



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

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

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

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ALBANIA: February 4th, the entire chain of command at the Pashaliman naval base has been discharged following a theft of weapons and ammunitions which occurred due to administrative irresponsibility. Authorities discharged 15 Officers, starting from the base Commander and his Deputy, punishing them for the theft that took place between January 9th – 10th, 2019 within the base grounds, where several weapons and different quantities of cartridges and grenades were stolen. The decision was made after an administrative investigation conducted by the General Army Staff, which then proposed to the Minister of Defense, Olta Xhacka the measures. Xhacka also signed the request to dismiss the Head of Navy Force, Major General Ylber Dogjani. All of them are accused of shortcomings in basic security measures. Two officers and guards responsible for the theft were arrested right after the incident under the charges of *“violating watchdog rules in important facilities resulting in armed robbery.”* Official data suggests that on January 9th, 2019 at midnight, two automatic weapons, a carbine, 40 grenades and about 5,500 different types of cartridges, including high power rifle bullets, were stolen. The investigation revealed the theft was carried out when the guard responsible had abandoned the post and was located in another place while the rules of service control and guard shifts were also not respected. The Pashaliman base is one of the most important military facilities where the coastal fleet is docked, carrying out controls of the Albanian maritime borders and operations in the framework of NATO forces in Albania. (www.tiranatimes.com)

- February 7th, over 170 officials and former Albanian officials, along with their families, have

been denied or revoked visas for travel to the United States since 2017. The U.S Embassy in Tirana said the US takes corruption allegations very seriously and emphasized that it will harden its procedures for U.S visa applications by Albania’s public officials. *“Since the refusal to allow entry to several Judges and Prosecutors in January 2017, the US Embassy has denied travel visas to more than 170 current and former public officials, as well as to their family members. The position of the U.S Embassy and its intention to deny entry to corrupted officials remains unchanged,”* the U.S Embassy statement said. During the past two years, the U.S Department of State has publicly banned former Albanian Prosecutor General Adriatik Llalla and current member of Parliament Tom Doshi from entering the U.S due to their involvement in significant corruption. The debate on U.S visas received more attention recently as the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama hinted the US has refused a travel visa to former Prime Minister Sali Berisha. The U.S Embassy has refused to confirm the allegations and has not given any specific names of the 170 officials banned from entry. However, the so called *“black list”* compiled by the U.S authorities to combat corruption in third countries includes several known public names, predominantly in the field of Justice. Albania is currently implementing a milestone reform of its highly corrupted justice system under the strong U.S and EU pressure to show credible results in its fight against corruption and organized crime. (www.tiranaecho.com)

- February 7th, Albania’s ambitious plans to build a new airport south of the country and launch a flag carrier in cooperation with Turkish investors and the Turkish Government are heading toward failure. Negotiations with a Turkish consortium

that has built Istanbul's third airport, set to become one of the world's largest, have so far failed to produce an outcome and plans to launch the much-rumored Air Albania national carrier with Turkish Airlines, where the Turkish Government has a 49% stake, have also received a blow following a test flight from Tirana to Istanbul last September. The idea for creating a national air company was announced on July 2017 as an initiative between the Prime Minister Edi Rama and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The initiative was made official one year later. On June 2018, Air Albania was created as a company with three shareholders; Turkish Airlines, MDN Investment, and Albcontrol. According to media sources the airplanes received from Turkish Airlines were taken back to Turkey. (www.tiranatimes.com, www.top-channel.tv)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political struggle between the Prime Minister, Edi Rama and President, Ilir Meta is ongoing. Both continue to blockade each other's political initiatives and decisions. Although opposition puts pressure on the Government, it is assessed that the ruling majority is stable and its collapse is rather unlikely due to opposition's weakness for such an "achievement". However, opposition urges citizens to join protests against the Government in an effort to push it for early parliamentary elections. The Government is accused of having links with organized crime and current situation raises questions over the power of "Albanian mafia" in the country and its influence in state's politics. Undoubtedly, corruption and organized crime remains the most significant state's problem undermining its strategic goal of opening accession negotiations with the EU. The EU closely monitors progress of

reforms especially in justice sector. Latest European Parliament assessment on Albania accession negotiations is a rather positive sign underlining concerns over specific issues such as corruption, justice reforms, and implementation of rule of law. The final decision for opening Albania's accession negotiations in June 2019 is up to the EU Heads of Governments. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a "mother nation." It is estimated that Albania will fully comply with the EU and U.S "line" for territorial exchanges or border changes between Serbia and Kosovo if it is necessary for a mutual accepted solution. Albania maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and F.Y.R.O.M. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on promoting Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access. Possible border changes may engage Albania in dangerous situations taking into consideration that it has the role of "protector" of Albanians in the region. Security situation stable without major incidents or challenges.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

February 4th, there is no reason for halting the progress of joining NATO, as membership in the Alliance will bring security, stability and foreign investments that will keep the youth in the country, Bosnia's Defense Minister Marina Pendes told N1. "I am convinced that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina want peace, stability and security and that this could be a basis for investments that would make the youth stay here," the Minister said. "In that regard, I believe that there is no real reason for why the national

annual program should not be adopted,” she added. The Annual National Program is a “*tool for cooperation between NATO and the country,*” she explained. NATO Foreign Ministers approved last December the Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Bosnia and Herzegovina, the last step before full membership in the Alliance. However, NATO membership is a topic that divides Bosniak (Muslim of Bosnia), Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb representatives, with the former two groups seeking the country to join, while the Serbs firmly oppose it. The Serb-member of Bosnia’s tripartite Presidency, Milorad Dodik, who previously was in favor of Bosnia to join NATO, has changed his mind and he firmly rejects membership since he has taken over the Office in October last year. He has been arguing that Bosnia should stay militarily neutral as long as Serbia is and that NATO membership would cost. “*Bosnia has a legal obligation when it comes to its NATO path,*” Pendes said adding that “*everyone should take that into consideration.*” “*I believe that we should completely implement the conclusions of the Presidency,*” she said, referring to a previous decision of the Presidency that said the country should join NATO. “*Every membership has its costs, it depends on what the benefits would be,*” she said. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- February 5th, after debating for hours, a bloc of the strongest centre-left parties in the country, the BH Bloc, announced it would rather remain opposition than enter into a governing coalition with any nationalist parties, including the main Bosniak one. The BH Bloc consists of the Democratic Front (Demokratska Fronta - DF), the Social Democratic Party (Socijaldemokratska Partija - SDP) and Our Party (Naša Stranka - NS). The three main nationalist parties in Bosnia once

again received last October most of the votes at the state level election, but also at the level of the country’s two semi-autonomous entities, the Federation (FBiH) and Republika Srpska (RS). These parties are, for the Serbs the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrataor - SNSD), for the Croats the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH), and for the Bosniaks - the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA). The BH Bloc won a significant number of seats at the state and FBiH entity levels which made the parties within it an attractive option for the ethnic-oriented parties to try and form an alliance with. After the election, SDA leader, Bakir Izetbegovic said he hoped the parties could be part of the governing coalition. But on Tuesday, the bloc said no to the idea. According to DF leader Zeljko Komsic, the decision was made in order to keep the bloc united. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- February 7th, authorities of Bosnia's Serb-dominated entity Republika Srpska (RS) plan to form two Commissions that would be dealing with the suffering of the Serbs in Sarajevo and suffering of all peoples in the eastern town of Srebrenica during the 1992-95 Bosnian war. The RS Government discussed the appointment of the Commissions’ members which will be formed, as the Government members said, to “*reconcile these and future generations.*” “*These two Commissions will be dealing with the suffering of people in the Srebrenica region and in Sarajevo, in the period 1992-95. This is a very delicate and difficult issue, and I'd like to say that this considers piety for all victims but also collecting of all relevant data regarding the horrors of the past war we all had experienced,*” said RS Justice

Minister Anton Kasipovic, addressing a press conference after the Government session. Bosnia's main ethnic groups do not have a common stance on the events that took place during the war in the early 1990s. The leadership in the RS never accepted or acknowledged international Court rulings that what happened in Srebrenica was genocide, arguing that it was an atrocity that all sides in the war had suffered under. The RS authorities also deny taking part in some of the mass killings in the capital of Sarajevo, which were attributed to Bosnian Serb forces. This includes the biggest massacre that took place in the then-occupied capital, the Markale massacre. *“It is our goal to shed light on all facts of those tragic events, for the sake of the victims, families, coexistence,”* he said. Israeli historian Gideon Greif will head the Commission for Srebrenica, while academician of the same origin, Raphael Israeli, will be at the helm of the Commission for Sarajevo. Fears have been expressed by Bosniaks that the Commissions will attempt to rewrite history denying that the 1995 Srebrenica massacres by Bosnian Serb forces were genocide. *“The International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, ICTY, have both concluded that what happened in Srebrenica, in July 1995, was genocide. Everyone should respect court decisions and bravely face and accept the truth, regardless of how painful it was,”* the US Embassy said. *“The OHR [Office of the High Representative] reiterated that both international and local Courts characterized the events from July 1995 as genocide,”* said the High Representative’s Office. (www.ba.n1info.com, www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

