



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

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

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

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**The administrative Board
of the “HERMES” Institute of
International Affairs, Security &
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wishes you
Happy New Year**



ALBANIA: January 2nd, Ukraine appreciates the fact that Albania will take the Presidency of the OSCE for one year. This organization composed of 57 European countries has paid great attention to the conflict in the East of Ukraine, an issue that will be carried on by the Albanian presidency. The Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Vadym Prystaiko, congratulated the acting Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Gent Cakaj, for taking over the presidency of the OSCE in 2020. *“We welcome the leadership of Albania since the OSCE plays a critical and important role for bringing peace to Ukraine,”* Prystaiko declared. (www.top-channel.tv)

- January 2nd, the Special Prosecution against Corruption has opened its internet website, in which they invite citizens to report any corruption activity of high-level officials. SPAK.AL has an electronic submission form where citizens can write their names and personal data, or they can choose to stay anonymous. They can write the e-mail address and give a short summary of the corruption they are reporting, by even attaching documents. (www.top-channel.tv)

- January 3rd, Albania ordered the first deportation of a member of the Gulen movement to Erdogan’s Turkey on Wednesday evening, January 1st, 2020, raising concerns about violations of fundamental human rights. State Police said they deported Harun Celik, 42 years old, a teacher by profession, who was arrested five months ago in an attempt to flee to Canada. *“The person was in jail after being apprehended by the Rinas border Police with false documents. Pursuant to the ‘aliens’ law, he will be expelled,”* State Police Spokesman Gentjan Mullai said. The office of Prime Minister Edi Rama said when asked by BIRN that *“sentencing is a matter of legal proceedings not related to the Prime Minister.”* Through this act, Albania joined a small number of states that obey Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s request to send to Turkey any person linked to the Gulen global movement, which he accuses of being the mastermind of the 2016 failed state coup. Mullaj told Voice of America that the Turkish citizen *“was convicted and released from prison on Wednesday ...under the law on aliens, legal procedures for leaving Albania have been undertaken.”* Asked by Voice of America if Celik had sought protection from Albania as an endangered political activist in his country, the Spokesman replied that *“there was no further information.”* The opposition Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) demanded *“immediate transparency”* about the event, raising the question of whether such action is in breach of laws, international conventions or human rights. European Parliament MP Ramona Strugariu reacted immediately by criticizing the Albanian Government through social media. *“Prime Minister Edi Rama, Albania signed the CoE Convention on extradition. Moreover, you say*

Albania is ready for the EU. Then please follow art.19, al. 2 EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and do not extradite #HarunÇelik to Turkey!" she wrote. (www.tiranatimes.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political crisis continues in Albania affecting democratic function of the state. While opposition keeps denouncing Rama's Government, the struggle between the President and Prime Minister is turning into a personal duel. Under these circumstances the only solution to exit the political abnormality could be early parliamentary elections. Besides, political instability and malfunction may have direct impact in investments and opening of EU accession negotiations. Reforms should continue more intensively if the state seeks to get an accession negotiation date with the EU. Corruption, organized crime, money laundering, drug and weapon smuggling and links between politics and organized crime are the main problems Albania should address effectively. Relation between Albania and Kosovo with a potential new Government under Albin Kurti as the Prime Minister is a good question. However, Albania continues to act as the "motherland" of all Albanians around Southeast Europe.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

December 30th, Bosnia's Prosecution has filed charges against former Security Minister Dragan Mektic, and three other Ministry employees for abuse of office and high-level corruption, the Prosecution said on Monday. After conducting an investigation, the Prosecution said they filed charges against Dragan Mektic, Igor Golijanin, Samir Agic and Edina Garaplija for complicity in

the crime of abuse of office which led to high-level corruption, damaging Bosnia's international reputation. The Prosecution noted they have evidence that the four suspects abused their position when implementing the cross-border cooperation agreement in the field of firefighting worth 198,454.51 euro, which was financed by the EU Delegation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They claim that the suspects gained illegal material gain in the amount of some 125,000 euro by violating the procurement procedure. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- January 3rd, it is morally unacceptable, and against stability and good neighborly relations for Croatia's presidential candidates to persistently and tendentially argue that there is an increased danger of terrorism in Bosnia and Herzegovina "because Muslims live there," Bosnia's Security Minister, Fahrudin Radoncic, said on Friday. The reaction came after Croatia's presidential candidates, Zoran Milanovic and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, argued that there is an increased jihadi threat specific to Bosnia during their debate on Thursday. "Placing Bosniaks into such a context, even after the (Srebrenica) genocide which took place, is truly not a neighborly act," Radoncic said, arguing that Bosnia is a responsible partner in the battle against terrorism and that the country's intelligence and Police agencies are doing a lot of work on the issue. "To scare one's voters with potential terrorism from Bosnia and Herzegovina and to act like someone who protects the EU from us speaks a lot more of the political tendencies in Croatia than of our Muslims here, the Bosniaks," Radoncic said. He stressed that terrorism is a global evil and that trying to tie it to one religion, nation or state is unacceptable. He called upon Croatia's presidential candidates to

“stop with such populism and unnecessary insults to members of a religion which also exists in Croatia and makes the country’s multi-ethnic image more beautiful and better.”
(www.ba.n1info.com)

- January 4th, the adoption of the Religious Freedoms Law in Montenegro was completely unnecessary regardless of what they thought about it, Bosnian Serb leader and Presidency member Milorad Dodik said on Saturday. Dodik said he supported the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro's demands and that they should continue to fight for their realization. After speaking with Bishop Ephraim of Banja Luka about situation in Montenegro, after the adoption of the Religious Freedoms Law, Dodik said in Banja Luka that the usurpation of acquired rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church is unacceptable. *“People belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church and those who hold public office must stand against such defilement of our rights, of our people and the Church in Montenegro,”* he added. But above all, he noted, the most important thing is to resolve all this peacefully.
(www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The newly established Council of Ministers of BiH is functional and it is expected to accelerate reform process especially in the field of economy, rule of law, human rights, and fight against corruption. Adoption of the 2020 state budget is a significant step that the Council should forward in order to allow the state’s institutions to become functional. Political instability, poor economic performances, entities’ rivalries, and problematic framework of state’s structure (due to Dayton Accord) have left Bosnia far behind other Western

Balkan countries towards the EU. NATO is a feasible goal but only due to geopolitical and geostrategic reasons (mainly because of the Russian threat of penetration in the region) and not because of achieving the Alliance’s standards. Despite the Council of Ministers establishment political situation in the country remains unstable due to the complicated decision-making and governance system, which blocks almost every political action due to entity’s interests. At the moment Bosnia is considered as a potential source of instability in the whole region of Southeast Europe. Neighboring Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia’s internal affairs, while Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran maintain a permanent presence through financial donations and investments.



BULGARIA: December 30th, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya - BSP) announced Monday that it is moving for a vote of no confidence in the Government over what it sees as a failure of the environment and water policy. BSP leader Kornelia Ninova broke the news after the party's decision-making Executive Bureau and the leadership of its parliamentary group held an extraordinary meeting earlier in the day. The announcement comes a day after Ninova visited the western town of Pernik where water supply has been rationed for one and a half months now since it transpired that the level of water in the town's potable water reservoir had gone critically low. Ninova said the water crisis has affected not only Pernik but also other towns and regions of the country. She was likely referring to Botevgrad, among other towns, whose mayor said

in a radio interview this last weekend that the town's reservoir has water for six weeks only due to uncontrolled use of water by a privately owned hydroelectric power plant. The no-confidence motion against the Government will be submitted in the first few working days of the National Assembly in the new year, Ninova said. The legislature will resume its plenary sittings on January 15th, 2020 after a Christmas recess. *“Incompetent policies, negligence and theft during [Prime Minister] Borissov's 10 years in power have left about half a million Bulgarians without access to drinking water. The water crisis in Pernik is becoming a national crisis, because other regions and towns are confronted by the same problem,”* she said. She added that during the 10 years under Borissov, water prices have grown steadily for the Bulgarian people, but no measures have been taken to boost investments in the sector. Ninova said *“Only 0.5% of the water supply network has been replaced. Over 50% of the water is lost. Our air pollution problem is the third most serious in the world, because Boyko Borissov's Government allows waste to be imported from all over the world and to be burned in Bulgaria. We are breathing cancer and drinking poison.”* According to the Socialist leader, criminal liability should be borne for the failure to address these issues in Pernik and elsewhere. The BSP is open for dialogue with all other parliamentary parties concerning the support for the no-confidence motion, she said. (www.bta.bg)

