



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

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

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

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ALBANIA: April 14th, the Albanian economy is expected to shrink by 5% during 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) latest World Economic Outlook report. Recovery is expected throughout 2021 as the report forecasts a 2.5% increase in GDP, although much like the rest of the world, the economic slowdown will have major consequences. The April 2020 forecast is much more pessimistic than that of the World Economic Outlook of October 2019, based on which the Albanian economy was expected to recover by 4% from 3% in 2019. However, the consequences of last year's earthquake and the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis combined have shifted the scenario significantly. Compared to other countries in the region, Albania is projected to experience the highest recovery in 2021. The report shows that North Macedonia's economy will shrink by 4%, Bosnia's and Kosovo's economies by 5% and Montenegro by 9%. Serbia is expected to experience the mildest recession, which is projected to experience a 3% economic contraction. According to IMF, the global economy is projected to contract sharply by 3% in 2020, much worse than during the 2008–09 financial crisis and might be rivaling the Great Depression in the 1930s. If the pandemic fades in the second half of 2020 and containment efforts can be gradually unwound, the global economy is projected to grow by 5.8% in 2021 as economic activity normalizes, helped by policy support. The Euro Area is expected to face the biggest economic slowdown, precisely by 7.5%, as Italy's and Spain's GDPs will decline by 9.1% and 8%, respectively. The IMF emphasizes the need for policymakers will to implement

substantial targeted fiscal, monetary, and financial market measures to support affected households and businesses domestically. As regards the international arena, strong multilateral cooperation is essential to overcome the effects of the pandemic, including helping financially constrained countries facing twin health and funding shocks, and for channeling aid to countries with weak health care systems. (www.tiranatimes.com)

- April 16th, opposition MP Rudina Hajdari, in her speech to the Assembly, said that she is against the majority's initiative for changes in the Criminal Code and imprisoning of all violators of measures against coronavirus. Hajdari said that the time has come for imprisonments, not for the citizens but for the politicians who have extorted the people for 30 years and themselves live in luxury as sheikhs. She then attacked the Prime Minister Edi Rama, saying that he is threatening the citizens every day with imprisonment. *“As if this bitter reality were not enough, today the Prime Minister appears on every television or phone screen, to threaten people with imprisonment. You are threatened with imprisonment every day. It is the biggest shame for an infected person to be threatened with imprisonment. The whole world says that citizens should be given more hope, more positivity, while this Prime Minister has used the word prison 674 times in a week. For him prison is the solution to every crisis and here we are today with the greatest shamelessness voting for these changes. The time has come for prisons to actually open, but not for citizens. We must fight together to imprison those rulers who have extorted citizens from their national wealth while themselves living in luxury as sheikhs. These days will come, I have*

full confidence, but we must fight together,” Hajdari stated. (www.top-channel.tv)

- April 17th, former Minister of Justice, Fatmir Xhafaj, today a member of the majority and a member of the Law Commission, through a message on social media said that *“we cannot waste more time with the process of re-establishing the new justice.”* The former Chairman of the parliamentary Committee for Constitutional Changes called on Judges, Prosecutors and members of the new judiciary, not to stop their work. Xhafaj underlined that the justice system cannot be put in quarantine and said that COVID-19 is not a reason for the complete blocking of investigations and trials. *“Part of people of justice has shown solidarity in donating part of their salaries. Many of them, the Supreme Court and Prosecutors in particular, are on duty these days. Many cases are pending, decisions need be clarified. This is really what we need. Judges and Prosecutors, vetting bodies, the entire justice system cannot be put in quarantine! COVID19 is not a cause for complete blocking of investigations & trials. We cannot waste more time with the process of re-establishing the new justice,”* Xhafaj emphasized. (www.top-channel.tv)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Measures against the COVID-19 continue in Albania, while political debate has started due to the Prime Minister, Edi Rama’s pursuit to impose heavy punishments (imprisonment) against those who violate the measures. The pandemic worked as “life jacket” for Rama and ruling socialists since the public interest turned to the COVID-19 instead of the political crisis. Corruption, accountability and transparency in public

administration, fight against organized crime and money laundering and establishment of the rule of law are the major challenges for the Albanian politics. Struggle between the Prime Minister, Edi Rama and the President, Ilir Meta continues affecting state’s political stability. Meta keeps on reacting against governmental law drafts using his constitutional powers to block them. Apart from that there are serious concerns over judicial independence in the country since the “vetting process” has become more or less a measure of pressure against judges. Media freedom is questioned in the country, while Rama himself does not hesitate to attack them.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

April 14th, senior officials of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) warned about potential violations of fundamental freedoms after the authorities of Republika Srpska, Bosnia's Serb-dominated region, issued a decree that could prevent media and journalists from reporting freely on the COVID-19 pandemic, urging the Bosnian entity to withdraw the document. On April 10th, 2020 OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Harlem Desir, and Head of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kathleen Kavalec, sent a letter to RS President Zeljka Cvijanovic, following the adoption of a decree prohibiting incitement to panic and disorder during the state of emergency. The decree, published in the Official Gazette of the Republika Srpska on April 6th, 2020 forbids the media and the general public from spreading false news that incites panic and prescribes significant fines for those who do so. *“We take note of the public statements by President Cvijanovic that followed our letter, in which she*

suggests there may be no need to implement such regulation or similar limitations,” said the OSCE officials. *“We fully understand the aim of tackling the dissemination of ‘fake news’ that could pose a risk to public health, or which could create panic and disorder during this health crisis,”* Desir and Kavalec said. *“However, it is important to ensure the free flow of information and that the media can work free from any kind of pressure, in order for them to provide essential information to the public, including on vital health measures,”* they added. In their letter, the OSCE officials also noted that such a decree could lead to censorship and self-censorship, as well as arbitrary and disproportionate penalties. This, they said, could undermine media freedom and the fundamental human right of freedom of expression. Furthermore, they were particularly concerned that the decree does not provide concrete details on how these offences would be determined, or on which jurisprudence they are based. *“We recall our press statement published on March 23rd, 2020 and we encourage authorities in Republika Srpska to take the statement into consideration in the framework of the current state of emergency,”* Desir and Kavalec said. They called on the authorities to withdraw the decree, reiterating their readiness to assist the state and entity authorities and to provide expert analysis on any media freedom issue. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- April 15th, Bosnia's Serb-dominated entity of Republika Srpska is carefully watching all the help Serbia has provided so far to help its economy which was shaken amid the coronavirus pandemic, Bosnian Serb Presidency member Milorad Dodik said at a press conference, following a meeting with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic on Tuesday. *“Our capabilities*

are limited by the RS budget and some of the opportunities we ensured through the International Monetary Fund. We have a good understanding of the business sector, and only 800 workers were laid off this month,” Dodik said. Speaking about Serbia's assistance to this entity, he said that *“the RS would have been far worse off epidemic-wise without the help from Serbia.”* The two also discussed the upcoming Easter holiday and stressed that the holiday comes during extraordinary circumstances, but that their love for the Serbian Orthodox Church should not enable the spread of the virus. *“We must not allow the spread of the virus to occur because we have been tolerant in some ways. We agreed to extend the curfew because we do not want to see the spread in Serbia and RS and we ask for understanding from all,”* Dodik said. In his address to the public, the Serbian President said that they talked about relations between Bosnia and Serbia, but also between Serbia and the RS. Talking about the upcoming Easter, Vucic said his job was to protect people's lives and urged Patriarch Irinej to hold services without the presence of people. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- April 17th, hundreds of migrants from across the northwestern Una-Sana Canton, the area affected the most by the migrant crisis in Bosnia, will be sent to the newly formed *“Lipe”* migrant camp in the coming days. The Civil Protection Headquarters of Bosnia's Federation (FBiH) region and the Red Cross in Bihac have already set up 50 tents containing 200 beds. *“We will soon complete the transit centre for all the migrants who are currently moving freely across towns in the Una-Sana Canton, especially Velika Kladusa and Bihac,”* said Una-Sana Canton Prime Minister, Mustafa Ruznic. *“We will, together with*

