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**Hermes Institute of
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SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

PROVIDING KNOWLEDGE TO THOSE WHO SHAPE THE FUTURE

“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: December 5th, the President of the EU Commission, Jean Claude Juncker stated that he might recommend to the European Council the opening of the accession negotiations with Albania. According to Juncker *“last six months was essential for Albania’s future...the reforms implemented in Albania have impressed us.”* (www.albaniannews.com)

- December 8th, the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama promised increase of military personnel wages in 2019. The statement was made during a medals awarding to the Albanian Armed Forces (AAF) ceremony expressing the state’s gratitude for their contribution in addressing the recent floods. Rama stated *“I commit myself, today before you that 2018 will be the last year in which the state budget will have the existing salaries for you. We are determined to increase the army budget, which we have already done for the 2018 budget, but growth will continue to reach an objective. And the first priority increase for 2019 will be the substantial increase of salaries of all the military personnel.”* (www.albaniannews.com, www.aaf.mil.al)



Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama during the
Armed Forces ceremony
(Photo source: www.aaf.mil.al)

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

December 7th, members of the Bosnia & Herzegovina Presidency, Bakir Izetbegovic, Dragan Covic, and Mladen Ivanic met in Sarajevo with a Serbian delegation led by the President, Aleksandar Vucic. It was announced that long and difficult talks took place regarding unresolved issues between the two countries. According to President Vucic *“I would not describe our political relations as bad.”* At a press conference after the meeting it was stated that both countries managed to eliminate certain trade barriers while both states confirmed their support to each other on their international paths. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

BULGARIA: December 5th, Azerbaijan and Bulgaria are not only friends, but also strategic partners, Azerbaijan’s ambassador to Bulgaria Nargiz Gurbanova said. This was reflected in the joint declaration on strategic partnership signed in 2015, said the envoy, adding that this document opens up new opportunities to develop cooperation not only in the sphere of energy, but also other spheres. According to Gurbanova *“Energy has always been an important component of our cooperation. In 2020, first volumes of Azerbaijani gas will be delivered to Bulgaria. This will be a very important step to provide for one third of Bulgaria’s demand for gas.”* It should be noted that Bulgaria’s Bulgargaz has a long-term contract for 25 years with Azerbaijan’s state oil company SOCAR for supply of 1 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year from Shah Deniz 2 deposit, which is one third of Bulgaria’s domestic consumption. (www.novinite.com, www.en.trend.az)

- December 7th, The Government approved the project for updating the National Strategy of

Bulgaria and submitted it to the National Assembly for its approval. The Council of Ministers announced that the strategy identifies the national interests, the necessary conditions and prerequisites for their realization by neutralizing the risks and threats to the country and its citizens. It is proposed to include new policies such as cyber security, transport security, crisis management, youth and sport, and protecting national archives as part of the cultural and historical heritage. It is of strategic importance to define as a top priority the implementation of the targets adopted by Bulgaria for NATO's capabilities for collective defense and defense capabilities of the European Union. A whole new point is the gradual increase of the defense budget to 2% of the country's GDP. The need to implement the investment projects for the acquisition of new basic battle platforms and the overall modernization of the armed forces, as well as the establishment of a system for transparent, clear selection and career development of the military and civil servants, including an effective package of measures for motivation, added by the Government. (www.novinite.com)

CROATIA: December 8th, Croatia is getting closer to the EU Schengen zone since it was announced that next week it will be discussed in Strasbourg the strengthening and expansion of Schengen Information System (SIS) by including Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania. (www.total-croatia-news.com)

CYPRUS: December 4th, Defense Minister, Christoforos Fokaides met with the German State Secretary to the Federal Minister of Defense, Marcus Grubel at the "Andreas Papandreou" military airbase in Paphos. Fokaides underlined

