNFICYP, but talk to each other facilitated by the peacekeeping force which will also be in the room, the source added. Having direct contacts "*does not mean that we are not going to be present, it does not mean that we are going to leave, it does not mean that anybody is being asked to recognize the other side,*" the UN source said. In a statement issued following the adoption of the resolution, the Foreign Ministry referred to the consultations that took place before the adoption of the resolution, and questioned the tactics which they said aimed at giving the impression that the Cyprus issue is a matter of stabilizing relations between the two communities. The Ministry said such approaches send the message that what is required is normalization of the status quo and could be seen as a disincentive to efforts to resume dialogue between the two sides. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- February 2nd, the Turkish research vessel "*Oruc Reis*" sailed into the island's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) on Saturday morning in an area off the western coast, a military source said. Earlier this month, Ankara dispatched the "*Oruc Reis*" to conduct unauthorized seismic research, issuing a NAVTEX. A military source told the Cyprus news Agency (CNA) that the Turkish vessel was located within the EEZ of Cyprus by 9.30 am, having as its final destination an area that partly falls within blocks 4 and 5. The NAVTEX

reserved the area until April 10th, 2020. The same source said the “Oruc Reis” crossed into the Greek maritime area due to bad weather conditions prevailing in the region in the past couple of days. In response to the Turkish NAVTEX, the authorities of Cyprus issued an anti-NAVTEX on January 14th, 2020 which is still in place. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Turkey continues to provoke Cyprus by violating its sovereign rights and sending research vessels within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). “Oruc Reis” has entered the Cypriot waters maintaining an atmosphere of tension. Cyprus is trying to block Turkish activity by diplomatic means but neither the US calls, nor the EU threats for sanctions are effective so far. Only France seeks to get a more active role by sending its aircraft carrier “Charles de Gaulle” but it is rather unlikely to see the French Navy blocking the Turkish drillship from the Cypriot waters. Greece is also unwilling in political level to send naval forces in Cyprus for defending its sovereign rights aiming to avoid escalation of tension with Turkey in the Aegean or South of Crete. Cyprus has to defend its sovereignty and national interests by itself and the fact is that it lacks aeronautical forces to do so. Trilateral cooperation between Cyprus, Greece and Israel or Cyprus, Greece and Egypt have been proved effective in plans and agreements but their implementation is rather questionable since there is lack of security in certain levels. Under these circumstances, it is doubtful if the EastMed will finally be implemented. Besides, the Turkish goal is to isolate Cyprus and Greece by forcing Egypt and Israel to choose Turkey as the transit country for

transferring their gas to the European market. Turkey is determined to establish its presence in the region and especially within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claiming the Turkish Cypriot community rights. It maintains a significant military force on the island (Army Corps seize) and it reinforce it with modern systems such as UAVs. As long as tension remains in eastern Mediterranean, there is always a high risk of an armed “hot” incident or a conflict. It is certain that Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



GREECE: January 30th, three people were arrested in an ongoing counterterrorism operation in northern Athens on Wednesday, a Police Spokesman said on Thursday. The three suspects, a man aged 32 and two women aged 28 and 26, were driving in a stolen car, when officers detained them. They each had a fake ID and radios tuned to the frequency used by Police. Inside the vehicle, police found a “Kalashnikov” rifle, a submachine gun, a handgun and stolen license plates, as well as clothes for men that may belong to other associates. The 32-year-old has been identified as Yiannis Michalidis, an alleged member of the urban guerrilla group “*Conspiracy of the Cells of Fire*,” who had escaped from the agricultural prison of Tyrintha in the Peloponnese on June 2019. Michailidis, who was accused in connection with an armed bank robbery in Velvento, northern Greece, in February 2013, was

in 2015 given a 13-year prison sentence over an armed attack on members of the Police force's immediate response unit in Pefki, northern Athens. Police said he was also involved in a bank robbery in Achaia, western Greece last August. He had been previously detained during a protest rally in "Syntagma" square in February 2011 after he tried to shoot at Police with a bow-and-arrow. He had since been dubbed the "Syntagma archer." The 28-year-old is Constantina Athanasopoulou, an associate of Panagiota Roupa (a leading member of the "Revolutionary Struggle" guerrilla group) who violated the terms of her conditional release, and disappeared during her trial in June 2019. Athanasopoulou had been arrested in January 2017 as an associate of Roupa, herself then a fugitive. She was released in June 2018 after the maximum 18-month period of pre-trial detention expired, on the condition that she report to the Police every week. Athanasopoulou was convicted in absentia in 2019 to 34 years for participating in a plot to free "Revolutionary Struggle" leader Nikos Maziotis from Korydallos Prison. The second woman, aged 26, is believed to be Michailidis' partner. Counter-terrorism Police also raided Michailidis' flat and those of the other suspects and their relatives in Athens and Thessaloniki. During the arrests, officers also found keys which they believe could lead to new hideouts. Authorities believe the suspects were preparing an armed robbery. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- January 30th, Greek lawmakers ratified an agreement with the United States for a major expansion of military cooperation. The deal was ratified with 175 votes to 33. Eighty lawmakers voted "present." The Mutual Defense

Cooperation Agreement was signed in October 2019 by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during a visit to Athens. The deal provides for increased joint US - Greece and NATO activities at Greek military bases and facilities in Larissa, Stefanovikio, and Alexandroupolis, in central and northern Greece, as well as infrastructure and other improvements at the Souda Bay US naval base on the island of Crete. The US Air Force is already operating MQ-9 "Reaper" drones out of Larissa airbase. Opposition Coalition of Radical Left (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – SYRIZA) voted against ratifying the deal, arguing that Greece should first seek a more comprehensive commitment of support from the US against Turkey's provocations in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis accused SYRIZA, which had negotiated the deal as Government, of inconsistency driven by political expediency. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- February 1st, the crossing of the "Oruc Reis" research vessel into the area of Greece's continental shelf placed authorities in Athens in a state of alert on Friday, but the Turkish vessel was seen leaving the vicinity early on Saturday. The ship on Friday was operating around 200 kilometers south of the island of Kastellorizo, in a maritime area that Greece considers a potential Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), from 6.30 a.m. until about 5 p.m., when it turned eastward and moved outside the area of Greek responsibility. In response, Greece dispatched the "Nikiforos Fokas" frigate, which had been moored at the island of Karpathos, to monitor the vessel, which was accompanied by two Turkish cargo ships and, at a distance, by two Turkish Navy frigates. The Greek frigate radioed the "Oruc Reis" and asked