“Ghosts” of the past keep on running after Bosnia’s people. The RS initiative to establish independent Commissions to probe crimes committed in Srebrenica and Sarajevo has triggered several reactions not only within the state, but also in international community. After SDA’s initiative to challenge RS’s name, SNSD’s Government challenges Srebrenica and Sarajevo’s war crimes. What an analyst can realize is that the hate and painful past keep undermining coexistence and reconciliation process of the three entities (Muslim Bosnians, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats). Bosnia has not a Government since October 7th, 2018 general elections. It seems that the three main parties representing the three constituent entities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats); HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) are reaching an agreement to cooperate in forming a Government bypassing their different views on main issues. Bosnia’s accession process towards NATO is the main disputable issue; Bosnian Serbs insist that the country should remain neutral staying out of NATO while the two other members of the tripartite Presidency set commitment to NATO accession as a precondition for supporting a Government. Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust. Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia’s internal affairs destabilizing the state. It is more than impressive that Bosnian Serbs and Croats came very close aiming at achieving their special goals. Of course, both entities take in advantage “Dayton Peace Agreement” weaknesses and malfunctions. Russia pays special attention in Serbia and Bosnia in order to maintain its influence in the region. Bulgaria,

Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and Montenegro have already entered NATO, while F.Y.R.O.M would join the Alliance on June 2019. These two countries (Serbia and Bosnia) are the only “vehicles” for Russia to maintain a narrow influence in Southeastern Europe. Election of ultra nationalist pro-Russian Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia’s EU and NATO (mostly) integration. Dodik is a person who does not actually believe in B&H viability and is expected to promote (actually, he has already started) his own political agenda. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey approach the country mainly through “investments” and/or funding ethnic or religious groups according to their interests.



BULGARIA: February 5th, Bulgaria's Ministry of Defense said that its drive to get people to enlist in the military will resume on February 7th, 2019 and continue until the end of October 2019. Titled “*Be a Soldier*” the campaign was launched by the Defense Ministry in October 2018, in a response to the serious shortfall of military personnel in Bulgaria, reports Army Recognition. The Ministry announced the establishment of information offices in 29 cities across Bulgaria for people who are interested in military service. Detailed information would be available about the requirements for applying to join the military, and also about specific posts in the Army, Air Force, Navy, Special Forces, National Guard, and the Military Police. In addition, there would be displays of weaponry and other military equipment, and performances by military bands to attract the public's attention, the Ministry said. (www.novinite.com)

- February 8th, if F.Y.R.O.M wants to be a full member of NATO and the EU, it should abide by the commitments it has made to Bulgaria and Greece, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Krasimir Karakachanov told Focus Radio. He added that the friendship treaty with Bulgaria and, respectively, the one with Greece include the renouncement of territorial claims and the renouncement of falsification of Bulgarian history. Karakachanov added that only when the real history of F.Y.R.O.M will replace the 70 year falsification in school books, he would be convinced that things were going in the right direction. “Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M] is hurrying to NATO because, like many Bulgarian politicians 20 years ago, they naively believe that joining NATO would nearly automatically solve all their problems. The membership in NATO is an opportunity to solve one’s problems, but without one’s participation and willingness no one else could solve them – neither Brussels nor the NATO Secretary General, nor any other member state, including Bulgaria,” said Karakachanov. He further said that if Bulgaria and Greece were not sure about Skopje’s commitments, F.Y.R.O.M’s membership in NATO and the EU would hardly become a reality. (www.novinite.com)



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense
Krasimir Karakachanov

(Photo source: www.mod.bg)

- February 8th, Bulgaria's Defense Ministry is to seek an external consultant for the project to acquire 150 armored and auxiliary infantry vehicles, Chief of Defense, General Andrei Botsev said. The project, which is among the main pillars of Bulgaria's military modernization is envisaged to cost about 746.5 million euro including Value-Added Tax, has like the other modernization projects been characterized by delays. Bulgaria's Defense Minister Krassimir Karakachanov, speaking at the annual Defence Chief's conference, described the infantry vehicle acquisition project as "more complicated" than the other two – the acquisition of fighter jets and naval patrol vessels – because of the specific requirement for the participation of Bulgarian companies. The project envisages that 20% of the money for the construction of the combat vehicles will go to Bulgarian companies. Karakachanov said that the opportunities and degree of participation of Bulgarian companies in the implementation of the project need to be clarified to prevent the procedure being challenged in Court. At the same time, questions have been raised whether the 20% threshold can be met. Bulgarian media quoted a senior military official as saying that at best, perhaps about five% of the production could be done in Bulgaria. It is possible that depending on the conclusions of the external consultant that will be sought, the draft of the project may have to go back to square one, because the approval of Bulgaria's Parliament will be required to change the terms. The project envisages the acquisition of 150 vehicles, including armored and support vehicles, along with special equipment, communication, and information systems and training for three Bulgarian Army Battalion groups. The armored vehicles should be 8×8 drive, while the specialized and auxiliary vehicles should be 6×6

and 4×4. Reportedly, the Army hopes that a Bulgarian company would produce the required NATO-standard cartridges for the machine guns, because the Western originals would be too expensive for the defense budget. The plan was to send out calls for proposals in January 2019, but this has not happened. The armored vehicles are essential for the Battalion groups, which are a basic NATO requirement for Bulgaria. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

The junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots looks like the vulnerable piece of the Governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus, Bulgaria has entered in a period of fragile political stability. The President Radev grabs every opportunity to criticize the Government (and the Prime Minister Borissov) highlighting his different political affiliation (Radev is backed by the opposition Socialists). Opposition BSP tries to push further Borisov and his Government by strengthening its rhetoric and having tabled three motions of no confidence so far. The country strengthened its efforts towards entering the Eurozone achieving a positive decision of the Eurogroup. However, the EC made clear that Bulgaria could not enter the Eurozone before 2022. Apart from that the European Parliament adopted a resolution for the accession of Bulgaria (and Romania) in Schengen Zone. However, it is questioned if the European Council will receive a unanimous final decision for Bulgaria under the current migration pressure. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles and should be addressed decisively. Although modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are

ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc) military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards. Security situation stable; no major threats.



CROATIA: February 6th, Hungary and Croatia are at odds over the INA oil and gas company, which Croatia privatized in 2003, with MOL buying into INA's ownership. MOL was subsequently allowed to obtain a slightly larger stake in INA than the Croatian Government and is alleged to have secured management rights in the company by bribing former Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader. The Hungarian suit is based on claims that Croatia has not met its obligations with regard to divesting INA's gas business from its core business. Government issued a statement today saying that the arbitration proceeding was still underway and that it is waiting for a final decision before making any comments on the case. The statement did, however, note very clearly that MOL has not suffered any damages in the process, but rather the Republic of Croatia has suffered serious financial damages as a result of corrupt contracts paid by MOL. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- February 7th, the Government has rejected an interpellation submitted by the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska Partija Hrvatske - SDP) regarding the failed attempt at acquiring 12 F-16 fighter jets from Israel. The Government rejected the motion, arguing Croatia was not to blame for the collapse of the deal. Defense Minister Damir Krsticevic said the SDP's demand for a formal report on the matter by the Government to lawmakers was unwarranted. *"Israel sent an official statement to Croatia reporting that, contrary to what it had promised,*

it could not secure the required approval of the US. The Republic of Croatia could not influence this outcome and is not responsible," Krsticevic said during Thursday's cabinet meeting. The Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said the Government did everything it could to acquire high-quality aircrafts that were well equipped. *"Unfortunately, because of circumstances beyond the Government's control, this transaction did not occur. There are lessons to be learned from this,"* Plenkovic said. The SDP's MP Pedja Grbin underlined the fact that the Prime Minister has pledged to do things differently next time, indicates mistakes were made. *"This procurement was riddled with mistakes. I am fully aware that they are trying to prove this wasn't so through certain media, but I believe we are smart enough and have the English skills to understand exactly what the United States had warned Croatia about,"* he said, referring to the correspondence sent by US officials warning Croatia that the US would not approve the deal unless Israel had removed its technology from the airplanes. The SDP's MP Igor Dragovan, the Head of the Defense Committee in Parliament, said the interpellation motion will give lawmakers the opportunity to address this issue openly and in detail. The leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ) in Parliament Branko Bacic said the ruling majority would vote against the motion. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- February 9th, the Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said in Sibenik there is no strategic goal the Government had not fulfilled, yet there are a lot to do and that demographic revival is one of the main tasks. *"There is no strategic goal we haven't fulfilled. We are in the club of the most developed world countries as a member of the*

EU, but we still have a lot to take care of. We are faced with population ageing. In Croatia, more people die than are born annually... and our fundamental task is to try to... change those trends, and we are working on that,” Plenkovic said. He said the population policy had started showing signs of success and that last year nearly 900 more children were born than in 2017. He said the present generation is privileged because it lived in an independent and internationally recognized Croatia. *“The recognition is not easy and didn't happen overnight,”* he said highlighting Croatia's accession to NATO and the EU. The Prime Minister said the economy is growing and that it is important for growth not to be based on new borrowing. Plenkovic said the Government would continue to reform justice and pension systems providing higher pensions. *“We are also working on making Croatia attractive for investment.”* He said the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ) would run *“in the next European elections to present a successful Croatia in Europe,”* voicing confidence that the party would *“triumph in the May 26 elections.”* (www.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Croatia follows a tough regional policy with neighboring countries. It is openly intervene in Bosnia's internal affairs, while it maintains open disputes with Slovenia, Serbia, and Bosnia. It is assessed that Croatia's strategic goal is to amend “Dayton Peace Agreement” achieving to recognize Bosnian Croats as a third entity in the country. It is more than obvious that Croatia tries to establish a leading role in Western Balkans not only as an EU and NATO member state but also as a rising “local” (Western Balkans) power. One should take into consideration that Croatia shows

its military strength and capabilities quite often not only in international, but also in national level sending strong messages to neighboring countries. Apart from that, Croatia pays special attention in energy strategy and security announcing ambitious projects. Although the President is a member of the ruling party, it is estimated that there is some kind of political distance between the President and Government. However, the state enjoys political stability. Border dispute on Piran Bay remains active and Slovenia's initiative to file a lawsuit against Croatia adds a new chapter between the two countries conflict. It is still a question how Croatia will react. The state accelerates its efforts towards accession in Schengen zone. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Failure to complete successfully the purchase of a modern fighter jet maintains a long period of an ineffective and weak Croatian Air Force.