that Cyprus has recently upgraded its bilateral relations with Germany while he added that Cyprus has been providing facilities to the German task force in UNFIL (UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon). Moreover Fokaides emphasized that Cyprus is ready to play a crucial role in the EU defense with the establishment of PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation), in which Cyprus is a founding member. In this context Fokaides expressed Cyprus readiness to contribute in this direction with the use of the airbase in Paphos and naval base in Zygi. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- December 5th, Cyprus, Italy, Greece, and Israel agreed to support the construction of a gas pipeline to transfer the newly discovered gas from fields in the eastern Mediterranean Sea to Europe. The project known as EASTMED, includes a 2,000 km long pipeline to channel gas reserves from the Levantine Basin in the far East corner of the Mediterranean Sea to Greece and Italy. The estimated cost is about 6 billion Euros. It is estimated the pipeline could transport up to 16 cubic meters of gas per year while the project owners are IGI POSEIDON, a joint venture between Greece natural gas company DEPA and Italian energy group EDISON. Ambassador of Italy in Cyprus who represented his country stated that the project would secure a direct long-term export route from Israel and Cyprus to Greece, Italy, and other European markets as an additional element of the Eastern Mediterranean Corridor, thereby strengthening the EU's energy security. The four countries have set a target of 2015 for completion of the project. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- December 6th, Defense Minister, Christoforos Fokaides announced that Cyprus will order to

more open sea patrol boats in an effort to upgrade Navy's operational abilities. Upgrade includes extension of a naval base in southern coast to host a large number of vessels. Cyprus has already procured a vessel from Israel. Moreover Cyprus will procure two more speedboats for the navy's Special Forces. Regarding the extension of naval base Fokaides announced that the first phase of the work has already started including installation of electronic surveillance systems. Cyprus has offered its military infrastructure for use in the context of the EU's PESCO defense framework. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

F.Y.R.O.M: December 5th, F.Y.R.O.M's President, Gjorge Ivanov accompanied by the Chief of the Army General Staff, Lieutenant General Metodija Velichkovski and the U.S Ambassador in Skopje, Jess Bailey visited the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) at the Military Barracks "Aleksa Drenovski-Bauman" in Veles where he inaugurated the Center for Simulations. The Center is a donation of the U.S worth 1,4 million dollars and it will contribute in the training of commands and headquarters personnel up to the brigade level. It will also provide the possibility to network the Center with other regional simulation centers.



President Gjorge Ivanov in Simulation Center
(Photo source: www.arm.mil.mk)

Ambassador Bailey said that the Center would raise the readiness level of the officers and would give them a chance to conduct operations in real conditions. (www.mia.mk, www.janes.com, www.arm.mil.mk)

- December 6th, FYROM's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev expressed his commitment, in an exclusive interview with Athens-Macedonian News Agency (ANA), to build a friendly relationship with Greece based on mutual trust that will facilitate a resolution to the issue of his country's name. Zaev directly called for "*support and help from Greek citizens and naturally through institutions from the Greek government, the opposition, and the Greek Parliament.*" According to Zaev "*the naming issue is a delicate issue and is not easy for the Greek politicians, either...we have to try to understand each other and encourage a resolution that will be mutually acceptable.*" Finally Zaev said that there is no alternative for FYROM but membership in the EU and NATO, and asserted that his six-month-old government is exerting immense effort towards fundamental reforms, especially in justice, public administration and education, while in foreign relations it gives top priority to improving relations with neighbors. (www.amna.gr)

GREECE: December 5th, municipal officials from the islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos, which are bearing the brunt of an increased influx of migrants from neighboring Turkey, arrived in Athens to press the government for action to ease the pressure on their local communities. The officials decided to coordinate their protests and seek a meeting with Migration Minister, Yiannis Mouzalas to speed up the transfer of migrants from the islands to mainland Greece. There are currently more than 15,000 migrants living in

state-run camps on Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos. More than 15,000 have been transferred to the mainland over the past year. Of those more than 3,500 were transferred in the last month alone. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- December 7th, a historic visit by Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Athens that had been anticipated as an opportunity to improve bilateral relations transpired into a series of testy exchanges with both Erdogan and Greek officials airing long-standing grievances. Diplomatic sources had indicated ahead of the visit that Erdogan would likely use the visit to Greece, the first by a Turkish President in 65 years, as an opportunity for rapprochement in view of his increasing isolation from the West and the European Union. Instead, Erdogan set out a series of demands, including the revision of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which defines the borders between Greece and Turkey, and greater rights for the Muslim minority in Thrace, northern Greece, which the Turkish leader visited on Friday December 8th, 2017. Tensions were palpable during Erdogan's joint televised appearance with Greek President, Prokopis Pavlopoulos, who told Erdogan that the treaty was "non-negotiable." The second day of his visit Erdogan met with members of Greece's Muslim minority ending a landmark visit to Greece that sharply divided opinion in the country and saw tensions in relations resurface. Erdogan attended prayers at the Kirmahalle Cammi mosque in the northeastern town of Komotini, where he was greeted by several thousand supporters chanting his name. He spoke to the crowd outside a Turkish-language school. Erdogan walked through Komotini handing out toys to children and greeting supporters. He also met two Muslim