it to leave the area. However, the crew of the Turkish vessel was reportedly dismissive of the request. The Turkish vessel's arrival in Greek waters was attributed to the difficulties that the "Oruc Reis" was facing due to weather conditions in the Cyprus EEZ, where it has been conducting research activities in the last few days. The Government saw the move as a mild show of force by Ankara, and for that reason the Defense Ministry, in full cooperation with the Prime Minister's Office, opted for a moderate approach to the issue. Nonetheless, Defense Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos and the Chief of the Hellenic National Defense General Staff (GEETHA), General Konstantinos Floros, arrived on Friday afternoon at the Maximos Mansion to brief Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who will visit Saudi Arabia on Sunday before heading for the United Arab Emirates. At the technocratic level, however, Turkey's move is viewed by the Foreign and Defense Ministries as part of Ankara's expressed willingness to conduct research in an area it considers its own. According to Ankara, the zone south of Kastellorizo is part of the EEZ and the continental shelf controlled by Turkey. Meanwhile, the Commander-in-Chief of the NATO Joint Forces in Europe, General Todd Walters, was in Athens on Friday and met with Floros and Panagiotopoulos. During the meeting, Greece's concerns regarding Turkey's stance were conveyed to the American Commander, who had arrived in Athens from Ankara, where he had held talks with the Chief of Turkey's Armed Forces, General Yasar Guler. (www.ekathimerini.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Tension with Turkey reached a peak last week due to the latter's decision to send the research vessel "Oruc Reis" over the Greek continental shelf. For almost 30 hours Greek and Turkish naval forces deployed around "Oruc Reis" ready for action. Greek frigate was monitoring the research vessel for any research activity having the order to block it ensuring the Greek sovereign rights. On the other hand, two Turkish frigates were ready to protect the research vessel from any potential Greek reaction. In other words, the two countries were in a tense situation which could be escalated at any time. Greece implementing its deterrence doctrine appeared determined to protect its sovereign rights, deployed rapidly its forces, and had a clear view of the potential "battlefield" meaning good surveillance and intelligence. In the diplomatic field it was a very active week. The Greek – US defense cooperation agreement was ratified by the Parliament strengthening strategic partnership and upgrading Greece's importance in the US and NATO strategic planning. It is not a secret to claim that Greece has become a forward fortress of the western Alliance. Larissa, Alexandroupolis, Stefanovikaio, and Souda have become air or naval bases for US or NATO forces. Moreover, Greece promotes a strategic partnership with France which is very keen on being engaged in East Mediterranean affairs. At the moment, France is the warmest supporter of Greek and Cypriot interests seeking of course to ensure French interests in a region of great importance regarding strategic transport lines, trade, security, and energy. Turkish fighter jets continue to violate Greek airspace overflying islets in the Aegean. It is assessed that it is more possible a narrow incident in an islet (Greece has thousands of them) instead of an excessive war. Besides, the

armed conflict will take place in limited time (no more than 72 to 96 hours) engaging a large number of land, naval and air forces and weapons in a rather narrow operational field. It is assessed that Turkey will avoid engaging troops in big Greek islands for several civil-military reasons. Migration could be considered as a major security issue which threatens internal stability of the country. Greece is in the forefront of the migrant flows which continue to arrive in the Greek islands of eastern Aegean Sea. Under the current situation in Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea Greece is obliged to strengthen and modernize its Armed Forces operational capability. Currently, Greece focuses on naval units, upgrade of fighter jets, UAVs and follow on support agreements. Taking into consideration the ongoing provocations in the Aegean Sea and the complicated current situation in Cypriot EEZ and eastern Mediterranean in general, security situation is of high risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident by Turkey.



KOSOVO: January 30th, the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Joseph Borrell said in Pristina on Thursday that his prime task was to make the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia easier, and not to persuade countries that had not recognize Kosovo's independence to do that, the KoSSev website reported. Borrell requested that Pristina form its institutions as soon as possible following the October's election. *“Only Kosovo and Serbia can resolve the problem between them and then the result will follow. A deal must be reached, there is no other solution,”* Borrell, who first met with Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci, said. He added he was aware of how eagerly Kosovo

people were waiting for the visa liberalization. *“It is a sensitive issue... I cannot tell you when it will happen, but what I can say is that Kosovo met all conditions for liberalization. It is high time to continue with that process and finish it,”* Borrell said. Thaci said the two discussed the current events in Kosovo and about the Western Balkans' European future. He added the topics in the talks included the dialogue with Belgrade. *“Borrell is an experienced politician, and I believe he will work together with his team on the guarantees for the transparent dialogue which will bring results to both countries,”* Thaci said. He complained about the damage inflicted on Kosovo regarding the ongoing visa liberation, blaming the EU for the mistake in that process. (www.rs.n1info.com)



Meeting of Kosovo President, Hashim Thaci with the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Joseph Borrell
(Photo source: www.president-ksgov.net)

- January 30th, Kosovo's Prime Minister elect Albin Kurti said on Thursday that the Belgrade - Pristina dialogue needs to be renewed. Writing on his social media account after meeting EU High Representative Josep Borrell, Kurti said that the dialogue also needs to be reviewed. *“I affirmed that the EU-facilitated dialogue must be reviewed and renewed,”* he wrote. Kurti added that the EU remains indispensable for the future of the region.

The Self-Determination (Vetevendosje) movement leader is known as a critic of the way the dialogue has been conducted.

- February 2nd, Leaders of the Self-Determination (Vetevendosje) movement and the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK) signed a coalition agreement after four months of negotiations, which opened the door for the Kosovo Government formation, Albin Kurti and Isa Mustafa told media on Sunday. *“I met today with the LDK leader, Professor Isa Mustafa, and we agreed to convene a session tomorrow to appoint a new governing body. We already signed the deal and agreed on the distribution of posts in the new Government that we will manage together,”* said Kurti. Mustafa also addressed the media and confirmed the news. *“I believe this is a good job; the changes that should happen in our country are in our interest. We looked into all alternatives and options. What we want for this Government is to be successful and meet the expectations,”* said the politicians. The party leaders did not unveil the details of the agreement they signed. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Kosovo is very close in the exit of the four months political crisis after Vetëvendosje and LDK reach finally an agreement. It is expected that next week Albin Kurti will form his Government giving some prospect for Kosovo future. Kosovo needs a strong Government to ensure political stability and to work hard in resolving critical challenges for Kosovo's sustainability. The Kosovo status is the first and most important problem which is directly linked to its Euro-Atlantic future. Secondly, the new Government should work with

honesty, courage and integrity to fight corruption and organized crime, and to establish an effective, transparent and accountable public administration model. We do not know yet Kurti's intentions regarding dialogue with Serbia. However, the US and EU made clear that dialogue should be revived. Kurti is considered so far as a hardliner but it is remained to see who really is. Normalization of relations with Serbia is an issue of national interest for Kosovo linked with its security, stability and growth.