the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Bihac city authorities, the Red Cross, and the Una-Sana Canton Ministries of Interior and Health begin moving the migrants,” he said. The project costs about one million euro. (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Entities' interests prevailed regarding international aid for tackling COVID-19 pandemic. Several Muslim countries have sent medical aid to Bosnia, while Russia and Serbia distributed aid to Republika Srpska. In other words, geopolitical interests specified the humanitarian aid orientation. The country continues to suffer from political and institutional crisis. Tension may be escalated anytime. In general, current political crisis confirms that the Dayton peace agreement is a problematic one and it is time to be amended. One could claim that “Bosnia is a captured state due to Dayton peace agreement.” It should be underlined that Serbia and Croatia play a crucial role in current crisis enjoying the power of influencing situation. Political instability, poor economic performances, entities' rivalries, and problematic framework of state's structure (due to Dayton Accord) have left Bosnia far behind other Western Balkan countries towards the EU. Furthermore, nationalistic rhetoric and actions from the three entities creates certain conditions of mutual mistrust and work as a factor of potential destabilization. Neighboring Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs, while Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran maintain a permanent presence through financial donations and investments. Croatia's plan to store nuclear wastes in a region

near to the border with Bosnia may turn into another dispute between the two countries.



BULGARIA: April 13th, population of Bulgaria dropped to 6,951,482 as of December 31st, 2019, the National Statistical Institute (NSI) said in a report on demographic processes. Compared with the figure at the end of 2018, the total represented a decrease of 0.7%, or 48,557 people. The most recent census in Bulgaria was in 2011. That year, population count was 7,364,570. This means that between 2011 and the end of 2019, Bulgaria's population decreased by 413,088. The next census in Bulgaria is to be conducted in the first half of 2021. Population of Bulgaria's capital city Sofia, as at the end of 2019, was 1,242,568, the NSI said. The difference between the number of live births and deaths represents the natural increase of population. The country's demographic development after 1990 has been characterized by a negative natural increase, the NSI said. “Due to the negative natural increase the country's population decreases by 46,545 people in 2019,” the NSI said. The process of population ageing continues, it said. By the end of 2019 the number of people aged 65 and over was 1,504,088, or 21.6% of the population of Bulgaria. Compared to 2018, the share of population aged 65 and over increased by 0.3%. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- April 14th, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has cut its economic growth forecast for Bulgaria for 2020 to minus 4%, before rising to 6% in 2021, according to its April 2020 World Economic Outlook. The IMF projection for Bulgaria's 2020 economic growth is in stark contrast to the one it issued in October 2019, when it saw the figure as 3.2%. The IMF titled its

report, “*The Great Lockdown*,” a reference to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The report projects unemployment in Bulgaria as rising to 8% in 2020, a projection that if it comes true would mean a figure about double that reported by EUROSTAT for Bulgaria in February 2020, with the IMF adding that it sees the country’s unemployment decreasing to 4.5% in 2021. Consumer prices in Bulgaria are projected to rise by 1% in 2020 and 1.9% in 2021. The IMF said that the COVID-19 pandemic is inflicting high and rising human costs worldwide, and the necessary protection measures are severely impacting economic activity. As a result of the pandemic, the global economy is projected to contract sharply by –3% in 2020, much worse than during the 2008–09 financial crisis. In a baseline scenario which assumes that the pandemic fades in the second half of 2020 and containment efforts can be gradually unwound—the global economy is projected to grow by 5.8% in 2021 as economic activity normalizes, helped by policy support, the IMF said. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- April 15th, the Bulgarian Cabinet adopted a Program for support of the Bulgarian communities in Albania, Serbia, Kosovo, Ukraine, Moldova and citizens of North Macedonia with Bulgarian self-awareness. The program is for the period 2020-2024. Funds will be provided on a project basis. The financial support aims to support the organizations of the Bulgarian communities registered under the relevant local legislation by financing activities to strengthen their structure, expand their activities to preserve the Bulgarian identity among the communities abroad, as well as their public presence in the respective countries. The projects

to be implemented in 2020 under the program will be financed with funds allocated by a Council of Ministers Decree of February 20th, 2020. (www.novinite.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Despite the political rivalry between the President, Rumen Radev and the Prime Minister, Boyko Borissov, the country enjoys political stability; a necessary condition amid a pandemic. Migration problem due to uncontrolled refugee and migrant flows from Turkey is closely monitored by Bulgarian authorities but currently there is no pressure in Bulgarian borders. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles for the country’s development and should be addressed decisively. The country pays special attention to energy security developing several projects. Reduction and ageing of Bulgarian population consist a national threat since they affect its national power through various aspects (economic, social, defense etc). Modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc). However, military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards.



CROATIA: April 14th, the GONG (Građani Organizirano Nadgledaju Glasanje - Citizens organize to Oversee Voting) NGO has demanded from the Government to publish a list of employers who receive funds through assistance due to COVID-19, along with total amounts of support and the number of employees the measure is being used for, because it believes

this to be the best way to protect against a possible misuse of funds. *“The public must know who the employers are that are being paid billions of kuna in support for preserving jobs during the coronavirus pandemic. Under these emergency circumstances it is definitely important to preserve jobs, but also to insist upon transparency in order to preserve the trust of citizens in Government decisions,”* said GONG in a statement. *“The public has the right to know which companies are receiving the support and how funds from the budget are spent,”* said GONG warning that they are especially demanding competence from executive authorities during the time of the pandemic, but also that transparency is no less important, in order to earned the sought after trust of citizens. They recalled that in their demand for the preservation of democracy the demanded that a list of all national and local emergency measures be published in one place, because the public needs to know which body adopted them and on the basis of what regulation. *“In this manner everyone will have a clearer view of what is happening to their rights and freedoms during the time of this crisis,”* GONG said. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- April 14th, in its latest World Economic Outlook released Tuesday the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts that the global economy will suffer its worst year since the Great Depression. Speaking at a virtual press briefing in Washington, IMF Chief Economist Gita Gopinath said that her organization feels that the global economy is on track to contract *“sharply”* by 3% in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gopinath said that this is much worse than the contraction during the 2008-2009

financial crisis. The International Monetary Fund has announced that it expects the Croatian economy to shrink by 9% in 2020, which is the highest drop among the group of European emerging economies. The IMF does however expect a recovery to follow in 2021, with an estimated growth rate of 4.9%. The IMF now expects a significantly higher unemployment rate in Croatia this year, at 11.5%. It also envisages a deficit in the current account of the balance of payments, expressed as a share of GDP, of 4%. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- April 16th, Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic has ordered his Cabinet to come up with proposals on how to gradually open up parts of the economy. Speaking at a cabinet session on Thursday, Plenkovic said all countries were grappling with maintaining a level of caution and sustained effort to fight the coronavirus, while also trying to mitigate the economic toll of the lockdown. *“We must come up with a flow chart mapping the activities that can be put back into function,”* he said. He told his Ministers to be creative in drafting the plans, while also paying close attention to epidemiological concerns. The Prime Minister also welcomed the agreement between the European Central Bank and the Croatian National Bank to set up a precautionary currency arrangement, a so-called swap line, to provide euro liquidity to Croatian financial institutions. Under the arrangement, Croatia’s Central Bank will be able borrow up to 2 billion euro from the ECB in exchange for Croatian kuna. Croatia’s coronavirus curve is flat, said Health Minister Vili Beros, but advised the public not to focus on when the prevention measures that have drastically changed their lives will be lifted. *“Accept that life has not stopped, it has just*