clerics who are not officially recognized by the state. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- December 8th, The Greek Parliament's Committee on Armament Programs and Contracts revoked its agreement to sell military equipment to Saudi Arabia, in an unprecedented move by the body. The arms deal had been approved by the Government Council for Foreign Affairs and Defense (Κυβερνητικό Συμβούλιο Εξωτερικών & Άμυνας - KYSEA). According to information, the move was approved by all the parties except main opposition party New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία – ND), which abstained from the vote, calling it "*pretext*". According to the governmental MP and member of the Committee, Nikos Fylis "*after three European Parliament decisions, there is an international pressure to end Saudi Arabia's armament because it is considered responsible for a humanitarian disaster. Therefore we have a new international reality which our country has to take into account.*" (www.thenationalherald.com)

KOSOVO: December 5th, NATO's Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg said in Brussels that NATO is not considering withdrawing KFOR from Kosovo due to the current situation on the ground. A journalist asked Stoltenberg about his view of "*some Pristina officials' statements about the presence of KFOR being an obstacle to formation of the army of Kosovo.*" NATO's Secretary General said "*we will monitor this, and this is not on the agenda now, we are constantly monitoring the situation on the ground, so now the emphasis is on the need for KFOR to continue to be in Kosovo.*" Regarding Kosovo Security Force Stoltenberg repeated once again "*any change in the mandate of this formation must be conducted in*

accordance with the Kosovo constitution and must be done based on the provisions of that constitution." (www.gazetaexpress.com, www.b92.net)

- December 5th, The United Nations calls on Kosovo to have a clear communication strategy to demotivate potential fighters joining Islamic terror groups in Syria and Iraq and offer more employment possibilities and education. An independent U.N.-commissioned report, made available to The Associated Press examined returned foreign fighters and the reasons that Kosovo citizens joined extremist groups. It also urged Kosovo and international bodies to develop better policies to prevent violent extremism. According to Kosovo Police, 335 citizens have traveled to or been caught en route to conflict zones in Syria and Iraq since 2012, making Kosovo one of Europe's largest exporters of foreign fighters on per capita basis. They included 253 were men, 55 women and 27 children. The would-be fighters usually traveled through Turkey to Syria, where they joined ISIS, Jabhat Al Nusra, Ahrar Al Sham or the Free Syrian Army terror groups. (www.ap.org, www.gazetaexpress.com, www.usnews.com)

MOLDOVA: December 8th, the new NATO Liaison Office in Moldova was inaugurated with the presence of the NATO Deputy Secretary General, Rose Gottemoeller, and Moldovan Prime Minister, Pavel Filip. Gottemoeller underlined NATO's respect in Moldova's neutrality adding that the office has only civilian employees. *"We have been impressed by the professionalism and dedication of the Moldovan armed forces, as well as the civilian members of the Ministry of Defense. NATO fully respects Moldova's neutrality,*

independence, and sovereignty, but neutrality does not mean that we cannot be strong partners" Gottemoeller said. However the Moldovan President, Igor Dodon stated that opening of the NATO office was a hasty action which is in contrast with country's neutrality. The Chief officer of the NATO office in Chisinau, Kristina Baleisyte is already in Moldova since June 2017. (www.moldova.org, www.nato.int)



Moldovan Prime Minister, Pavel Filip and NATO Deputy Secretary General, Rose Gottemoeller
(Photo source: www.nato.int)

MONTENEGRO: December 6th, According to the World Bank CEO, Kristalina Georgieva Montenegro has shown sound financial stability in a region which is vulnerable itself. Georgieva met Montenegrin President, Filip Vujanovic in Sofia confirming Montenegro's responsible attitude towards the World Bank which sets a high-quality framework for future cooperation between the institution and Montenegro. Vujanovic said that he has great respect for cooperation with the World Bank and its support in numerous projects and reforms contributing in Montenegro's financial stability and overall prosperity of the state. (www.cdm.me)