MOLDOVA: January 29th, President Igor Dodon, in his speech given at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), said that the providing of a neutrality status to Moldova would contribute to the strengthening of security in the region. The President believes that the neutrality status would have a positive impact on the Transnistrian settlement process. *“The Transnistrian conflict settlement and the confidence building measures are among the most important priorities of Moldova's present leadership,”* Dodon said. In the context, the Head of state welcomed Russia's last August initiative on resuming the process of ammunitions' elimination in Moldova. President Igor Dodon pays a working visit to Strasbourg today. (www.moldpres.md)

- January 30th, following his speech delivered at the Winter Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on Wednesday, Moldova President Igor Dodon stated answering Russian parliamentarians' questions that a full-scale implementation of the EU - Moldova Association Agreement is well in the interests of the Republic of Moldova. *“The Moldovan society has been strongly split along*

the external geopolitical line. With slight variations at different periods, approximately a half of the Moldovan population has always stood for integration with Russia, with the Eurasian Economic Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). And approximately same proportion of citizens supports integration into the European Union. To place the people before a severe choice “either-or” would mean to split up the country. Therefore, we have to wage a weighted external policy, and we will cooperate with both the West and the East,” Dodon stressed. The President said that the Association Agreement realization is a main priority for the new Government and Moldova leadership as a whole. *“We shall be implementing the Agreement, along with all other international documents signed before. We need all this badly. Many provisions in the Association Agreement are very advantageous for us. We need this in order to raise the living standards of our citizens,”* Dodon said. The President expressed pity that after a change of Government in Chisinau last November, the EU started demonstrating restraint in the development of relations with Moldova. *“We have not blocked or stopped anything in our relationship with the European Union. We are constantly ready to go to Brussels to negotiate our further cooperation. We implement all our international commitments, and are ready to move on. But we feel a restraint from Brussels’ behalf. It has assumed a ‘wait-and-see’ stance. I understand that there is disappointment after the dismissal of the [Maia Sandu] Government, which was regarded as pro-European by some people. But this is a question to the former Government, it was its choice. As for us, we cannot sit and wait. We are ready to continue cooperation,”* Dodon stated. (www.infotag.md)

- January 31st, Moldovan Prime Minister Ion Chicu has welcomed *“the constructive approach and pro-Moldova stance”* demonstrated by Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) leader Andrei Nastase during his meeting with EU Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Oliver Varhelyi held in Brussels on Wednesday. The Prime Minister wrote in the social networks that he had himself made a similar message to Varhelyi during their meeting several weeks before, *“and now such approach has been supported by an opposition politician.”* *“I am convinced that our European partners will positively assess such reasonable actions. I hope other opposition politicians will also demonstrate respect to citizens and will follow Mr. Nastase’s example,”* Chicu wrote. As was already reported by Infotag, on Wednesday Nastase met in Brussels with Varhelyi and highlighted the need for Moldova’s direct cooperation with EU structural funds, for ensuring a sustainable development of the Moldovan economy and business community such as simplification of regulatory procedures for new enterprises (startups), the need for building up investment in the infrastructure, an easier access to the funds for development of European transport corridors. Nastase confirmed citizens’ hopes for broadening the programs of direct funding for Moldovan regional and local governing bodies, for lowering the roaming tariffs, funding for small businesses that are developed by means of new projects and industrial centers integrated with already existing research institutions. (www.infotag.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The Moldovan President, Igor Dodon and the Government have initiated a well coordinated campaign to promote a pro-European or pro-western profile of the country in order to secure EU's financial support. After pro-western Maya Sandu's collapse the EU appeared skeptical in its relations with Moldova. In fact, Romania was appeared the hardliner of such political attitude. The country enjoys relative political stability since the President Igor Dodon achieved to establish his own Government putting aside the pro-western ACUM block. The country definitely follows a pro-Russian orientation, although it declares that it seeks to join the EU. Due to its strategic geographic position, Moldova has become a field of rivalry between Russia and the US and NATO. The country lacks economic growth, while corruption is in high rates. Russia maintains troops in Transnistria which are considered by pro-western forces as violating Moldovan sovereignty. The frozen conflict of Transnistria is always a "running sore" for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: January 28th, the Rector of the Cetinje school of theology, Gojko Perovic, called for calm on Monday after a series of incidents between Police Officers and opponents of the new law on religious freedom, who believe the legislation is intended to undermine the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the country. Perovic said that the Serbian Orthodox Church had nothing to do with the incidents and urged people to refrain from violence. Police used tear gas as they arrested 11 young men from Podgorica on Saturday for refusing to allow Community Police Officers to

remove a mural with a red, blue and white tricolor, the colors of the flag of Serbia and the pre-independence flag of Montenegro. Montenegrin media reported that on Monday night there were also incidents following celebrations of the Montenegrin water polo team's bronze medal win at the European championships. Media published a video of a group of national team supporters beating up a young man in front of a mall in Podgorica, and was also alleged that Police prevented cars with Montenegrin flags from being stoned in two districts of Podgorica. Police Director Veselin Veljovic said Police would not respond to any kind of provocation and would reject any call for them to side with the protesters' cause. *"The unity in our ranks is beyond question and we all act together in the interest of all citizens. Attempts from certain political and religious sources to influence our officials cannot jeopardize the professional attitude to tasks that have been assigned,"* Veljovic said on a Police social media account on Monday. Tens of thousands of people – priests and followers of the Serbian Orthodox Church – have been marching twice weekly in Montenegro in protest against the new law on religious freedom that the Serbian Orthodox Church says is designed to strip it of its property and land. Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic said on Monday that the state will ensure the unconditional implementation of the controversial law. *"Do not allow your religious freedom to be abused the way it is being abused these days in Montenegro, and it is being abused to bring down Montenegro. Do not let yourself be part of this lunatic movement,"* Djukanovic said at a ruling Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS) conference in Tivat. Serbian

