



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

# ***SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE AT A GLANCE***



***SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE***

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

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

### **“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE**

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**ALBANIA:** April 17<sup>th</sup>, the Parliament of Netherlands voted in favor of removing the visa-free travel with Albania, arguing that there is an increased criminality from Albanians in their country. The voting will allow the Netherlands to address the request in Brussels, where the last word will be given by the EU. In Albania, the decision has caused intense domestic debates. Albanian President Ilir Meta spoke of “*an alarm bell*,” while the opposition’s Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë - PD) leader Lulzim Basha described it as “*a pure act of distrust towards the Government*.” The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, on its side, stressed that the Dutch request “*does not meet any of the criteria laid down by European Union legislation leading to the implementation of the temporary suspension mechanism*,” while valuing the decision as influenced by the Netherlands’ own electorate climate. The House of Representatives in the Netherlands approved on Tuesday through a majority of votes, 92 out of 150, a proposal submitted by 5 political forces, 3 of which part of the ruling coalition, according to which the government of this country will have to ask the European Union Commission to suspend the visa-free regime. The demand was motivated by the increased activity of Albanian criminal organizations operating in this country. The Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released in the evening a long statement explaining that “*an EU member state may ask the European Commission to open the procedure for the suspension of visa-free travel only on the basis of conditions well-defined in EU legislation and none of these conditions is met for submitting this request from the Netherlands to Albania*.” The statement further said that “*judging objectively,*

*based on official facts and figures it is confident that the resolution cannot find support in the European Commission, since none of the criteria that would lead to the application of the suspension mechanism provisional is fulfilled in Albania’s case*” and pointed out that “*illegal migration of Albanian citizens to the Netherlands has fallen continuously, while the suspension applies in case of an increase of more than 50%.*” According to the Ministry, the Dutch decision has been affected by the upcoming European elections in May. Of a similar note were the words of Prime Minister Edi Rama, who said during Thursday’s parliamentary session that Albania found itself amid the Dutch domestic political fight and that the proposal is simply a consequence of the general anti-migration policy. (www.tiranatimes.com, www.top-channel.tv)

- April 20<sup>th</sup>, Albania is to receive three Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk medium-lift utility helicopters from the United States. Xhacka finalized the bilateral agreement with the US Department of Defense to receive the Black Hawk helicopters, which Minister Xhacka considers a great support for Albania. Xhacka visited the New Jersey National Guard, at the McGuire-Dix-Lakerhurst base, where she was received by the base Commander, Brigadier General Jemal J. Beale. “*The US support not only modernizes our forces, but it also increases our capacity*,” the Minister said. According to Xhacka the acquisition will be part of a US military aid package for Albania that was signed off during her visit to the US. The helicopters will be second hand but in very good condition, while Albanian pilots and maintenance technicians will be trained in New Jersey. (www.top-channel.com, www.apnews.com)

- April 20<sup>th</sup>, three decades after the late Azem Hajdari co-founded the Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë - PD), his daughter, Rudina Hajdari, founded the newest party in Albanian politics, called “Democratic Conviction.” The first member who joined the new party is Astrit Patozi, while she needs 3000 signatures to be registered as a political force. According to Hajdari, boycotting the electoral race is a political suicide. It will remain to be seen if she will make it to register her party as a political force for the next elections. This is the first big division of PD under the leadership of Lulzim Basha. Under Berisha there has been the Democratic Alliance of Neritan Ceka in 1992 and the New Democratic Spirit of Bamir Topi in 2012. A day before, Hajdari as an MP of the new parliamentary opposition had strongly rejected boycott of local elections claiming “*We do not agree with boycott as an opposition alternative. We consider it a political suicide. The only way to change systems are elections.*” (www.top-channel.tv)



MP Rudina Hajdari

(Photo source: www.parlament.al)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

*Albania has entered in a period of political turmoil and fragile political stability not only because opposition organizes huge protests against the Government, but mainly because opposition MPs decided to abandon Parliament and resign. Such an action is blocking Parliament's works undermining Albania's reforms (economic, justice etc). Such decision was strongly criticized by the international community namely the EU (and U.S) putting at risk the opening of accession negotiations in June 2019. The Prime Minister, Edi Rama urged opposition to return in the Parliament starting a constructive dialogue but PD and LSI leaders, Basha and Kryemadhi respectively pushing for the Government's topple and snap elections. Governmental institutions and media close to the Government strongly highlight that political destabilization is in favor of Russian influence in the country underlying that Rama and his Government are the only credible stakeholders which could guarantee the firm western orientation of the country. It is not normal for a stable country seeking to enter the European club to face such situation of political abnormality. Opposition MPs' resignation aiming at forcing the Government in collapse is not a reasonable political strategy for a functional and stable democracy. At the moment, the Government seeks to maintain Parliament fully functional, while opposition accuses Rama for buying its MPs to refuse resignation. In the meanwhile, several political executives of PD and LSI “disobeyed” their leaderships and accepted to replace the vacant seats in the Parliament invalidating partially their boycott plans. It is assessed that Rama is stabilizing situation eliminating possibilities for snap elections. Opposition PD appears divided and Hajdari, a new MP and daughter of the co-founder of PD announced a*

*new party. Further polarization of political atmosphere in Albania by the opposition could not be excluded. Opposition PD and LSI did not submit their candidates within the deadline (March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019), while PD leader Basha stated that his party plans to boycott the local election scheduled for June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The Government is accused of having links with organized crime and current situation raises questions over the power of “Albanian mafia” in the country and its influence in state’s politics. Undoubtedly, corruption and organized crime remains the most significant state’s problem undermining its strategic goal of opening accession negotiations with the EU. The Netherlands decision to request from the EC the suspension of visa free for Albanians due to increased criminality is a hard “slap” against the state and the Government’s image. The EU closely monitors progress of reforms especially in justice sector. Commissioner Hanh urged the EU leaders to start accession negotiations with Albania (and North Macedonia) underlying that other forces namely Russia, China, Turkey, and Arab countries may increase influence in the region. The final decision for opening Albania’s accession negotiations in June 2019 is up to the EU Heads of Governments. One should underline that unofficial concerns have already been raised regarding this date due to current political instability. Failure of opening accession talks with the EU it will further destabilize the country toppling the Government. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a “mother nation.” The state maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and F.Y.R.O.M. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on*

*promoting Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access. Possible border changes may engage Albania in dangerous situations taking into consideration that it has the role of “protector” of Albanians in the region.*



## **BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:**

April 15<sup>th</sup>, if Croatia would “show more respect for Bosnia,” relations between the two countries could improve, Bosniak (Muslim Bosnians) leader of the Party for Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA), Bakir Izetbegovic told N1 speaking of the tense relations between the neighbors. “*Relationship between the two countries could be better. Croatia could show more respect towards Bosnia and could listen to our voice more when it comes to, for example, the Peljesac Bridge,*” he said referring to a bridge Croatia is building across Bosnian waters. Bosnia is cutting Croatia’s territory along the Adriatic coast and Zagreb is building a bridge that would connect its coast to a peninsula detouring the little strip of Bosnian territory. However, Bosnia fears the bridge could cut off its small strip that is located at the bottom of the bay from the open sea and that large ships will not be able to pass underneath it. “*We have nothing against it, to the contrary, we are happy if Croatia can connect its territory, we just ask and expect that Bosnia’s right to the open sea is not taken away, we need to define the border and the access to it,*” Izetbegovic said, insisting that the pillars of the bridge should be wider. “*A corridor can always be set, a treaty can always be signed, that is the only thing we ask from Croatia,*” Izetbegovic said. The Bosniak leader also commented on Croatia’s plan to dump nuclear waste in Trgovska Gora, close to Bosnia’s

northern border. *“We fear that it will pollute groundwater and destroy chances for agriculture. Why would anyone dump such dangerous waste at the border with a neighboring country?”* he asked. He also touched upon an alleged affair which local investigative outlet Zurnal published and which caused a diplomatic spat between Bosnia and Croatia. The outlet said that Croatian secret service agents tried to recruit Bosnians to transport arms into Muslim places of prayer in Bosnia in order to justify statements by Croatia’s President, Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic, who called Bosnia a *“terrorist hub.”* (www.ban1info.com)

- April 18<sup>th</sup>, a session of delegations of the Party for Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA), Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrataor - SNSD), and Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH) was held in the BiH Presidency building on state-level Government formation on Wednesday. Delegations were led by party leaders Bakir Izetbegovic, Milorad Dodik, and Dragan Covic and after the meeting it was said that they all received three Ministries at the Council of Ministers of BiH. Covic said that the Croats received three Ministers and three Deputies, while Bosniaks (Muslim Bosnians) received three Ministers and four Deputies in the Council of Ministers of BiH, and Serbs received three Ministers and the Chairmanship of the Council of Ministers. He said he hopes to have a mandate for the composition of the BiH Council of Ministers in the coming days. Regarding the Annual National Program (ANP) Covic said that there is still a need for more compromise so that everyone will come out as winners. The HDZ BiH received the Ministries of Finance, Civil Affairs,

and Justice. The SDA received the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Security, and Defense. The SNSD received the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations, the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees and the Ministry of Transport, as well as the Chairmanship of the Council of Ministers. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