changed,” he said. He reported that Croatia had tested nearly 20 thousand people for the coronavirus and was currently at 1,741 reported cases. The mutual trust that has formed between the public and public health experts has yielded very positive results in controlling the epidemic, Beros said. Addressing the exit strategy unveiled by the European Commission on Wednesday, Beros underscored that cooperation between member states was extremely important. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Croatian economy will be strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Forecasts are disappointing with the IMF predicting a 9% shrink of the Croatian economy within 2020; the highest rate among European emerging economies. A potential recession of the Croatian economy threatens one of the major strategic goals of the Government; to enter the ERM2; the eurozone’s “waiting room.” Croatia – Slovenia border dispute remains active and it should be noticed that Croatia needs Slovenia’s support regarding its accession in the Schengen Zone and OECD. Croatia implements a hard-line foreign policy with its neighboring countries maintaining open disputes with Bosnia, Slovenia, and Serbia. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces’ modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic may affect the ambitious modernization plans due the economic repercussions in the country. Croatian Air Force is far from NATO standards and actually the country lacks an operational air power.



CYPRUS: April 14th, a Turkish Cypriot businessman who donated 10,000 medical masks to the Republic’s Health Ministry said authorities in the breakaway north were preventing him from doing the same there, citing the Green Line Regulation. Olgun Arguden had imported 30,000 much-needed medical masks through the Republic on a special DHL cargo flight. He donated 10,000 to the Republic and intended to do the same in the north. The remaining 10,000 he planned to sell to pharmacists in the north at cost price. However, he has not yet been given permission to cross north with the masks because of the Green Line Regulation. Arguden told the Cyprus News Agency he had set up a company in the Republic some 15 years ago, which he uses to trade but because of the current conditions, he cannot carry the masks to the north. He said the Turkish Cypriot authorities signed all the paperwork needed but he was informed that for the shipment to go through there must be a “cabinet” decision. Arguden said they are citing the fact that only products that are made or undergo processing in the Republic can pass through the dividing line. The businessman argues that the island was in a state of emergency and if they wanted, they could have let the cargo through in five minutes, especially considering the shortage of masks. Turkish Cypriot “prime minister” Ersin Tatar said they could not bypass their customs. “It has nothing to do with a donation, this is an import. Customs were paid (Republic). But we also have a state and customs here,” Tatar said. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- April 15th, as the Cyprus Government is looking at a long delay in its hydrocarbons program,

Turkey says it plans to continue drilling in the island's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said during an online discussion organized by the Turkish branch of the Atlantic Council that Ankara would continue drilling and even deploy a third drillship. *"For reasonable stability, the main goal should be for the two sides to come together on the island for a fair distribution of revenue, and the proposal of the Turkish Cypriot authorities represents the only logical and realistic basis for a solution,"* he said, referring to the Turkish Cypriot side's proposal to jointly manage hydrocarbons planning simultaneously with negotiations on the Cyprus issue. The Greek Cypriot side rejects the proposal saying previous Cyprus talks have already converged on gas management after a settlement. Earlier this week it emerged that US giants EXXONMOBIL informed the Government they would be delaying a planned drill in their block 10 concession in Cyprus' EEZ, with other oil companies expected to do the same due to the ongoing coronavirus situation as well as the sharp drop in energy prices globally. Energy Minister Giorgos Lakkotrypis confirmed that in recent days he was informed in writing by EXXONMOBIL that they have pushed back to September 2021 an appraisal (or follow-up) well at the site dubbed Glafcos in block 10. The appraisal well there was initially scheduled for this summer. A second appraisal operation at the same site, planned for late 2020 or early 2021, has likewise been postponed to early 2022. ENI and TOTAL had planned to carry out exploratory drilling at a site dubbed Kronos in block 6. Prior to the coronavirus outbreak, work had been due to start in early February, but was delayed owing to technical issues faced by the drillship, the TUNGSTEN EXPLORER, while it was operating

in Egyptian waters. The rig is currently drilling in Lebanese waters, where it is expected to finish sometime in late April. After that, it had been scheduled to come to Cyprus. Although it is understood that ENI and TOTAL have not formally informed the Government that the Kronos drill has been put on hold, a postponement is considered likely. Without specifically referring to Cyprus, ENI recently announced it was reviewing its activities in 2020 and 2021, as well as all its energy projects in the Middle East, with the aim of reducing capital expenditures. NOBLE ENERGY had also been planning an appraisal well at Aphrodite in block 12. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- April 16th, the Government said Turkey was behaving like a pirate after the neighboring country declared its intention to continue drilling for natural gas inside Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone. *"Turkey is enforcing gunboat policy, it is behaving like the pirate of the Eastern Mediterranean, trampling on and violating the principles of international law and interfering with the sovereign rights of third countries, including Cyprus,"* Government Spokesman Kyriacos Kousios said. His comments followed an announcement by Turkey on Wednesday that it intended to carry out drilling for natural gas inside the island's Exclusive Economic Zone between April 20th and July 18th, 2020. At the same time, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said his country would continue its natural gas operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. He said Turkey had told the EU, the UN and even Greece that the Greek Cypriots should not have carried out any unilateral activities when it comes to drilling or exploitation in the Eastern Mediterranean before reaching an agreement on a

fair distribution of revenue with the Turkish Cypriots. Ankara's position was however ignored, he said. "This policy is not only continuing but it is intensifying at a time when the entire globe is facing the coronavirus pandemic and the efforts of all the states is to protect the health and safety of their citizens," Kousios told the Cyprus News Agency. He said Cyprus condemned the Turkish actions and was taking the necessary measures. A framework for restrictive measures in response to Turkey's illegal drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean was set up by the EU in November 2019 after the Council had repeatedly expressed its concerns and strongly condemned the drilling activities in various sets of conclusions, including European Council conclusions of March 22nd, 2018 and June 20th, 2019. The move also comes as international players are delaying exploration and exploitation projects in the region, including Cyprus, due to the economic effects of the pandemic. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Turkish provocations within the Cypriot territorial waters have been significantly reduced, but Turkey maintains its threats against Cyprus' sovereignty. Currently, Turkey looks determined to send back in Cypriot EEZ its drillships starting again the hydrocarbon drills. Cyprus has to face another disappointing situation since EXXON MOBIL announced that it postpones its scheduled projects due to COVID-19 pandemic but also because of the sharp drop of oil prices globally. ENI and TOTAL are schedule to start drillings in late April but it is assessed that they will postpone them too. Possible drills within the Cypriot EEZ could become source of tension and crisis between Cyprus and Turkey. Turkey has achieved

its initial strategic goal to deter international energy giants from investing in Cypriot fields and starting research activities. By its continuous presence within Cypriot territorial waters, Turkey promotes the Turkish-Cypriot community rights. It maintains a significant military force on the island (Army Corps seize) and it reinforce it with modern systems such as UAVs. It is certain that Turkey will not accept "fait accompli" in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