Interior Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic said meanwhile that in the coming days Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic will meet Djukanovic to discuss the tensions sparked by the law. According to the 2011 census, over 70% of the population of Montenegro is Orthodox Christians. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- January 31st, Police in Montenegro arrested the mother and cousin of a leader of the opposition Democratic Front (Demokratski Front - DF), Milan Knezevic. Media reports said that retired teacher Ratka Knezevic, 70, was detained at the family home in the village of Mojanovici, near the capital, Podgorica. The Police Directorate stated that Knezevic has been arrested for violating the Law on Public Order and obstructing Police Officers during a house search. It is alleged that 16 people were brought to the Podgorica Security Center after Police searched 17 locations and found *“a rifle and two handguns, ammunition and means of communication.”* MP Knezevic said that he had been in Belgrade at the time of his mother’s arrest, adding that his cousin, Goran Knezevic, and some members of DF from the Podgorica district of Zeta had been arrested as well. *“Apart from the sin of being my mother, obviously there is no other reason why she would be arrested. The authorities cannot forgive us for protesting against the law on freedom of religion. But we will not give up our fight,”* Knezevic told Serbia’s Tanjug news agency. The recently adopted law on religion has angered both DF and the largest faith group in the country, the Serbian Orthodox Church, SPC, and tens of thousands of people have been marching twice weekly in the streets in protest against it. Knezevic is one of the leaders of pro-Serbian DF, the largest opposition coalition in the country. Together with another

DF leader, Andrija Mandic, he was sentenced last May to five years in prison for staging an attempted coup in 2016. In the first-instance verdict, the Higher Court sentenced a total of 13 people, including two Russian military intelligence officers, eight Serbs and two Montenegrin opposition leaders for staging a coup attempt. Defense lawyers said they would appeal. Earlier, in March 2018, Knezevic served a four-month prison sentence for assaulting a Police Officer during the October 2015 crackdown on opposition protests. Knezevic also faces fresh charges over a violent incident in Parliament before the vote was taken on the new law on religion. On December 27th, 2019 Police detained all 18 DF Deputies because they had rushed at the Speaker, trying to stop the vote on the law. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- January 31st, two political leaders that attended the meeting recently held between part of the opposition and Metropolitan Amfilohije Radovic proposed formation of a unique opposition election list. Pobjeda sources who attended the meeting said that Amfilohije *“evidently ignored”* the idea, declining to elaborate further on it. They also said that he declined direct calls from Democratic Front (Demokratski Front - DF) for the radicalization of protests. *“We should try to unite political forces in the opposition and everybody should sit at the same table. We are going together in the fight for the freedom of Montenegro and that means formation of one list,”* one leader of political parties was quoted as saying. Other political leaders said that it was not possible to discuss the idea at that moment since President of the Democrats, Aleksa Becic, was not attending the meeting. As sources cited, Metropolitan Amfilohije said that *“brotherly*

reconciliation” and harmony among orthodox population was necessary. The meeting was intended to be held in secrecy. However, the plan dropped because participants were seen in front of Cetinje monastery. According to Pobjeda, leader of the Movement for Changes (Pokret za Promjene - PzP), Nebojsa Medojevic, said in his address that the President, Milos Djukanovic’s political destiny depended on Metropolitan Amfilohije. Amfilohije did not react to Medojevic’s claims. (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Human rights, media freedom and democratic order are under alert in Montenegro. The state’s authorities arrest politicians, politicians’ family members, journalists and activists in the name of “hybrid threats hysteria.” Law on religious freedoms has opened the “Aeolus bags of wings” for the ruling DPS. What opposition failed to achieve so far will succeed it via the religious factor. President Milos Djoukanovic did not foresee that his political decision on religious freedoms law would have challenged the religious element and faith of Orthodox Christians; the majority of Montenegrin people. Political decisions and actions by the ruling DPS from here and now will determine political atmosphere in the country. If Police and other security stakeholders exercise excessive violence against protesters then tension will be escalated rapidly. Serbia keeps an eye in Montenegro trying to capitalize tension in the country in the name not only of the Serbian Orthodox Church but also of Serbs live in Montenegro. The Serbian factor could be under certain conditions to act destabilizing. Corruption, smuggling and money laundering are dominated in the country setting

significant obstacles and risks for every investor. Besides, such situation has strongly affected progress of accession negotiations with the EU. Montenegro needs more concrete reforms in the field of justice, rule of law, fight against corruption, money laundering, and organized crime, public administration transparency and accountability in order to become a stable and attractive investment environment. The country focuses on strengthening its Armed Forces by purchasing modern equipment and reducing the average age of its military personnel (currently 37 years old).



NORTH MACEDONIA: January 30th, the US Ambassador to North Macedonia Kate Byrnes said that she expects a peaceful transition of power following the April 12th, 2020 elections. The Ambassador asked for a fair campaign and that the next Government remains committed to Euro-Atlantic integration. “We expect to see smooth and fair elections, we expect to see following the elections a smooth transition to a new Government that remains committed to implementing reforms that would take this country forward on its path to Euro-Atlantic integration. In this regard it is incumbent on political leaders and candidates to focus on the issues, not on personal attacks, to allow space for good discussion and good discourse, and not for external and other internal influences that would seek to disrupt or denigrate the democratic processes,” Byrnes said, adding that the US Embassy will be closely following the elections. The Ambassador also called on the future Government, if led by Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна

македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE), not to give up on the “Prespa” treaty that Zoran Zaev signed with Greece. *“This is a real concern and citizens should not be confused or misled at what is at stake in this process. It is important to remember that good neighborly relations are a prerequisite for integration to Euro-Atlantic institutions, for the membership to NATO and the EU. We recognize that ‘Prespa’ was a compromise, it required tough negotiations and concessions on all sides, but what ‘Prespa’ did was ultimately unlock the path for North Macedonia to become a NATO ally and pursue its path to the EU,”* Byrnes added. Byrnes spoke with the Sitel TV in an interview where she also asked the parties to approve a new law on state Prosecutors before the elections. This became a serious priority for North Macedonia given the spectacular meltdown of the Special Prosecutor’s Office, which is now spreading to other branches of the judiciary. Adopting the law is also seen as a pre-condition for North Macedonia to be allowed to open EU accession talks, which were denied in October 2019. *“We were indeed very deeply disappointed that in October the EU was unable to reach a positive decision and to issue an invitation for North Macedonia to open its accession negotiations. That said we are heartened that in past weeks we have seen more positive statements from EU leaders and EU capitals. We are hopeful that in the coming weeks and months, even by March, there will be a very positive signal. That said, there are things that North Macedonia can do. The EU has specifically cited some things which include continuing reforms, holding smooth and fair elections, maintaining good neighborly relations with*

neighboring countries. That means pursuing those reforms, passing the PPO law, fighting corruption, creating the economic reforms and environment necessary to attract investment,” Byrnes added. (www.republika.mk)