- April 19<sup>th</sup>, the Party for Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA) in the country asked its members holding public offices on Friday to launch an initiative for the establishment of an auxiliary Police Unit in Bosnia’s Federation (FBiH) entity after the other semi-autonomous part of Bosnia, Republika Srpska (RS), adopted a draft of law changes which establish such a Unit there. SDA also asked its members to initiate a procedure to fill all the positions in the current police in FBiH and its Cantons and to equip them. *“Since the Interior Ministry and the National Assembly of the RS entity have ignored warnings and appeals by domestic and some international officials, and adopted the draft law which established a reserve Police Unit in the RS entity, we consider that such a response is necessary and the only correct one, so that the balance of Police forces is not disturbed,”* SDA said in a statement. SDA emphasized that it will do everything it can to have a provision in the new RS law which enables the issuing of fake Bosnian documents that would allegedly serve in Police operations removed. *“Such a provision violates the current laws and Police standards and opens the door for all kinds of misuse that would endanger the security,”* the party said. The Head of the Commission for Security in the FBiH House of Representatives, Damir Masic, scheduled an extraordinary session for April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019 where the RS National Assembly decision and responses to it will be

discussed. The SDA proposal immediately received support from other parties in FBiH, such as the left-leaning Democratic Front (Demokratska Fronta – DF). According to a DF statement, if the new RS Police Unit will be composed of some 1,000 new Officers, than FBiH reserve Unit should count some 2,500 new Officers. The Union for a Better Future (Savez za Bolju Budućnost BiH - SBB) also expressed support for the initiative, saying that it is an “appropriate” response to what the RS is doing. The office of Bosnia’s High Representative, the international official who oversees the implementation of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement which ended Bosnia’s war, said in a statement to media that “*the reason for the existence of a reserve Police Unit [in RS] is unclear,*” reminding that “*the establishment of a reserve unit must fit the needs which are within the competency of the RS.*” (www.ba.n1info.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Political instability and uncertainty continues in Bosnia because it has not formed a Government since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018 general elections. The three main parties representing the three constituent entities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats); HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) have reached an agreement to cooperate in forming a Government and next days it will be officially announced. It seems that the three parties achieved to bypass their different views on main issues and especially Bosnia’s accession process towards NATO. Bosnian Serbs insist that the country should remain neutral staying out of NATO, Bosniaks remain committed to NATO accession as a precondition for supporting a Government, while Bosnian Croats*

*appears neutral on the issue wishing to overcome the deadlock. Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust. Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia’s internal affairs destabilizing the state. Of course, both entities (Croats and Serbs) take in advantage “Dayton Peace Agreement” weaknesses and malfunctions. Russia pays special attention in Serbia and Bosnia in order to maintain its influence in the region. Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and Montenegro have already entered NATO, while North Macedonia would join the Alliance within 2019. These two countries (Serbia and Bosnia) are the only “vehicles” for Russia to maintain a narrow influence in Southeastern Europe. Apart from external influence and intervention the country has to confront several internal “threats” which undermine its sovereignty, cohesion, and viability. Establishment of auxiliary Police Unit by RS raised tension between the FBiH and the Serbian entity emerging the mistrust between the state’s communities. Election of ultra nationalist pro-Russian Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia’s EU and NATO (mostly) integration. Dodik is a person who does not actually believe in B&H viability and is expected to promote (actually, he has already started) his own political agenda. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey approach the country mainly through “investments” and/or funding ethnic or religious groups according to their interests.*



**BULGARIA:** April 17<sup>th</sup>, “Qatar has the will and interest to invest in the Bulgarian



*transport infrastructure, but we need to prepare and present our investment projects convincingly. Without specific technical parameters, financial analyzes, and deadlines, we cannot attract large international investors.”* The President Rumen Radev stated at a meeting with MPs from the Committees on Regional Policy, Urban Planning and Local Self-Government, and on Transport, Information Technologies and Communications at the National Assembly. He introduced the results of his official visit to Qatar where he was invited by Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani from April 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019. *“During my talks in Doha with the Emir, the Prime Minister, the Qatar Transport Minister and the Executive Director of the Qatar Investment Agency, the Partnership for Road Infrastructure Development in Bulgaria in the North-South direction was raised again,”* Radev pointed out. The President highlighted the excellent political ties between Bulgaria and Qatar, including good personal contacts, and highlighted the willingness of the Arab state to invest in the Ruse - Svilengrad motorway and the tunnel under the Shipka peak. ([www.novinite.com](http://www.novinite.com))

- April 17<sup>th</sup>, three companies have submitted bids to supply two new multi-purpose patrol vessels to the Bulgarian Navy, the Defense Ministry announced. The three are Fr. Lürssen Werft GmbH & Co.KG of Germany, MTG Delfin AD of Bulgaria, and Fincantieri of Italy. Prime Minister Boiko Borissov has appointed an inter-ministerial working group, chaired by Deputy Defense Minister Anatoli Velichkov, which will deal with the opening of the offers on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019. The working group includes experts and administrative officials from the Ministry of Defense, as well as representatives of the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, and the State Agency for National Security. The opening of the offers will be followed by an evaluation process and a final report ranking the offers, which will be subject to approval by the Defense Minister and then the Cabinet. The Bulgarian Navy currently has six naval vessels; three dating from the Soviet era and the rest are second-hand former Belgian vessels. The three from the USSR era have difficulties in getting spare parts and are not compatible with the standards of the NATO alliance which Bulgaria joined in 2004. The project envisages the two new vessels replacing the Soviet-era three. The project envisages delivery of the first vessel in December 2023 and the second by the end of December 2024. The National Assembly's July 2018 vote set new options; first, the purchase of newly-made vessels adapted for the needs of the Navy, or licensed production, or a combination of developing a new product and modifying an existing one, the Defense Ministry said. The ships should be supplied with armaments, the project envisages. ([www.sofiaglobe.com](http://www.sofiaglobe.com))

- April 17<sup>th</sup>, Bulgarian Deputy Economy Minister Alexander Manolev resigned hours after the Supreme Cassation Prosecutor's Office said that it began an investigation following media reports alleging that he illegally used EU funds to build a private villa with a mineral pool. Prime Minister Boiko Borissov accepted Manolev's resignation, the Government information service said. Manolev, who has denied wrongdoing, was quoted in the Government statement as saying that with the beginning of the investigation, he did not want the matter to interfere in the work of the Government. Since a succession of investigations began into top Bulgarian politicians in connection with alleged irregularities in real estate deals, the country's Justice Minister and two Deputy

Ministers have resigned, as has Tsvetan Tsvetanov, Deputy leader of Borissov's Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Граждани за европейско развитие на България – GERB) party who resigned as an MP. "I am sure that there is nothing against me in the documentation, but I cannot burden my family again with this," the statement quoted Manolev as saying, adding that he said that his decision was a personal one. The Prosecutor's Office said on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019 that the investigation had begun two days earlier. The Supreme Cassation Prosecutor's Office had requested from the State Fund Agriculture a certified copy of the project financed during the Rural Development Program, quoted in the media reports. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Although the Government claims that there is no parliamentary crisis and possibility of snap elections, BSP absence from parliamentary sessions it is not a good sign of democratic function and the Government always has a responsibility about it. However, one should claim that Bulgarian politics follows the Balkan trend (Albania, Montenegro, Serbia etc) of leaving the Parliament; a strong sign of democratic and parliamentary immaturity. It is assessed that Bulgaria has not entered yet in political instability but it could be evolved into a potential major crisis. On the other hand, the junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots remains the vulnerable and unpredictable piece of the inter-governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus, Bulgaria has entered in a period of rather stable political situation. The President Radev grabs every*

*opportunity to criticize the Government (and the Prime Minister Borissov) highlighting his different political affiliation (Radev is backed by the opposition Socialists). Opposition BSP tries to push further Borisov and his Government by strengthening its rhetoric and having tabled three motions of no confidence so far. The country strengthened its efforts towards entering the Eurozone achieving a positive decision of the Eurogroup. However, the EC made clear that Bulgaria could not enter the Eurozone before 2022. Fitch upgraded Bulgarian economy from stable to positive; a good sign of economic function. Apart from that the European Parliament adopted a resolution for the accession of Bulgaria (and Romania) in Schengen Zone. However, it is questioned if the European Council will receive a unanimous final decision for Bulgaria under the current migration pressure. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles and should be addressed decisively. Although modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc) military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards. Security situation stable; no major threats.*



**CROATIA:** April 16<sup>th</sup>, a meeting of the National Security Council was held in Zagreb. The focus of discussion was on the future of Croatia's defense industry, with an emphasis on making use of EU funds for the sector's development. Croatia is looking to further strengthen its defense industry. According to Goran Basarac from the Croatian Defense Industry Competitiveness Cluster one of the

strategies discussed at the council for achieving that goal was dual-purpose investment. *“One of the big opportunities we see as a cluster and within our defense and security industry is investment in dual-purpose areas, which means that we are trying to open new niche security markets, which is not as strict and for which EU funding is more readily available, for our companies already working in the military industry,”* Basarac said. Defense Minister Damir Krsticevic was unable to attend the council meeting as he is currently on a two day official visit to Slovakia, where he met today with his host Peter Gajdos. The two Ministers discussed preparations for Croatia's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, bilateral cooperation and participation in NATO missions and operations. Both countries' armies are preparing to participate in the Visegrad Battle Group in the second half of this year. They also addressed the EU's security and defense policy, or Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). ([www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr](http://www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr))

- April 17<sup>th</sup>, Poland supports Croatia's bid to join the Schengen Area, Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz said after meeting with Croatian Foreign and European Affairs Minister Marija Pejcinovic Buric during an official visit to Zagreb on Wednesday. *“I hope that next time when I come to Zagreb that visit will be in the Schengen regime,”* Czaputowicz said. Economic and defense cooperation, the future of the European Union in light of Brexit, the EU multi-annual budget, cooperation in infrastructure, digitalization, and energy with emphasis on the Three Seas Initiative and connecting the Polish and Croatian LNG terminals, were some of the topics discussed by the two Foreign Ministers. The two countries share similar opinions on

several issues, particularly with regard to security and defense, Pejcinovic Buric said. The LNG terminal on the northern Adriatic island of Krk and the terminal in Swinoujscie on the Baltic Sea, which will be connected and which complement the initiative to connect the three seas, the Adriatic, Black and Baltic seas, would contribute to diversification. *“That can be the backbone of the economy”* that will spur various forms of economic cooperation, Czaputowicz said. Earlier this year Croatia and Poland signed an agreement on defense cooperation. Czaputowicz thanked Croatia for the 80 troops participating in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Poland. ([www.hr.n1info.com](http://www.hr.n1info.com))