CYPRUS: February 4th, the Turkish research vessel Barbaros Hayreddin Pasa is carrying out another unauthorized seismic survey inside Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). According to a Navigational Telex (NAVTEX) issued by Turkey's Antalya station, the vessel will be conducting the surveys until May 26th, 2019. The Navtex (0147/19) is in force since January 26th, 2019. The area reserved for seismic surveys covers large parts of Cyprus' offshore blocks 1, 8 and 12, south of Limassol. The reserved area consists of a roughly rectangular block. Barbaros is being accompanied by two support vessels, the M/V Tanux-1 and the R/V Apollo Moon. Sources confirmed to the Cyprus Mail that the Barbaros is also being escorted by a Turkish frigate. Marine

Traffic, a vessel tracking website, shows that over the past 24 hours the Barbaros performed a south-to-north sharp loop, covering blocks 1, 8 and 12. In 2013, the same vessel had carried out surveys inside blocks 2, 3, 8 and 9. In September 2011 the breakaway regime signed a “*Continental Shelf Delimitation Agreement*” with Turkey. It is on this basis that the north declared an “*Exclusive Economic Zone*” of its own, which in effect claims that half of Cyprus’ EEZ belongs to them, including parts of blocks 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 12 and 13. The seismic surveys are considered illegal by Cyprus, as under international law a foreign state must request permission from the country of jurisdiction (Cyprus) to conduct any economic activity within its waters. Turkey does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus. The Turkish warship shadowing the Barbaros is not in violation of international law as it is sailing in international waters. The current Turkish expedition into Cyprus’ EEZ is seen as a response to gas explorations being carried out by ExxonMobil in block 10. Meanwhile under another NAVTEX (0181/19) the Turkish navy will during this month be conducting a series of gunnery exercises spanning parts of Cyprus’ blocks 7 and 8. Additionally, under NAVTEX 0195/19, Turkish and NATO naval units will be carrying out a ‘bilateral naval exercise’ on February 19th, 2019 in an area covering parts of blocks 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7, to the south and southwest. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- February 8th, the Government reiterated that it is taking corrective steps to address shortcomings in the call-up system for National Guard reservists, an issue highlighted in a recent report by the Auditor-General. Government Spokesman Prodromos Prodromou acknowledged that the reservists’ system has been plagued by problems

for decades, but said that measures are being taken. “*These are technical weaknesses, problems relating to the monitoring of the system, but which also reveal a problem in mentality [in reporting for reservist duty],*” Prodromou said. He said the Government has already taken some steps to rectify situation, and already since January this has produced better results. However, he did not elaborate. In any case, the Spokesman added, the necessary changes would be fast-tracked. This is where computerization and e-government come in, he added. Although the Government welcomes the identification of problems in the Armed Forces’ recruitment and reservist systems, this information should have been kept away from the public eye, in the interests of national security. Prodromou was echoing the Defense Ministry, which a day earlier likewise stated that the disclosure of sensitive information relating to the military could compromise the Army’s operational capability and expose weaknesses to adversaries. The Ministry was responding to the publication of a report by the Audit Office that showed widespread dodging by men eligible for reservist duty. According to the report, some 11,000 Cypriot men do not serve in the National Guard reserves either because they fail to declare their repatriation (are still listed as being students abroad despite being over 30), or they know someone in high places. It said 10,930 men who did their army service between 1990 and 2010, have not been recruited as reserves because they are still registered in the computerized system as an “*external student.*” The audit found that out of the total number of people registered as having done army service during the 20-year period, only 46% are listed as reservists, while the remaining 54% are listed as having temporary exemptions from reserve duty. These include people currently serving as board members of semi-government

organizations, football referees in the first division of the Cyprus League, first-division footballers, politicians, as well as people who work at the presidential palace, lawyers and media. Many also have relatives in the cabinet, local authorities, Parliament and big business, the report said. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- February 8th, the President Nicos Anastasiades, when he meets Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci later this month, will go with an attitude of openness, the Government said. He is also in contact with UN envoy Jane Holl Lute to make sure any resumption of talks is based on the six parameters of the UN Chief's framework. Speaking after a National Council meeting, Government Spokesman Prodromos Prodromou said Anastasiades remains open for discussions *"which are finally taking place."* He clarified that the meeting with Akinci would not be part of any negotiations, but rather an informal meeting *"where the two, the President together with the Turkish Cypriot leader, will have the chance to discuss all issues that concern them, in a bid to facilitate efforts to formulate the terms of reference."* The Spokesman also said in order to really go back to settlement talks, both sides should be willing to discuss all issues. *"The Cyprus problem is not only a matter of how to regulate the federal Government, political equality provided by UN resolutions and effective participation. The Cyprus problem is also an issue of foreign occupation which needs to end, withdrawal of troops, ending guarantees, creating a security system that makes all Cypriots feel safe,"* he said. Lute, who is attempting to facilitate the two leaders in drawing up terms of reference for the start of new talks, would not be in Cyprus to participate in the leaders' meeting at the Chief of Mission's residence in the United Nations

Protected Area on February 26th, 2019. The UN announced that the leaders would be hosted by Elizabeth Spehar, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative in Cyprus. Concerning the National Council session, he said Anastasiades informed participants about his two meetings with Lute earlier in the week, and the ongoing effort to reach an agreement on the terms of reference. The resident updated the National Council also with regard to information received from the Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras in relation to his contacts with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, last Tuesday in Ankara. As for a preparatory meeting between Turkey and Greece on the security aspects of a Cyprus settlement – a reference made by Tsipras after his meeting with Erdogan – Prodromou said that this was something to be agreed between the two Governments. What matters for Nicosia, he said, is that when negotiations resume, all issues will be open for discussion, including security. *"The goal is to resume negotiations from the point they were left off. And of course, the six parameters submitted by the Secretary-General should serve as a guide,"* Prodromou said. He also noted that in Crans-Montana, guarantor powers Greece, as well as Britain in a way, took a clear stance on this issue, facilitating a Cyprus settlement. It was up to Turkey to also make this move he said and expressed hope that the preparatory meetings between the Greek and Turkish Governments would help in that direction. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Cyprus works systematically in order to become a major part of the East Mediterranean energy hub. Its natural gas deposits affect not only its economy but also its security. The strategy of

multilateral cooperation seems to be fruitful. At the moment, Cyprus is engaged in three different trilateral formations which also include strong features of strategic cooperation and alliance; Cyprus – Egypt – Greece, Cyprus – Israel – Greece, and Cyprus – Jordan – Greece. The last two are highly improved due to the US engagement which expressed their interest by joining the latest summit. Drilling activities on behalf of ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum in Cyprus Exclusive Economic Zone are close to the end and the announcement of results will determine further steps. Turkish threats and aggression did not stop the Cypriot energy project so far. It is a fact that Cyprus has a significant deficit of military power which is (externally) balanced by regional cooperation. However, the US administration appears ready to abolish the arms embargo against Cyprus allowing it to improve its military capabilities. Involvement of an American company (ExxonMobil) in the drills it is proved “wise” and “smart.” Turkey escalates tension in the region by sending its drill ship Barbaros (accompanied by a Turkish frigate) within Cyprus Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) while a huge aeronautical exercise has been announced for February 27th, 2019. Taking into consideration that Cyprus lacks of military power and especially aeronautical forces it is expected Greece to be engaged more actively in the region. Conduct of aeronautical exercises in cooperation with other countries (Israel, Egypt etc) sends various messages of defense capability, readiness, and determination. Although the UN Secretary General appears optimistic for a new round of talks between the two communities, it is assessed that talks could not be resumed earlier than summer 2019. However, there is interesting activity on the matter and President Anastasiades will have an informal meeting with the Turkish

Cypriot leader Akinci on February 26th, 2019 under the UN auspices. President Anastasiades promotes the scenario of a “bizonal, bicomunal decentralized federation”; an idea which is in principle accepted by the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and enjoys support from the U.S. However, there are a lot of disputed issues in which both parts should compromise; the most important is considered the decision-making process. Recent close approach between Cyprus and the US provoked Russia’s strong reaction which foresees a possible isolation from its influence in the Island. It is not a secret that Russia enjoys or used to enjoy a privileged relationship with Cyprus due to the US distance regarding defense and foreign policy neutrality. It is a question how Cyprus will achieve to balance between the US and Russia interests in the region. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



F.Y.R.O.M: February 6th - 8th, at NATO Headquarters in Brussels the Permanent Representatives to NATO of the 29 members of the Alliance signed the Accession Protocol for the future Republic of North Macedonia. The signing ceremony took place in the presence of Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov. Following the signing of the Accession Protocol, Skopje can now take part in NATO activities as an invitee. The accession process now moves to the capitals of the 29 Allies where the Protocol will be ratified according to national procedures. The country will become a member of NATO as soon as all Allies have ratified the Accession Protocol. Speaking following the signing ceremony NATO