GREECE: April 14th, Greek forces are on high alert to prevent a repeat of the standoff on the Evros border earlier this year when Turkey opened the doors for migrants to travel to the EU, Kathimerini understands. Intelligence reports from the past few days show groups of migrants being moved from Turkey's inland areas to the country's western shores, across Greece's eastern Aegean islands, under the guidance of Turkish security forces. According to sources, aerial photos taken by Greek fighter jets depict new migrant camps set up across the islands of Lesbos and Chios. The sites are believed to also accommodate migrants that had been placed in quarantine following reported cases of coronavirus. According to the same sources, that any migrants found to have crossed into Greece from Turkey will be put into 14-day quarantine as a precaution. If there is a spike in migrant arrivals, Greece will have to set up isolation areas next to existing reception facilities. Situation would naturally put a strain on already

stretched resources. Meanwhile, Greek Navy vessels have joined the operations of the Hellenic Coast Guard in a bid to send a clear signal to Ankara that Athens will not bow to pressure. On a diplomatic level, Greece has lodged complaints with Ankara over the systematic overflights by Turkish fighter jets. Analysts say the escalation of provocations is also linked to domestic developments in Turkey. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 16th, a dozen unaccompanied refugee and migrant minors were flown from Greece to Luxembourg on Wednesday as part of an EU initiative to expedite the relocation of some 1,600 over the next few months to EU member-states. Greece is currently hosting more than 5,000 unaccompanied migrants under the age of 18, from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and the African continent, many of them at overcrowded camps on the Greek islands. Their relocation is part of the effort to protect vulnerable groups amid heightened concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a joint statement on Wednesday, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), welcomed what they said was an *“encouraging start in a larger effort to relocate vulnerable children from Greece in the coming weeks.”* In the same statement, the IOM's regional Director Ola Henrikson said that *“the importance of this crucial initiative is amplified now due to the challenges we are all facing from COVID-19. Relocation of vulnerable children, especially at a time of heightened hardship, sends a strong message of European solidarity and we hope to see this expand soon.”* Another 58 unaccompanied minors are expected to arrive in

Germany on Saturday, the German Interior Ministry announced Wednesday, noting that it will receive a total of at least 350 children. It said they will be initially housed in Lower Saxony, where they will remain in quarantine for two weeks, as required by the measures in place to contain the spread of COVID-19, before they are sent to various German states. Another 20 minors are also expected to be transferred from Greece to Switzerland in the coming weeks. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 16th, Greece raised the issue of Ankara's aggression during Wednesday's NATO summit of Defense Ministers via teleconference as Turkish fighter jets this month smashed the record of Aegean overflights. Even before the completion of the first four months of 2020, a total of 217 overflights had already taken place, a record number for decades. The next worst year in terms of overflights was 2019, when 124 overflights were recorded over the entire year. In fact, in the last two months, Turkish fighters have also shown a penchant for flying over larger inhabited islands (Lesvos, Chios, Samos) and over the Evros land border. There were more overflights on Wednesday in a clear violation of the moratorium in place against such actions during the holidays, especially Easter Week. In addition to Chios and Samos, Turkish F-16s also flew over Arkoï, Grylousa, Leipsoi, Farmakonisi, Agathonisi, Panagia and Oinousses. The issue was broached during the NATO summit by Defense Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos, who also referred to Ankara's recent aggressive behavior at the Evros land border, despite the fact that Wednesday's meeting was about ways to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the Hellenic Coast Guard and Navy remain on high alert in the

eastern Aegean in order to thwart possible attempts to transport migrants from the Turkish coast. Indicative of the situation is that 15 Hellenic Navy vessels are operating behind the ships of the coast guard. The number is close to the level of vigilance that existed until the end of March, during the migrant crisis that erupted on the Evros border. Meanwhile, in the last 24 hours, there have been zero migrant arrivals on the islands. The migration issue was also raised at the NATO summit by Panagiotopoulos, who stressed the need for a continuation of the patrols and surveillance by Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 (SNMG2) in the Aegean. Panagiotopoulos “highlighted the negative consequences of migration flows from Turkey in conjunction with the escalation of COVID-19, and called on the Allies to deploy additional forces in the Aegean.” He also stressed that *“the exercise of pressure with organized migration flows on our borders in Evros and the islands of the eastern Aegean, accompanied by a campaign to spread false news internationally, was successfully and decisively addressed by the Greek Government.”* (www.ekathimerini.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Greek authorities strengthen their efforts for restrictive measures during the Easter holidays claiming that it is the last obstacle before softening them. However, the economic aspect of the measures has started to become a “headache” for the governmental officials since the state’s economy has been paralyzed last two months. Greece as most EU countries seeks to get a strong financial support by the EU in order to avoid a new deep economic crisis. It is assessed that it is very possible Mitsotakis to call for early

parliamentary elections in early autumn trying to capitalize his success to COVID-19 management. Greek security forces are on high alert regarding possible new migrant waves in land borders or the Aegean Sea. There is information that migrants have gathered across the eastern Aegean islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Kos and are ready to pass to Greece by the assistance of Turkish security forces. It should be noted that such information are not confirmed yet and migrant flows are zero so far. Turkey insists on provoking the Greek forces in the Aegean Sea, both in the air and in the sea. There is always a significant possibility of an armed incident which could be escalated into a crisis. Under the current situation in Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea Greece is obliged to strengthen and modernize its Armed Forces operational capability.



KOSOVO: April 14th, the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK) chairman Isa Mustafa said that the General Council of his political party has given the consent for entering a ruling coalition with Ramush Haradinaj’s Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës - AAK) and Fatmir Limaj’s Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA Social Demokrate - NISMA). Of the entire General Council, 108 supported such a coalition, 6 opposed and 10 did not respond. This will of the LDK General Council comes after the LDK leaders asked whether a coalition should be formed with Haradinaj’s and Limaj’s parties if President Hashim Thaci decides to give the LDK a mandate to establish the new Government. Following the overthrow of the Kurti Government on March 25th, 2020, President Thaci sent a

request to Vetevendosje as the party that won elections to nominate a candidate for creation of the Government. However, it is unknown if Thaci will give the LDK the mandate to create the Government should Vetevendosje refuse to do so. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- April 17th, EU Special Representative on Kosovo - Serbia dialogue, Mirloslav Lajcak, continued Friday discussions with political leaders on resumption of dialogue and COVID-19 response. Lajcak wrote on social media that he spoke over the phone with the caretaker Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Mitrovica North Mayor Goran Rakic. *“Continuing my discussions with political leaders in the region, I spoke to additional partners including care-taker Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Goran Rakic. We had productive and helpful talks regarding the resumption of the Dialogue, COVID-19 response and EU assistance measures,”* Lajcak said Gazeta Express reports. Lajcak reached out on Thursday Kosovo Parliament Speaker Vjosa Osmani, Deputy Head of Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK), Lutfi Haziri and Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA Social Demokrate - NISMA), leader Fatmir Limaj. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- April 19th, Kosovo President, Hashim Thaci, said next week he will take final steps enabling formation of a new Government after no-confidence vote in Albin Kurti’s Cabinet on March 25th, 2020. Thaci wrote on Sunday that tariffs and reciprocity with Serbia need to be dropped in order for Kosovo to strengthen US and EU support, Gazeta Express reports. *“Next week I will take the final constitutional steps to enable the formation of a new Government with full legitimacy from Parliament, capable to fight*

COVID-19 and serve people. Tariffs and reciprocity need to be dropped in order to strengthen USA and EU support for Kosovo,” Thaci said. President of Kosovo sent four letters to Kurti in his capacity as leader of the Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) asking him that as winners of elections last year propose a new candidate for Prime Minister. The Vetevendosje is refusing to nominate new candidate and asks holding of early elections once the coronavirus pandemic is over. Legal experts say that according to the Constitution of Kosovo only winner of the elections has the right to nominate a candidate for Prime Minister, but the Constitution is ambiguous when it comes to a timeframe of making such a proposal. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Kosovo has entered into a political crisis which could be developed also into a constitutional one. The President Hashim Thaci pushes the caretaker Prime Minister, Albin Kurti to nominate a new candidate for the Prime Minister but the latter does not give an answer asking for early elections. According to the Constitution, only the winner of the last elections (Kurti) has the right to propose a candidate. However, Thaci promotes the idea that if Kurti fails to propose a candidate, he will give a new mandate to another party leader, most probably LDK leader, Isa Mustafa. It is more than obvious that Thaci, as the absolute dominant in Kosovo politics controlling all state’s mechanisms, promotes a constitutional aberration by nominating a new Government without following constitutional order. It is estimated that Thaci’s actions backed by the US administration which from the very first moment showed its

annoyance with Kurti's stance. The EU Special Representative, Miroslav Lajcak had talks with Kosovo officials including the Mayor of Serbian dominated north seeking to create fertile ground for restart of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Under these circumstances it is doubtful if he will achieve any tangible results. Fight against corruption, organized crime, money laundering and trafficking, establishment of rule of law, accountable and transparent state institutions, and functional public administration are the main challenges for Kosovo towards its European path.