- January 30th, The North Macedonia’s Parliament will ratify the NATO accession protocol on February 11th, 2020 just before the legislative body is dissolved in preparation of the early elections on April 12th, 2020. Speaker Talat Xhaferi said that he will invite leaders of the main parties, Hristijan Mickoski and Zoran Zaev, to the session, as well as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Parliament representatives from regional NATO members. It is expected that Spain, the last remaining NATO member which has not ratified North Macedonia’s accession, will do so by then. Xhaferi also said that he is prepared to convene the Parliament if a two thirds majority is provided to adopt the new law on state Prosecutors. The leading parties are locked in a heated debate over the law, which would determine which direction will the on-going campaign to go after top politicians for alleged corruption take after the elections. The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) party has made full use of the SPO and OJO services of state Prosecutors to go after the opposition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) party, but is now resisting calls that the opposition appoints a Prosecutor to look into the numerous corruption scandals of the

nearly three years long SDSM term in office. (www.republika.mk)

- January 31st, political parties to submit amendments on the Public Prosecution law by Saturday noon. A meeting will probably be held Monday to discuss which of the amendments will be accepted, Justice Minister Renata Deskoska said Friday after the meeting of the working group on the draft-law on the public Prosecutor's Office with representatives of MP groups. Deskoska said after the meeting that some of the parties submitted amendments at today's meeting, some announced that they would do so tomorrow, while Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) submitted remarks that the experts presented at the public debate organized over the draft law. Deskoska said that VMRO-DPMNE, which submitted remarks by experts, was also asked to prepare amendments as the other political parties and submit them by Saturday noon. VMRO-DPMNE, however, called on the Ministry of Justice to organize a meeting with legal experts who made remarks at the public hearing and together with them to make amendments to the draft-law. (www.republika.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

As long as elections are coming closer political confrontation between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE is getting tougher. As it was expected the "Prespa" agreement is in the forefront of the debate. VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski claimed that if he will get a 2/3

parliamentary majority he will seek to cancel the agreement. It is a tricky statement since it is estimated that it almost impossible for his party to elect 80 MPs in the 120-seat Parliament. It is rather a populist statement which is addressed to the nationalist group of voters. Failure of opening accession negotiations with the EU, scandals and corruption cases, is expected to be also in the main issues of political debate. The EU monitors the pre-election process and, as the French Ambassador to Skopje claimed, successful elections will be decisive for North Macedonia's opening of accession negotiations. At the moment, North Macedonia has political uncertainty and next day of election it needs a strong Government to proceed with necessary reforms and securing opening of accession negotiations with the EU within 2020. The country should focus on reforms regarding justice, rule of law, fight against corruption and money laundering, administration, and respect of human rights in order to accelerate its European integration process.



ROMANIA: January 28th, Minister of National Defense Nicolae Ciuca was in Portugal for a two-day official visit at the invitation of his counterpart, Joao Gomes Cravinho, to set the main steps for the strengthening of the Romanian Air Force F-16 multirole aircraft fleet by the purchase of the five more fighter jets, the Defense Ministry said in a release. In addition to the 12 aircraft already purchased, the Air Force will buy from Portugal four more F-16 Fighting Falcons this year and a fifth in 2021, said the Romanian official. *"It is a visit that complements the steps initiated several years ago, when Romania decided to create an air combat capability on the F-16 platform,"* Ciuca

said, referring also to the consolidation of the Romanian air industry. *“We have not yet established the stages and technical phases for these developments. What it has been established today is the general framework and the requirement that everything that happens next be targeted at the creation of this maintenance capability in the Romanian air industry,”* the Defense Minister said. He mentioned that Portugal’s OGMA and the US Lockheed Martin have expressed their willingness to support the Romanian defense industry and that from the discussions coordinated by the Ministry of Economy, Aerostar Bacau and Romaero Bucharest have emerged as the possible locations for the maintenance works to be carried out in Romania. *“For Romania, this will also materialize in the transfer of knowledge and technology to its defense industry, enabling it to start during this contract everything related to the technical procedures for modernizing both the aircraft to be purchased, and the already existing 12 planes. (...) With the acquisition of these five jets we will be able to develop a maintenance capability of these platforms in Romania and this will be done by continuing cooperation with the Portuguese side and also with the direct involvement of Lockheed Martin,”* Ciuca said. Cravinho said that two F-16 aircrafts will be handed over to Romania in June, another two – in October, and a fifth one early next year. *“Portugal and Romania share the same vision regarding the challenges and threats to NATO,”* Cravinho said, according to the same release quoted by Agerpres. In December last year Romania and Portugal signed the contract for the purchase of a new lot of 5 F-16 Fighting Falcons which complement the 12-strong fleet acquired over 2014 – 2017 and are part of the major

“Romanian Air Force multi-role aircraft” endowment program. (www.nineoclock.ro)

- January 28th, The National Bureau of the Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România - USR) - Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party (Partidul Libertății, Unității și Solidarității - PLUS) alliance formed by the reformist parties USR and PLUS decided at the joint alliance meeting, to request a mandate from organizations to organize a merger congress in July, G4media reported quoting a press release issued by the alliance. The decision marks the acceleration of the merger process, after PLUS leader Dacian Ciolos said in an interview on January 21st, 2020 that the merger is scheduled for after the parliamentary elections (expected this autumn), because the alliance is currently focusing on the local and parliamentary elections. USR President Dan Barna confirmed at that time the merger calendar. In order to explain the change in plans, Ciolos explained to G4Media.ro that he insisted on *“sending a public signal for the merger with USR in order to avoid any doubts and interpretations, after information circulated in media about negotiations on how the two parties will be represented on the lists for the local elections. The logic behind this explanation seems to be that such negotiations would undermine credibility of the alliance.”* USR decided on Saturday to go to the negotiations with PLUS for the lists of candidates in the local elections with the ratio of 3 to 1, that is three USR candidates to one from PLUS, USR sources told G4Media.ro. (www.romania-insider.com)