- December 30th, Bulgarian consumers will pay 5% less for Russian gas starting January 1st, 2020, after Bulgaria's state-owned company Bulgargaz and Russia's Gazprom Export have agreed to move the gas point-of-entry from Negru Voda on

the border with Romania to Strandja on the border with Turkey, Energy Minister Temenouzhka Petkova said. Petkova said that the change in the delivery route would result in lower transit fees, with annual savings estimated at about 76 million leva (or 38.8 million euro), which will be mainly passed on to consumers. For its part, Bulgargaz's financial results for the 2019/2020 fiscal year would improve by 4.6 million leva, she said. Bulgaria's gas grid already had the necessary infrastructure in place and preparations for the switch were in place, the head of the gas grid operator Bulgartransgaz Vladimir Malinov said. At the same time, Russian gas will continue to enter Bulgaria through the Negru Voda point-of-entry, under existing transit arrangements with Greece and North Macedonia, he was quoted as saying. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- January 5th, in a position published on Sunday, the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry says that the Bulgarian Government defends and will continue to defend the rights of Bulgarian communities abroad, and not just in Serbia. This is also one of the priorities of the Foreign Ministry, the position reads. The Foreign Ministry's position was released in reaction to an interview of Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic for Serbia's RTS national television on Sunday, where he reportedly said that the Bulgarian minority in Serbia was only 0.26% of the country's population and yet Bulgaria raises the matter of the Bulgarian national minority's rights at every meeting of the European Council. The Bulgarian Foreign Ministry's position reads further that when it comes to Serbia, Bulgaria insists on nothing more than Serbia observing its own constitution and laws on minorities, as well as its commitments within the pre-accession process.

Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Krassimir Karakachanov also reacted to Dacic's statement. In a social media post on Sunday, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote *“This concerns the rights of those Bulgarians in the territories which Serbia occupied illegally in 1919 after the Neuilly Treaty. Of those Bulgarians who Serbia forbid from calling themselves Bulgarians until 1944 and then tormented, oppressed and forced to leave their birthplaces. The Bulgarian State will not stop defending the rights of the children of its compatriots to study with textbooks in Bulgarian. It will not yield an inch from the requirements for the observation of all freedoms and rights that the Bulgarian national minority in neighboring Serbia is entitled to.”* (www.bta.bg)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT █:

Boyko Borissov's Government is stable. There is an ongoing struggle between the Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov and the President Rumen Radev due to their opposing political affiliation. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles for the country's development and should be addressed decisively. The country pays special attention to energy security developing several projects. Modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc). However, military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards.



CROATIA: January 1st, Croatia took over the presidency of the Council of the

European Union on 1st January 2020 from Finland, six and a half years after entering the European bloc. The beginning of the Croatian presidency will be formally marked on January 9th, 2020 when members of the European Commission are due to come to Zagreb and when a concert on that occasion is going to be held in the Croatian National Theatre. A concert will also be held in Brussels on January 15th, 2020 to mark the start of the Croatian presidency, and this will coincide with the anniversaries of Croatia's international recognition on January 15th, 1992 and the completion of the peaceful reintegration of the Croatian Danube region on January 15th, 1998. The presidency over the EU is seen as an opportunity to promote the country-in-chair and making the local society more sensitive to EU-related topics. *“A strong Europe in a world of challenges”* is the slogan Croatia has chosen for its presidency. The program of its EU presidency is based on four themes or pillars - A Europe that develops; A Europe that connects; A Europe that protects; An influential Europe. (www.hr.n1info.com)



The Croatian Presidency of Council of the EU
logo
(www.eu2020.hr)

- January 5th, military equipment, including heavy weapons and 15 Patria AMV armored vehicles,

were loaded onto trains in Knin on Sunday bound for the second Croatian contingent to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania. The equipment is set to depart the military base in Knin on Monday afternoon and travel six days to its final destination. The Patria AMV is an 8×8 multi-role military vehicle produced by the Finnish defense industry company Patria. The main feature of the AMV is its modular design, which allows the incorporation of different turrets, weapons, sensors, or communications systems on the same carriage. Defense Minister Damir Krsticevic and General Mirko Sundov were in Knin on December 30th, 2019 to see off 188 members of the second Croatian contingent to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. The Croatian soldiers are part of four multinational battle groups located in Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland that make up the Alliance's defense and deterrence strategy in Eastern and Northern Europe. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- January 5th, former Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic, candidate of the top opposition party the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (Socijaldemokratska Partija Hrvatske - SDP), will be Croatia's next President, the results of the presidential election showed on Sunday. In the second and final round of the election, Milanovic won 52.7% of votes, while the incumbent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, candidate of the ruling centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ) garnered 47.3% of the votes. The President's role is largely ceremonial in Croatia. The Head of state cannot veto laws, but has a say in foreign policy, defense and security matters. Milanovic, who served as Prime Minister from 2011 to 2015, ran

his election campaign on a promise to fight corruption, which he said had increased since he lost power to the conservatives. *“Milanovic's victory is a wind in the sails of the Social Democrats and will strengthen the party ahead of a parliamentary vote (due in the autumn),”* political analyst Branko Caratan told state television. In the first round of the election two weeks ago, Milanovic beat 11 other candidates to come first with 29.6% of votes, with Grabar-Kitarovic in second place with 26.7%. *“For me (from now on) each party will on the formal level be the same. I will cooperate with everyone who will have the executive power. I will not make divisions among the Croatian citizens,”* Milanovic told his cheering supporters in the party campaign headquarters. The outgoing President Grabar-Kitarovic in her speech wished Milanovic a successful five-year term in office which begins in February. While some analysts said Milanovic's victory could hurt the standing of Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic in his HDZ party, ahead of the party leadership election this year, others said he would be able to manage the challenge. *“I think that Plenkovic is a skilled politician who will know how to balance in the new situation,”* Smiljana Leinert Novosel told state television. (www.reuters.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The country enjoys political stability. Zoran Milanovic backed by the opposition SDP is the new Croatian President for next 5 years. Incumbent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic backed by the ruling HDZ was defeated. The electoral result may affect coming parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn 2020 but the Prime Minister, Andrej Plenkovic has plenty of time to

handle situation. Besides, the presidential result may have more active role in HDZ internal affairs and more specific the struggle for dominance between the right and the center-right factions. Coexistence of the newly elected President and the Prime Minister, coming from different political affiliation may cause some disputes or disagreements on state's issues mainly in the fields of foreign policy or defense and security. It should be noticed that the President in Croatia is rather ceremonial. The country took over the EU Presidency and it will have a six month period to implement its political agenda. The country received a positive recommendation by the European Commission for implementing all necessary criteria for entering the Schengen Zone. However, the final political decision by the member states requires a unanimous vote and it is expected to become a field of confrontation between Croatia and Slovenia. Slovenia has already expressed its intention to block Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area due to their border dispute. However, Croatia expresses confidence that finally it will get full support (Slovenia including) for entering the Zone. However, Croatia insists on claiming that the arbitration rule is not valid and the dispute should be resolved through bilateral negotiations; a position which is unacceptable for Slovenia. Croatia implements a hard-line foreign policy with its neighboring countries maintaining open disputes with Bosnia, Slovenia, and Serbia. Top officials do not hesitate to openly interfere in Bosnian domestic affairs in the name of Bosnian Croats as forementioned. 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: January 2nd, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo postponed on Wednesday a trip to Ukraine so he could focus on situation in Iraq after demonstrators attacked the US Embassy. “Secretary Pompeo must postpone his visit to Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Cyprus due to the need for the Secretary to be in Washington, D.C., to continue monitoring the ongoing situation in Iraq and ensure the safety and security of Americans in the Middle East,” the State Department’s Spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a statement. “Secretary Pompeo’s trip will be rescheduled in the near future and he looks forward to the visit at that time,” she added. His trip was scheduled for Friday through Tuesday, when he was due to visit Cyprus. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- January 2nd, the East Med pipeline agreement between Cyprus, Greece and Israel is not financially advantageous and will not help solve the Cyprus problem, Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci said on Thursday. In a written statement, Akinci said that the pipeline, which is planned to extend from Israel “to Southern Cyprus, from Crete to Greece and ultimately to Italy” is a much longer and more costly route than other alternatives. It is clear, Akinci said, that this project, which is being kept on the agenda despite the views by experts, “will not help solve the Cyprus problem, just as Southern Cyprus has become a member of the EU.” According to the Turkish Cypriot leader, decision to sign the agreement in Athens later on Thursday is contrary to geographical realities, it does not make sense