MOLDOVA: April 13th, Chisinau demanded to urgently convene a meeting in 5+2 format, stated Deputy Premier for Reintegration Cristina Lesnic at the Friday's briefing. She said that the problems, faced by medical workers, who live in Transnistria, but are working in the mainland Moldova and after Tiraspol closed its borders due to quarantine, they cannot get to their workplace, demand urgent resolution. *"Since the introduction of quarantine, around 95 medical workers complained they cannot move due to the quarantine, introduced by the Transnistrian side. However, there may be more such cases, which is a very concerning fact, because citizens have no possibility to receive medical assistance, which may lead to losses of human lives,"* Lesnic said. She said she tried to organize a sitting of the joint working group on the healthcare issues, but Tiraspol did not respond. *"I regret that the Transnistrian side has unserious attitude to the coronavirus pandemic. Chisinau has already developed a number of decisions concerning the movement and accommodation of medical personnel, but it is necessary to cancel the*

Tiraspol's restrictions on movement," the Deputy Premier said. According to her, the self-isolation of the Transnistrian institutions does not fit into the sphere of respect for human rights. *"Let me remind that 230 thousand Moldovan citizens who live in Transnistria have medical policies, and the auto-isolation, imposed by the PSRM authorities, restricts their access to compensated medicines. Now, there are 78 cases of COVID-19 in the region and we are concerned about the dynamic of spreading, as well as the measures applied in the region,"* Lesnic said. She said that absence of information from Transnistria led to a conclusion that a way out of this situation is to hold negotiations in the 5+2 format. Lesnic confirmed that she directed an address to all negotiation participants on Friday. *"We call to urgently organize a sitting, dedicated to the coronavirus pandemic,"* the Deputy Premier concluded. (www.infotag.md)

- April 15th, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) published the new World Economic Outlook, which says the Moldovan GDP will fall 3% this year, while the inflation will grow 0.5%. For 2021, the Fund experts target improvement of the situation, maintaining that the Moldovan economy will grow 4.1%, while the inflation will reach 6%, thus returning into the National Bank's target corridor. *"As a result of the pandemic, the global economy is projected to contract sharply – 3% in 2020, much worse than during the 2008-2009 financial crisis. In a baseline scenario which assumes that the pandemic fades in the second half of 2020 and containment efforts can be gradually unwound – the global economy is projected to grow by 5.8% in 2021 as economic activity normalizes, helped by policy support,"* the report authors say. Meanwhile, they recognize

that there is extreme uncertainty around the global growth forecast, because the economic fallout depends on factors that interact in ways that are hard to predict, including the pathway of the pandemic, the intensity and efficacy of containment efforts, the extent of supply disruptions, the repercussions of the dramatic tightening in global financial market conditions, shifts in spending patterns, behavioral changes (such as people avoiding shopping malls and public transportation), confidence effects, and volatile commodity prices. Moldova's neighbors – Ukraine and Romania – will face GDP decline 7.7% and, respectively, 5% this year. In 2021, it will grow 3.6% and 3.9%. As for the inflation, in Ukraine it is forecasted at 7.7% in 2020 and 5.9% in 2021, while in Romania – 1.8% and 1.9%. Infotag's dossier: In March, the IMF forecasted GDP growth 3.8%, while the inflation – 5% in 2020 and 2021. (www.moldpres.md)

- April 16th, Moldovan Prime Minister Ion Chicu told a TV show on Wednesday that the country's public finances were in dire straits owing to the pandemic, and the country desperately needed a new IMF loan to avoid catastrophe. Since March 17th, 2020 budget revenues had been cut in half, Chicu said. *"If we launch a massive emission of lei, [the national currency], this means inflation, and pensioners with 1,500-2,000 lei pensions [equal to 75 to 100 euro] will not be able to buy even bread. We will not allow this. There is no point in printing money,"* he said. The Prime Minister told the show aired by NTV Moldova on Wednesday night that the state was currently paying pensions and salaries out of the money collected by the customs service in the first two months of the year while also drawing on a tranche of 20 million US dollars provided by the

IMF at the start of 2020. The Prime Minister said the only hope in this situation was another IMF loan, of about 200 million euro, or 4 billion lei, which he said the IMF might approve at the end of April after its board meets on April 17th, 2020. Between November 2016 and March 2020, Moldova received a loan of 178.7 million US dollars from the IMF, following the severe crisis caused by the unsolved so-called "*grand theft*" of a billion US dollars from the banking system, which represented about 15% of the country's GDP. The IMF and World Bank on Thursday announced an aggressive plan to tackle the worst economic effects of COVID-19 pandemic, especially in vulnerable countries, mainly the poorest ones. The plan targets 111 countries in total. *"We are moving forward with a new process that will immediately cancel the debt of the 27 countries facing debt distress. Additionally, all 76 of the World Bank's International Development Association, IDA countries will receive full debt cancellation,"* the press release said. However, the Spokesperson of the Moldovan Government, Vitalie Dragancea, told BIRN that as far as he knew, *"for the moment, Moldova is not on the list of countries that will benefit from debt cancellation"* even though Moldova is included in the World Bank IDA program, together with Kosovo and other poor countries in Europe. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

According to the Moldovan Prime Minister, Ion Chicu the country is on the edge of economic catastrophe which may lead in incalculable consequences. The Government seeks to get a new IMF loan of 200 million euro or it will face difficulties in paying pensions and salaries. Under

these circumstances, the country is entering into an uncertain and not so stable economic and social environment. The President Igor Dodon has consolidated his political power in the country, while PDM achieved to come back in power with little casualties since last elections. Under these circumstances, the country enjoys relative political stability. However, corruption, lack of transparency and accountability reign in public administration and state's politics. Due to its strategic geographic position, Moldova has become a field of rivalry between Russia and the US and NATO. Russia maintains troops in Transnistria which are considered by pro-western forces as violating Moldovan sovereignty. The frozen conflict of Transnistria is always a "running sore" for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: April 13th, Montenegro's Prime Minister, Dusko Markovic, held talks today with prominent Montenegrin economists and professors, Veselin Vukotic, Bozo Mihailovic, Igor Luksic, Gordan Djurovic, Andjelko Lojpur, Nikola Milovic and Vasilije Kostic. They discussed proposal for measures of supporting economy, employees and socially vulnerable citizens. Participants of the meeting expressed full support for Government's economic measures and said they were responsible and appropriate. Interlocutors discussed mid term and long-term measures for enhancement of development and maintenance of citizens' standards. They agreed that banking system would have very important role in the maintenance of liquidity. They also agreed further development should be based on science, innovations and digitization. Markovic said that

the country was working very hard on responding to the challenges coronavirus pandemic had provoked. "Your approach and your suggestions are essential. This situation has shown that our administration can be efficient and that our institutions are sustainable," Markovic said. Prominent Montenegrin economists have demonstrated resolve to help with their suggestions and proposals for putting adequate measures into place, with the aim of accelerating recovery and creating favorable business environment as prerequisite for further development. (www.cdm.me)