Secretary Jens Stoltenberg said, “NATO keeps almost one billion citizens across Europe and North America secure and with you joining NATO there will be thirty countries committed to protect each other. Your accession will bring more stability to the Western Balkans. This is good for the region and for Euro-Atlantic security.” Stoltenberg congratulated both Skopje and Athens for showing commitment and courage in reaching an agreement on the name issue. Skopje already makes important contributions to NATO’s training mission in Afghanistan and the Alliance’s KFOR peace keeping mission in Kosovo. Greece became the first country that ratified on February 8th, 2019 the accession protocol. Then F.Y.R.O.M will inform the United Nations and other institutions about its new name. (www.bbc.com)



F.Y.R.O.M’s Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Permanent Representatives of NATO member states

(Photo source: www.nato.int)

- February 8th, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија – SDSM) has not yet defined its position on whether to hold early elections, because the dilemma is whether to go for a new mandate or focus on EU integration and receive a date for accession talks with the EU, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev said. “The dilemma over whether to announce early parliamentary

elections is between two options – whether to choose a whole new mandate that is appealing to politicians, so that we can deliver economic effects, reform effects and improve the overall life or to put the interest of the state before the parties, and not to give any excuses to those member states who are against enlargement. Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M] is waiting for a positive decision at the EU summit in June, where I believe that the European Commission, which is at the end of its mandate, wants to leave its legacy,” Zaev said. According to Zaev, in the coming days his party will start searching for the best presidential candidate by consulting and approaching coalition partners, political parties outside the coalition, and parties that are not parliamentary. Regarding Democratic Union for Integration’s (Demokratska Unija za Integracija - DUI) statement that they will not support a presidential candidate from the SDSM Congress, Zaev said that they will choose a candidate together through a joint analysis. Parliament Speaker Talat Xhaferi announced the first round of the presidential elections will be held on April 21st, 2019. If no candidate wins outright, the second round will be held two weeks later, on May 5th, 2019. Along with the presidential elections, two rounds of municipal elections will be held for mayors of Ohrid and Novo Selo, after the former died in office, and the latter was caught and sentenced for smuggling cigarettes to Bulgaria. Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) demands early elections insisting that that is the only way to ensure that the vote is free and fair, given that general elections come with additional layers of security

and provide that several key Government departments will be held by opposition representatives. (www.meta.mk, www.republika.mk)

- February 8th, by becoming a NATO member, F.Y.R.O.M will lose its ability to follow its own foreign policy as a sovereign state, said the Spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Marija Zaharova, during her briefing with the press. According to her, it is unclear from who would NATO protect the country and concluded that the only danger to the region is the Army of Kosovo. *“The only serious armed force that will destabilize the region is the army of Kosovo that was created by former Albanian militants. We don’t see other threats to security and regarding this, we asked ourselves; whether NATO would fight against those it trained and armed? We already saw this construction in the Middle East countries and North Africa. First they armed them, and then it fought the terrorists and militants. First they created conditions for terrorists to come out at places they previously never did, and then they spent billions of funds and efforts to prevent the spread of terrorist threats, not only in the region but in the world as well,”* Zaharova said. She said that it is difficult to say what would the real advantage for F.Y.R.O.M will be within NATO. *“Actually, that will have to be paid for by increasing defense costs, by participating in military operations that have nothing to do with the interest of the Macedonian [F.Y.R.O.M] people and by losing the ability to carry out a sovereign foreign policy,”* Zaharova said during the briefing in Moscow. (www.meta.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

F.Y.R.O.M signed the NATO accession protocol waiting for its ratification by the Parliaments of the 29th member states. Greece was the first country which ratified the protocol fulfilling its obligations by the “Prespa Agreement.” F.Y.R.O.M will be the 30th NATO member state under the name North Macedonia. Russia reacted in the latest development watching another Balkan state entering the Western Alliance. It is a good question what the Russian (and Chinese) stand will be in the UN Security Council regarding F.Y.R.O.M’s accession with its new name. Presidential elections announced for April 21st, 2019 (first round) and May 5th, 2019 (second round). Ruling coalition makes second thoughts for snap parliamentary elections together with the presidential ones. However, it is assessed that Zaev will avoid early elections aiming at gaining the success of NATO accession in June 2019 and hoping to start accession negotiations with the EU at the same month. Although Zaev enjoys “the fruits of his effort” he is afraid of the nationalistic rhetoric of VMRO-DPMNE which may affect the electoral body. Consequently, he is balancing his next steps carefully. The historic fact is that Zaev resolved a 27 year long dispute unlocking the doors of the EU and NATO and strengthening stability and security of the state. One should also note that F.Y.R.O.M’s Albanian community is satisfied with latest developments strengthening state’s cohesion. The U.S and EU enjoy their success since F.Y.R.O.M moves in their paths far from Russia’s influence. Needless to say that in a period where border questions are raised again in the Balkans F.Y.R.O.M achieved to strengthen its political stability and growth prospects.



GREECE: February 4th, six Greek independent lawmakers who backed the

Government in a confidence vote on January 16th, 2019 told Parliament President Nikos Voutsis they will approve any future legislation submitted by ruling Coalition of Radical Left (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – SYRIZA), thus ensuring its majority in Parliament. The letter, which was read out at the start of a meeting of a Parliamentary Committee discussing regulations relating to parliamentary groups, is signed by Tourism Minister Elena Kountoura, Deputy Agriculture Minister Vassilis Kokkalis, Deputy Citizens' Protection Minister Katerina Papacosta, and MPs Thanassis Papachristopoulos, Spyros Danellis and Costas Zouraris. Following the departure from the Government of junior coalition partner Independent Greeks (Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες - ANEL) in January 2019, leftist SYRIZA has been struggling to push legislation through Parliament, having only 145 MPs in the 300-seat House. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- February 5th, in Ankara Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan outlined their established positions on key topics just a few hours after Turkish authorities issued a provocative announcement, offering a bounty for the return of eight Turkish servicemen who fled to Greece in 2016. Among the positive developments were decisions to keep channels of communication open, for the country's Defense Ministers to meet soon, and for the establishment of a joint business forum in Thessaloniki. Apart from bilateral issues, talks also focused on the migration crisis and the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal to curb arrivals. In a joint press conference with Tsipras in Ankara, Erdogan declared that all issues with Greece can be solved “*on an equitable basis and in a peaceful way.*” He also insisted on

the return of the eight servicemen, blaming them for deaths during the botched coup of 2016. “*Greece must treat the fugitives appropriately. They are responsible for the deaths,*” he said, adding that Greece must not become “*a safe haven*” for terrorists. The Turkish leader also referred to the need for the “*equal status*” of Turkish Cypriots in Cyprus and Turks in Western Thrace to be recognized, and linked the question of the reopening of the Orthodox Seminary on Halki to the ability of the Muslim minority of Thrace to appoint its own Muftis. Asked by a reporter about the Halki school, he said “*Every time this comes up, I tell them we should resolve the issue of the Muftis in Western Thrace. Let's also solve this issue.*” Tsipras, for his part, remarked that “*coup plotters are not welcome in Greece*” but that “*Greece must respect the judiciary's decisions,*” referring to rulings rejecting the men's extradition to Turkey and granting them asylum. The Greek PM also referred to transgressions over the Aegean. He said Greece and Turkey have agreed to de-escalate any tensions in the Aegean Sea and proceed with confidence-building measures, while any differences with Turkey “*can and must be solved with dialogue.*” If these steps materialize, the two countries can then make progress and repeat the exploratory talks on the issue of the continental shelf in the Aegean, he added. Tsipras also commented on gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean, noting the importance of “*respect for international law... and the need for energy to form a bridge for cooperation in the region.*” As for the Cyprus problem, he called for a fair and viable solution that would benefit both communities. Erdogan said that an important parameter is achieving “*equality*” for Turkish Cypriots on the island. On February 6th, 2019, Tsipras visited Hagia Sofia in Istanbul, before

going to the Halki seminary in the first such visit by a Greek Premier in nearly nine decades. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- February 8th, the Greek Parliament ratified with 153 votes in favor and 140 against a NATO accord with F.Y.R.O.M for its admission into NATO under a the name North Macedonia, after a deal with Greece ended a 27-year-old dispute over its name. NATO members signed the accord with F.Y.R.O.M this week, days after the Greek Parliament endorsed an agreement between Athens and Skopje that changes the Balkan state's name to North Macedonia. (www.ekathimerini.gr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Greek Parliament ratified on February 8th, 2019 F.Y.R.O.M's NATO accession protocol concluding successfully the name deal between the two countries. Political situation in the country is rapidly evolving and it is assessed that early parliamentary elections will be held on May 2019. The country has entered in pre-electoral period; the Government announces social care measures, while opposition announces its candidates for the parliamentary elections. A long pre-electoral period may polarize society with unpredictable results. Political turmoil emerged in a period where Greece faces several diplomatic, security, and economic challenges. Internal terrorism is considered as a major unresolved problem of national security undermining stability of the state. Tension between Greece and Turkey has been raised not only in rhetoric level. Turkish fighter jets keep violating Greek airspace, while NAVTEXs reserves part of Greek continental shelf and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone. Turkey escalates tension mainly in Cyprus by its drill

ship Barbaros which has started entering within Cypriot EEZ. None could exclude Greek Navy intervention in a possible incident with Turkish vessels accompanying Barbaros. It is estimated that next weeks and especially the period from February 27th until March 3rd, 2019 when a major aeronautical exercise will be conducted in the Aegean and East Mediterranean Sea including real fires, virtual naval blockade of eastern Aegean Greek islands, and simulations of landing operations. Tsipras visit to Turkey aimed at reducing tension between the two countries but security situation is of high risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident.