financially, but rather it has been prompted by political concerns. He argued that the political atmosphere can be changed by mutual steps but that it is impossible to change geography. The Turkish Cypriots and Turkey cannot be excluded from the Eastern Mediterranean energy equation, he said. Akinci reiterated there was need for a way to jointly exploit energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean which could ultimately help solve the Cyprus problem. He also reiterated that the solution of the Cyprus problem “*has become a necessity not only for Cyprus but also for the region.*” The agreement for the construction of the EastMed natural gas pipeline is set to be signed on Thursday evening in Athens between Greece, Cyprus and Israel by the three countries’ Energy Ministers. President Nicos Anastasiades is also in Athens for the occasion. In the meantime, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said during an event in Trabzon that Turkey would not allow any violation of its rights or those of Turkish Cypriots. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- January 4th, Cyprus will send a proposal for the exploitation of the Aphrodite natural gas field in the coming weeks to Israel, Government Spokesman Kyriacos Koushios said on Saturday. Koushios commented on the signing of the EastMed pipeline agreement on Thursday, saying the Government met with Israeli representatives and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss the exploitation of the Aphrodite field. “*In the next two to three weeks, our side will send a proposal to the Energy Ministry of Israel, and we believe that there will be no problems for the exploitation of the Aphrodite field,*” he said. Commenting on statements made by Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci, who regards the

pipeline agreement as a step back in restarting peace talks, Koushios said the agreement does not go against anybody, “*but could instead aid in stability and peace in the area.*” He added countries wishing to join in on the EastMed agreement are welcome, something the leaders who signed the agreement noted. Regarding what further developments are expected in the energy sector, Koushios said “*As Energy Minister Yiorgos Lakkotrypīs has indicated, new drilling is expected in the coming months. In the first half of the year, we will have some results that we will announce immediately.*” Commenting on developments in the Middle East, following the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, Iran’s prominent military Commander and architect of its growing influence in the Middle East, Koushios said no retaliation was expected in Cyprus, but that Police have increased their presence outside areas “*which are in the interest of other countries, and potential targets of retaliation.*” (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Cyprus conducted an excessive diplomatic initiative by informing regional countries of the current situation in eastern Mediterranean and more specific about the Turkish actions and the agreements with Libya. Although it tries to establish defense relations with other countries aiming to balance its military deficit it is rather unlikely to see a foreign military force or coalition to defend Cypriot sovereign rights. In other words, Cyprus is obliged to protect its sovereignty if it is necessary. Turkey is determined to establish its presence in the region and especially within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) claiming the Turkish Cypriot

community rights. It maintains a significant military force on the island (Army Corps seize) and it reinforce it with modern systems such as UAVs. Lift of arms embargo by the US administration and the sign of EastMed pipeline between Cyprus, Greece and Israel may escalate tension in the near future. Turkey continues its invasion in Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) with YAVUZ drillship challenging the state's sovereignty. Lack of military power and more specifically aeronautical power is critical for Turkish uncontrolled action within Cypriot EEZ. As long as tension remains in eastern Mediterranean, there is always a high risk of an armed "hot" incident or a conflict. It is certain that Turkey will not accept "fait accompli" in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. Next trilateral meeting of Cyprus, Egypt and Greece is planned for early January in Cairo, while France announced it will join the session. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



GREECE: December 30th, Greece's Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis said in remarks published on Sunday that if Athens and Ankara cannot solve their dispute about maritime zones in the Mediterranean they should turn to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague to settle the disagreement. Turkey signed an accord with Libya's internationally recognized Government last month that seeks to create an Exclusive Economic Zone from Turkey's southern Mediterranean shore to Libya's northeast coast. Greece and Cyprus, which have long

maritime and territorial disputes with Turkey, say the accord is void and violates the international law of the sea. They see it as a cynical resource-grab designed to scupper the development of East Mediterranean gas and destabilize rivals. Mitsotakis, in an interview with weekly newspaper "To Vima," said his intention is for Greece and Turkey to discuss their differences about maritime zones in the Aegean and east Mediterranean on a political and diplomatic level. "But we should say clearly that if we cannot find a solution then we should agree that the one difference that Greece recognizes [over maritime zones] must be judged in an international body like the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in Hague," Mitsotakis said. Earlier in December, Cyprus petitioned the ICJ to safeguard its offshore mineral rights. There has been no response so far from Turkey to that initiative. Cyprus's internationally recognized Government discovered offshore gas in 2011 but has been at loggerheads with Turkey over maritime zones around the island, where it has granted licenses to multinational companies for oil and gas research. Turkey, which does not have diplomatic relations with Cyprus's Government, says that some areas Nicosia operates in are either on the Turkish continental shelf, or in areas where the breakaway Turkish Cypriot state has rights over any finds. It has sent its own drill ships to the island. The ICJ has the power to issue binding decisions. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- December 30th, Greece's new asylum law, which goes into effect on January 1st, 2020 will facilitate the return of more people to Turkey under the terms of the 2016 EU -Turkey deal designed to curb migration across the Aegean, officials say. A key element of the new measures, which have

come under fire from international aid groups, is the prioritization of asylum applications, with those from individuals belonging to vulnerable groups and coming from countries with high asylum recognition rates being examined first. *“There is a misunderstanding regarding the EU - Turkey statement,”* an unnamed Migration Ministry official told Kathimerini. *“It concerns Syrians who can be sent back to Turkey, despite having a refugee profile and provided that their life is not at risk,”* said the official, adding that Ankara is getting EU funds to cater for these people. A total of 13,000 Syrians landed in Greece in 2019. *“If we could return half of them to Turkey, it would help a great deal,”* the official said. Some critics have said the change in asylum rules have caused a spike in inflows. Speaking to Kathimerini, the Director of the Asylum Service on Lesbos in the eastern Aegean, Marios Kaleas rejected the notion. *“I do not think that political decisions in Greece influence arrivals from Turkey,”* he said. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- January 2nd, Greece, Israel and Cyprus signed a deal Thursday to build an undersea pipeline to carry gas from new offshore deposits in the southeastern Mediterranean to continental Europe. The 1,900 kilometer (1,300-mile) EastMed pipeline is intended to provide an alternative gas source for energy-hungry Europe, which is largely dependent on supplies from Russia and the Caucasus region. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who attended the signing ceremony with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades, said the pipeline will offer Europe *“better flexibility and independence in its energy sources.”* The pipeline would run from Israel's Levantine Basin offshore gas reserves to Cyprus, the Greek island

of Crete and the Greek mainland. An overland pipeline to northwestern Greece and another planned undersea pipeline would carry the gas to Italy. The project could also accommodate future gas finds in waters off Cyprus and Greece, where exploration is under way. The project, with a rough budget of 6 billion US dollars, is expected to satisfy about 10% of the EU's natural gas needs. But it is fraught with political and logistical complexities. The race to claim offshore energy deposits in the southern Mediterranean has created new tensions between Greece and Cyprus, on one side, and historic rival Turkey. Ankara has raised the stakes with recent moves to explore waters controlled by the two EU member countries. Cyprus and Greece are particularly disturbed because Turkey sent warship-escorted drill ships into waters where Cyprus has exclusive economic rights. Anastasiades said the pipeline affirms that Greece and Cyprus have sovereign rights in waters assigned to them under international law. *“This cooperation that we have developed ... is not directed against any third country,”* he said. *“On the contrary, whichever country wishes is welcome to join, on the understanding of course that it adopts the basic principles of international law and fully respects the sovereign rights and the territorial integrity of independent states.”* Alluding to Turkey's stance, Anastasiades said cooperation is the only approach in an unstable region instead of embarking on a course of *“self-isolation.”* Netanyahu said Israel is set to become a *“powerhouse in terms of energy”* with its offshore gas reserves. He added that the three countries have established *“an alliance of great importance”* that will bolster regional stability. Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz has said the EastMed pipeline would take up to seven years to

build and that its advantages include being less vulnerable to sabotage and not crossing many national borders to reach markets. Turkey does not recognize Cyprus as a state and claims much of Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone as falling within its own continental shelf. Turkey is also laying claim to large tracts under Greek control in the Aegean Sea and off Crete. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said no project can proceed without his country's consent following a maritime border agreement that Ankara signed with the Libya's Tripoli-based Government. The Cypriot Government has licensed Italian energy company Eni, France's Total, ExxonMobil and Texas-based Noble Energy to carry out exploratory hydrocarbons drilling in the country's offshore economic zone.(www.ekathimerini.com)



Sign of EastMed deal by Cyprus, Greece and Israel

(Photo source: www.primeminister.gr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Greece enjoys political stability focusing on strengthening economy and imposing law and order. At the moment, migration is the main security problem of Greece. Control of migrant flows coming from Turkey is a critical point for Greek national security and consequently EU's security. The Government announced strict measures aiming to control the problem but also seeks to the EU solidarity to address the problem.