- April 14th, there is a significant interest in the capacities of the undersea power cable despite the coronavirus pandemic, as the revenues from allocations on all new borders in the first quarter were 56% beyond the projected rates, the Montenegrin Electric Transmission System, CGES, told Dnevne Novine daily. They also said that the allocation of oversea capacities of the cable, which was put into function in November last year, has been unhindered. "The revenue from allocations of capacities on the border with Italy is in line with the projected rates, while it is even beyond the projected ones on other borders," the CGES pointed out. According to them, the CGES generated revenues exceeding 7 million euro from all the auctions and borders, including the undersea power cable. Data suggest that several hundreds of megawatt-hours of electricity were exchanged with Italy since the undersea cable was put into operation. (www.cdm.me)

- April 18th, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on tourism industry has been staggering. The state is facing many challenges. The National Coordination Body set up the Operational Staff to support tourism several days

ago, aiming to assist this sector in responding to the impacts of COVID-19. In an interview for CdM, a tourism official and co-owner of several tourism agencies, Dragan Purko Ivancevic, says it will not be easy for the state to cope with the crisis. He further explains that the state has to react by offering some serious support measures in order to make tourism industry sustainable, as it [tourism] contributes at least one quarter to Montenegro's Gross Domestic Product. The Government has to preserve the national airline Montenegro Airlines as well, as its role will be of paramount importance after the pandemic. All pre-season trips to Montenegro were cancelled. Companies, he added, mostly have long-term investment loans as well as short-term bank loans for maintaining liquidity. No short-term or illusory interventions can help to preserve the tourism industry and make it function in its full capacity in 2021, Ivancevic was adamant. The question is now whether the state is ready and capable of perceiving the catastrophic impact of the pandemic on this sector, as the largest number of hospitality and tourism businesses will not be able to pay out their suppliers and workers already next month. (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

As the COVID-19 spread is slow down, the Government and society worry for the economic aspects of the pandemic. Taking into consideration that Montenegro is a country which bases its economy in tourism, which has heavily affected by the pandemic, it is easily understood that economic forecasts are not encouraging. Corruption, smuggling (especially cigarettes) and money laundering are dominated in the country setting significant obstacles and risks for every

investor. Such situation has strongly affected progress of accession negotiations with the EU. Montenegro needs more concrete reforms in the field of justice, rule of law, fight against corruption, money laundering, and organized crime, public administration transparency and accountability in order to become a stable and attractive investment environment. The country focuses on strengthening its Armed Forces by purchasing modern equipment.



NORTH MACEDONIA: April 14th, Interior Minister, Nake Culev said that the incident in Skopje's Cento district yesterday evening, when dozens of ethnic Albanian citizens protested the curfew and the arrest of three of them, was politically motivated. Culev said that the Police acted professionally after noticing photo evidence that a group of citizens is violating the curfew. Some of the group fled, but three were detained. *“Meanwhile, around 22:00 we were informed that a large group of citizens is gathered at the site of the arrest spurred by a fake report that the detainees were mistreated. I can confirm that this report was false, and it was also confirmed by the detainees. They were arrested on the street, not in their yards. There is a clear attempt to politically manipulate the citizens in this case,”* Culev said. The three men were released during the riot, as the Mayor Boris Georgievski promised make protesters stop violating the curfew. (www.republica.mk)

- April 14th, NATO is setting up counter-hybrid support teams in North Macedonia and Montenegro after fake news and disinformation from Russia and China have gained ground with the coronavirus pandemic in the Western Balkans, Kay Bailey Hutchison, US Ambassador to

NATO, has told MIA. *“The Alliance expects more information from Skopje on setting up such a team for North Macedonia, aimed at preparing media in the country on how to deter disinformation campaigns coming from Russia,”* Hutchison told an online press briefing in Washington on Tuesday. According to her, a counter-hybrid support team is already operational in Montenegro. *“There is a lot of fake news spreading in North Macedonia regarding the coronavirus and the NATO assistance in equipment provided to its ally, which is dealing with the crisis during a state of emergency,”* Hutchison added. She said disinformation from Russia have been long-standing, ever since North Macedonia applied for NATO membership, and continued once the country’s accession to the Alliance was confirmed. *“North Macedonia is a full-fledged member, and as an ally, it is supported by NATO in this crisis. The assistance will continue, including for fighting disinformation coming from Russian sources,”* Hutchison noted. In July 2018, NATO leaders agreed to set up counter-hybrid support teams, which provide tailored targeted assistance to Allies upon their request, in preparing against and responding to hybrid activities. The US Ambassador calls NATO allies to oppose disinformation on the coronavirus coming from Russia and China. *“There are false reports they are sending assistance, there are false reports that the virus emerged from Europe or the United States. This is absolutely false and we are trying to respond to the false information with facts,”* Hutchison said. She noted this is part of the continual hybrid and cyber war they are using to spread dissatisfaction but also devalue state’s leadership in time when western societies are coping with the crisis. (www.republika.mk)

- April 15th, the Constitutional Court has decided not to initiate a procedure for assessing the constitutionality and legality of the Decision for dissolution of the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia. The Constitutional Court informs that today at a session after an extensive debate on the case at the end with a majority of votes it was decided not to initiate a procedure for assessing the constitutionality of the Decision for dissolution of Parliament. The *“World Macedonian Congress”* submitted the initiative. (www.republika.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The country lacks political stability since a caretaker Government is running the state affairs, while elections have not been rescheduled yet. Tension broke up between ethnic Albanians and Police due to curfew, while Slavmacedonian officials expressed the view that the incident was politically motivated. NATO is taking advantage of North Macedonia as its new member state establishing its presence in the country. North Macedonia should focus on reforms regarding justice, rule of law, fight against corruption and money laundering, public administration, and respect of human rights in order to accelerate its European integration process.



ROMANIA: April 13th, interim Chairman of the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) Marcel Ciolacu has stated on Monday, on social media, that extending the state of emergency without a minimum guarantee that the *“correct and necessary”* measures are to be taken to prevent an economic disaster *“would be totally unwise.”* He requested President Klaus Iohannis and the

National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal - PNL) that the extension of the state of emergency be mandatory accompanied by several things; information transparency of the decisions and acquisitions made by the Government during the state of emergency, a short and medium-term action plan in the healthcare area for testing the population, a mandatory condition for the rapid return to work and the resumption of economic activities, economic and social measures for the citizens and the business milieu, in order to protect the purchasing power of Romanians, keeping jobs and limiting the effects of the economic crisis (those taken until now are unenforceable and insufficient), major investments projects that the Government will start during the state of emergency to restart the economy, measures to be taken during the state of emergency in agriculture in order to limit the effects of drought and ensure the necessary food for the population. *“The PSD fully understand the need not to endanger people’s health! However, at the same time, I believe that every Romanian expects a clear perspective from President Iohannis and the Government. We will not agree to have another month wasted for the citizens and for the economy,”* Ciolacu said. (www.nineoclock.ro)

- April 16th, Parliament passed a decision on Thursday approving the extension of the emergency state for a further 30 days that also includes obligations on the Government, with one of them being the Government preparing weekly follow-up reports on its measures. The decree passed in an online vote 404 to 29 and 5 abstentions. Leader of the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal - PNL) MP Florin Roman called for the repeal of provisions

imposing conditions on the Government, the same amendment having been made by the leader of the Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România - USR) MP Catalin Drula. However, the proposals were voted down 180 to 254 and 7 abstentions. President Klaus Iohannis criticized on Thursday the fact that the parliamentary majority voted several measures to the decree on extending the state of emergency. (www.nineoclock.ro)