- December 7th, it seems that political crisis in Montenegro reaches an end since most of the opposition parties returned in the Parliament's sessions providing the necessary majority and

legitimacy for decision making. Democratic Front (Демократски фронт – DF) announced its MPs would return to Parliament after more than a year of being absent from it. Moreover independent MP Aleksandar Damjanovic and United Montenegro (Уједињена Црна Гора – UCG) MPs Goran Danilovic and Goran Radonjic will also end the Parliament's boycott. Thus 63 out of 81 MPs will join the Parliament's sessions. (www.cdm.me, www.dnovine.me)

ROMANIA: December 5th, Romanian President, Klaus Iohannis told the ambassadors of the EU states accredited in Bucharest that Romania's task to join the Euro zone is still a fundamental goal, while the Schengen's accession remains a legitimate goal for his country. The meeting was organized by the Embassy of Estonia, which is currently holding the Presidency of the EU Council. Iohannis congratulated Estonia for its results while at the helm of the EU Council, saying the launching of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) initiative in the field of the European defense policy represents one of the major achievements of its mandate. He also reiterated Romania's commitment to take part in those initiatives that are meant to contribute to the enhancement of the European projects, while underlining that his country will preserve the same approach while holding the EU Council Presidency in the first semester of 2019. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- December 10th, "Romania 100" platform Chairman, Dacian Ciolos has announced that out of the platform, a political party will break away which will be presented in the coming months and will be open to cooperate with the opposition parties. He added that the new party will be ready to submit a political proposal at the next election,

whenever it will take place. Finally Ciolos attacked to the coalition Government *"I don't believe this coalition was voted and has the legitimacy to destroy justice, to destroy Romania's credibility abroad...How could one have welfare in a corrupted state?"* (www.romaniajournal.ro)

SERBIA: December 5th, Romanian Defense Minister, Mihai Fifor paid a visit in Belgrade where he met with his Serbian counterpart, Aleksandar Vulin. The two men underlined the high level of defense cooperation between their countries while they signed a defense agreement. Vulin highlighted Romania's support for the territorial integrity of Serbia, while Fifor said *"Serbia is one of the best friends of Romania and that bilateral relations in the field of defense are maintained and strengthened at the high level, which is important in the current complex security challenges in the neighboring countries."* (www.b92.net, www.tanjug.rs)

- December 6th, ambassadors of the EU member states approved the opening on December 11th, 2017 of two chapters regarding negotiations of Serbia membership accession. Chapters are the 6th (company law) and 30th (external relations). In the same time five countries (among them Germany and France) blocked the opening of a third chapter (financial and budgetary provisions) expressing their dissatisfaction with the progress Serbia has made in the area of the rule of law, and in completing the chapter 23 action plan relating to the judiciary and fundamental rights. Serbia has so far opened ten out of 35 chapters, with two temporarily closed. (www.b92.net, www.tanjug.rs)

- December 6th, Serbian Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff, General Ljubisa Dikovic stated in an interview that due to the current security challenges and big risk of conflict in the Balkans, Serbia needs military units that can respond effectively in crisis situations. According to the General *"We will therefore create a larger formation of these forces, they will have the best equipment and will be supported by helicopter units, which is why we are buying helicopters, that we will arm and equip for combat operations."* In this context General recalled that Serbia once had a corps of special units, which was disbanded in 1999. Moreover Dikovic emphasized Serbia should improve its air defense capabilities adding that Serbian Armed Forces should modernize the "NEVA" system but also to buy a number of modern air defense systems. General underlined *"Our goal is to always be ready to protect the airspace of Serbia in peace, but also to gain the capacity to strike at a potential aggressor."* Finally Dikovic spoke about the Ministry of Defense's plan to build around 30,000 apartments for security sector personnel underlying *"We must not allow people from the defense system to leave the army without a roof over their heads. Building the apartments, increasing the wages and improving the overall status, will make us once again a desirable employer among young and ambitious people."* Apart from that General mentioned that wages of military personnel will be increased by 10% from January 1st, 2018 while another increase will be come in 2018. Dikovic announced also an extra bonus of 10,000 Dinars for each military adding *"Our plan is each professional soldier's wage to reach the average salary of the state."* (www.b92.net, www.tanjug.rs, www.novosti.rs)



Chief of Serbian Armed Forces General Staff
General Ljubisa Dikovic
(Photo source: www.vs.rs)