- April 19<sup>th</sup>, Analysts at Raiffeisen Bank announced that they expect Croatia to end the year with similar growth rates as in 2018. According to RBA, following last year's GDP growth of 2.6%, this year's growth should come in at 2.5%. The latest RBA report also addresses Croatia's return to an investment grade rating. The report states that currently Croatia's return to an investment grade rating is based solely on the rating of the Standard & Poor's agency, but that RBA expects the other two major rating agencies will follow suit shortly on the basis of Croatia's solid fiscal policy indicators, the reduction of external vulnerability, continued economic growth and the preservation of political stability. The report concludes that Standard & Poor's' upgrade came shortly after the European Commission's decision that Croatia was no longer in excessive imbalance. This decision RBA says is largely based on Croatia's plans to join the Eurozone, which the analysts feel will be an overall positive for the Croatian economy. ([www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr](http://www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr))

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Croatia follows a tough regional policy with neighboring countries. It is openly intervene in Bosnia's internal affairs, while it maintains open disputes with Slovenia, Serbia, and Bosnia. It is estimated Croatia tries to establish a leading role in Western Balkans not only as an EU and NATO member state but also as a rising "local" (Western Balkans) power. One should take into consideration that Croatia shows its military strength and capabilities quite often not only in international, but also in national level sending strong messages to neighboring countries. Apart from that, Croatia pays special attention in energy strategy and security announcing ambitious projects. The state enjoys political stability. Concerns have been raised over media freedom in Croatia and one should focus on the Government's action on this matter. Border dispute on Piran Bay remains active and Slovenia's initiative to file a lawsuit against Croatia adds a new chapter between the two countries conflict. The state accelerates its efforts towards accession in Schengen zone, while the EC sends good news regarding Croatia's fiscal policy. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Failure to complete successfully the purchase of a modern fighter jet maintains a long period of an ineffective and weak Croatian Air Force.*



**CYPRUS:** April 16<sup>th</sup>, US Senator Robert Menendez spoke of a new era in Cyprus-US relations after a meeting at the presidential palace in Nicosia with President Nicos Anastasiades, a week after announcing that a

bipartisan bill seeking to lift the US arms embargo on Cyprus, which has been in place since 1987, had been tabled in Washington. After the meeting, Menendez told reporters had “an excellent meeting” with Anastasiades, and that he himself has had a long relationship with Cyprus. “We talked about many important subjects, Eastern Mediterranean's security strategy, energy strategy, Cyprus' continuous engagement with the United States, questions of our foreign policy in the region, economic questions, the changing dynamics of Cyprus in its banking zone,” Menendez said. “I think there is a great moment for Cyprus to find a whole new day in its relationship not only with the United States but with the West,” he said. The bipartisan bill was introduced by Democrat Menendez of New Jersey, Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida. In an announcement, the two Senators said what has been termed the “Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019” would “lift the prohibition on arms sales to the Republic of Cyprus, authorize the establishment of a United States-Eastern Mediterranean Energy Centre to facilitate energy cooperation between the US, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus.” It would also authorize 3 million dollars in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance for Greece, 2 million dollars for International Military Education and Training (IMET) assistance for Greece and 2 million dollars for Cyprus. The bill also seeks to impede the transfer of F-35 aircraft to Turkey, as long as Turkey continues with plans to purchase the S-400 air defense system from the Russian Federation, a purchase that would be sanctionable under US law. It would also require the US administration to submit to Congress a strategy on enhanced security and energy cooperation with

countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as reports on malign activities by Russia and other countries in the region. The Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019 would allow the US to fully support the trilateral partnership of Israel, Greece, and Cyprus through energy and defense cooperation initiative including by lifting the embargo on arms transfers to the Republic of Cyprus. The legislation also seeks to update US strategy in recognition of consequential changes in the Eastern Mediterranean, including the recent discovery of large natural gas fields, *“and a deterioration of Turkey’s relationship with the United States and our regional partners.”* Government Spokesman Prodromos Prodromou said the issue was not related with any plans to buy American military hardware but the arms embargo created a dissonance in strategic relations between Nicosia and Washington. It was also important, he added that the bill was tabled by both major political parties in the US, something that *“improves the possibilities and shows that this is a national issue for Cyprus and the United States.”* Anastasiades and Menendez had reviewed the strategic relationship and partnerships developed by Cyprus, as a state that guarantees stability and security in the region with neighboring countries such as Egypt, Lebanon and especially Israel and its role as an extension of the EU to the Eastern Mediterranean. Prodromou also said Anastasiades had raised the issue of the UN peacekeeping force in Cyprus UNFICYP, and had pointed that any changes to the force’s mandate posed a risk to stability on the island. Prodromou also said that as regards the Cyprus issue, Anastasiades had asked Menendez for help in putting pressure on Turkey *“to change its attitude and cooperate in the attempt to resume negotiations.”* Meanwhile, Turkish Cypriot press

reported on Tuesday that the lifting of the US arms embargo on Cyprus would trigger an armaments race in the Eastern Mediterranean and would be tantamount to adding fuel to the fire, the Turkish Cypriot “Foreign Ministry’s” said. In an announcement, it said the statements made by the US Senators who had prepared the bill, *“and by the Greek Cypriot leadership”* was aggressive and threatened peace and stability on the island. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- April 19<sup>th</sup>, Turkish Cypriot “Foreign Minister” Kudret Ozersay has said Greek Cypriots could be “partners” in hydrocarbons explorations by Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean. According to Turkish Cypriot media, Ozersay met in Ankara the general director of Turkish Petroleum (TPAO), Melih Bilgin. According to a statement made by Ozersay on his social media account, during the meeting, they discussed TPAO’s explorations for natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean, the “licenses” already granted and that will be granted to TPAO by the Turkish Cypriots to carry out explorations on their behalf, and the company’s drilling program. *“We are taking a step forward our works in the area of Eastern Mediterranean for materializing in practice our rights which nobody can deny,”* Ozersay said. This however, did not exclude cooperation with the Greek Cypriots, he said, *“who are another partner in the natural gas reserves.”* Ozersay said that the Turkish Cypriot “We will continue taking our steps without hesitation so that the rights and interests of the Turkish Cypriot people in this area are not violated”, he said. Turkish Cypriots have raised their opposition to the Republic’s hydrocarbons program, which they say is a unilateral move, maintaining that any offshore wealth also belongs to them and proposed a mechanism so that they

can have a say in the management of natural gas. Turkey too has made claims inside the Republic's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The Cypriot Government, however, says that any future benefits of gas finds will eventually be shared by all Cypriots once a settlement solution to the Cyprus problem is achieved. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- April 21<sup>st</sup>, President Nicos Anastasiades' goal is for the Cyprus talks to resume as soon as possible and on the correct basis, Government Spokesman Prodromos Prodromos said. Invited by the CNA to comment on press reports that the UN Secretary-General is planning to convene a conference on Cyprus in the summer, he said that what is concrete at this stage is the UN Secretary-General's willingness and the effort of his envoy Jane Holl Lute for the resumption of the Cyprus negotiations. Prodromou pointed out that Turkey is deliberately causing delays, while the Turkish Cypriot leader avoids any meeting. Referring to the UNSG's report on Cyprus, he said that it will be discussed at the UNSC and noted that the report, in general terms, is a positive stressing that the UN persist and are willing to contribute to the resumption of the talks. The Spokesman was also invited to comment on a report by Phileleftheros daily, according to which Turkey, through the occupied part of Cyprus, informed the UN of its willingness to proceed with drilling within Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Noting that the UN itself has declared the North occupied part as illegal, null and void, thus any document has no validity, he said that those actions fall within the Turkish side's constant threats on the basis of an illegal approach. He explained that Turkey is the only country in the world which does not recognize Cyprus and said that the response to this are the

numerous international agreements of Cyprus and interstate agreements with countries of the region for the delimitation of the EEZ, the support from states like the US, Russia and the EU which support Cyprus' sovereign rights to its natural wealth and its EEZ. Concluding, he said that President Anastasiades highlights and enhances Cyprus' international position and role and said that Turkey is a state with a destabilizing role in the region. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT   :

*Cyprus works systematically in order to become a major part of the East Mediterranean energy hub. Cyprus is favored not only by its natural gas deposits, but also by its strategic position in the "heart" of East Mediterranean Sea and of course of being an EU member state. The strategy of multilateral cooperation seems to be fruitful. At the moment, Cyprus is engaged in three different trilateral formations which also include strong features of strategic cooperation and alliance; Cyprus – Egypt – Greece, Cyprus – Israel – Greece, and Cyprus – Jordan – Greece. The last two are highly improved due to the US engagement. At the moment Cyprus is promoting a fourth model of cooperation between Cyprus, Greece, and Lebanon. Cyprus seeks to negotiate and reach agreements with its neighboring countries regarding their EEZ expanding cooperation, and maritime and energy security. Turkey is isolated from the energy game and it is a good question how it will react since it is certain that it will not accept "fait accompli" in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. It is assessed that Turkish provocative actions may be intensified either by Turkish gas and oil drills within the Cypriot EEZ, or by military actions. It is a fact that Cyprus has a significant*

deficit of military power which is (externally) balanced by regional cooperation. Furthermore Cyprus improved its bilateral relations with the U.S, strengthened its defense cooperation with France, UK, and lately develops its defense and security relations with Germany. The US administration appears ready to abolish the arms embargo against Cyprus allowing it to improve its military capabilities. Conduct of aeronautical exercises in cooperation with other countries (Israel, Egypt etc) sends various messages of defense capability, readiness, and determination. Although the UN Secretary General appears optimistic for a new round of talks between the two communities, it is assessed that talks could not be resumed earlier than summer 2019. President Anastasiades promotes the scenario of a “bizonal, bicomunal decentralized federation”; an idea which is in principle accepted by the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and enjoys support from the U.S. However, there are a lot of disputed issues in which both parts should compromise; the most important is considered the decision-making process. 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:** April 15<sup>th</sup>, According to Kathimerini daily newspaper, Athens and Washington are reportedly exploring “flexible” options to further consolidate the presence of American weapon systems in Greece. These options include stationing more drones or flying tankers at the military air base in Larissa in central Greece. Moreover, the US appears prepared to increase its participation in Greek