- January 31st, the main opposition party in Romania; the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD) submitted on Thursday, January 30th, 2020 a no-confidence motion against

the Liberal Government in response to the executive taking responsibility in Parliament on a draft law that reintroduces the voting of Mayors in two rounds. Prime Minister Ludovic Orban said that his Government is prepared for any scenario and that his party is heading towards winning the elections and forming a robust majority. The permanent bureaus of the two Chambers will table, next Monday, the calendar for the reading, debating and voting the motion in a dedicated sitting, local News.ro reported. Under the procedures, the motion must be read to lawmakers within 5 days after it was submitted and the debates followed by a vote should take place within another three days. Leader of the PSD deputies, Alfred Simonis, announced on Thursday, after submitting the motion, that his party can count on over 233 votes, which is the minimum needed for it to pass, and the reading and voting of the motion will not be delayed very long. The motion was submitted by PSD and ethnic Hungarians' party Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România - UDMR), backed by 208 MPs at the time it was filed. (www.romania-insider.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Opposition PSD filed a censure motion against the PNL's Government claiming it has the necessary votes to achieve its goal to topple it. Political instability and uncertainty is emerging again in the country. However, this no-confidence motion works in favor of PNL's political plans which seek to push the country towards early parliamentary elections. PNL leaders decided to call for early elections due to favorable conditions for their party to win. PSD is in a transition process and even its Chairman is an

interim one. The fact is that Romania needs early elections in order a strong Government with new mandate to come in power ensuring political stability of the country. Besides a strong Government will forward reforms regarding fight against corruption and modernizing public administration. The country enjoys advanced upgrade in US and NATO strategic plans due to its geographical position located close to Russia. Consequently, Russia reacts in this close military cooperation between the two countries and the Alliance perceiving it as a threat against its national security. Romania keeps strengthening its Armed Forces seeking to achieve NATO standards.



SERBIA: January 27th, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic called an urgent meeting of top security officials on Monday night over what the Serbian State TV (RTS) said was an unspecified deterioration of the situation in the region. "A meeting is underway which President Vucic called urgently because of the deteriorated situation in the region," the RTS said. It added the meeting was being attended by Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic, Internal Affairs Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic, Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin and the country's top intelligence and security agency (BIA) Director Bratislav Gasic. No press release was issued after the meeting. The RTS said in its early morning news on Tuesday that the meeting was called over the beating of a young man in the Montenegrin capital Podgorica during a mass gathering for the return of the national waterpolo team which won the bronze at the European championships. The RTS quoted other media outlets which alleged that the young man had been beaten after he showed the Serb three

finger salute. The RTS said that the BIA would ask its Montenegrin counterpart for more information. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- February 1st, leaders of Serbia's opposition formally marked the beginning of their campaign for the boycott of the forthcoming general elections in Serbia, saying they would fight for fair vote and the change of the system, and then joined demonstrators in the street, and those who earlier protested in support of N1 the Beta news agency reported on Saturday. Dragan Djilas, the leader of the Party of Freedom and Justice (Stranka Slobode i Pravde - SSP), said that those who would take part in the ballot in spring "work to the benefit of the Head of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (and Head of the state) Aleksandar Vucic." "On those [electoral] lists is only one name 'Vucic' and the name of all of those who will enter the Parliament is 'Vucic'," he said. Leader of the People's Party (Narodna Stranka - NS) Vuk Jeremic said that "in healthy countries, people were not divided to 'we and they', while that was the case in Serbia as a consequence of totalitarian regime. Remember, whatever he [Vucic] does or says, stay at home on the election day. Do not turn out for general, local or provincial vote, because the only way is a total boycott," he said. Bosko Obradovic, leader of the nationalist Serbian Movement Dveri (Srpski pokret Dveri) requested "immediate resignation of Vucic and [Prime Minister Ana] Brnabic, since they have never won in free and fair elections." Following their gathering, the opposition leaders joined a civil protest in the street which continued with the traditional Saturday's walk and ended outside the state RTS TV building in downtown Belgrade. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- February 2nd, Nikola Selakovic, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's Chief of Staff, told the Belgrade Prva TV that the parliamentary and local elections in the country would be held on April 26th, 2020. Vucic earlier said they could be called for April 19th or 26th, but the latter was chosen since the Orthodox Christians celebrate Easter a week before. The leading opposition group the Alliance for Serbia (Savez za Srbiju - SzS) officially launched the boycott campaign on Saturday. Vucic's ruling Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka - SNS) has submitted a motion to the Parliament to lower the election threshold from 5 to 3%, thus enabling smaller parties to enter the Assembly and reduce the effect of the boycott. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Serbian politics are entering in a crucial period for the country's stability. Parliamentary and local elections will be held on April 26th, 2020 but opposition has already announced the beginning of its boycott campaign. It is expected a polarized atmosphere, while opposition's boycott raises question of legitimacy over the coming elections. As already "HERMES" claimed such political behavior is a sign of immature democracy which is not ready to adopt and follow rules. Of course the Government carries the burden and responsibility to improve electoral procedure, strengthen media freedom and ensure free and fair elections but it is assessed that from the very first moment the opposition did not actually seek to join the elections. In other words, opposition failed to offer tangible solutions to political deadlock; on the contrary it became part of the problem. Serbia needs political stability since it has a lot of diplomatic, security and economic

challenges ahead. Kosovo is going to have a new Government after the agreement reached Vetevendosje and LDK. It is interesting to see how the new Kosovo Government will move towards 100% taxes on Serbian goods and its intentions about the dialogue with Serbia. However, Serbian elections will block any further progress in Belgrade – Pristina negotiations. The US and EU push both sides for a quick solution but it is doubtful if it will be achieved. Montenegro – Serbia relations are in low level lately due to the Montenegrin law on religious freedom which is considered by Belgrade as a direct attack on Serbian Orthodox Church and consequently on Serbian population in Montenegro. The country has developed very close relations with Russia, especially in the field of defense. Russia keeps supplying Serbia with weapons, while both countries conduct common military exercises. In other words, Serbia is trying to balance between the west, namely the EU and the US on one side and Russia on the other. The EU has raised serious concerns over Serbia's effectiveness on independence and accountability of the judiciary, freedom of expression, prevention of corruption and the fight against organized crime. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its Armed Forces declaring towards all sides that they are the power of the state. It implements an ambitious armament program mainly supported by Russia.