In the field of east Mediterranean, Greece continues its diplomatic efforts to gain support by international actors. The Turkey – Libya accord on maritime boundaries creates “fait accompli” in eastern Mediterranean and significantly harms Greek national economic and security interests. At the moment situation is escalating on diplomatic level, but there are concerns that soon Greece will be forced to address Turkish offensive by military power. On January 2nd, 2020 Athens became the center of geostrategic and geoeconomic interest of regional stakeholders since Cyprus, Greece and Israel sign an agreement on EastMed pipeline. The EastMed pipeline connects the Israeli and Cypriot gas fields via Greece and Italy with European markets. It is estimated that Turkey will react in implementation of the project claiming that it violates its sovereign rights as they were formed by the Turkish – Libyan agreement. In short, situation is evolving rapidly characterized by increased tension and uncertainty. There is a large number of internal and external actors involved in the ongoing situation and could easily be transformed into a crisis or armed conflict. It is assessed that soon Greece will be forced to address Turkish provocation within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) South of Crete. Turkey declares readiness to start drills in the region and if drillships will appear then a crisis will be emerged including the threat of armed violence. Greek Government has sent a strong and clear message that if Turkey violates Greece's sovereign rights by seismographic or drill ships it will use violence. Lately, there are more voices including the Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis and prominent members of the ruling ND party, speaking for the need Greece and Turkey to address the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in

Hague for resolving their disputes. The Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikos Dendias stated that the only bilateral issue between the two countries is that of the continental shelf. It should not be excluded a “hot” incident in the Aegean Sea or within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) since Turkish political and military leadership has the advantage of surprise. Greece is concerned due to Turkish intention to search for hydrocarbons within its EEZ near to Kastelorizo region. Turkey has targeted the wider area of Kastelorizo (and Northeast Aegean Sea) issuing several NAVTEXs for naval exercises with live fires. Moreover, Turkish fighter jets massively violate Greek airspace, while Turkish drones fly over Greek islands or islets. Greece seeks to modernize its Armed Forces by receiving US military aid. It is a fact that Greek military force has been affected by the long economic crisis threatening the balance of power with Turkey. Currently, Greece focuses on naval units, upgrade of fighter jets, UAVs and follow on support agreements. Taking into consideration the ongoing provocations in the Aegean Sea and the complicated current situation in Cypriot EEZ and eastern Mediterranean in general, security situation is of high risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident by Turkey.



KOSOVO: December 31st, the President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, spoke in an interview about the Balkan “Mini Schengen” as well. Thaci said that Kosovo has not been invited at the very first meeting for the “Mini Schengen.” “I refused the invitation from Zaev and Rama. Kosovo was excluded from the first meeting. I am not demanding Albania, Northern Macedonia and Montenegro to not cooperate, but I want Kosovo

to behave as an independent country. We cannot endanger our state interests for advancing those of Serbia,” Thaci said. He added that “We are ready to sign a bilateral agreement that treats Kosovo as independent. Kosovo is ready to decide removing border with Albania and also Customs. We are one single nation with two states. We operate as two democratic countries,” Thaci declared. (www.top-channel.tv)

- January 3rd, Self-Determination (Vetevendosje) leader and candidate for Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, said he would resume dialogue with Serbia once his party secures majority to form new Government. Kurti’s party won October 6th, 2019 elections, but has not formed the Government yet as it is still negotiating with the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK) to secure majority in Parliament. Resumption of Kosovo - Serbia dialogue is one of the main requests of the US and EU. Kurti in an interview with the Tirana-based TV Ora News, said that if he manages to form the Government, he will start dialogue with local Serbs in Kosovo in the first week as Prime Minister, and promised resumption of the EU-facilitated talks with Belgrade before Serbia’s elections which are expected to be held in Spring 2020. “We can resume the dialogue before elections in Serbia, but there can be no historic agreement reached in a hurry,” Kurti said. Further, he said that all agreements reached so far between Kosovo and Serbia will be reviewed by his Government. “We will review those 33 agreements we have reached with Serbia to make an overall assessment to learn from the past in order to move towards the future,” Kurti said. Pristina and Belgrade halted EU-facilitated dialogue on normalization of

relations in November 2018 after Kosovo introduced 100% tax on all Serbian imports countering Belgrade's aggressive campaign against Kosovo's statehood. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- January 3rd, Deputy Head of the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK), Vjosa Osmani, says potential failure to reach an agreement between her party and the Self-Determination (Vetevendosje) on Government formation would be a historic mistake, Gazeta Express reports. The LDK is expected to convene its General Council on Monday to discuss potential agreement with the Vetevendosje on co-governance. "On Monday we will discuss the new circumstances after constitution of the Parliament and to see how to proceed further," Osmani said. She considers that a potential failure to reach a deal between the two parties which won October 6th, 2019 elections would be a historic mistake. She said that the two parties held no new meetings over the last days adding that LDK will convene on Monday its bodies and take a stand on potential coalition with the Vetevendosje. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Vetëvendosje and LDK have not reach an agreement yet but it is assessed that finally the Government will be established this week avoiding new elections. Besides, top officials of LDK underline that the two parties should reach an agreement. It is still a question if LDK will join the Government or it will support a minority Government of Vetëvendosje without joining ministerial posts. Vetëvendosje leader and candidate Prime Minister, Albin Kurti stated that if the Government will be established, he will

resume dialogue with Serbia before the Serbian elections (late April or early May 2020). Furthermore, he claimed that he will talk with Kosovo Serbs in the first week of his governance. Such statements showing compromise are in line with the US and EU which seek restart of Belgrade – Pristina dialogue before Serbian elections. However, if 100% tariffs on Serbian goods are revoked Serbia will not join in any kind of negotiations. It is assessed that relation of President, Hashim Thaci and potential Prime Minister, Albin Kurti will be a major obstacle for Kosovo politics. Only through normalization of relations with Serbia, Kosovo will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. It should be noticed that possible deployment of security forces and the newly established Kosovo Army in the north may become a reason for turbulence and an armed conflict. Although international community namely the US and EU push both sides (Kosovo and Serbia) for reaching a mutual accepted agreement, it is assessed that negotiations restart and an agreement is too far. Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish rule of law and modern functional administration in the country. Kosovo unresolved status, political instability, corruption, and organized crime are not encouraging factors for its future within European community. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard.



MOLDOVA: December 30th, Moldovan President Igor Dodon made an official visit to Ankara, where he met his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Monday as the two countries seek to expand mutual

cooperation in a series of areas including security. *“Turkey is our strategic partner. The official visit to this country allows us to expand, deepen and strengthen bilateral cooperation relations in all areas of common interest, for the benefit of both peoples,”* Dodon wrote on social media. Dodon said that the new agreements that will be signed during his visit will focus on the conversion and mutual recognition of driving licenses, international transport, and cooperation in the field of science and technology. One of the agreements will also enable Moldova and Turkey to train each other’s law-enforcement personnel. Moldova and Turkey already collaborate on the training of military personnel under an agreement that was signed in October 2018 when Erdogan visited Chisinau. That visit came after six professors who were working for a private chain of high schools that had been linked to Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen, who Ankara accuses of being behind an attempted coup in 2016, were detained and expelled from Moldova by the Turkish and Moldovan intelligence services. All of them were sentenced to up to nine years in jail for alleged terrorist activities. Dodon and Erdogan have a good personal relationship. Turkey paid around 10 million euro for the repairs of the presidential palace in Chisinau which was set ablaze during the so-called Twitter Revolution in 2009 which overthrew the communist regime of then President Vladimir Voronin. Before visiting Turkey, Dodon stated that in 2020, Moldova will become a *“construction site”* for new building projects. Dodon is aiming to secure a second presidential mandate next year. In previous years, many Turkish companies have been given major infrastructure contracts in Moldova, among them the construction of the country’s biggest sports arena, the Arena