military exercises and to expand their scope. Among these is the “Iniohos” exercise, which Athens and Washington plan to upgrade to a large-scale drill from a mid-range one that it is now. Given this ever closer military cooperation between the two countries, Greece now also expects American ships to dock more frequently at Aegean Sea ports. The strengthening of relations has also coincided with increased strain in the alliance between Washington and Ankara, with Athens standing to gain geopolitically from the apparent shift in the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean. Last week, Washington strongly urged Turkey not to acquire the Russian S-400 air-defense system while, at almost the same time, the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act was submitted to US Congress aiming to boost Greece and Cyprus, both militarily and diplomatically. For the time being, discussions between Athens and Washington revolve around the Larissa military air base, where two Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV), MQ-9 Reaper-type drones are currently stationed. With the contract for their stay at the Larissa base expiring in August, two options are currently under discussion. The first concerns the possibility of stationing KC-135 tankers there, while the second, albeit least likely, scenario, suggests the replacement of the MQ-9 Reapers with other UAVs, namely Global Hawk RQ-4. Moreover, the use of the Stefanovikeio air base in central Greece by US helicopters is also expected to continue, with the ports of Alexandroupoli or Thessaloniki serving as stopovers for flights to Eastern Europe. Although Athens has welcomed the new phase that its military ties with Washington have entered, it wants, at all costs, to avoid being caught in the middle of recent US-Turkish frictions. Greece is also concerned with the way Turkey has reacted to its increasing



cooperation with North Macedonia. Ankara has already informed Greece that it considers the rhetoric calling for the imposition of obstacles to Turkey's influence in the Western Balkans as extremely hostile. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 16<sup>th</sup>, in a wide-ranging TV interview Monday Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras reiterated his intention to complete his four-year term in office, which ends in October, saying it is a “*strategic choice*” while also hinting that more relief measures of a permanent nature will be mooted after the Easter holidays. Moreover, he vowed that no Coalition of Radical Left (Συνασπισμός Ριζοσπαστικής Αριστεράς – SYRIZA) Government will allow a reduction of the tax threshold that is planned for 2020. The interview with Antenna TV was held against the backdrop of looming European and local elections next month, with opinion polls suggesting a double-digit gap with opposition New Democracy (Νέα Δημοκρατία – ND). Referring to the opinion polls, he said they do not reflect the true picture and claimed that there is a “*silent wave*” that will determine the outcome of the elections. With regard to criticism that downtown Athens has been surrendered to lawlessness, Tsipras conceded that the problem in the Exarchia neighborhood had deteriorated over the years. He noted that the problem cannot be dealt by a policy of “*oppression*” but requires a comprehensive blueprint that will revamp the area. Tsipras also defended the “*Prespes*” accord with North Macedonia – which polls suggest harmed the popularity of his ruling SYRZA party – insisting the deal was of historic significance and boosted Greece's international image. And given these benefits accruing to Greece, he said he could not allow the consideration of a political cost to stop him and his Government from proceeding with

the agreement. On the contrary, he said, the deal has provided SYRIZA with an opportunity to bring together a front of progressive forces. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 20<sup>th</sup>, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar claimed that Greece is violating international law by “*arming*” islands in the Aegean and called on his Greek counterpart to demilitarize them, according to statements given to state-run news agency Anadolu earlier in the day. “*Greece violates international law and treaties by arming Aegean islands, which are under demilitarized status,*” he was quoted as telling Anadolu. “*The demilitarized status of these islands should be protected and continued.*” He said Greek Defense Minister Evangelos Apostolakis should “*take necessary measures*” on this issue as part of “*sincere, constructive and good bilateral relations.*” Responding to Akar, the Greek Foreign Ministry's Spokesperson Alexandros Gennimatas rejected the call, saying Greece is exercising its rights according to international law. “*The raising of such issues by the Turkish side, particularly when it threatens with war a sovereign country, in the case it exercises a legitimate sovereign right stemming from international law, does not rise to the level or relations that Greece, as a democratic and European country, wishes to foster with all its neighboring countries,*” he said in a statement. “*Since Turkey claims to respect good neighborly relations, it should learn to respect international law as it stands, and not in the arbitrary way interprets it.*” He also called on Turkey to de-escalate tensions and build trust and stop its “*continuous fruitless provocations.*” (www.ekathimerini.gr)

**COUNTRY ASSESSMENT  :**



*Political situation in the country is rapidly evolving and it is assessed that early parliamentary elections will be held on May 2019 (although the Prime Minister Tsipras insists that his Government will complete its mandate by October 2019). The country has entered in pre-electoral period due to EU elections scheduled for May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and local elections scheduled also for May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019 and June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019 (second round). A long pre-electoral period first of all may polarize society with unpredictable results and secondly it hurts national economy. The Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras focuses on approaching the center-left voters and weakening KINAL (former PASOK). Moreover, the ruling SYRIZA intensifies its efforts to gain the electoral body by announcing social care measures. Political turmoil emerged in a period where Greece faces several diplomatic, security, and economic challenges. Internal terrorism is considered as a major unresolved problem of national security undermining stability of the state. Although Greek Defense Minister announced mutual efforts with his Turkish counterpart for confidence-building measures the latter insists on a provocative rhetoric undermining de-escalation efforts between the two countries. Lately, Akar requested demilitarization of eastern Aegean islands which rejected by the Greek Foreign Ministry. Turkish fighter jets keep violating Greek airspace and NAVTEXs reserves part of Greek continental shelf and Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone. Strengthening of military cooperation between Greece and the U.S upgrades Greece's strategic role in Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East as a western (US, EU, NATO) forward military base. On the other hand, Greece is concerned that this upgraded relation with the US may reinforce Turkish aggression in the Aegean Sea.*

*Furthermore, 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 Greece. Security situation is of significant risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident by Turkey.*



**KOSOVO:** April 15<sup>th</sup>, during the meeting of the Western Balkan leaders on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019 set to be held in Berlin, hosted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, a draft agreement between Kosovo and Serbia is expected to be proposed. The meeting will be attended by Presidents and Prime Ministers of both Kosovo and Serbia. Merkel is opposing to the idea on redrawing borders in Balkans, and is personally dealing with the Kosovo issue. Gazeta Express has learned that during the meeting in Berlin will be proposed a draft agreement aimed at reaching a final deal between Kosovo and Serbia. The new frame agreement does not include land swap as promoted by Kosovo President Hashim Thaci, but will not be in favor of Kosovo. Most likely it will be proposed that Serbia exercise a sort of sovereignty in certain territories of Kosovo. The German Government in an answer to Gazeta Express has confirmed that the aim of Merkel and Macron is stability in the region, focusing on Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Thaci and Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj are going to Brussels without a unified stance. Thaci met on Monday EU's Commissioner Johannes Hahn, whereas Haradinaj from Kosovo accused Hahn and the EU Foreign Policy Chief, Federica Mogherini, for wasting a year with their statements on exchange of territories between Kosovo and Serbia. Meliza Haradinaj, Foreign Policy advisor to the Prime

Minister, in a social media post said that Kosovo issue will be on the focus of the Berlin regional meeting, and called on institutional leaders to be represented with a unified stance before Merkel and Macron. ([www.gazetaexpress.com](http://www.gazetaexpress.com))

- April 17<sup>th</sup>, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, declared that for Kosovo, Russia will accept any solution that Serbia finds acceptable. *“Moscow insists in the implementation of the Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council, which includes the direct dialogue between Prishtina and Belgrade, and the respecting of the Serbian territorial integrity,”* the Russian Chief Diplomat said. *“We will contribute with everything possible to find a solution. We have constantly underlined that we will accept any solution that Serbia finds acceptable,”* Lavrov said. ([www.top-channel.tv](http://www.top-channel.tv))

- April 19<sup>th</sup>, the Belgrade-backed Serbian party in Kosovo, Serbian List (Srpska Lista), will face no opponents in the upcoming local elections in northern Kosovo, as it is the only party representing Serbs that has applied to run. The Kosovo Central Election Commission announced on Friday that the deadline had expired for parties to apply to take part in the snap elections scheduled for May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019 in four Serb-majority municipalities. Three parties have applied; the Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës - PDK), Self-determination Movement (Levizja Vetevendosje), representing Albanians and Serbian List. Serbian List, strongly supported by the Serbian Government, has the highest chance of winning. Its mayoral candidate for Leposavic is Zoran Todric; for Zubin Potok is Srdjan Vulovic; for Zvecan is Vucina Jankovic; and for North Mitrovica is Goran Rakic, Zeri newspaper

reported on Friday. The PDK has governed the country in coalitions with other parties for more than ten years. But neither the PDK, nor Vetevendosje has a chance of challenging Serbian List in these mainly Serbian districts. President Hashim Thaci called the elections to replace Mayors who resigned last year after the Government imposed a 100% tax on imports from Serbia and Bosnia. Past elections in the north of Kosovo have always created tension in the Serbian community, often matched by incidents. ([www.balkaninsight.com](http://www.balkaninsight.com))

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT   :

*Haradinaj's decision to impose 100% tax on Serbian and Bosnian products provoked major problems in Kosovo affecting Governments stability. The international community namely the EU and the U.S put a lot of pressure on the Government to suspend taxes. The UN Secretary General confirmed that tax is the major problem regarding dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade. A joint French – German initiative for restarting the dialogue is underway seeking to bring Kosovo and Serbia leaders on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019 at the same table for talks. There are rumors that unofficial secret talks are ongoing before the Berlin summit where the German – French leaders will present a draft agreement without border changes. It looks like (or at least it is spread through friendly media) the Kosovo President Hashim Thaci and Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj go to the Berlin summit with different stance which seems to be a major negotiating problem if it is true. Only through normalization of relations with Serbia it will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. The state's authorities show a tendency of*