KOSOVO: February 5th, Kosovo's President, Hashim Thaci favors "slight border correction" as a compromise for a final agreement with Serbia. Thaci made the statements during a debate held at the Council of Foreign Relations in Washington. "If slight border correction is the price for reaching a final peace agreement, this would be acceptable," Thaci said. Delivering a speech at the "Council on Foreign Relations" in Washington DC, in front of an audience of regional specialists, Thaci presented his idea on a final comprehensive agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. Despite readiness to "slightly redraw borders" Thaci noted that strategic assets of Kosovo in northern part of the country such as Ujman Lake, Mitrovica and Trepca mining complex are nonnegotiable. He said Kosovo always won when acted in coordination with the United States, emphasizing that despite painful compromises the final outcome was always in favor of Kosovo when allied with the U.S. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- January 30th, sharp disagreements among Kosovo officials over whether the import tax of

100% on goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina should be revoked have fresh sparked warnings that the Government could fall and be forced to hold snap elections. Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj is not budging from his stance that the tax will only be scrapped when Serbia recognizes Kosovo. But the Head of his ruling coalition partner party, the Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës - PDK), Kadri Veseli, has proposed suspending it for 120 days and has warned that the Government could collapse over the issue. Veseli, who is also the Speaker of Parliament, told RTV Dukagjini that although his relationship with Prime Minister Haradinaj remained cordial, *“the Prime Minister has started to become too individualistic.”* Veseli proposed suspension of tax after his meeting with the US Ambassador to Kosovo, Philip Kosnett on Monday. The US has called on Kosovo to consider an *“immediate suspension”* of the tax, but Haradinaj has made no sign of considering the appeal. Veseli told the TV station that the Government would fall if relations with the country’s main ally, the United States, broke down over the issue of the import tax. Earlier on Tuesday, Haradinaj said that even if the snap elections were called, the tax would still remain in force until summer. The Government's majority is slender, with the two sides sharing an almost equal balance of power. The opposition can easily obstruct parliamentary initiatives, mainly because the Government has lost the backing of the principal Serbian party, Lista Srpska, after the Government imposed the stiff taxes on goods from Serbia. The EU has also told Kosovo to scrap the tax, saying it contravenes Kosovo's membership of the regional free-trade group, CEFTA. Kosovo imposed, and then raised, the import tax after it failed to join the international

police body, Interpol, which it credited to Serbian lobbying. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- February 8th, Kosovo's 2019 budget has awarded the Defence Ministry an extra six million euro to support the slow process of transforming the country's security force, KSF, into a regular Army. The budget planned for defense in 2019 is 58.7 million euro; the previous year it was 52.3 million. Of the total, 54.5 million euro is earmarked for the KSF, which did not respond to queries from Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) about its military investment plans. *“Some 21.9 million euro are foreseen for the KSF on capital investments,”* the Defense Ministry’s Ibrahim Shala clarified to BIRN. The difference between KSF *“capital investments”* this year and 2018 would amount to about 3 million euro, according to Shala. He said the Ministry received *“over 17 million”* for investments in 2018. The Government plans to invest gradually over several years in transforming the KSF into an Army. *“In order not to overstretch the state budget during the process of transformation, the plan is to increase the budget for KSF by 5 million euro every year,”* Shala said. Kosovo’s Parliament in December 2018 adopted three draft laws on the KSF, expanding its competences and creating a legal base for its transformation into a regular army. A constitutional obligation for that would require a *“double majority”* – meaning the support of two-thirds of all 120 MPs and two-thirds of the 20 ethnic non-Albanian MPs. Kosovo Serb MPs, who hold 10 of the 20 seats in Parliament reserved for non-Albanian communities, have blocked all such initiatives in the past. Kosovo approved the laws despite warnings from NATO, which urged Kosovo to consult NATO and all the other relevant stakeholders in the country,

primarily meaning the Kosovo Serb minority. NATO called the change “ill- timed.” (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Haradinaj's decision to impose 100% tax on Serbian and Bosnian products provoked major problems in Kosovo affecting Governments stability. The international community namely the EU and the U.S put a lot of pressure on the Government to suspend taxes. The UN Secretary General confirmed that tax is the major problem regarding dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. In a spasmodic reaction Prime Minister Haradinaj stated that the Government has ceased contact with UNMIK. Kosovo reacts more or less as a spoiled child refusing to realize how international system and institutions works. Cease of communication between Pristina and UNMIK is another sign of isolation. Although Kosovo still enjoys the EU and U.S support none could avoid recognizing that the state acts beyond European standards violating international agreements such as CEFTA. On the other hand dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia has reached a deadlock trapping mostly Pristina in an endless conflict. Only through normalization of relations with Serbia it will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. However, the state's authorities show a tendency of escalating tension with Serbia undermining a peaceful resolution of the case. By imposing 100% tariff on Serbian (and Bosnian products), establishing Kosovo army, executing Special Forces operation in northern Kosovo, arresting Serbs, and requesting special court for Serbs it is created a climate which does not facilitate dialogue and the establishment of confidence between the two parties. It should be

also underlined that at the moment Kosovo's political power are divided (or looks like being divided) regarding negotiation process and goals. The Prime Minister Haradinaj and the Government are not in harmony with the President Thaci who is the chief negotiator of the state. There is even a matter of legitimacy within the state regarding who is authorized to represent the country in dialogue with Serbia. Thaci reiterated once again speaking in Washington's Council of Foreign Relations that he is open to “slight” correction of borders if this would lead to Kosovo recognition by Serbia. The question of border exchange or simply change continues to divide Kosovo political forces and population. It seems that the U.S (and the EU) has a leading role in the background pushing for the idea of territorial change (or exchange). Thaci reiterated once again his confidence that dialogue will start again and agreement will be reached. It is assessed that there is somekind background talks between Thaci and Vucic which strengthen Kosovo President's confidence that his country will be recognized by Serbia. Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish in the country rule of law and modern functional administration. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard. Establishment of Kosovo Army is also a factor of destabilization since there is always a possibility of Police or military engagement with Serbian forces. One should take into consideration that the Serb President has already ordered all defense and security stakeholders to take all necessary measures for protecting Serbian population in Kosovo.



MOLDOVA: February 5th, Defense Minister Eugen Sturza met with General Curtis

M. Scaparrotti, Chief Allied Force Commander Europe (SACEUR) at Mons. Talks between the two officials focused on advancing the strategic dialogue between Moldova and the Alliance as well as NATO's support in the consolidation and modernization of the National Army. According to a press release, the Minister of Defense referred to the medium and long-term priorities of the Armed Forces, aimed at training professional soldiers, focusing on the creation of a sergeant training school, planning and participation in joint exercises with allied and partner countries to test interoperability, and increasing contribution to global and regional security. General Scaparrotti noted that NATO is willing to continue providing assistance to reform the defense sector, in particular, to carry out the project to improve the stockpiles of ammunition in the National Army's depots and to create a sergeant training school in line with international standards. At the same time, Sturza and General Scaparrotti (who is also the Commander of the European Armed Forces Command) have reviewed the Moldovan-American collaboration on the defense dimension through training and assistance programs that run both in Moldova and the United States. In turn, General Scaparrotti thanked Moldova for contributing to international security, as well as the opening of this year's Chisinau annual conference to plan the evaluation process in line with the Operational Capabilities Concept (OCC). Moreover, Minister Sturza met with General Odd Egil Pedersen, Deputy Chief of Staff of the SHAPE Military Partnership Directorate discussing the training and testing system of the National Army militants according to the OCC, performance of the Moldovan contingents in the KFOR peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, training in NATO schools, and standardization of the

National Army's logistics system. (www.moldova.org)

- February 7th, Defense Minister Eugen Sturza claimed that the project of professionalization of the Army will allow Moldova to have well-trained military personnel. Currently, Moldova draws on the experience of other countries that have implemented such a reform, especially Romania's experience. The Minister noted that the process of modernizing the army began in 2018 when the strategic documents were approved. Also, in 2018, they were assigned 400 less servicemen who have been replaced by contract troops. "In 2019 we have the next stage of replacement; 1,000 people will be replaced by contract personnel, and next year we will have the final stage. When the process will be completed by the end of 2020 we will have in the National Army only militaries by contract," the Minister said. Sturza added the National Army will move to modern equipment. According to him, military armaments must be replaced. "Unfortunately, the National Army still has Soviet armament, which no longer meets the current requirements. We are talking about acquisition of ammunitions, transport means, special machinery, technical equipment," the Minister said. The Minister concluded by claiming that cyber security of the state is another field in which the Ministry of Defense pays special attention due to the fact that it is its own responsibility. (www.24h.md)

- February 8th, at the meeting of the Joint Control Commission (CUC) on February 7th, 2019 there were addressed the violations recently committed in the Security Zone (ZS) by the so – called structures on the left bank of the Dniester river, the office for reintegration policy's information and media communication service has reported.