Chisinau. Dodon is being accompanied on his visit to Ankara by Prime Minister Ion Chicu and Irina Vlah, the leader of the autonomous region of Gagauzia, which is inhabited by ethnic Turks. The visit comes as Turkey continues to increase its investments and influence in Moldova – part of a strategy which has also seen Ankara under Erdogan’s rule seek to strengthen ties with countries in the Black Sea and Balkan regions in order to become a regional power. Over the past decade, Turkey has also strengthened military links to friendly countries. Experts say that Turkey has become increasingly competitive in the military exports sector and has the chance to penetrate Balkan markets despite tough competition from Europe’s big military companies. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- January 3rd, Gabriela Cuneva has been appointed as State Secretary at the Finance Ministry. The Government took a decision to this effect today. Finance Minister Serghei Puscuta made this proposal at a cabinet meeting. *“You are the first civil servant appointed to office in 2020. Welcome to the Finance Ministry,”* Prime Minister Ion Chicu said. Cuneva also held the office of State Secretary at the Finance Ministry on the period February - August 2019. (www.moldpres.md)

- January 3rd, the set of documents regarding the justice sector reform is to be submitted to the Council of Europe today. Prime Minister Ion Chicu made statements to this effect in the beginning of a today’s cabinet meeting. According to Chicu, subsequently, by January 20th, 2020 a group of Council of Europe experts is to come to Moldova, to provide assistance in the reform’s implementation. The package of documents contains the strategy for ensuring the

independence and integrity of the justice sector, an action plan on its implementation and the draft law on judges' evaluation. *“According to the agreements with the Council of Europe, including the discussions I had at a visit paid to Strasbourg, the Government and the Justice Ministry today will submit the package of acts concerning the justice reform in Moldova to the Council of Europe. Our promise was to submit these documents till January 5th, 2020, so that the ad hoc group of experts on behalf of the Council of Europe comes to Moldova by January 20th and assist us in the reform's implementation,”* Chicu said. (www.moldpres.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The President Igor Dodon enjoys his political reign in Moldova as the most powerful actor. With his political maneuvers achieved to dissolve the pro-western ACUM Block although it was fully supported by the EU and US. Currently he seeks his PSRM Government to complete its governance by 2023 claiming that almost none political party wishes snap elections except the PAS and SOR parties. It is assessed that PDM is currently a “hostage” of PSRM guarantying political support in the Parliament. Under these circumstances, Russia is a privileged stakeholder in the country promoting its strategic interests Besides, Moldova is considered by Russia as a pivotal country for its national security. Moldova strengthens its relationship with Turkey seeking to economic, defense and security benefits. The “Transnistrian case” is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: January 3rd, another cruel, uncivilized attack on the Embassy of Montenegro occurred in Belgrade last night, said Montenegro's Prime Minister, Dusko Markovic, and pointed out that he was astonished with how Serbian Government reacted to it. *“Once again, Montenegro is faced with the challenge of defending its independence and freedom. We will protect our Montenegro despite a frenzy of hatred,”* Prime Minister. Supporters of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Red Star fans tried last night to destroy Montenegrin flag in front of the Embassy by shooting from the fireworks rockets. (www.cdm.me)

- January 3rd, thousands of people gathered in the center of the Montenegrin capital Podgorica on Friday evening, continuing the days of protest over the introduction of a law on religious communities. The Montenegrin Parliament adopted the law on religious communities which the Serbian Orthodox Church says will allow the Government to seize its properties and turn over monasteries, temples and holy sites which it has held for centuries to the unrecognized Montenegrin Orthodox Church. The protests began before the law was adopted and have continued since. The religious procession was headed Montenegro Littoral Bishop Amfilohije, a fierce critic of the authorities in both Montenegro and Serbia. Local media reported that a crowd of several thousand gathered in the northern Montenegrin town of Berane to protest the law in front of their local monastery. The crowd included the opposition Mayor and local officials. Berane is the only opposition controlled town in the country. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- January 5th, hybrid threats against Montenegro are increasing day by day, especially having in mind the forthcoming elections, Defense Minister Predrag Boskovic told in an interview with Nova M. Boskovic noted the last two and a half years, since Montenegro joined NATO, have shown that the country has chosen the right path and that the NATO membership was one of its historical decisions. “Hybrid threats exist and are continuous. The fact is that they are increasing every day as Montenegro is getting closer to make some big decisions, such as the elections in autumn next year.” This is the reason, according to him, why Montenegro increased the level of protection, adding that certain malicious activities occurred over the past period. When asked whether we were able to resist to spreading of the Russian influence in the Balkans, Boskovic said Montenegro managed to counter it in 2016 “when we were not so much aware of it.” (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Montenegro's Government has provoked harsh reactions not only within the country, but also in neighboring countries by adopting the controversial law on religious freedoms. Serbian Orthodox Church has strongly opposed to the law claiming that the Government seeks to seize its property belonging to the Church for centuries. Serbian Government engaged in the struggle between the Montenegrin Government and the Church, while Russia also following the case. The Church organizes protests in Montenegro where thousands of citizens participate. Montenegrin – Serbian relations are in tension since Serbs burned the state's flag outside the Montenegrin Embassy in Belgrade. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic underlined that Serbia will

protect Serbs in Montenegro who are currently under threat. Montenegro's authorities claim that the country faces hybrid threats which are increasing as the country moves towards elections. Current crisis may destabilize the country since protests will continue and Police will have to intervene. Recently top officials of the Government expressed its intention to establish the independent Montenegrin Orthodox Church making things even worse. Apart from that, the ongoing political crisis undermines political stability. The EU expressed its concern for the long political crisis which does not fit with “a state that seeks to join the EU.” The Government promotes state's political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment, but current situation is alarming for state's stability. Besides, Montenegro needs more concrete reforms in the field of justice, rule of law, fight against corruption, money laundering, and organized crime, public administration transparency and accountability in order to become a stable and attractive investment environment. Russian influence continues to be considered as a “threat” against state's national security. Moreover, Serbian intervention in Montenegrin internal affairs is considered also as a notable problem which needs to be resolved. Serbia refuses to abandon the view that Montenegro is the “natural extension of the country.” The country focuses on strengthening its Armed Forces by purchasing modern equipment and reducing the average age of its military personnel (currently 37 years old).



NORTH MACEDONIA: January 3rd, with all votes in favor of, this evening, a new interim Government was elected at the Parliament

which will have to carry out free, fair and democratic elections. 101 MPs voted in favor, while there was not anyone against. President Stevo Pendarovski met late Friday with members of the interim Government tasked with administering the April 12th, 2020 early elections, the President's Office informed. (www.meta.mk)



North Macedonia President, Stevo Pendarovski
with members of the interim Government
(Photo source: www.pretsedatel.mk)

- January 3rd, a proposal to ratify the NATO accession protocol was sent by the outgoing Government to the Parliament. North Macedonia is still waiting on Spain to ratify the protocol in order to become a fully fledged NATO member, but because of the political crisis in Spain this move has been delayed. Given that the Parliament is supposed to dissolve on February 11th, 2020 and only reassemble after the elections on April 12th, 2020 opposition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) party proposed that the country ratifies the protocol without waiting on Spain. The Government rejected this option, and the Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev said that he will wait on Spain as early as Thursday morning as he was sending his

resignation letter to Parliament, but such a proposal was sent to the Parliament today. Zaev announced he may try to postpone the elections, citing the NATO protocol as a reason, and the opposition suspected that he is secretly hoping that the Spanish ratification is delayed, but as the Government's resignation was all but assured on Thursday, it seems that the early ratification option is now in force. (www.republika.mk)

- January 4th, interim Interior Minister Nike Culev ordered the removal of politically linked Commander Primislav Dimovski, who was appointed as Head of the newly reorganized Rapid Response Police Unit. Dimovski, known as a strong Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) party loyalist, who used to work for the now thoroughly disgraced Special Prosecutor's Office, was appointed Head of the reformed "Alfa" Unit. The Unit was subject to much controversy lately, as with just days before his removal from the position of Interior Minister, Oliver Spasovski ordered the Unit to be abolished and then immediately reformed, in a move clearly meant to more easily re-assign SDSM party loyalists to key positions. The "Alfa" Unit is of key role in case of turbulence during the April 2020 elections. Culev who is Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) has the right to replace 15 top Officers and Directors in the Interior Ministry. Dimovski was the first one. Other officials set to be replaced including the Police Chiefs of Skopje, Veles, Bitola, Strumica, Stip and Ohrid, and the Directors of the