- April 16th, Romanian reformist party Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România - USR) demanded the urgent resignation of the Interior Minister Marcel Vela, after he signed a protocol with the Orthodox Church regarding the Easter celebration. *“Resignation of the Interior Minister Marcel Vela has become a necessary act aimed at restoring confidence in the Government's ability to handle the crisis we are going through. The faster it will happen, the better. Health of population should not be jeopardized by poor political calculations. The PNL Government must handle the crisis as best as possible for the country, not for the electoral score,”* USR said in a press release quoted by G4media.ro. Later, the ethnic Hungarians' party Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România – UDMR), also asked for the resignation of Vela for putting public health at risk. Under the agreement between the Interior Ministry and the Church, Romanians are allowed to visit the local churches on Friday and Saturday to take the blessed bread (paste). At the same time, officers and volunteers would take the Holy Fire to believers on Easter night. Vela claimed that all the actions would be carried out in strict observance of social distancing regulations. President Klaus Iohannis criticized the agreement and asked the

Government to review it. (www.romania-insider.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

State of emergency has been extended for one more month due to COVID-19 pandemic. Opposition appeared divided in voting the emergency situation raising concerns for media freedom, transparency of information and economic repercussions of long restriction measures. The country enjoys relative political stability after the new PNL Government has been established. Romania enjoys advanced upgrade in US and NATO strategic plans due to its geographical position located close to Russia. Consequently, Russia reacts in this close military cooperation between the two countries and the Alliance perceiving it as a threat against its national security. Romania keeps strengthening its Armed Forces seeking to achieve NATO standards.



SERBIA: April 13th, “China has notably helped Italy and some other EU member states in this crisis, and especially those countries that are still outside the bloc like Serbia, where the EU has failed to meet its obligations,” Jean Claude Juncker, former President of the European Commission (EC), said, the Beta news agency has reported on Monday. He told several media in an interview, that “with and without the coronavirus crisis, we saw a visible and unhidden wish, particularly from China, to influence the development of the European economies. China hopes to benefit from this situation.” But, he added, since the Finance Ministers adopted over 500 billion euro in aid to the EU member states’

economies, “China's and Russia's wishes will dwindle.” (www.rs.n1info.com)

- April 16th, leader of the opposition Democratic Party (Demokratska Stranka - DS), Zoran Lutovac accused Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic of waging a ruthless political campaign during the state of emergency. “He is appearing everywhere and speaking about everything. The campaign is inappropriate and is based on fanning fear and giving hope: ranging from there not being enough space in graveyards to promises that everyone will get 100 euro,” Lutovac told this week’s issue of Belgrade weekly NIN. The DS leader said that “one man along is ruling just as he has over the past eight year. As a true autocrat he has suspended rule of law, division of power, limited media freedom, and prevented fair elections.” Lutovac said that he does not know what could trigger a change of the authorities, adding that it could be something simple. “The key question is whether the glass is so full that a drop would make it overflow. Events during this pandemic are filling the glass to the rim. History is full of examples of tyrants and autocrats making fateful mistakes because they did not accept the fact that they can make mistakes,” he said. He emphasized that Vucic’s animosity towards journalists who are not servile is pronounced to the extreme. “It is probably because he is dissatisfied with the results of the measures (during the state of emergency) and campaign,” Lutovac said. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- April 16th, Serbia's Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic said on Thursday that Belgrade was ready to further improve and strengthen the relationship with the US in all fields and to intensify political dialogue with Washington which, according to him, had “a positive dynamic so far,” the Beta

news agency reported. Addressing an online conference “*Serbia - US relations in the face of Coronavirus Challenges,*” Dacic said both countries wanted to make the region safe, economically stable and based on democracy, “*hoping for our region to become the united European community of states.*” He thanked the US on donating 6,000 tests for coronavirus, adding Serbia appreciated that aid. Dacic recalled that the US companies had so far invested almost four billion dollars in the country and that “*there are over 600 companies with the majority of US-owned stakes.*” Speaking about the Kosovo issue, he said Serbia was grateful to US President Donald Trump's and the State Secretary's Special Representatives Richard Grenell and Mathew Palmer, for their efforts “*put into the search for a mutually acceptable and fair compromise.*” “*In the period ahead, especially due to the pandemic which hits everyone in the region, all of us must empower relations, stabilize the Western Balkans and solve all open issues for the benefit of the whole region,*” Dacic said. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Serbian elections scheduled for April 26th, 2020 have postponed due to COVID-19 pandemic, while the country is in state of emergency. Opposition claims that the President, Aleksandar Vucic and the Government have established an autocratic regime restricting media freedom and human rights. Moreover, opposition is concerned if the coming elections will be free and fair. Elections should be scheduled soon after the end of the pandemic securing political stability in the country. Serbia is in the “microscope” of Western powers (namely the US and EU) due to increased activity of China and Russia which are seeking to

put the country under their own sphere of influence. It is a fact that Serbia and Russia have developed very close relations, especially in the defense sector which concerns the EU and US. Serbia and Bosnia are the “vulnerable” and “fragile” links in the “security chain” of Southeast Europe since they do not belong to the Euro-Atlantic structures. Restart of dialogue with Kosovo is far since its newly elected Government collapsed and political uncertainty reigns in Pristina. The EU has raised serious concerns over Serbia's effectiveness on independence and accountability of the judiciary, freedom of expression, prevention of corruption and the fight against organized crime. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its Armed Forces declaring towards all sides that they are the power of the state. It implements an ambitious armament program mainly supported by Russia.



SLOVENIA: April 15th, the coronavirus crisis has shown Slovenia urgently needs a transport airplane, Defense Minister Matej Tonin pointed out after a videoconference of NATO Defense Ministers. “*It has turned out that we can only rely on ourselves in these difficult times,*” he said. The multi-purpose 1988 Turbolet L-410, which can transport both passengers and cargo, has done an excellent job in this crisis but a new solution must be found, Tonin pointed out. (www.sta.si)

- April 16th, Interior Minister Ales Hojs told the press that the Government plans to deploy soldiers if needed despite the fact that it was unable to muster the two-thirds majority in Parliament to grant soldiers limited Police powers

to patrol the border. It plans to use a different legislative provision that allows a more limited form of deployment. This provision, allows soldiers to cooperate with the Police in the “broader protection of the state border,” albeit without Police powers. (www.sta.si)

- April 16th, the Government appointed Brigadier General Robert Glavas the new Chief of the General Staff of the Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF), Defense Minister Matej Tonin announced in social media, saying that Glavas had proven himself in the past weeks of crisis as exceptionally operative, committed and professional. Glavas previously served as Deputy Chief of the General Staff and was also interim Chief of the General Staff following the dismissal of Alenka Ermenc at the maiden session of the new Government on March 14th, 2020. (www.sta.si)



The new Chief of Slovenian Armed Forces General Staff, Brigadier General Robert Glavas
(Photo source: www.slovenskavojska.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Slovenia overcomes the COVID-19 pandemic controlling current situation. Migration problem is considered as a great challenge for the country and in this context the Government seeks to

deploy the Army in the borders with Police powers. It seems that the Parliament will not allow such a thing (2/3 of the MPs should support such a decision) but the Government is determined to overcome constitutional and legal restrictions deploying military forces without Police competencies. On Slovenia – Croatia dispute the latter has started on calling for dialogue but it is doubtful what Slovenia will finally decide to do. Besides, Slovenia could push Croatia on this case taking into consideration that Croatia needs Slovenia’s support to enter the Schengen zone and OECD. The 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 White Book on Defense presented a rather ambitious program of improving operational capabilities of the Armed Forces. It foresees an 8,000-strong professional military force and a 2000-strong standing reserve by 2035, up from 6,400 and 700, respectively. Slovenia’s defense budget will finally reach 2% of GDP (a NATO requirement) by 2035.