Thus, the Moldovan delegation has repeatedly warned of the consequences that might occur as a result of the abusive actions of the Tiraspol administration, referring to the alleged provisions of January 25th, 2019 and October 19th, 2018 in which some areas of ZS are targeted. In the given context, the parties involved in the peacekeeping mission were given the appeal, in which they were exposed the irregularities committed by issuing the aforementioned provisions, as well as the systematic violations admitted by the so – called Transnistrian structures, especially in Bender city. There is to mention that on January 18th to 22nd, 2019 several cases of abusive location of Transnistrian “*custom officers*” and “*border guards*” in vicinity of Varnita, where representatives of Tiraspol in the Commission, were found to lack competence in the given subject. Thus, the Moldovan delegation asked the representatives of Russia, Ukraine and OSCE Mission to Moldova to take the necessary measures in order to relieve the situation in the designated localities. Another case of defiance of the peacekeeping mission is the expansion of the infrastructure and installation of the unknown targets to the Transnistrian “*border guard*” structures at Dorotcaia control station. These actions were not coordinated beforehand within the Commission and the works are carried out even during the meeting of CUC. Also, the exit of the military observers for the observation of these actions was blocked by the Transnistrian side. Starting from the permissible deviations, the Moldovan delegation reiterated the necessity to adopt a mechanism for monitoring the situation in ZS, which would not admit the current inconsistencies in the process of verification, detection and resolution of violations. The Ukrainian side and representatives of the OSCE Mission to Moldova, which are part of the

Commission, have shown their openness to the development of such a mechanism. Another topic addressed is the elimination of the Transnistrian post of border guards between localities Slobozia and Cremenciug and its substitution with a joint pacification. Thus, the components of the Commission agreed to hold further consultations to resolve the issue. (www.moldpres.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political life is “hostage” of the pro-Russian President Igor Dodon and pro-Western Government rivalry which undermines the institutional function of the country. In the wider framework Moldova is between the Euro-Atlantic structures on the one hand and the Russian influence on the other. Political situation in the country is alarming and the EU has hardened its policy towards Moldova pushing for more reforms which will strengthen state’s transparency, accountability and democratic values. Coming parliamentary elections scheduled for February 24th, 2019 will be closely monitored by the international community and especially the US and EU as a “democratic stress test.” Romanian Presidency of the EU Council is a positive conjuncture for Moldova changing the climate between Moldova and EU. Moreover the US express concerns over a possible Russian interference in the elections. The Government is sliding into dangerous paths which support corruption and organized crime and deep and determined justice reforms are needed. The U.S, EU and IMF express their major concerns. Opposition parties try to establish a single united bloc against the ruling coalition accused of nepotism and corruption. The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Moldova; First of all Russia maintains military forces in

Transnistrian ground and secondly it shares common borders with Ukraine which cannot go unnoticed by international stakeholders. One should keep an eye on current political (and public) trend on reunification with Romania. The "Transnistria case" is always a "running sore" for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: February 4th, *"there's no any doubt that Russia is making a hybrid war in the entire Balkans. That war is the combination of the political pressure, economic influence, corruption, media reality fabrication, provoking affairs, discrediting the most influential political individuals... You can notice that all things from this list have already been applied in Montenegro, and they are being applied in other Balkan countries as well. Montenegro and now Macedonia [F.Y.R.O.M] too, is the best possible example that the resistance is possible, and that it gives results,"* said the Professor of the Faculty of Security of the University in Belgrade, Zoran Dragisic. He pointed out that security and stability of state does not depend on its military and defense power. Its real power lies in its ability to make friendships with developed, democratic societies. *"In this regard, Montenegro has already gone far. That is why I am not worried about its strength to resist the hybrid attacks it is still exposed to,"* Dragisic said. According to him, the role of Russia in the Balkans is considered to be dangerous. *"Russia believes that it can exert its influence on Europe via our region. They turned out to be unsuccessful. Their efforts to impede NATO accession of Montenegro failed. However, that does not mean that Russia will give up. They will try to impede NATO accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina by provoking conflicts and bringing*

into power politicians who are loyal to Kremlin. Also, Russia's view regarding normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina is not as it should be and that can complicate the problem even more," Dragisic added. The Professor doubts that a new war in the Balkans is likely to break out, but adds that some armed provocations, violence, demonstrations and various forms of hybrid war will definitely happen, because Balkan problems are very complicated and there are still a lot of stakeholders who seek to complicate them further. (www.cdm.me)

- February 4th, Ministry of Defense is planning to form reserve military forces from 2019 to 2026. These forces should be integral part of the Armed Forces of Montenegro. The long-term defense plan, adopted by the Government, states that the military units will be consisted of contractual reserve and strategic reserve. Contractual reserve will count up to 100 people and it will be used to fulfill special formation positions in the Armed Forces. *"In accordance with the contract and required needs, they will be engaged in the permanent composition of the Armed Forces during training, drills, participation in international missions, provision of assistance to the citizens and their protection from the consequences of natural and other disasters. Furthermore, they will be engaged in performance of other tasks related to the field of defense and engagement of additional forces,"* reads the defense plan. Contractual reserves will be composed of *"people who have adequate specialist knowledge and skills that are scarce."* As far as the strategic assigned reserve is concerned, it will count up to 2.691 people and they will complement the reserve units of the Armed Forces. *"They will be engaged in the activities of preparation and organization of*

defense and in providing assistance and protection to the citizens from the consequences of natural and other disasters. This strategic reserve will be composed of people who had served the voluntary military service, i.e. people who had been trained to perform military duties in the conditions of warfare or emergency situations,” the plan said. Unassigned reserves will be used strategically for reinforcing defense abilities of active units if this is necessary. These people will be in the military records and in case of warfare or any other emergency situation, they will be mobilized and invited to serve in the Armed Forces. Members of the active and inactive reserve will go through the general and special military training. The focus will be on basic military skills, conditioning and special training. In order to bring the military training to a higher level, the Ministry is planning to form a Regional center for mountain warfare, by the end of 2019, among many other things. (www.cdm.me)

- February 5th, the 3D geophysical survey of the Montenegrin submarine area in the blocks 30 and 26, under the Concession agreement for gas and oil exploration signed with the Greek company Energean, is going to start in next 10 days, according to the Hydrocarbon Administration of Montenegro. The research will be conducted by the Norwegian seismic company PGS, while arrival of the Ramform Titan vessels that will do the 3D research and another 2 accompanying vessels (Thor Freya and Sanco Sea) arrived on February 6th, 2019. “3D geophysical research will be conducted at an area of 338km² between Bar and Buljarica. The research is expected to start on February 10th lasting 8 days,” the Hydrocarbon Administration announced. All environmental standards have been met as well as

the environmental monitoring parameters, in compliance with the guidelines from the Elaboration of environmental impact assessment, adopted by the Agency for Nature and Environmental Protection of Montenegro. (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although the country enjoys a period of “euphoria”, major reforms should be implemented in order the country to come closer to the EU. The EP assessment is positive praising the state’s efforts to implement major reforms, but on the other hand it underlines the problems of the rule of law, media freedom, corruption, money laundering, and organized crime. However, the EP expressly states that Montenegro under certain conditions may be able to access the EU by 2025. The Government promotes state’s political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. Although the Government takes concrete measures against corruption, organized crime, and money laundering it is assessed that a lot should be done to reach such a level of economic activity; mainly in the field of public administration, public sector corruption, and money laundering. Imprisonment of opposition MPs is a worrying and alarming sign regarding rule of law and democratic values in the country. Montenegro shows activity within NATO trying to prove that it is an equal partner of the alliance with military capacity according to NATO standards. Moreover, it tries to modernize and strengthen its operational capabilities and in this context it raised its defense budget aiming at purchasing new assets such as armored vehicles. Establishment of a credible and effective system of Armed Forces reservists will strengthen defense capabilities of its Armed Forces.



ROMANIA: February 5th, Romanian Prime Minister Viorica Dancila in an interview with POLITICO accused Western European leaders of double standards in criticizing her country over corruption and a crackdown on anti-government protests. Dancila, whose Government holds the EU's rotating Presidency, said corruption is also a problem in Western Europe and noted there had been no outcry among EU leaders when French riot Police clashed with protesters from the Yellow Jackets movement. The Prime Minister's remarks reflect tensions between Eastern and Western Governments in the EU, which have heightened in recent years and threaten to make finding common ground among the bloc's leaders increasingly difficult. *"Romania is not allowed what other countries are allowed to do,"* Dancila said. The Prime Minister said her country is not treated equally within the EU. *"I saw what happened with the Yellow Jackets in France,"* she said, referring to the massive street protests against French President Emmanuel Macron's policies which also resulted in violence. *"No one had any reaction. It is a double standard. I did not see anyone come to the European Parliament and say 'We want a resolution on France.'"* The Prime Minister, flanked by the Romanian and EU flags, also pushed back against comparisons between her Government and those in Budapest and Warsaw, both of which are in the midst of EU censure proceedings over accusations they are breaching the bloc's fundamental values. Dancila also said it is unfair that her country and Bulgaria are the only ones subject to anti-corruption monitoring through a yearly report from the European Commission. Dancila described herself as *"a convinced pro-European"* and said she will talk with European leaders in the coming days to reassure them about the state of

democracy and rule of law in Romania. *"To solve certain issues I do not think you need to put someone in a corner or point the finger at them; the others need to come to support you to solve these issues,"* Dancila said for Politico. (www.romaniajournal.ro)