Organized Crime Unit, Internal Control, Special Police Unit and Riot Police. Culev announced that, as interim Minister, he will also investigate the large number of last minute appointments made by his predecessor Oliver Spasovski. (www.republika.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Prime Minister Zoran Zaev resigned and an interim Government including members of opposition was formed as the law stipulates. It is important that Zaev avoided delays which could have caused opposition's reaction and political tension. Everything goes as it was scheduled so far which is a guarantee for political calmness during the pre-electoral campaign. VMRO-DPMNE controls the "sensitive" Ministry of Interior which actually controls state's security forces. It is expected that the interim Interior Minister, Nake Culev will replace Heads and Directors of key positions in security forces (Riot Police, Organized Crime Police, local Police Directors etc). Parliamentary elections are scheduled for April 12th, 2020. Undoubtedly, North Macedonia has entered in political uncertainty and instability after rejection of opening accession negotiations by the EU in mid-October 2019. The country should focus on reforms regarding justice, rule of law, fight against corruption and money laundering, administration, and respect of human rights in order to accelerate its European integration process. North Macedonia's politics are still shaken by a series of corruption and extortion scandals undermining not only country's political stability, but also its European perspective. Fancy names such as "Extortion", "Empire", "Racket", "Titanic", "Monster" are nothing more than

scandals involving politicians, businessmen, criminals, and judicial servants demonstrating that corruption, absence of rule of law and non transparency dominate in state's function. It should be noted that Justice moves slowly towards full investigation of these scandals.



ROMANIA: December 30th, Prime Minister Ludovic Orban will pay a working visit to Brussels, at the headquarters of the European institutions and NATO, on January 7th – 9th, 2020. According to a Government's release, the head of the Bucharest Executive will have meetings with the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, and NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. The agenda also includes meetings with European Council's President Charles Michel and European Parliament's President David Sassoli. (www.nineoclock.ro)

- December 30th, the state budget law could come into force on January 6th, 2020, if not challenged at the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR), the Deputy Prime Minister Raluca Turcan said on Monday, at the beginning of the Government's sitting. Turcan added that the three bills the Executive has taken responsibility on, among which the state budget law, have completed their parliamentary path, and as of Monday those who wish so could challenge them to the CCR for two days. If not challenged, the bills could reach their being promulgated on January 6th, 2020. (www.nineoclock.ro)

- December 30th, Prime Minister Ludovic Orban has stated on Monday that decisions regarding the reorganization and functioning of Ministries will be most likely adopted by January 15th, 2020. "At

the last meeting I requested you to come up with the draft Government decisions for the organization and functioning of each Ministry, with two exceptions, the Defense Ministry and the Interior Ministry, there, where the CSAT [Romania's Supreme Council for National Defense] opinion is necessary and we will have to carry out a separate discussion. It is a first talk, we adopt only those Government decisions where we clarified all the aspects related to the optimization, the efficiency of each Ministry. We will discuss the Government decisions and after we make all decisions, we will adopt them most likely by January 15th, 2020. This is the term I give you," Orban stated in the beginning of the Government meeting. On Monday's Government meeting also presented, in a first reading, reorganization of the Public Finance Ministry and Foreign Affairs Ministry. (www.nineoclock.ro)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The Government promotes reorganization of state's Ministries which is actually an ambitious project, but absolutely necessary for modernization of public administration and governance. Although the Government is a minority one, it promotes significant political initiatives under the President, Klaus Iohannis' guidance. Elections should not be expected before spring 2020, giving the necessary time to opposition PSD to be reorganized and even to take in advantage a possible wear of current ruling party. The country enjoys advanced upgrade in US and NATO strategic plans due to its geographical position located close to Russia. Consequently, Russia reacts in this close military cooperation between the two countries and the Alliance perceiving it as a threat against its national security. Romania keeps strengthening

its Armed Forces seeking to achieve NATO standards.



SERBIA: December 30th, Alliance for Serbia (Savez za Srbiju - SzS) Chairman Vuk Jeremic said on Monday that the opposition's decision to boycott the coming elections is final and added that there are no conditions to ensure free and fair elections. Jeremic, leader of the People's Party (Narodna Stranka - NS), told a news conference that the efforts by European Parliament officials did not yield results. He said situation is getting worse and that any hope that free and fair elections are possible is gone. *"We definitely decided (not to run in the elections) long ago and I think that our friends in the European Union will give up if they have not already. Situation is getting worse every day. [Serbian President] Aleksandar Vucic is not prepared to make any concession and we have taken our final decision,"* he said. He claimed that events in the past year showed that protests cannot be stopped and added that he believes that next year will bring the start of fundamental changes in Serbia. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- December 21st, Serbia's President, Aleksandar Vucic said on Tuesday it was important to preserve peace in Montenegro after unrest following a new law on religious communities which the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) saw as an attack on it and its property in the coastal republic, the news agencies reported. After meeting SPC Patriarch Irinej, Vucic said it was necessary to ease tensions in Montenegro, adding he thought it would not be good if someone tried to take over the monasteries. *"It is necessary to keep the unity of the Serb people and to understand what kind of national issues we face,*

with the respect of other countries' state borders," Vucic told reporters, adding that "the unity is something Belgrade will continue to work on." Vucic said Irinej was considering of forming an international commission to protect the SPC and Serb people's interests in Montenegro. *"We can use words, knowledge and legal means to prove to everyone in the world what that is about and show our unity and that, regardless of the borders, there is no difference between the Serbs in Banja Luka, Belgrade, Podgorica or Budva,"* Vucic said, adding he believed that *"everyone will come to their senses."* Vucic said that it was *"up to us to respect Montenegro, but also to honor the demands of the Serbs."* He added he did not have a problem to talk to his Montenegrin counterpart Milo Djukanovic *"although my view of the issue is different than his."* Vucic said there was a possibility that Djukanovic would take part in the regional leaders' gathering soon to be held in northern Serbia's Vojvodina province. Patriarch said that *"big events"* were happening in Montenegro and that *"the Serbs are facing a big problem,"* adding he hoped that *"common sense will prevail."* *"We are one nation despite some who say the opposite,"* Irinej said, adding the people in Montenegro were ready to defend its holy places. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- January 4th, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic decided not to go on a private visit to Montenegro on Christmas Eve, saying Patriarch Irinej agreed with his decision and supported it. *"I do not want to give an alibi to the Montenegrin regime to say that this was an attack on the independence and constitutional order of Montenegro. We respect the independence and constitutional order of Montenegro and we have never threatened it in any way, nor are we interested in doing so,"*

Vucic said. He added that a visit to Pljevlja and the Miliesian Diocese had been arranged, that everything was ready, and that between 30 and 40 thousand Serbs from Montenegro were expected to come, as well. *"I made that decision because I am sure there would be a conflict and I do not want a conflict. I know that some would use it to harm the Serbian people in Montenegro,"* he said. He blamed the international community for the *"hysterical campaign of lies"* and cited the AP agency as an example, stating that the Serbian President was *"pouring gas on the fire"* with his visit. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Opposition announcement that it will not join the coming elections strengthens political uncertainty and instability of the country. A functional democracy needs participation of all political forces in order to guarantee fundamental principles of the country. However, opposition claims that Serbian state has a "democratic gap" since elections will not be free and fair. Elections should be expected late April or beginning May 2020 (President Aleksandar Vucic said general elections would be held on April 26th or May 3rd, 2020). Vucic announced that he will withdraw from party leadership on June 2020 namely right after the elections. A new crisis has emerged with neighboring Montenegro. The adopted law on religious freedom is considered as "a reason for war" for Serbian Orthodox Church, but also for Serbian Government. Vucic considers Montenegrin actions as a threat against Serbian population in Montenegro, while Patriarch Irinej claims that the law threatens Serbian Church's property in the Montenegrin territory. Vucic cancelled his scheduled private visit in

Montenegro for the Christmas day claiming that he did not want to escalate tension with his presence. It is assessed that the issue will become a source of turbulence not only within Montenegro, but also between Montenegro and Serbia. Vucic keeps repeating that Serbia will protect Serbs in Montenegro reminding the unity of all Serbs living in neighboring countries. Russian – Serbian relations are very close and Russia enjoys significant influence in the country. The EU has raised serious concerns over Serbia's effectiveness on independence and accountability of the judiciary, freedom of expression, prevention of corruption and the fight against organized crime. Regarding Kosovo, Serbia is waiting to see initiatives and actions of the new Government which will be formed (most likely) with Vetevendosje leader, Albin Kurti as the Prime Minister. A possible deployment and permanent presence of Kosovo security forces in Serb majority north Kosovo would bring tension and turbulence. However, the US and EU are increasing pressure on both sides to restart dialogue. If elections will be held on late April or early May it is almost impossible for dialogue to restart before the Serbian elections. Serbia insists that taxes should be revoked for joining dialogue. One should have in mind that top state officials have said repeatedly in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its Armed Forces declaring towards all sides that they are the power of the state. It implements an ambitious armament program mainly supported by Russia.