TURKEY: April 15th, Turkish and Russian militaries held the fourth joint patrol in Syria’s Idlib region, the RIA news agency cited the Russian Reconciliation Center for Syria as saying on Wednesday. The patrol covered the M4 highway, which links the cities of Aleppo and Latakia, and is part of the two countries’ efforts to uphold a cease-fire agreement in the region. Turkey and Russia, which back opposing sides in

Syria's war, agreed on March 5th, 2020 to halt military activity in the northwestern Idlib region after an escalation of violence displaced nearly a million people and brought the two sides close to confrontation. The deal addresses Turkey's main concerns, namely stopping a flow of refugees and preventing the deaths of more Turkish soldiers on the ground. As part of the agreement, Turkish and Russian forces are to carry out joint patrols along the M4 highway linking Syria's east and west, as well as to establish a security corridor on either side of the road. During earlier negotiations, Russia reportedly proposed a map that edged the borders of the Sochi deal borders north of the strategic M4 and M5 highways, thus putting 60% of Idlib under regime control. However, Turkey said it would make no concessions on its observation points. Along with many European officials and the UN, Ankara is concerned about the civilian displacement in Idlib due to regime operations, which could trigger a new mass exodus to the Turkish border and Western countries. Turkey launched Operation "Spring Shield" on February 27th, 2020 after at least 34 Turkish soldiers were killed in a Bashar Assad regime airstrike in Idlib province and after repeated violations of previous cease-fires. According to a 2018 deal with Russia, Turkish troops were to remain in Idlib to protect civilians from attacks by the regime and terrorist groups. The M4 motorway connects the port city of Latakia to the Iraqi border while the M5 forms the backbone of the country's highways, connecting economic hub Aleppo to the central cities of Hama and Homs, the capital Damascus and to the Jordanian border farther south. Opening major highways in the region to revive a shattered war economy has been a key goal of the Russian-led campaign. Before the war, the M5 motorway

served as an economic artery for Syria, mainly feeding the country's industrial hub of Aleppo. Experts estimate the road carried business worth 25 million dollars a day at the height of Syria's trade boom before the war. The highway was a passageway for the crossing of wheat and cotton from the Syrian east and north to the rest of the country. It was also a road used for the exchange of commodities with regional trade partners. (www.dailysabah.com)

- April 15th, Turkey has extended mandatory military service for its male citizens by at least one month, in a move aimed at preventing the further spread of the coronavirus during the discharge period characterized by the mass movement of people. Following a meeting with military Commanders, Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said in a statement late on Tuesday that the year's first conscription period, due to take place in April, had also been postponed. With a few exceptions, all Turkish men have to complete six months of military service after they turn 18. The compulsory time was reduced from 12 months when a new law came into effect in June last year. The men affected by the Ministry's decision had started their duty in November 2019 and were due to be discharged in April. *"Despite the measures we have taken, we see that mustering out and conscription [of the military personnel] constitute a risk for our soldiers, society and Turkish Armed Forces,"* Akar said. According to the Defense Ministry, some 55,000 citizens were foreseen to be conscripted in April, while 66,000 others were due to complete their service. Considering that some relatives and friends would have accompanied both groups of people, as many as 500,000 individuals might have moved between provinces during the process, Akar said in his

statement. The spread of the disease has accelerated in recent days, with more than 4,000 new cases and 100 deaths announced daily. Meanwhile, the Turkish military has reported 223 coronavirus cases and one death to date. Dr Esin Alavut, a specialist family practitioner based in Mersin, said that any measure that prevents travel and interaction between people is beneficial for the containment of the virus. *“It might be very hard to quarantine and monitor that many people at their Brigades before their military service ends,”* she told Al Jazeera. *“And self-quarantine might not be possible in many crowded homes they return to,”* Alavut added. (www.aljazeera.com)

- April 16th, Turkish authorities blocked Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates state news websites on Sunday, days after the sites of Turkey's state broadcaster and news agency were blocked in Saudi Arabia. The apparently reciprocal moves come four weeks after Turkish Prosecutors indicted 20 Saudis over the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, a killing that soured relations between Ankara and Riyadh. Internet users in Turkey trying to access the sites of Saudi news agency SPA, the UAE's WAM news agency and more than a dozen other sites saw a message saying that they were blocked under a law governing internet publications in Turkey. A Spokesman at Turkey's Justice Ministry declined to comment on the actions and Saudi Arabia's Government media office did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment. The Turkish website of the UK-based Independent newspaper, which is operated by a Saudi company, was one of the sites to be blocked on Sunday, in a move that its editor said reflected political tensions between Riyadh

and Ankara. *“We believe tensions between Saudi Arabia and Turkey reflected on us,”* editor Nevzat Cicek told Reuters. Sunday's decision appeared to be *“retaliation against Saudi Arabia,”* he said. Earlier this month Saudi Arabia banned Turkish state news agency Anadolu, along with the website of state broadcaster TRT. According to Anadolu, the Saudi-based newspaper al-Marsad said on April 11th, 2020 that it *“knew from its sources that many Turkish media outlets have been blocked.”* *“One of these blocked media outlets is Anadolu Agency,”* al-Marsad reported. Riyadh's move to block the sites came after the Istanbul Prosecutor's office announced last month that it had prepared an indictment against 20 suspects over the killing of Khashoggi, including the former Deputy Head of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence and a former royal adviser. The Prosecutor's office said the indictment accuses Ahmed al-Asiri and Saud al-Qahtani of having *“instigated premeditated murder with monstrous intent.”* Khashoggi's killing in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 caused a global uproar, tarnishing the image of Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). Some Western Governments, as well as the CIA, said they believed MBS ordered the killing; an accusation Saudi officials have denied. (www.aljazeera.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

COVID-19 pandemic affects political, economic, social and security aspects of Turkey. The already problematic Turkish economy is deteriorating coming on the edge of a strong recession. Agreement with Russia on the Syrian front is implemented stabilizing situation in the region and securing Turkish national interests. Turkey

works on improving relations with the US and a negotiation is underway which may lead in improvement of bilateral relations which have reached the zero point last months. Turkey continues to support actively the UN recognized Libyan Government aiming to maintain a permanent influence and presence in the Mediterranean Sea. Turkish military support is crucial for Fayez Al-Sarraj who enjoys the UN recognition in his fight against Field Marshall, Halifa Haftar. It seems that Haftar is losing ground by the Sarraj forces. Turkey, enjoying a pivotal geographic location is engaged in several regional challenges. Despite that, enjoys special relationship with great powers such as the US and Russia. Erdogan made clear publically that “Turkish security is beyond its borders.” This statement summarizes the security doctrine of Turkey; Turkey will be engaged in regional challenges, conflicts and cooperation to ensure its security. Turkish engagement in Syria, Libya, Cyprus, Somalia is explained by this doctrine. The country combines both diplomatic means and “hard” power aiming to achieve its goals. In Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea Turkey presents its aeronautical power against Greece and Cyprus questioning their sovereign rights. In the east Mediterranean front, Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in the region and is expected to react violently if balance of power is jeopardized. The country continues to face several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs, Mayors, journalists and thousands of citizens are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Turkey develops an ambitious armament project aiming at becoming

self-sufficient in defense sector; if it succeeds it will set the base to become a regional military super power. Without any question, Turkey has the characteristics of a regional superpower and it tries to act like one.

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NOTE

-  Stable situation. No security risk.
-  Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored.
-  Major concerns over stability and security. significant security risk in specific regions. Low tension incidents.
-  Imminent major incidents regarding stability and security. Violent incidents or armed violence in specific regions. Ongoing tension or crisis. High security risk.
-  Evolving or ongoing crisis including major armed violence or violent/armed conflict. Civil, inter-state or non –state actors war.