*escalating tension with Serbia undermining a peaceful resolution of the case. By imposing 100% tariff on Serbian (and Bosnian products), establishing Kosovo army, executing Special Forces operation in northern Kosovo, arresting Serbs, and requesting special court for Serbs it is created a climate which does not facilitate dialogue and the establishment of confidence between the two parties. The question of border exchange or simply change continues to divide Kosovo political forces and population. It seems that the U.S (and the EU) have a leading role in the background pushing for the idea of territorial change (or exchange). The Western Balkan protests “wave” may hit Kosovo door too as Vetevendosje prepares demonstrations against the Government. Mayoral elections in the North (of Serbian majority) scheduled for May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019 offer fertile soil for provocations or violent incidents. Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish in the country rule of law and modern functional administration. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard. Establishment of Kosovo Army is also a factor of destabilization since there is always a possibility of Police or military engagement with Serbian forces. Kosovo seeks KSF to be operating all over the country pushing NATO towards such direction. The presence of Kosovo Army in the north it is assessed of high security risk which may lead in armed violence. One should take into consideration that the Serb President has already ordered all defense and security stakeholders to take all necessary measures for protecting Serbian population in Kosovo.*



**MOLDOVA:** April 16<sup>th</sup>, the ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul

Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] block has suggested the setting of a working group with the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) that would examine the social initiatives of both factions. The PSRM has reiterated the need to create a governance coalition. The ACUM two leaders, Maia Sandu and Andrei Nastase, said at a press conference that they would not participate in creation of a parliamentary majority. They said they would only accept a minority Government, but they proposed to set up a working group with the MPs of PSRM which would review the social initiatives of both parties by April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Shortly after the proposals, the PSRM's MP, Vlad Batrincea, wrote on a social network that PSRM clearly set out the conditions under which the party would be ready to make a major coalition. “As long as the representatives of the ACUM block's leadership are not available to discuss the initial terms from which there can start negotiations on establishment of a governance coalition and coalition Government, we do not see the creation of working groups and the continuation of clear discussions that have taken place in the past,” wrote Batrincea. He reminded Members that there are about two months left before the parliamentary dissolution procedure commenced, and urged lawmakers in block ACUM to revise their decisions. (www.moldpres.md)

- April 18<sup>th</sup>, the leaders of the ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] block, Maya Sandu and Andrei Nastase, held separate meetings with the US Ambassador,

Dereck Hogan, the Russian Ambassador, Oleg Vasnetsov, and with the Head of the EU Delegation, Ambassador Peter Michalko. According to Infotag sources the meeting with the Russian Ambassador was organized in the ACUM office in the Parliament Building. Oleg Vasnetsov requested a meeting with them yet last week, for he is holding familiarization meetings with the leaderships of all the new Moldovan parliamentary parties. On Wednesday, ACUM leaders visited the diplomatic missions and held conversations with Hogan and Michalko. According to official reports, all the three meetings were dedicated to discussing the situation in Moldova and the ongoing negotiations on ruling coalition formation and appointment of a Government. Andrei Nastase and Maya Sandu confirmed their conditions for negotiations with Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM); voting for the ACUM package of country de-oligarchy bills, refusal to form an official majority coalition, and the appointment of a minority Government to be headed by Maya Sandu. *“The ACUM bloc is concerned about the current socio-political situation in the country. We have presented our vision of how the mounting problems can be resolved, and proposed our variant of overcoming the impasse that appeared after the February 24 parliamentary elections,”* the leaders wrote in social media. (www.infotag.md)

- April 19<sup>th</sup>, President Igor Dodon said the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) can let the ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate -

PAS)] block have the Prime Ministerial post but not of the Parliament Speaker's. Dodon stressed on the national public television on Thursday night that Socialists will be further insisting on appointing PSRM Chairperson Zinaida Greceanii as Parliament Speaker because the Party has won the largest number of seats in the legislative assembly. He again expressed an utter surprise that ACUM, which has only a quarter of seats in the forum, is stubbornly railroading its leaders Maya Sandu and Andrei Nastase to the positions of both Prime Minister and Parliament Speaker, respectively. In his opinion, presently the probability of an early parliamentary election is very high, and in case of such a poll the right parties will be losers. *“If the Parliament fails to appoint a Government and to adopt at least one law by next June 21, then 30 days after that the President must appeal to the Constitutional Court for its consent for dissolution of the Parliament. This should mean that by late July the President is to sign a Decree on Parliament dissolution, and to announce a snap election date,”* said Dodon. (www.infotag.md)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT  :

*Political deadlock continues in Moldova after parties failed to form a ruling majority so far. Although PSRM and ACUM block “try to communicate”, the hard line of the latter makes thinks complicated. However there are chances of a Government between the two parties. Otherwise, snap elections are ahead. President Dodon benefits from political gap promoting a closer relation between his country and Russia. Moldova is between the Euro-Atlantic structures on the one hand and the Russian influence on the other. Political situation in the country is alarming and the EU has hardened its policy*

*towards Moldova pushing for more reforms which will strengthen state's transparency, accountability, and democratic values. The current Government has walked into dangerous paths which support corruption and organized crime and deep and determined justice reforms are needed. The U.S, EU and IMF express their major concerns. The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Moldova; First of all Russia maintains military forces in Transnistrian ground and secondly it shares common borders with Ukraine which cannot go unnoticed by international stakeholders. The "Transnistria case" is always a "running sore" for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.*



**MONTENEGRO:** April 15<sup>th</sup>,

Parliament is the place for debates on the behalf of Montenegrin people. What I would like to see is a functional dialogue. That means the effort of the elected representatives to hear those who had elected them and use the Parliament to tackle all issues, said in the interview for Pobjeda USA Ambassador, Judy Rising Reinke. She hopes that MPs will take part in the Parliament work because, without them, this institution is weakened. The USA see Montenegro as a friend, partner and ally. *"This is actually the foundation of my mission here, developing friendly relations with Montenegro, its citizens, civil society and the Government. Montenegro's NATO accession was a very important step and an opportunity for Montenegro to prove its commitment as an ally and as a friend. We reciprocate through different training programs and we will keep doing so. Last year only, the USA invested 4 million euro in different programs aimed at strengthening rule of law, freedom of the media and strengthening*

*social activism,"* said Reinke. She claimed that American investors think Montenegro is safe for investing in. American Ambassador also commented on the protests in Montenegro. *"The fundamental question here is how Montenegro resolves its problems. Protests are the pillar of democracy. My country has a very active, very alive history of protests and they are part of democratic tradition. I consider that civil society in Montenegro has been using the concept of peaceful protests so far and that is democracy,"* Reinke said. According to her the second pillar of democracy is free and fair elections. *"Parties have to take part in the work of institutions, in this case, that is Parliament. I would say that both things are legitimate; respecting the institution of the Parliament and raising the voice of people through protests. Hopefully, protests will remain peaceful and will serve as a platform for expressing different views,"* she said. (www.cdm.me)

- April 15<sup>th</sup>, speaking about the protests and the connection of the "dissatisfaction" of the citizens in Tirana, Belgrade, and Podgorica, Minister of Defense, Predrag Boskovic, said that protests in Montenegro are politically colored and are not inclined to national values and identity at all. Boskovic firmly believes that problems in the surrounding areas cannot affect Montenegro because the institutions of the system are well organized. *"Besides we are NATO member,"* he claimed. Speaking about NATO membership he said *"A concrete example of NATO system of collective security is the protection of our air space. I am talking about the Air Policing mission, carried out by Italy and Greece following the model that is being applied to the air space of Albania and that has turned out to be very efficient."* Security challenges in the region



are the same as those that the international community is faced with; hybrid threats, migration and violent extremism. *“In case of Montenegro, hybrid threats require most commitment. However, thanks to its strict policy and strong support of partners and allies, Montenegro manages to resist the temptations and harmful methods,”* Boskovic said. (www.cdm.me)

- April 19<sup>th</sup>, one year ago, when he returned into the presidential seat, Milo Djukanovic undertook to work on the economic growth, overcome social divisions, stop crime and corruption and reinforce the position of this country within the international community. One year later, he was welcomed by thousands of citizens who claim that the institutions are captivated. In addition, the escaped businessman Dusko Knezevic is accusing him of being involved in corruption, pro-Government media in Serbia dubbed him *“Kim Jung Milo,”* while foreign commentators and diplomats are saying it is high time he retired. *“I expected that I will have more time to be focused on my priorities, the ones I outlined in my inauguration speech,”* Djukanovic said for the BBC. However, when asked who will oust him, he said *“Nobody! I have withdrawn three times, voluntarily, and I do not think anybody can bring me down.”* After almost three decades of rule, Djukanovic presents himself as an epitome of the policy that has moved Montenegro towards Euro-Atlantic values. He describes his political opponents as people who failed to understand that the key issues have been resolved. However, Djukanovic is now faced with protests which put corruption and crime in focus. What lies behind the protests is what he recognizes as *“three-legged structure of destruction”* – his old rival. This structure consists of the opposition,

independent media, and part of civil society. (www.cdm.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Massive protests against the President and high officials disturbed a period of “euphoria”, emerging state’s problems such as corruption, media freedom, and nepotism. Protest movement and opposition parties reached an agreement to join forces for toppling the Government ensuring fair and free elections. Of course, under these circumstances polarization of political situation could not be excluded undermining the EU process of the country. The EP assessment was positive praising the state’s efforts to implement major reforms, but on the other hand it underlined the problems of the rule of law, media freedom, corruption, money laundering, and organized crime. However, the EP stated that Montenegro under certain conditions may be able to access the EU by 2025. It is assessed that the EU and U.S strongly supports the President Djukanovic and the Montenegrin Government despite corruption accusations as being the only loyal partner committed to the Western orientation of the state. In other words the west is closing its eyes in lack of democratic values and rule of law due to geopolitical interests namely Russian influence. The Government promotes state’s political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. Although the Government takes concrete measures against corruption, organized crime, and money laundering it is assessed that a lot should be done to reach such a level of economic activity; mainly in the field of public administration, public sector corruption, and money laundering. Imprisonment of opposition MPs is a worrying and alarming sign regarding*