SLOVENIA: January 27th,

Slovenia's Prime Minister Marjan Sarec has announced he is stepping down in a bid to push for a snap election, the national news agency STA reported on Monday. The reason for Sarec's resignation is that *“he could not achieve what he*

set out to do with the current minority coalition,” the news agency said. Sarec announced his decision at a news conference in Ljubljana. After that, the Finance Minister in his cabinet, Andrej Bertonec, also resigned. *“Finance Minister Andrej Bertonec has stepped down, presumably over differences regarding a bill scrapping top-up health insurance. The Finance Ministry cited ‘technical reasons’,”* the STA news agency said explaining that details are to be presented by Prime Minister Marjan Sarec in a statement. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- January 30th, a biennial visit conducted at the end of last week by NATO inspectors checking compliance with targets has reportedly produced the conclusion that Slovenia is becoming an increasingly heavy burden for the Alliance, having for years now failed to meet the promises given. While the details of the review are not known, Radio Slovenija said it had obtained parts of the draft records, which show the inspectors noticed no progress in the past two years despite the improved economic conditions in the country. (www.sta.si)

- January 31st, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) announced on Friday that it does not have jurisdiction to rule on a Slovenian case against Croatia over alleged infringements of European law resulting from Croatia's refusal to implement a border arbitration ruling, the Luxembourg-based court stated today. The decision on non-jurisdiction means that Croatia's arguments are accepted and further proceedings cease automatically. Rulings handed down by the CJEU are final and cannot be appealed. Slovenia had brought its case against Croatia invoking EU treaty law which orders respect for the rule of law and loyal co-operation

between member states, as it claims that Croatia's refusal to accept the 2017 border arbitration ruling is in breach of EU law. The arbitration, which was an attempt to solve a decades old dispute between the two former Yugoslav states which are now EU members, concerns the exact demarcation of their land and sea border. Both countries agreed to the arbitration prior to Croatia's EU membership in 2013. However, in 2015 Croatia withdrew from the process over of a scandal involving leaked tapes which showed that a Slovenian government official had contacted and discussed the case with the court's judge. In spite of Croatia's withdrawal, the court made a ruling in 2017, which Slovenia considers binding for both parties. Croatia, on the other hand, keeps insisting that the arbitration had been irreversibly tainted by the scandal, and does not recognize the ruling. Successive Zagreb Governments have called Slovenia back to the table to settle the dispute through bilateral negotiations. (www.hr.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Marjan Sarec's minority Government collapsed after the prime Minister's resignation. Snap elections are the possible scenario but a new ruling coalition could not be excluded. Political instability blocks significant reforms in the field of healthcare, pensions etc. Rejection of Slovenia's case against Croatia on border dispute creates new conditions between the two countries on this issue. Croatia has started on calling for dialogue but it is doubtful what Slovenia will finally decide to do. Besides, Slovenia could push Croatia on this case taking into consideration that Croatia needs Slovenia's support to enter the Schengen zone and OECD. The issue of illegal migrants entering Slovenia mainly from Croatia is high in

the agenda lately. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The annual report on the Armed Forces operational readiness released by the Armed Forces Chief of Staff is disappointing since it assessed that the Armed Forces have limited operational capabilities in war time namely they cannot accomplish their mission. Announcement of White Book on Defense last week presented a rather ambitious program of improving operational capabilities of the Armed Forces. It foresees an 8,000-strong professional military force and a 2000-strong standing reserve by 2035, up from 6,400 and 700, respectively. Slovenia's defense budget will finally reach 2% of GDP (a NATO requirement) by 2035.



TURKEY: January 30th, US President Donald Trump's so-called peace plan for the Middle East aims to legitimize Israel's occupation and destruction of Palestine, Turkey's National Security Council (MGK) said in a statement Thursday. *"The US' so-called peace plan aims to legitimize occupation, destruction and oppression of Palestine,"* the MGK said. *"The only solution is the establishment of an independent Palestine on the basis of the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital,"* the council said in a statement issued following its meeting, headed by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in the capital Ankara. Trump on Tuesday unveiled the long-awaited peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although it had already been roundly rejected by Palestinians. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was with Trump at the White House for the announcement, but no Palestinian officials were present. In a news conference, Trump said that Jerusalem will remain Israel's *"undivided*

capital.” Speaking later in the day, President Erdogan described the plan an “*occupation project*.” Speaking at the fifth Anatolian Media Awards ceremony in the capital Ankara, Erdogan said “*Jerusalem is not for sale*.” Condemning the so-called “*Deal of the Century*,” the President said, “*Jerusalem is a red line for us*.” Turkey also conveyed its concerns to Washington. Turkey's presidential Spokesman, İbrahim Kalın, discussed the plan late Thursday in a phone call with US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien, as well as developments in Syria and Libya. Kalın emphasized that Turkey supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the creation of an independent and sovereign Palestine state based on the 1967 borders and with East Jerusalem as its capital.



Turkey's National Security Council January 30th,
2020 meeting

(Photo source: www.mgk.gov.tr)

Turkey will not support any plan that Palestinians reject in the region, Kalın stressed over the phone. Turkey's Foreign Ministry reiterated that Turkey would not support any plan that is not accepted by Palestinian authorities, adding that peace in the Middle East would not be obtained if policies based on occupation did not end. The Ministry also stressed that Jerusalem was a red line in the eyes of Turkey. The MGK also touched upon other regional developments, particularly war-

ravaged Syria and Libya. The council stressed the importance of taking further measures against terrorism in various parts of Syria, especially Idlib. The MGK also emphasized the need to preserve the cease-fire in Libya, saying “*All countries invited to support efforts to establish (a) permanent cease-fire*.” “*Turkey condemns attack in Somalia where Turkish citizens were among casualties*,” the Council further stated. In the statement, tensions between Iran and US over the assassination of Quds Force Commander General Qassem Soleimani were also mentioned. The council reiterated its call for “*common sense and clear-headedness*.” (www.dailysabah.com)