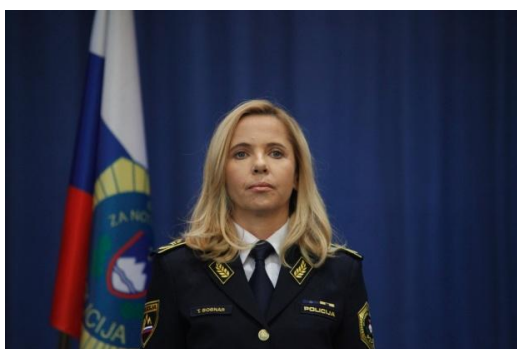
SLOVENIA: December 30th, Slovenia recorded an above-average general

Government surplus in the third quarter of the year, as it reached 193 million euro or more than triple of that in the same period last year, the Statistics Office said on Monday. The general Government surplus in the July - September period represented 1.6% of Slovenia's GDP, and was up by 134 million euro or 1.1% of GDP compared to the same period in 2018. Total public expenditure in the third quarter of 2019 was 5.43 billion euro, or 7.4% more than in the same period last year. Revenue from social security contributions again represented the highest share in the revenue structure. Tax revenue was up by 5.8%, with the growth of total revenue being impacted the most by current taxes on income and property, which increased by 9.7%. Taxes on production and exports were meanwhile up 3.5%. Total public expenditure amounted to 5.24 billion euro, or 4.8% higher. It was the first time that the growth of expenditure was lower than the growth of revenue since the last quarter of 2018. Compared to the third quarter of last year, expenditure related to employees increased the most, by 7.5%, followed by expenditure for social benefits (+5%) and expenditure for investments in fixed assets (+4.8%). On the other hand, expenditure for the payment of interest continued to decrease in the third quarter, dropping by 15% year-on-year. Consolidated general Government debt increased to 32.39 billion euro at the end of the third quarter, or 586 million euro more than at the same point last year. Debt related to short-term loans increased the most. Expressed as a share of GDP, general Government debt was at 68.1% at the end of September, the Statistics Office said. (www.sta.si)

- January 3rd, the Slovenian ethnic minority in Austria is optimistic about the coalition

agreement between the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Greens, which aims to make Austria carbon-neutral by 2040 and pledges to increase funding for ethnic minorities. Umbrella minority organizations believe “better times” are on the horizon. Valentin Inzko of the National Council of Carinthian Slovenians has great expectations from the new Government, while the Head of the Association of Slovenian Organizations Manuel Jug is a bit more cautious although still expects dialogue with the new Government. Bernard Sadovnik of the Community of Carinthian Slovenians hailed the commitments from the coalition agreement as “a major step in the right direction.” (www.sta.si)

- January 3rd, one year into her term, Slovenian Police Commissioner Tatjana Bobnar is happy to report that crime clearance rate increased to over 50% from 47%, which she says is the success of the system, not just individuals. Bobnar told the STA in an interview that the Police now handle many more cases of corruption and that cracking down on such crime is a priority. Cyber crime is a problem, in particular on the dark web “where criminals use electronic currencies, leaving behind dispersed digital traces, which we cannot secure,” said Bobnar, adding that the Police were falling behind for lack of powers. (www.sta.si)



Slovenian Police Commissioner Tatjana Bobnar
(Photo source: www.policija.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Marjan Sarec's minority Government continues to enjoy support in the Parliament. Although the Prime Minister is reassuring for the Government's stability and sustainability there are questions over its effectiveness. The possibility of snap elections is rather unlikely, however it is not certain what it will happen since the Government bases its viability on opposition support. Slovenian Government presented positive financial data for Q3 2019 which is an encouraging sign for state's economy. Slovenia – Croatia relations may be tested in coming period due to the latter's effort to join the Schengen Zone. Slovenia appears determined to play the “Schengen Zone card” in order to push Croatia to implement the ruling arbitration regarding the Piran Bay dispute, but it is not sure if it will insist until the end of the process. It might Slovenia be isolated by the other member states; it is not an easy way to veto in EU institutions. It should be underlined that relations between Croatia and Slovenia are in low level and an “underworld war” is ongoing (at political, diplomatic and intelligence context) due to the two countries border dispute. The issue of illegal migrants entering Slovenia mainly from Croatia is high in the agenda lately. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The annual report on the Armed Forces operational readiness released by the Armed Forces Chief of Staff is disappointing since it assessed that the Armed Forces have limited operational capabilities in war time namely they cannot accomplish their mission. The 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. However, the 2020 and 2021 budget foresees increased funding for defense sector.



TURKEY: January 2nd, Turkey's Parliament has approved a bill to deploy troops to Libya in support of the embattled United Nations-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), paving the way for increased military cooperation despite criticism from opposition legislators. Parliament Speaker Mustafa Sentop said on Thursday that the legislation passed with a 325-184 vote. The Government has not revealed details about the possible Turkish deployment. The motion allows the Government to decide on the scope, amount and timing of any mission. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) and its allies hold a parliamentary majority. All important opposition parties in the assembly voted against the bill. Parliament cut short its winter recess to address developments in the Libyan capital, Tripoli, where GNA-aligned forces are countering a renewed push by eastern-based, renegade military Commander Khalifa Haftar to wrest control of the city. Following the announcement, US President Donald Trump warned Erdogan against any “*interference*” in Libya in a telephone call. Trump “*pointed out that foreign interference is complicating situation in Libya,*” White House Spokesman Hogan Gidley said in a statement. GNA Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj and Erdogan in November signed two agreements relating to maritime border demarcation and enhanced security cooperation. Al Jazeera's Mohammed Adow, reporting from Ankara, said “*The governing party has the numbers to have sailed the motion through. There was strong opposition*

from the members of parliament, particularly from the main opposition party, the CHP, which had argued that Turkey should not get sucked into a murky quagmire.” (www.aljazeera.com)

- January 3rd, Turkey's multidimensional foreign policy has led it to seek cooperation and open itself to previously neglected regions, one of which is the African continent, which is close both geographically and in terms of historic relations. Turkey's political and strategic partnership with the continent has manifested itself best in the cases of long-term cooperation with Somalia and recently Libya this year. “*Turkey which has not been able to form an international political strategy toward the continent for 45 years following African countries' independence periods is now closely following the continent's agenda. Ankara receives support of the continent's countries on international platforms and acts together with them regarding decisions concerning the continent while also supporting Africa's security,*” founding President of the Association of Researchers on Africa Ahmet Kavas told Daily Sabah. Turkey's foreign policy had been long determined with its relations to Europe and the Middle East, even though it has deep historical ties with the continent. The actual jump can be said to have been made in 2005, which was also declared as the “*Year of Africa*” by Ankara, and Turkey was accorded observer status by the Africa Union the same year, under the then Prime Minister, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership. Accordingly, the successfully conducted initiative to Africa has given way to the Africa Cooperation Policy in 2013. The number of Embassies in Africa was only 12 in 2002, but it increased to 42 in 2019. African

countries, on the other hand, currently have 36 Embassies in Ankara with Zimbabwe opening its Ankara Embassy in October this year, showing that Africa also has an interest in enhancing relations. Moreover, Erdogan has visited 27 African countries, which includes visits while he was Prime Minister which constitutes half of the countries found on the vast continent. *“Turkey's goal is for Africa to reach the level of other continent's countries without suppressing their future. Turkey displays a stance that does not prioritize its own interests in its approaches toward the countries of the continent. It does not present the winning side but rather the side that wins while enabling the other side also to win,”* Kavas stated on Turkey's general approach toward the continent. Somalia is one of the best examples reflecting Turkey's Africa policy which is based on mutual help and humanitarian values. Following Erdogan's visit in 2011, the Somalian agenda for Ankara had become particularly busy. In line with the political engagement, the Turkish public has also paid particular attention to Somalia as a destination for humanitarian help. In recent years, Turkey began operating a hospital in Somalia, as well as other educational facilities, while TIKA runs educational, agriculture, infrastructure and water management projects across the country. Erdogan has visited Mogadishu twice since his visit to the war-ravaged country in 2011. He was the first non-African leader to visit the war-ravaged country in 20 years. Turkey also opened its largest overseas military training base in the Somali capital of Mogadishu, a move that would contribute to the security training of the country and also Turkey's strategic presence in East Africa. By this means, Turkey aims to restore the country's Army, helping the people to re-establish their security.