*rule of law and democratic values in the country. Montenegro shows activity within NATO trying to prove that it is an equal partner of the alliance with military capacity according to NATO standards. Moreover, it tries to modernize and strengthen its operational capabilities and in this context it raised its defense budget aiming at purchasing new assets such as armored vehicles.*



**NORTH MACEDONIA:** April 15<sup>th</sup>, the “Prespes” accord has emerged as a hot issue in North Macedonia’s upcoming presidential election. Center-left candidate Stevo Pendarovski defended the name change at a campaign rally in the capital of Skopje on Sunday. He reminded the rally crowd that it was part of a deal with Greece that paves the way for NATO membership. Conservative candidate Siljanovska Davkova blamed the current Government for the “painful” name change on Saturday and accused it of corruption and nepotism. North Macedonia and Greece reached a deal last year to end an almost three-decade dispute over the Balkan country’s name. The name change was one of the deal terms. (www.ap.org)

- April 18<sup>th</sup>, Turkey is reportedly threatening to delay the ratification of North Macedonia’s NATO accession protocol if the Balkan country does not extradite 15 Turkish nationals Ankara accuses of taking part in a failed coup in 2016. According to a report on the Balkan Insight website, Ankara insists that the 15 Turkish nationals are members of a network run by self-exiled cleric Fethullah Gulen, who it says masterminded the coup attempt. Following the signing of the Prespes agreement with Greece in June last year, NATO member-states’ permanent representatives signed a protocol on the accession of North Macedonia to the alliance in February

this year. But Ankara’s threat could now stall North Macedonia’s bid to join the North Atlantic alliance. The issue was also raised by Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar during his visit to Skopje on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019. During a recent visit to neighboring Kosovo Akar made extradition requests for other Turkish nationals also accused of being Gulenists. Balkan Insight said that, for his part, North Macedonia’s Prime Minister Zoran Zaev has rebuffed Ankara’s demands and has received backing from European Union officials, who also called on the Government in Skopje to uphold the human rights of the 15 men. However, according to the website, North Macedonia’s Defense Minister Radmila Sekerinska said during a recent television interview that, apart from other members of the North Atlantic alliance, her country also needs Turkey for the ratification of its NATO accession protocol. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 21<sup>st</sup>, the top two candidates in North Macedonia presidential polls, Stevo Pendarovski and Gordana Siljanovska, are both celebrating after the first round of voting that ended with a practical draw. Preliminary results from Sunday’s first round of presidential elections in North Macedonia suggest that Stevo Pendarovski, the candidate supported by the country’s ruling parties, is just slightly leading the count, ahead of his main rival, Gordana Siljanovska, who is backed by the right-wing opposition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE). Pendarovski won 307,562 votes or 42.62% and Siljanovska won 307,404 votes or 42.60%, the preliminary unofficial results of the

State Electoral Commission show out of 96% of votes that have been counted. The turnout was just over 41%, the lowest at any presidential poll since the country gained independence in 1991. The bloc centered around the main ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) at a press conference on Sunday night declared victory on behalf of their candidate, Pendarovski. *“Our candidate has made a convincing lead, which means that he is headed for a certain victory in the second round of voting,”* the SDSM Secretary General Aleksandar Kiracovski told a press conference. The opposition VMRO DPMNE at a press conference held on the same evening sounded equally optimistic. *“Results show that you cannot go against the will of the people... The [electoral] results are heralding a new political spring in the country,”* said Igor Janushev, VMRO DPMNE’s Secretary General. The third presidential candidate, Blerim Reka, who was supported by two small ethnic Albanian parties, is far behind with 75,163 votes or 10.42%. He is likely to drop out of the race in the second round that takes place in two weeks’ time, on May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019. *“We are very happy with the result, it exceeded our expectations. [by the end of the count] We expect to reach some 80,000 votes... We will not trade with these votes,”* Reka told a press conference. The second election round of voting in two weeks is deemed potentially more problematic because for it to succeed, at least 40% of the total electorate must cast ballots. Most observers agree this may be hard to achieve, as historically presidential elections attract far less attention than parliamentary elections. The official results from the first round of presidential voting are expected to arrive on Monday. ([www.balkaninsight.com](http://www.balkaninsight.com))

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Ratification of NATO accession protocol by the member states proceeds rapidly. However, there is concern for Turkey’s ratification due to the fact that it tried to connect the North Macedonia accession process to NATO with its demands over FETO persecution. Presidential election is a little bit complicated since main candidates received almost the rate in the first round. It seems that Reka, the ethnic Albanian candidate could determine the result. It was leaked that he will cooperate with Siljanovska but at the moment these are only rumors. Possible victory of VMRO-DPMNE candidate may force Zaev to call for early parliamentary elections. However, it seems that the “Prespes” agreement and the positive prospect of the Euro-Atlantic future of the country did not create the necessary climate for a clear victory for SDSM candidate in the first round. Polarization of state’s political life including low scale violent incidents could not be excluded during the pre-electoral campaign especially if VMRO-DPMNE realizes that it is not going to elect its own President. The EU did not hesitate to send the message that coming presidential elections would be a stress test for state’s opening of accession negotiations. The fact is the country is more stable and more coherent watching its future in a more optimistic way. One could claim that North Macedonia is a country in “identity transition”; name deal with Greece oblige it to change institutional documents, while the law on the use of languages also obliges the state’s institutions to implement changes that are brand new for public services. Too many changes in too little time. The country should focus on its economy and major administrative reforms aiming at reaching the EU standards. The U.S and EU enjoy their success since F.Y.R.O.M*



*moves in their paths far from Russia's influence. Needless to say that in a period where border questions are raised again in the Balkans F.Y.R.O.M achieved to strengthen its political stability and growth prospects.*



**ROMANIA:** April 15<sup>th</sup>, MEPs and representatives of the European Commission have discussed in Strasbourg on the observance of the rule of law in Romania. Romania must get back on the path of reforms, the EU Commissioner for Justice, Vera Jourova said, while presenting the situation of the rule of law in Romania. Jourova said the debate is not on technical issues and brings no new facts from the last November, while no evolution has been recorded after the last year's Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) report. She gave an ultimatum to Romania, stressing that the state must urgently get back on the path of reforms and that it is not too late for that. *"If there is no progress, then the Commission must take actions,"* Jourova warned. The EC Commissioner also stated that in Romania *"the rule of law might be systematically violated,"* while the independence and the impartiality of Justice might be jeopardized. Jourova has also referred to the actions of the Romanian Government that has strengthened the special section for the investigation of magistrates. *"All these elements are raising our joint concerns, while revealing a concerning trend. The situation is extremely volatile. If these concerns are not tackled, then the EC will act with all the means it has. It is not too late for Romania to get back on the path of reforms,"* Jourova concluded. Portuguese MEP Ana Gomes (PES) has launched a harsh attack against the Romanian Social Democrat leader Liviu Dragnea during the EP debate, stating that the Romanian

Government is captured by the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) leader who created a criminal organization. On the other hand, MEP Josef Weidenholzer, representatives of the Austrian Socialists in the European Parliament, said that Romania had made progress on the rule of law and contradicted his fellow MEPs who slammed the side-slips of the rule of law in Romania. In her turn, Romanian MEP Monica Macovei has called on the European officials not to let Romania become the prisoner *"of some hundreds of politicians"* in the country *"who hold the levers of power."* She also said the ruling power in Bucharest is subduing the country to *"a criminal dictatorship"* that prompted the country to lose four millions citizens. On the other side, Romanian MEPs Renate Weber and Maria Grapini have rejected the MEPs and the EC criticism, criticizing the double standard used by the European officials and referring to the public statements of several EU leaders who asked that investigation against Kovesi in Romania should be stopped. ([www.romaniajournal.ro](http://www.romaniajournal.ro))

- April 15<sup>th</sup>, Russia is *"closely following"* the temporarily deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to the Deveselu base in Romania, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said, according to the Russian news agency TAAS. The US has decided to temporarily deploy a THAAD system to Romania this summer, when the Aegis Ashore Ballistic Missile Defense site will undergo a long-planned update. NATO said in a press release that the system would remain operational until the Aegis Ashore Romania site is back online. However, Grushko sees things differently. Referring to the THAAD system deployment to Romania, he told reporters *"We are closely following this. There is a Russian saying 'Nothing*

*is more permanent than a temporary fix.” He also said that Russia has two questions related to this move of the US; which are the reasons for the THAAD deployment and what the modernization of facilities in Romania involves. “A question arises; what types of work will actually be carried out at facilities in Romania,” the Russian official said, quoted by TASS. “Since it is well known that the United States is currently enhancing missile interception technology and many no longer keep it secret that the US antimissile system, including its European segment integrated into NATO, needs to be capable of intercepting missile systems operated by the Russian Federation,” Grushko said. NATO said that the update scheduled to take place this summer would not provide any offensive capability to the Aegis Ashore missile defense system in Romania. (www.romania-insider.com)*

- April 17<sup>th</sup>, Romanian President Klaus Iohannis has stated during the international conference “Enhancing NATO’s Eastern Flank” that the Black Sea region is still marked by frozen conflicts and latent tensions. *“Moreover, we see an increase of the confrontation climate, the advanced militarization of the Black Sea and the escalation of the hybrid actions, extremely dangerous through their effects, which are targeting both us and also our partners, NATO’s partners in the region,”* the Head of state pointed out. He underlined that all these have major impact that is exceeding the Black Sea area, and which *“is affecting the European space and eroding the Euro-Atlantic security architecture as a whole.”* *“I want to be very clear; security in the Black Sea and on the entire Eastern flank is directly reflecting on the Euro-Atlantic security. Any deficiency, any vulnerability in the Black Sea becomes one of the entire Alliance, as a whole,*