- February 2nd, Turkish-Pakistani ties get stronger every day in all the areas, said Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan, highlighting the two countries' decades-long past. “*Relations of people who live in the lands we call Pakistan with Turkey dates back to the 1920s when there was a Khilafat movement. This movement was initially established to stop the attacks on Turkey coming from everywhere possible and help the country as a whole*,” Khan stated. Speaking to Anadolu Agency (AA) in an exclusive interview, he added that Indian Muslims and people in Pakistan also collected money for Turkey when it was under the occupation of the European powers back then. “*Turkish people still remember that monetary aid from this side of the world with gratitude*,” Khan expressed, underlining that the basis of the brotherly ties today dates back to this incident. Emphasizing that today bilateral relations are quite close, Khan indicated that ties are building up in all areas. As far as trade relations are concerned, Khan said that in February, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is expected to visit Pakistan alongside businessmen and

entrepreneurs. *“Our aim is to improve trade ties. For instance, Pakistan and Turkey can cooperate in mining work,”* the Prime Minister stated, underlining the wealth of Pakistan in terms of mine resources such as gold, copper and coal. *“However,”* Khan said, *“we are not able to research these resources or extract them. When Erdogan comes, we will discuss these issues, among others.”* Khan added that Pakistan also wants to make technology transfers from Turkey. *“Strategic and diplomatic relations will be another major topic in our agenda,”* the Prime Minister highlighted. There are many things that Turkey and Pakistan share in common and thus, the countries have always supported each other. For instance, Turkey has backed Pakistan at all times, including on the issue of Kashmir in all possible forums. Pakistan, on the other hand, has stood by Turkey on tensions with Greece and Cyprus. The two also often cooperated on international conflict issues. This joint stance on diplomatic and political issues reflected on the economy as well, leading to stable and indestructible economic ties. (www.dailysabah.com)

- February 2nd, Turkey has deployed additional armed vehicles and soldiers to its border with Syria as an intensifying military push by Syrian Government forces in the country's last major rebel-held stronghold has prompted fears of a new refugee crisis. Backed by Russian jets, the Syrian troops have recently made large advances in Idlib province during the deadly offensive that has forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee towards safer areas near the Turkish border, according to the UN. The Syrian Government's campaign has shattered a fragile ceasefire that was brokered last month by Turkey and

Russia, raising tensions between the two countries which back opposing sides in the conflict but have also cooperated in attempts to find a solution to the almost nine-year-old war. Turkish state media reported on Sunday that the deployment of tanks and other armored vehicles to Reyhanli district of Hatay province was completed earlier in the day. *“Turkey would do what is necessary diplomatically or militarily in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib and keep the region stable,”* Ahmet Berat Conkar, a member of the Turkish Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, told Al Jazeera. *“Ankara would not hesitate to intervene if the Syrian Government offensive turns into a catastrophe,”* Conkar said. *“We need to protect our border against any kind of threat, particularly terrorism, and control it in case of a refugee flow against the backdrop of the attacks going on in Idlib,”* he said. The UN said on Wednesday that almost 390,000 people - the vast majority of them women and children - had fled their homes in northwestern Syria since December 1st, 2019. Turkey hosts more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees and is wary of a fresh influx. Idlib is home to approximately three million people, half of whom were transferred there en masse from other parts of Syria that were taken by Government forces. Damascus and Moscow maintain the military operation in Idlib is aimed at driving out *“terrorists”* from the region, in accordance with a 2018 de-escalation agreement reached between Russia, Iran and Turkey. The Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham armed group, a former al-Qaeda affiliate that is considered by Russia and Turkey a *“terrorist”* organization, controls a large portion of Idlib. Conkar, who is also a senior legislator in the governing Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP),

said Ankara was not opposed to operations against “terrorists” but stressed that civilians should not be harmed. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently warned that Ankara may launch a cross-border military operation in Idlib unless fighting there was quickly halted. Ankara has 12 military observation posts around Idlib, set up in line with the 2018 deal for de-escalation zones in the region, but several of them have since been surrounded or have come under fire by advancing Syrian Government forces. Moscow and Ankara also cooperated late last year in establishing the borders of a so-called safe-zone in a separate region in northeastern Syria following an operation against Kurdish fighters dubbed “terrorists” by Turkey. (www.aljazeera.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Turkey exercises a multilateral, multifaceted, dynamic external policy ensuring its national interests. Enjoying a pivotal geographic location is engaged in several regional challenges. Despite that, enjoys special relationship with great powers such as the US and Russia. The Preseident Recep Tayyip Erdogan made clear publically that “Turkish security is beyond its borders.” This statement summarizes the security doctrine of Turkey; Turkey will be engaged in regional challenges, conflicts and cooperation to ensure its security. Turkish engagement in Syria, Libya, Cyprus is explained by this doctrine. The country combines both diplomatic means and “hard” power aiming to achieve its goals. Turkey achieved so far to establish a safe zone within Syria eliminating the Kurdish threat. Moreover, it launches several military operations in Southeast Turkey and Eastern Iraq against PKK. It has conducted hydrocarbon drills in Mediterranean

Sea within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and presents its aeronautical power against Greece and Cyprus questioning their sovereign rights. Finally, it sends troops in Libya aiming to have a “say” in North Africa developments. Of course it is a NATO member and enjoys a special relationship with Russia. Without any question, Turkey has the characteristics of a regional superpower and it tries to act like one. It is assessed that its relations with the US will never reach a “zero point” since Turkey is an integral and critical part of the western security architecture. Under these circumstances an armed conflict or a “hot” incident could not be excluded in the Aegean Sea, the Cypriot territorial waters or southeast of Crete. Definitely Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in the region and is expected to react violently if balance of power is jeopardized. Turkey has been outraged by the Cypriot, Egyptian, Greek and Israeli cooperation in the fields of energy and defense. It declares that any possible project in the Eastern Mediterranean should include Turkey or it will not be sustainable. The Turkish – Libyan agreement on delimitation of maritime zones was a major step which gives to Turkey a central role in Eastern Mediterranean cutting the Greek, Cypriot and Egyptian EEZs in the middle. Tension will break out when Turkey will try to exercise its rights in the declared EEZ. Moreover, it is assessed that Turkey works intensively to divide the quadrilateral cooperation of Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and Israel by setting bilateral delimitation of EEZs with Egypt (and Israel as a second thought). Syrian offensive in Idlib is testing not only the Turkish patience but its relations with Russia. Turkey will not abandon Idlib and that is why it reinforces its troops. The country continues


to face several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs, Mayors, journalists and thousands of citizens are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Turkey develops an ambitious armament project aiming at becoming self-sufficient in defense sector; if it succeeds it will set the base to become a regional military super power.


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NOTE

 *Stable situation. No security risk.*

 *Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored.*

 *Major concerns over stability and security. significant security risk in specific regions. Low tension incidents.*

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

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