Turkey has entered cooperation with Libya's official U.N.-recognized Government to help it against dictator Haftar, who vowed to seize the capital Tripoli. Signing a deal on providing military training and equipment, Turkey also underlined that the deployment of troops would also be considered if the GNA makes a formal request, to restore peace and stability in the war-torn country. Apart from political and economic initiatives, Turkey has expanded its activities on the continent through institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), the Yunus Emre Institute, the Maarif Foundation and Turkish Airlines. TIKA is carrying out its activities in 22 program coordination offices throughout the continent and with the help of these offices, technical assistance is provided to African countries. Furthermore, African students receiving scholarships of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) in various fields can be an opportunity for Turkey. Turkey will hold the third Turkey - Africa Cooperation Summit in Istanbul in 2020 with the participation of representatives of 54 African countries. In the upcoming year, Ankara is determined to enhance diplomatic, cultural, economic and trade relations, according to the 11th development plan. According to the Trade Ministry, Turkey's trade volume with Africa has risen 7.7% in the first 11 months of the year, reaching 22.9 billion US dollars. Trade Minister Ruhsar Pekcan had said *“2020 looks like it is going to be the year of Africa for us,”* during the announcement of the development plan in August, which clearly shows that Africa will be on Ankara's top agenda, leading to further relations with the continent. *“Unfortunately this situation is*

being abused by countries such as the US and China, the continent's countries are continued to be colonized with modern techniques, we can say. In this manner, the best Turkey can do is transfer its experience and available technology to these countries,” Muhammed Tandogan, an academic at Istanbul Medeniyet University said. (www.dailysabah.com)

- January 3rd, any project that aims to sideline the rights of Turkey and the (so-called) “*Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)*” in the Eastern Mediterranean will be unsuccessful, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said Thursday. The Ministry’s remarks came after Greece, Cyprus and Israel inked a deal on Thursday in Athens for the construction of a 1,900 kilometer subsea pipeline to carry natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe. The Foreign Ministry called the deal “*the latest instance of futile steps in the region that try to exclude our country and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.*” “*Any project disregarding Turkey, who has the longest coastline in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Turkish Cypriots, who have equal rights over the natural resources of the Island of Cyprus, cannot succeed,*” Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hami Aksoy said in a statement. Bringing this issue once more to the attention of the international community, Aksoy underlined that “*such sordid plans will continue to fail in the future as they did in the past.*” Although Turkey opposes the project, the countries aim to reach a final investment decision by 2022 and have the pipeline completed by 2025 to help Europe diversify its energy resources. “*Turkey is the securest and most commercially feasible route for the utilization of the natural resources in the Eastern Mediterranean and their transfer to*

consumer markets in Europe including Turkey,” Aksoy added. Aksoy said refusing to cooperate both with Turkey and the “*TRNC*” is “*actually a direct manifestation of some countries’ pursuit of futile political motivations instead of cooperation.*” European Governments and Israel last year agreed to proceed with the so-called EastMed project, a 6 to 7 billion US dollars pipeline project that is expected initially to carry 10 billion cubic meters of gas per year. It is planned to run from Israel through Cyprus, the Greek island of Crete, on to the Greek mainland and into Europe’s gas network via Italy. The main problem with the project is its economic feasibility, and the gas to cover these costs has not yet been supplied. According to the Greek daily To Vima on Thursday, the transfer cost of the natural gas is estimated to be three times lower if the pipeline passes through Turkey, instead of the route the EastMed project suggests. A Turkish official recently told Reuters there was no need to build the EastMed pipeline because the Trans-Anatolian pipeline already existed. Androulla Vassiliou, former Cypriot EU Commissioner for health and also for education, culture, multilingualism and youth, has questioned the project as well. “*For a pipeline that will be so expensive that it will be impossible to finance, for natural gas the price of which we do not know if can justify the expenditure and the quantities of which are still unknown..... It is all a game of impressions.....,*” she wrote on social media on Thursday, referring to the signing of the agreement on building the EastMed pipeline. Oktay Tanrısever, an expert on energy diplomacy and International Relations Department chair of the Middle East Technical University in Turkey's capital Ankara, told Anadolu Agency (AA) on Friday that the EastMed natural gas pipeline is a

political project, not viable and very expensive. Tanrisever said the project cannot be realized also because of legal difficulties as the planned pipeline would pass through the Turkish Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). To realize this project, Turkish consent is required, he said, adding *“The Greek Cypriots, Greece and Israel should cooperate with Turkey and redefine this project.”* He stressed that the route of the pipeline should pass through the island of Cyprus and Turkey to reach the European market. Isolation of Turkey does not benefit anyone, and it is not sustainable in the long run, he emphasized. Tanrisever said he believes that the parties will eventually consider revising the pipeline project by cooperating with Turkey for the construction of a mutually beneficial pipeline project, with a route from the island of Cyprus passing through Turkey. Energy diplomacy is a key for the solution of this issue, and Turkey has been offering its willingness to cooperate with all the countries concerned, he said. The signing of the EastMed pipeline comes weeks after Turkey and Libya struck an accord on the countries’ maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean, a move which Greece, Cyprus and Israel opposed. Analysts say that pact could present a barrier to the proposed pipeline which would have to cross the planned Turkey-Libya economic zone. Reports recently emerged citing Israeli officials as saying that they are ready to discuss the building of a gas pipeline with Turkey. *“If Turkey would be interested, the door is open,”* Israel’s Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz told Reuters on Thursday. *“We are ready to discuss some kind of cooperation, energy cooperation, also with the Turks. We are not against the Turks, but we are very much in favor of the EastMed gas pipeline project,”* he said. In an interview with reporters in

December, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said negotiations with Israel for a pipeline to carry the Eastern Mediterranean gas to Europe via Turkey are not on Ankara’s agenda yet. (www.dailysabah.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

A tough “chess game” is ongoing in eastern Mediterranean putting at risk peace and stability in the region. Turkey is in the center of this struggle aiming to avoid political, security and energy isolation by other regional stakeholders namely Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel and Italy. However, power politics in eastern Mediterranean are not so simple since more actors are engaged. For instance United Arab Emirates are interested in regional developments due to their rivalry for power with Turkey Furthermore, traditional stakeholders such as the USA, France, Russia and the EU are engaged with one way or another. Agreement with Libya was of vital interest for Turkish national security since it rejects the country’s isolation from Eastern Mediterranean by delimitating maritime boundaries between the two countries although it overtly violates international sea law. Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and Israel strongly reacted in this agreement since it disregards their national interests and consequently has become an issue of conflict. Agreement on EastMed pipeline has made things more complicated because Turkey has now to reply back. It seems that situation has reached a critical point of further escalation; if Turkey decides to send drillships within Greek or Egypt Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) there will be a violent answer and a crisis will be emerged. On the other hand Turkey has approved troops deployment in Libya for supporting the UN recognized Government of Fayez al-Sarraj

against military forces of Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar which march towards Libyan capital, Tripoli. Defeat of Sarraj by Haftar is not so simple case for Turkey since it will be detrimental for Turkish presence in eastern Mediterranean. It could be said that struggle of power in Libya (Haftar vs Sarraj) will determine balance of power in the region. That is why Turkey declares that any project or activity in the region without Turkish participation is out of question. Although there is a sense that the country is isolated by international stakeholders, that is not true. Turkey currently maintains open channels of communication with the USA, Russia and Germany (namely the EU) negotiating equally its role in the region. One should take a look in Syria where the country achieved its strategic goal of establishing a safe zone within Syrian ground securing Turkish national interest. Besides, the country develops a multilateral foreign policy engaging in several regional theaters, while it does not hesitate to deploy military forces to promote or defend its interests. Under these circumstances an armed conflict or a “hot” incident could not be excluded in the Aegean Sea, the Cypriot territorial waters or southeast of Crete. Definitely Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in the region and is expected to react violently if balance of power is jeopardized. The country continues to face several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs, Mayors, journalists and thousands of citizens are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Turkey develops an


ambitious armament project aiming at becoming self-sufficient in defense sector; if it succeeds it will set the base to become a regional military super power.


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NOTE

 Stable situation. No security risk.

 Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored.

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

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

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