*while just inviting to hostile actions,”* Klaus Iohannis stated, urging the Romanian Government and Defense Ministry to speed up the Army’s endowment plan. *“I said it before and I repeat; I warn Romania’s Government and particularly the Defense Ministry to act more efficiently to achieve the essential strategic acquisition programs that we committed to, so that the allotted sums could be fully and usefully spent. I strongly believe it is in Romania’s interest to enhance its national defense capabilities, so that the Romanian citizens can be safe,”* he concluded. Romania has recently hosted an exercise in the Black Sea involving NATO ships. Exercise “Sea Shield” involved more than 20 ships and crews from Romania, Bulgaria, Canada, Greece, the Netherlands, and Turkey. Five ships from Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2) participated in the exercise, which ran from April 5<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019. “Sea Shield” was designed to practice joint warfare tactics and techniques used against underwater, surface, and air threats. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Political struggle between the President Klaus Iohannis and Government has been transformed into an “open battle” leading the political functionality in a deadlock. Iohannis announced a referendum on justice issue together with the European elections on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019 which approved by the Parliament. It is another initiative which pushes further the Government over its decisions on manipulating justice system. Iohannis strongly opposes in Government’s plans to intervene in judicial system while there are specific signs that the Government works towards controlling state’s justice. Under these circumstances, it is assessed that political climate*

*will be fully polarized affecting Romania's political stability. Romania took over the Presidency of the Council of EU facing criticism and non-confidence by the EU member states' high officials. The state looks divided in major institutional issues such as national defense, justice, and security. In this context, one should add the direct European Parliament warning for activating article 7 of the EU Treaty (suspending certain rights of an EU member state when a country is considered at risk of breaching the EU's core values). The state faces political abnormality in many levels which at the moment could be resolved only by early parliamentary elections. The Prime Minister's announcement of transferring Romanian Embassy in Israel from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem harmed the state's relations with Arab world increasing security risk in the country. Romania according to NATO strategic and operational planning has become an advanced base close to Russia. Its strategic importance and role has been upgraded and high level NATO exercises take place in its territory. Consequently, Russia reacts mainly against the NATO military base in Deveselu where anti-missile defense systems have been deployed. Temporarily deployment of THAAD system, a modern high-capability system, may raise tension in the region.*



**SERBIA:** April 17<sup>th</sup>, Russia urged the US and the EU to understand their responsibility for implementing the UN Security Council resolutions pertaining to Kosovo. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in Moscow after his meeting with Serbian counterpart Ivica Dacic, adding that the West also needs to force Pristina leaders to stop with provocations and confrontational policy aimed against Belgrade. He

stressed that Russia will not allow the Security Council to change the mandate of the United Nations in Kosovo. *"It seems to us that the West is trying to force the UN Secretariat to push through some proposals that would undermine the mandate of the UN Mission in Kosovo, which would be a direct violation of (UNSC) Resolution 1244, and we will do everything in our power to prevent this provocative plan from being implemented,"* Lavrov stressed. Lavrov also announced that Russia will continue efforts to develop coordination of foreign policy with Serbia. *"We are continuing intensive dialogue and contacts at the highest level, the tone for which was particularly set by the visit of President Vladimir Putin to Belgrade in January,"* Lavrov said. Lavrov reiterated today that Moscow insists on implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which means direct dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina and respect of the territorial integrity of Serbia. Dacic confirmed that Vladimir Putin and Aleksandar Vucic would meet in Beijing on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019 ahead of a meeting in Berlin at the initiative of Germany and France on April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019. *"Serbia is not capable of protecting its state interests without the assistance of the Russian Federation,"* Dacic said. According to him, the country cannot protect its interests without the assistance of friends, including Russia, that is the greatest friend them - and a (veto-wielding) member of the UN Security Council. Dacic pointed out that Serbia would not make any moves, when it comes to a permanent solution for Kosovo, without consulting with Russia. Speaking about Belgrade's foreign policy, Lavrov said that he respected Serbia's decision to be a military-neutral state, which, in his opinion, contributes to peace and stability in Europe, and that he appreciates Serbia's cooperation with the Collective Security

Treaty Organization, a military alliance led by Russia. Lavrov also said that he expects continued pressure from the US administration on Belgrade to resolve the Kosovo problem, to achieve “*as much as possible*” before the next election. (www.b92.net)

- April 17<sup>th</sup>, Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic has commented on media reports that France and Germany will present the idea of “*dual sovereignty*” at a meeting in Berlin. The meeting later this month will bring together top representatives of Belgrade and Pristina. Dacic said that the reports are just assumptions and that he is unaware of such a solution existing anywhere in the world. “*This is what Merkel will supposedly propose; so-called dual sovereignty in the north of Kosovo - both of Kosovo and of Serbia. But these are all assumptions and I do not know that this solution exists anywhere in the world, except on that paper,*” Dacic said. The report said that this plan does not envisage “*partition of territory.*” “*There is talk of dual sovereignty, Kosovo would preserve territorial integrity, but Serbia would enjoy some sovereignty over Kosovo Serbs and Serbian churches,*” a source said. (www.b92.net)

- April 19<sup>th</sup>, speaking at the end of the rally within his “*Future of Serbia*” campaign, President Aleksandar Vucic said his aim is for the citizens to be satisfied, adding that among his political opponents there are those who wanted good for the country and that “*we should see what we could agree on,*” but said he would not accept ultimatums, N1 reported. In what appears to be his response to the opposition demands for a dialogue sent to him last Saturday with a deadline until this Friday evening, Vucic said that “*anything but ultimatums and violence is*

*possible.*” Ahead of the April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019 Western Balkans leaders’ summit in Berlin organized by Germany and France during which the Belgrade – Pristina relations were expected to top the agenda, Vucic said Serbia had to learn from those who managed to preserve their nations. Before him, Serbia's Prime Minister Ana Brnabic said that “*we gathered here to show that Serbia is not a divided country nor its society is divided.*” Other speakers were Milorad Dodik, the Chairman of the Bosnian tripartite Presidency and the most influential leader of Bosnian Serbs, and Serbia's Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic. (www.rs.n1info.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Serbia has entered in a period of fragile political stability due to citizens’ reactions against governmental practices regarding human rights, media freedom, and elections transparency. It was ruling SNS which organized a rally in Belgrade showing its strength and sending message of unity. It seems that opposition protest and reactions lose momentum. June 2019 is a possible time for early elections, but it would be determined by developments on Belgrade – Pristina dialogue progress and especially by Vucic’s meetings in China with Chinese and Russian Presidents (April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019) and Berlin summit (April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019). France – Germany initiative for restarting Serbia – Kosovo dialogue may change internal political agenda. It was leaked that German and French leaders prepare a draft agreement proposing a status of “dual sovereignty” in north Kosovo. A provocative incident in Kosovo before the Berlin summit could not be excluded. Serbia has followed so far a successful diplomatic strategy regarding Kosovo achieving to be appeared in the international community as a reasonable voice seeking a*

*compromise resolution via dialogue. On the other hand Serbia strengthens its relations with Russia (and China) seeking stronger support regarding Kosovo case. Security situation is complex and uncertain since Serbia apart from political and diplomatic means has engaged its military and security forces. The Armed Forces are in high readiness alert but Vucic tried to de-escalate situation by stating that war is not a possible solution. However, none could predict Serbia's reaction in a possible accidental or pre-planned (provocation included) incident in Northern Kosovo against local Serbs. One should have in mind that top state officials have said in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. Municipal elections in Kosovo Serb dominated north may provoke a violent outbreak engaging Kosovo Police force and KSF with unprecedented repercussions. At the moment, Serbia looks like acting in accordance with the international law aiming at reducing tension in the region. In other words state's leadership is acting in a "reasonable" and "wise" way avoiding mistakes of the past which have isolated Serbia from the international community. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its armed forces.*



**SLOVENIA:** April 15<sup>th</sup>, According to the Slovenian Prime Minister Marjan Sarec regarding the border dispute between Slovenia - Croatia *"Slovenia is not in a much bigger dispute, than it has been so far."* Despite the meeting with his Croatian counterpart Andrej Plenkovic last week, Sarec underlined that Croatia does not look prepared to implement the arbitration award. On the margins of the National Assembly, the Prime Minister said that *"I can only add that I regret the*

*fact that part of the Slovenian opposition cooperates more with the Croats than with internal politicians. You will not find this in Croatia, where there is unity."* *"What kind of a country are we, if we do not say that some things are disturbing us. Every country is working for its national interest, and so must Slovenia,"* Sharec said. *"In the future, I would like more unity,"* he emphasized. Slovenia strongly reacted last week to the disclosure of 24ur.com that the Croatian Government (through the mediation of Ivan Tolja) tried to put pressure on POP TV not to publish information regarding the involvement of the Croatian Intelligence Service SOA in the wiretapping of telephone talks between the Slovenian Judge Jernej Sekolac and agent Simona Drenik during the arbitration procedure in 2015. Sharec called Plenkovic to refrain from non-European acts and disputed practices reiterating Slovenia's position on the validity of the arbitration award. Croatia insists on rejecting the arbitration award claiming that it was violated by the Slovenian side. (www.vecer.com)