Romanian Prime Minister, Viorica Dancila

(Photo source: www.gov.ro)

- February 8th, Romanian Foreign Minister Teodor Melescanu said the anti-missile base in Deveselu is purely defensive and would not create problems to Russia. The reaction came as Russia's Defense Ministry said that the United States should destroy the MK-41 anti-missile system in Deveselu, Romania, as well as its strike drones, in order to again follow the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). Moscow has vowed last weekend to restart the development of medium-range nuclear missiles as it mirrors Washington's decision to withdraw from the 1987 arms control agreement. The split has the potential to incite a new arms race. Russia will withdraw from the INF Treaty, President Vladimir Putin said on Saturday, a day after the United States announced a similar move. The White House said in a statement on Friday that the US withdrawal *"will be completed in 6 months unless Russia comes back into compliance by destroying all of its violating missiles, launchers, and associated equipment."* Russian Ambassador in Bucharest, Valery Kuzmin, said on Thursday, during a press conference, the Russian Federation

has no aggressive intentions regarding Romania and that Moscow is ready to negotiate with the U.S, but his country does not want to initiate the dialogue. *“The Americans said for a decade, if not longer, that their anti-missile system is not targeted on Russia, but recently it was proven that it is exactly aimed on Russia. We have learned history and we are not naïve. We have no hostile, unfriendly actions planned, and I can assure you Russia has no hostile intentions towards Romania. We believe it is our neighbor country and the best way to build relations with the neighbors is to offer good neighborhood conditions,”* Ambassador Kuzmin said. According to him Romania has become *“provider of insecurity and destabilization in the region, due to the missiles in Deveselu.”* (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- February 8th, President Klaus Iohannis rejected the appointment of Lia Olguța Vasilescu as Development Minister for the fourth time and sent a letter to Prime Minister Viorica Dancila asking her to come up with a new proposal for this portfolio. Iohannis argued that Olguța Vasilescu does not have the necessary training for this position. He also mentioned controversial statements, virulent attacks against people, and pressures on justice allegedly made by Vasilescu. The leaders of the ruling Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) decided in November 2018 that a Government reshuffle was needed, and changed some of the key Ministers. The President accepted the new Minister proposals, except for two of them; that of former Labor Minister Lia-Olguta Vasilescu as Transport Minister and Ilan Laufer as Regional Development Minister. He said at that time that the proposals were *“unfit.”* PSD came up with new names quickly, proposing Lia-Olguta

Vasilescu for the Development Ministry and Mircea Draghici for the Transport Ministry. President Iohannis rejected them four times, after Dancila sent him the proposals three times. Following her fourth rejection, Vasilescu said in a social media post quoted by Ziarul Financiar daily that she plans to sue President Iohannis, since there is no reason for him to reject her nomination. (www.romania-insider.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Political struggle between the President Klaus Iohannis and Government has been transformed into an “open battle” leading the political functionality in a deadlock. The President rejects the Government’s proposals one after another leading in institutional and constitutional deadlock. Apart from that the state looks divided in major institutional issues such as national defense, justice, and security. Romania took over the Presidency of the Council of EU facing criticism and non-confidence by the EU member states’ high officials. In this context, one should add the direct European Parliament warning for activating article 7 of the EU Treaty (suspending certain rights of an EU member state when a country is considered at risk of breaching the EU’s core values). It is assessed that the Romanian Government is reaching a deadlock which could overthrow it only through early elections. On the other hand, it is “unrealistic” a state holding the EU Presidency to face snap elections; It could be detrimental. MPs and executives of the ruling PSD – ALDE keep on resigning and joining the newly established party PRO putting at risk majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Iohannis strongly opposes in Government’s plans to intervene in judicial system while there are specific signs that the

Government works towards controlling state's justice. As a conclusion, the state faces political abnormality in many levels which at the moment could be resolved only by early parliamentary elections. Romania according to NATO strategic and operational planning has become an advanced base close to Russia. Its strategic importance and role has been upgraded and high level NATO exercises take place in its territory. Consequently, Russia reacts mainly against the NATO military base in Deveselu where anti-missile defense systems have been deployed.



SERBIA: February 4th, at the ninth “One of Five Million” protest march in Belgrade, which took place on February 2nd, 2019 the protesters left messages for Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, explaining the reasons why they had taken to the streets and criticizing Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development Mladen Sarcevic's statement and voicing demands that he resign. Three boxes were placed outside the Serbian Presidency building, and the marchers put their letters inside, explaining why they had been protesting for nearly two months. The organizers quoted Vucic as saying that he did not know the reasons for their discontent, hence the boxes. A performance outside the Serbian Broadcasting Corporation (RTS) headquarters was part of Saturday's march, leaving the RTS door covered with stickers displaying the faces of the RTS public service, Dragan Bujosevic, and Pink TV's director Zeljko Mitrovic merged into one. The pillars around the door to the Politika newspaper premises were also covered with stickers saying “Censored,” “One of Five Million,” and “It has started.” The Professor at the Belgrade School of Philosophy, Marija Bogdanovic, said that thinking men and women

were protesting against the rule of “an over-learned leader,” for freedom, justice, and democracy. The rally ended with the message that the Government would not survive the wave of freedom and the next rally was scheduled for February 9th, 2019. On February 2nd, 2019 protests took place in Jagodina, Aleksandrovac, Brus, Kragujevac, Pirot, Pozega and Kosovska Mitrovica. Protests were also held in Uzice, Pancevo, Novi Sad, Leskovac, Smederevo, Krusevac, Vranje, Cacak, Sabac, Pozarevac, Kraljevo, Zajecar and Nis on February 1st, 2019. (www.b92.net)

- February 4th, Prime Minister Ana Brnabic welcomed the new Ambassador of China to Serbia, Chen Bo. Brnabic stressed that friendly relations between the two countries are constantly improving, the Government announced. Brnabic pointed out the cooperation in large infrastructure projects and Chinese investments, including the investment in Smederevo Zelezara and RTB Bor. Ambassador Chen expressed her conviction that cooperation will continue through new projects, and announced that she will personally strive for further development of a comprehensive strategic partnership and a firm friendship between Serbia and China. The officials also discussed Serbia's participation in the Summit of 16+1 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and China, held in Dubrovnik this April. The summit is expected to continue talks on the development of projects in the transport infrastructure sector, which, according to the Prime Minister, are of priority importance for our country. (www.b92.net)

- February 8th, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dacic met on in New York with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. The meeting took place on the eve of a

meeting of the United Nations Security Council dedicated to Guterres' regular report on the work of UNMIK, the UN mission in Kosovo, the Serbian Government said. Dacic informed the UN Secretary-General about the current situation in Kosovo and Metohija, especially in the context of a series of unilateral moves made by Pristina, without whose withdrawal there can be no continuation of the dialogue. He expressed full support for the mandate of UNMIK in Kosovo. Also, in the light of the discussions preceding the meeting of the UN Security Council, the First Deputy Prime Minister informed the UN Secretary-General about reaching an agreement on the dynamics of the meetings in the coming period, and that it is more important to keep this issue on the agenda of the UN Security Council than how many sessions per year will be held. The UN Secretary-General expressed readiness for the continuation of the engagement of UNMIK in an objective and constructive manner, according to a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (www.b92.net)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Serbia has entered in a period of fragile political stability due to citizens' reactions against governmental practices regarding human rights, media freedom, and elections transparency. People protest in the streets, while opposition starts to take action. Vucic is thinking of snap elections, but he has to balance a lot of things before his final decision. It is assessed that he will try to avoid early elections but it is likely to be forced to conduct them. Serbia has followed so far a successful diplomatic strategy regarding Kosovo achieving to be appeared in the international community as a reasonable voice seeking a compromise resolution via dialogue.

Serbia realizes that time runs in favor of it and knows that Kosovo will become more and more nervous as long as it cannot get Serbia's recognition. On the other hand Serbia strengthens its relations with Russia (and China) seeking stronger support regarding Kosovo case. Security situation is complex and uncertain since Serbia apart from political and diplomatic means has engaged its military and security forces. The Armed Forces are in high readiness alert but Vucic tried to de-escalate situation by stating that war is not a possible solution. However, none could predict Serbia's reaction in a possible accidental or pre-planned (provocation included) incident in Northern Kosovo against local Serbs. One should have in mind that top state officials have said in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. At the moment, Serbia looks like acting in accordance with the international law aiming at reducing tension in the region. In other words state's leadership is acting in a "reasonable" and "wise" way avoiding mistakes of the past which have isolated Serbia from the international community. Of course, under these circumstances none could speak for restarting of Belgrade – Pristina dialogue. There are certain analysts who claim that such situation will inevitably lead in Kosovo partition with the north part going to Serbia. Some of them claim that this scenario has already agreed by Vucic and Thaci. Serbian repayment will be Kosovo recognition. By expressing neutrality and maintaining equal distance from the U.S.A and Russia it moves in an environment of fragile balance.