SLOVENIA: December 4th, Slovenian Foreign Minister, Karl Erjavec joined the extended Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia) session of foreign ministers in which took part also Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Serbia. Joining members focused on the future and enlargement of the EU, including energy security. Erjavec advocated a strong and united European Union set on achieving concrete results to the benefit of its citizens, especially security, prosperity and economic progress. The Minister underscored the need to re-establish the Schengen system and control at European external borders as soon as possible. Slovenia remains an active supporter of EU enlargement with the Western Balkan countries. There is no alternative to European perspective for these countries and, according to the Minister, their priorities include the rule of law, economic progress, employment and offering better prospects for young people. Erjavec explained that Slovenia supports the opening of the remaining negotiation chapters with Serbia and Montenegro and the launch of accession talks with F.Y.R.O.M and Albania as soon as possible, which would also give additional impetus to Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo. (www.sta.si, www.mzz.gov.si)

- December 6th, Slovenian Intelligence and Security Agency (Slovenska obvescevalno-varnostna agencija – SOVA) employees have been on strike due to poor working conditions and low salaries. Strike has been confirmed by the Government which clarified that *“key tasks which are important for national security are still being executed in accordance with the law.”* (www.sta.si, www.total-slovenian-news.com)

- December 8th, Slovenia intends to begin to implement four new laws which relate to territory awarded to it under the international arbitration ruling on Croatia and Slovenia’s border dispute. According to State Secretary Ljiljana Kozlovic *“there is no need for panic”* and Slovenian Government is fully prepared, without further specific details. Kozlovic also said that the Slovenian Prime Minister, Miro Cerar will not meet his Croatian counterpart unless the issue of arbitration ruling’s implementation is resolved. The Slovenian Foreign Minister, Karl Erjavec announced that his country speeds up its actions to take Croatia to the court over its failure to respect the arbitration ruling. (www.sta.si, www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

TURKEY: December 5th, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to cut ties with Israel if the U.S. President Donald Trump recognizes Jerusalem as its capital, portending the backlash the move could cause in Muslim-majority nations. *“Mr. Trump, Jerusalem is a red line for Muslims. This could lead us to break off our diplomatic relations with Israel.”* Erdogan said in a speech at the Parliament in Ankara. Moreover the Turkish President claimed that Turkey would take necessary measures in the event of a possible U.S. move, including convening the Organization of Islamic

Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul. Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesperson Emmanuel Nahshon hit back at the Turkish President, saying Jerusalem has been Israel’s capital for 70 years, *“whether Erdogan recognizes it or not.”* (www.bloomberg.com, www.hurriyetdailynews.com)

- December 6th, According to “JANE’S” Turkey has been seeking to buy an unknown number of “HARRIER” fighters (AV-8A or AV-8B attack aircrafts) as a stop-gap measure until the F-35B Short Take-Off/Vertical Landing (STOVL) version of the Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) is ready for Turkish service. Turkey had expressed to the United States its interest in purchasing 19-20 of the F-35B STOVL version. This is in addition to the 100 F-35A it already plans to buy from Lockheed Martin. Turkey first approached the United Kingdom about the purchase of “HARRIERS” but then turned to the United States for the AV-8B in the inventory of the US Marine Corps because the aircraft have not been used by the UK Armed Forces since 2010. (www.janes.com)

- December 7th, trial of co-leader of the pro-kurdish People’s Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi – HDP), Selahattin Demirtas has started without his presence. He was not allowed to appear in court for security reasons and refused to take part via video link. Demirtas has already been in detention for more than a year, facing charges on terrorist activities against the state (“establishing a terrorist organization”, “spreading terror group propaganda” and “praising crimes and criminals”) due to his links with the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê – PKK) which is deemed a terrorist organization in Turkey (the

U.S and EU as well). The former human rights lawyer faces up to 142 years in prison in a case closely watched by rights groups and Western governments. The judge ruled he should be kept in detention until the next hearing on February 14, 2018. HDP is the third largest party in Turkey's Parliament. The party's other co-leader, Figen Yuksekdag, also jailed pending trial on terrorism charges, was remanded in custody by an Ankara court. *"Holding the leader of a major opposition party in pretrial detention for over a year on flimsy charges is another example of the political abuse of the criminal justice system we are repeatedly seeing in Turkey. Keeping Demirtaş in jail for months on end not only denies his right to political association, participation, and freedom of expression, but it disenfranchises those who voted for him and his party"* said Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. (www.al-monitor.com, www.reuters.com, www.hrw.com)



Selahattin Demirtaş

(Photo source: www.hdpenglish.wordpress.com)

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