- April 16<sup>th</sup>, Prime Minister Marjan Sarec called for a European Commission that would consistently implement the rule of law and respect small member states. His vote for the next European Commission Chief will go to Margrethe Vetsager (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe – ALDE). In an interview for Politico, Sarec took issue with the EC President Jean Claude Juncker for implying that small EU member states do not enjoy the same status as the big ones such as France and Germany. In this context, Sarec focused on EC refusal to intervene in the ongoing border dispute between Croatia and Slovenia. The Slovenian Prime Minister suggested that the soft-handed approach of the issue could have been politically motivated due to



the fact that Juncker and the ruling Croatian party belong to the same European Parliament group, the center-right European People's Party (EPP). "We need a European Commission which will follow the rule of law...we need a Commission which will be less politicized," Sarec said. He also called for an EU which would be faster at making decisions and expressed his disapproval on the "Spitzenkandidat" process for the election of the EC President as "not legal" and "non democratic." (www.sta.si, www.sloveniatimes.com)

- April 18<sup>th</sup>, Croatian Courts have delivered the first rulings on Slovenian fishermen fishing in the Bay of Piran along the border as set by the border arbitration tribunal in 2017, which Croatia rejects. The fishermen also continue receiving fines from the Croatian authorities for crossing the median line in the bay. Two rulings were handed down. One fisherman was fined nearly 15,000 euro, while the second one was fined some 2,000 euro. Since the new year, Slovenian fishermen have received some 90 new fines and will challenge all of them. Slovenian fishermen are currently fishing in accordance with the border arbitration award, which Croatia does not accept. (www.sta.si)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. Although the Government is a minority one seeking compromise for survival, Sarec has been proved of being flexible in Slovenia's politics so far achieving to balance adequately between different political trends. Left party is the key factor for Government's stability and viability by supporting it in the Parliament. Without the Left's support the Government would be toppled and early elections should be called. At the moment*

*none of the ruling coalition parties wish snap elections. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc). Tension has been raised again regarding the border dispute with Croatia over Piran Bay due to Croatia's Police violation of Slovenia's territorial waters by boats. It is assessed that such low level skirmishes will continue without major incidents. Tension has been reinforced by the revealed wiretapping scandal regarding the arbitration process between Croatia – Slovenia. Engagement of Croatian Intelligence Service operating in another country (Slovenia) is a serious accusation undermining their diplomatic relations. Slovenia implies that such actions may affect its decision regarding Croatia's membership candidacy in Schengen Zone. Slovenia, as it is already known, has filed a lawsuit against Croatia over its refusal to implement the border arbitration. 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. More attention should be paid on navy (or coast patrol) assets given the open dispute with Croatia on Piran Bay and Slovenia's weak surveillance and protection capabilities.*



**TURKEY:** April 17<sup>th</sup>, following a number of recounts from Turkey's local elections last month, the Istanbul mayoral candidate from

the main opposition party Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi - CHP), Ekrem Imamoglu received his certificate of election from electoral authorities. Imamoglou was awarded the certificate of election at Caglayan Courthouse, where the Istanbul Election Council is located, to become Mayor of Istanbul. The certificate followed recounts in districts of the metropolis - where some 15 million people live - such as Maltepe, Buyukcekmece and Fatih. On Monday, Binali Yildirim, the ruling Justice and Development (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi - AKP) Party Istanbul mayoral candidate, said that it is "clear" that his votes had been stolen during the March 31 elections and gone to Imamoglu. Yildirim told reporters that it was the Supreme Election Council (YSK) that would make the final decision on Istanbul's local polls. The Regional Election Council that awarded Imamoglu's certificate is part of the Supreme Council. (www.yenisafak.com)



Ekrem Imamoglu

(Photo source: www.ekremimamoglou.com)

- April 18<sup>th</sup>, the area between northern Syria's Afrin and Jarablus sets an example for safe zone

proposals, Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin said adding that negotiations have intensively resumed for a 32-kilometer safe zone. Addressing reporters following the cabinet meeting, Kalin said that the areas liberated in Turkey's Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations already serve as a de-facto safe zone, noting that more than 350,000 Syrian refugees have returned to these areas liberated from DAESH and Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militant group. *"It is not realistic to say regime elements should come into areas liberated by Turkey,"* Kalin added, saying that Turkey's expectation from the US is that the road map set for the Manbij region involving the withdrawal of the YPG is to be realized as soon as possible, with no terrorist elements allowed to remain in areas located east of the Euphrates River. Kalin said that Turkey expects the U.S. withdrawal from Syria to continue and a safe zone to be established and controlled by Turkey. He said that US President Donald Trump could visit Turkey this year. Kalin said that making the Idlib de-escalation deal reached between Turkey, Russia and Iran permanent is among Ankara's primary goals and it has largely been achieved. He added that efforts have resumed ending fighting while upholding Syria's unity and territorial integrity, in addition to establishing the constitutional committee under the U.N.'s purview and facilitating the political transition process through elections. Regarding Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif recent visit to Ankara following contacts with Syria's Bashar Assad in Damascus, which he presented in a report to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Kalin said that Turkey does not seek mediation, contact, or dialogue with the regime. *"When we need to transmit a message there we already do it through Iran and Russia, and this is being carried*

*primarily to maintain our border security,” Kalin said. (www.dailysabah.com)*

- April 19<sup>th</sup>, Turkey is “*taking into account*” NATO concerns over its Russian missile deal, the country's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in more conciliatory remarks over a purchase stoking tensions between Washington and Ankara. The two NATO allies have argued for months over Turkey's order for the advanced S-400 missile air defense batteries, which Washington says are incompatible with the Western Alliance's air defense network and would pose a threat to US F-35 stealth fighter jets which Turkey also plans to buy. “*We are taking into account NATO's concerns. It is not right to say Turkey is not considering them,*” Cavusoglu told a press conference in Ankara. His remarks followed a visit by Turkey's Defense Minister Hulusi Akar to Washington and a meeting between US President Donald Trump and Finance Minister and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's son-in-law Berat Albayrak at the White House, where they discussed the S-400 deal, local media reported. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and several prominent US senators have warned Turkey that it would face penalties for buying the S-400s under legislation which calls for sanctions against countries procuring military equipment from Russia. Turkey says as a NATO member it poses no threat to the US and the sanctions should not apply. Resolving the dispute could allow the two Governments to turn the corner on years of tense relations. The stakes are higher for Turkey, which is mired in recession after a separate US diplomatic dispute last year sparked a currency crisis that has echoed in recent weeks as ties have again frayed. Two months before the first batch of S-400s could arrive in Turkey, a team of senior Turkish Ministers visited

Washington this week for talks aimed at easing the crisis, culminating in an unexpected Oval Office meeting with the President. Few details of the White House meeting have emerged, but Turkish media quoted Albayrak as saying Trump had a “*positive understanding ... regarding Turkey's needs for the S-400s.*” Even minor US sanctions could prompt another sharp sell-off in the Turkish lira that can deepen the recession in the Middle East's largest economy. After shedding 30% of its value last year, the currency is down another 10% and markets remain on edge. Relations between the two countries have been strained over several disputes, including military strategy in the Syrian conflict, Iran sanctions, and Turkey's requests for Washington to extradite a US-based Muslim preacher Fethullah Gulen, whom Ankara blames for the failed 2016 military coup. (www.aljazeera.com)

## COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

*CHP candidate Ekrem Imamoglu received the official mandate for becoming Istanbul Mayor, although AKP candidate Binali Yildirim continues to question the electoral results requesting revote. Deterioration of Turkish – U.S relations is a major concern for Turkey threatening its political and economic stability. Purchase of Russian air-defense system S-400 is unacceptable for the U.S administration threatening directly Turkey with sanctions. Taking into consideration that Turkey is a pivotal country enjoying geopolitical importance and having one of the largest militaries (the 2<sup>nd</sup> within NATO) it is hard to believe that the U.S seek a full rift with its NATO ally. On the contrary, there are still open official and unofficial channels of communication working on a mutual accept it compromise. Last*



week's meeting between the US President Donald Trump and Turkish Finance Minister and Erdogan's son-in-law Berat Albayrak confirms such communication. One should keep in mind that the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglou appeared last week more condescending underlying that "Turkey is considering NATO concerns on S-400 purchase." The U.S needs Turkey and the opposite. It looks like Erdogan and his rhetoric is the problem and an "orange revolution" or a "Turkish spring" could not be excluded in the future. Economic recession does not help the Turkish President to strengthen his position internally undermining his political power. Turkey is heading in a major economic crisis. It seems that economy is the major Turkish problem which may be emerged as the "Achilles' heel" for Turkish President Erdogan and his political long reign. It cannot be excluded dramatic developments regarding Turkish economy. Besides Turkish society looks like being fed up with autocratic practices of Erdogan and this was a key point during last local elections. Turkey faces several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs and journalists are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Although Turkey maintains its strategic goal of entering the EU, the EU sends strong messages of suspending the EU – Turkey accession talks. Turkish Armed Forces declares its readiness to intervene militarily in Syria, eastern of Euphrates river but the U.S does not give the "green light" aiming at protecting Syrian Kurds and YPG. Turkey is reinforcing its troops in the Turkish – Syrian borders waiting for the "green light" for establishing a safe zone in Syria but it is doubtful


if it will ever get it. There are thoughts of unilateral action within Syria but such a decision may bring Turkish troops against the U.S forces; an unprecedented scenario. The state demonstrates decisively its leading role in the wider region of the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and East Mediterranean implementing its doctrine for a diligent capability development effort to be able to fight two multi-front, inter-state armed conflicts while being able to simultaneously carry on large-scale counterterrorism operations at home and beyond borders. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Regarding Turkish interests in East Mediterranean Sea, Turkey looks like has been isolated from the energy activities in the region. Cyprus, Egypt Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority have established an energy coalition promoting their interests and isolating Turkey. Turkey has proved so far its decisiveness in protecting its interests and it assessed that it will not give up its role in the "energy game" in Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Turkey is ready to start oil and gas drills within the Cypriot EEZ escalating tension which could not exclude an accidental or pre-planned "hot incident."


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#### NOTE

 Stable situation. No security risk

 Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored

 Major concerns over stability and security.  
significant security risk in specific regions

 Imminent major incidents regarding stability  
and security. High security risk

 Evolving or ongoing crisis or violent/armed  
conflict