SLOVENIA: February 4th, Foreign Minister Miro Cerar has briefed the Parliamentary Foreign Policy Committee on the progress in

preparing a reply to Croatia's reply against the lawsuit Slovenia has brought against it at the EU's Court of Justice for the neighbor's failure to implement the 2017 border arbitration ruling. According to Cerar, the arguments against Croatia's claims have been prepared carefully after consultation with Slovenian experts on European and international law, and lawyers from all over the world. Cerar said that Slovenian reply will be sent to the Court on February 13th, 2019 the latest. Cerar reiterated that Croatia's argument against Slovenia is not acceptable. *"We believe that our action is justified. With this lawsuit we claim that Croatia violates the European legal order. The fact is that with the arbitration decision we have a certain limit under international law. Croatia does not take this decision into account and thus violates European law,"* he explained. Cerar criticized the European Commission stand by saying that it *"behaved politically"* after the arbitral decision was adopted. *"It did not act as a proper guardian of the European fundamental values. It has given priority to political motives before the rule of law, which is extremely harmful,"* the Minister said. (www.dnevnik.si)

- February 7th, the Postojna city Council has tasked Mayor Igor Marentic to enter talks with the Defense Ministry to immediately close the main training area of the Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF), located in Pocek in the Postojna municipality. All planned war games should also be cancelled. However, Defense Ministry Spokesman Ales Sila confirmed that the military exercises at Pocko are still ongoing and that the state will not leave Pocka because the area belongs to the Ministry and has a valid permit for it. Defense Minister, Karl Erjavec claimed that the Ministry is already searching for alternatives

because *"we do not want to go to a place where the Slovenian Armed Forces are not welcomed. It is our Army that defends our citizens, so we will just search for areas where it will be welcomed."* According to Erjavec there are some potential locations where the main training facilities of the Armed Forces could move like Bac or Kocevski horn. Heavy weapons training could be conducted in Hungary, where the Slovenian Army is already performing some exercises. According to Marentic military presence in the region affects water resources poisoning drinking water with Chromium, Arsenic, Nickel, Cadmium, Zinc and Cobalt. The Ministry of Defense is waiting for a final environmental assessment report, which will ultimately be one of the main tabs on the balance, whether Pocek will remain only as a minor exercise field or will be closed. (www.dnevnik.si)

- February 7th, after the meeting of Foreign Ministers, Slovenian Foreign Minister Miro Cerar said that the country remains an active member of the coalition by offering its instructors in Iraq, humanitarian aid, and the services of the ITF demining fund. *"All 79 countries agreed that we will continue to be active together until the terrorists are completely destroyed, eliminated from territories operating. The unity of the coalition has been re-examined, and above all, we have said that it is necessary to continue to contribute in funding so that we can continue to be successful,"* Cerar said. (www.dnevnik.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc) which may test governmental

cohesion. Border dispute with Croatia is still ongoing and former Government of Miro Cerar filed a lawsuit against Croatia over its refusal to implement the border arbitration. Although the Prime Minister Marjan Sarec announced that his Government will follow the same policy in the issue, he showed up with an attitude of compromise by claiming that his country will not stop Croatia's accession in the Schengen zone. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The med-term 2018 – 2023 defense program it could improve situation, but under current political situation it is doubtful if it will be implemented to the end.



TURKEY: February 7th, Russia has demanded that Turkey do more to tackle hardcore fighters in Syria's Idlib province and fulfill promises it made as part of a deal with Moscow last year. Turkey, which backs moderate Syrian rebels, and Russia, the Syrian Government's principal foreign ally, agreed in September to create a demilitarized zone in northwest Idlib region that would be evacuated of all heavy weapons and hardline fighters. Ankara pledged to disarm and remove Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham dominating there, according to the deal, which prevented the Russia-backed Syrian Government from launching a major military operation in the region to wipe the group once affiliated with al-Qaeda. Speaking at a news conference in Moscow Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said situation in Idlib is rapidly deteriorating and Tahrir al-Sham is trying to seize control of the entire area. The comments came with Russian President Vladimir Putin due to meet the leaders of Turkey and Iran next week at a summit in the southern Russian

city of Sochi, where they are expected to discuss Syria again. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said last month “terrorist” groups are operating in about 70% of the demilitarized zone in Idlib, which he said went against the September deal. Turkey says it has been implementing the Idlib agreement without any problems, despite provocations from different sides in the war. Idlib has been hit by sporadic Government shelling for weeks despite the deal between Russia and Turkey. (www.aljazeera.com)

- February 7th, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Turkey is ready to take over the duty of fighting against terrorism in Syria, referring to his U.S. counterpart Donald Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria. “U.S withdrawal from Syria should not leave a gap in governance and security in the region. We are ready to undertake the responsibility,” Erdogan said. “Creation of a safe zone in northern Syria is crucial,” the President said. “Turkey is determined to fight against all terrorist groups, particularly DAESH, which poses a great threat to the region and the world.” In regard to strained Ankara-Washington relations over U.S. support for the Kurdish Syrian People's Protection Units (YPG) group, Erdogan said initiatives by Trump have thwarted efforts to heighten tensions between the two NATO allies. He warned that continued U.S. support for the YPG would undoubtedly have “consequences.” In regard to the YPG, Erdogan said “Equating the PKK/YPG terrorist group with local civilians is the biggest insult to our Kurdish brothers.” On the bilateral relations between Turkey and the U.S, Erdogan said that the two NATO allies have successfully overcome the problems they have faced. Turkey and the U.S have a strong, comprehensive and strategic alliance based on common interests, he

added. Erdogan also said Trump offered to increase the two countries' bilateral trade volume to 75 billion dollars. “*I gladly accepted it,*” he said. In June 2018, Ankara and Washington agreed on a road map that would see the YPG removed from Manbij in northern Syria. Turkey has repeatedly expressed its frustration that the implementation of the plan has been delayed. Erdogan said that Turkey would only wait a few weeks for militants to be removed from Manbij. The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is spearheaded by the YPG militants, have controlled Manbij since 2016. (www.dailysabah.com)

- February 10th, Turkey has condemned China's treatment of its Muslim ethnic Uighur people as “*a great cause of shame for humanity*” and asked it to close the “*concentration camps.*” In a statement on Saturday, Turkish Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hami Aksoy said that China has arbitrarily detained more than a million Uighurs. He said the Turkic Muslim population faced pressure and “*systematic assimilation*” in western China. “*It is no longer a secret that more than one million Uighur Turks, who are exposed to arbitrary arrests, are subjected to torture and political brainwashing in concentration centers and prisons,*” Aksoy said. “*We invite Chinese authorities to respect fundamental human rights of the Uighur Turks and shut down concentration camps,*” he said. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had once accused China of “*genocide*” but has since established closer diplomatic and economic relations with Beijing. China's Xinjiang region is home to around 10 million Uighurs. The Turkic Muslim group, which makes up around 45% of Xinjiang's population, has long accused Chinese authorities of cultural, religious and economic discrimination. Practicing Islam is

forbidden in some parts of China, with individuals caught praying, fasting, growing a beard or wearing a hijab, a headscarf worn by many Muslim women who feel it is part of their religion, facing the threat of arrest. China's embassy in Ankara posted a lengthy response to Aksoy's statements, saying that the accusations were false and urged the Government to retract them. “*Allegations that the Chinese Government is attempting to ‘eliminate’ the ethnic, religious and cultural identity of Uighurs and other Muslims are completely groundless,*” it said. (www.aljazeera.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Turkey faces several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs and journalists are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Turkish – U.S relations have strongly been harmed forcing Ankara to approach new allies such as Russia. Although Turkey re-examines its relations with the EU in an effort to avoid international and regional isolation, the EU sends messages of terminating the EU – Turkey accession talks. Turkish Armed Forces have been engaged in military operations against Kurds and PKK in Northern Iraq and against YPG Kurds in Syria as well. The U.S reconsiders its unconditional withdrawal from Syria after domestic and international critics. Protection of Syrian Kurds and YPG forces is a priority for the U.S troops which will remain in Syria as long as it is necessary. In this context, dialogue between Turkey and the U.S is ongoing aiming at reaching a common point of understanding. Turkey is waiting for the “green light” for establishing a

safe zone in Syria but it is doubtful if it will ever get it. President Erdogan expressed once again his anxiety to start a new military operation in Syria. Turkey has been developed into a “regional power” engaged in military operations in the territory of two other countries, it threatens to start a new operation in Syria, maintains a significant military force in North Cyprus, and threatens a NATO ally – Greece – with an armed conflict. Apart from the use or the threat of use of direct armed violence Turkey participates actively in diplomatic processes in the region (Syria negotiations, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Cyprus question, Qatar crisis etc). The state demonstrates decisively its leading role in the wider region of the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and Southeast Mediterranean. In this context, Turkey in a rather strict message urged China to respect human rights of Uighur population. Announcement of a huge navy drill in the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea may raise tension with Cyprus and Greece. It is assessed that the Greek Prime Minister’s visit to Turkey aimed at re-establishing channels of communications in order to avoid further escalation in the Aegean and East Mediterranean Sea. However, it is not clear what has been agreed between the two leaders. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Regarding Turkish interests in East Mediterranean Sea it seems that they are reaching a critical point since Cypriots have already started hydrocarbon drills in their Exclusive Economic Zone via the US energy giant ExxonMobil. Turkey has sent its drill ship Barbaros in the EEZ of Cyprus escalating tension in Eastern Mediterranean. Taking into consideration that a huge aeronautical exercise has been announced by the Turkish Armed Forces

in the end of February one should keep an eye on possible incidents in the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea.

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NOTE

- Stable situation. No security risk
- Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored
- Major concerns over stability and security. significant security risk in specific regions
- Imminent major incidents regarding stability and security. High security risk
- Evolving or ongoing crisis or violent/armed conflict