



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

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

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

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



ALBANIA: December 26th, two Prosecutors, Vladimir Mara and Dritan Prençi, will be part of the Special Prosecution Against Corruption (SPAC), taking the number to a total of 10 members. This change comes a few days after SPAC started operating, and right after the Chief Prosecutor of SPAC, Arben Kraja, notified the High Council of the Prosecution for the temporary appointment of Prosecutors Prençi and Mara. (www.top-channel.tv)

- December 27th, Albanian President, Ilir Meta does not withdraw from the idea of referendum stressing that it is the only way to bring Albania out of this situation. Invited on a TV show on Thursday evening, he said that it is the utmost moment when citizens “speak” in a referendum. *“Only through referendums will Albania emerge from this situation. As we have it difficult for dialogue, cooperation and responsibility, a referendum remains the only solution. I believe very much in democracy and in giving the power to people. It is enough for vagabonds who speak on behalf of people; it is the time that people*

should talk with a referendum,” the President said. (www.albaniadailynews.com)

- December 27th, Vice Chairman of the Socialist Movement of Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim – LSI), Petrit Vasili held on Friday, the Prime Minister, Edi Rama accountable for supporting dark and anti-Albanian project via “*Balkan Schengen*.” In his statement, Vasili said that Serbia does not recognize Kosovo and considers it as part of its territory. Therefore, Vasili underlined that one of the most significant governmental aims of the Albanian foreign policy is rapport with Kosovo and recognition of the latter by the other states. Furthermore, Vasili inquired on where Rama finds himself in relation with Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic’s completely negative and aggressive attitude towards Kosovo. *“Serbia does not recognize Kosovo and considers it as part of its territory. Albania has a fundamental political, strategic and national interest; its rapport with Kosovo and recognition of Kosovo by the other states, as one of the most important governmental objectives of its foreign policy. Where does the Prime Minister, Edi Rama find himself in rapport to the totally negative and aggressive attitude of Vucic towards Kosovo? The project that Rama supports through the ‘mini Schengen’ is of course a dark, anti-Albanian project,”* Vasili said. (www.albaniadailynews.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political crisis continues in Albania affecting democratic function of the state. While opposition keeps denouncing Rama’s Government, the struggle between the President and Prime Minister is turning into a personal duel. Ilir Meta is calling for a referendum, but it is rather

unlikely to see the Government to organize one. Under these circumstances the only solution to exit the political abnormality could be early parliamentary elections. Besides, political instability and malfunction may have direct impact in investments and opening of EU accession negotiations. Rama's decision to join the "mini Schengen" has strongly criticized by the opposition mainly because it is seen as cooperation with Serbia. Reforms should continue more intensively if the state seeks to get an accession negotiation date with the EU. Corruption, organized crime, money laundering, drug and weapon smuggling and links between politics and organized crime are the main problems Albania should address effectively. Relation between Albania and Kosovo with a potential new Government under Albin Kurti as the Prime Minister is a good question. However, Albania continues to act as the "motherland" of all Albanians around Southeast Europe.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

December 23rd, the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia-Herzegovina appointed on Monday a new convocation of the Council of Ministers of BiH chaired by Zoran Tegeltija from the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata - SNSD) party. Twenty-nine Deputies voted in favor of the decision, eight against, while one abstained. The Ministers pledged to conscientiously carry out their duties, to respect the Constitution of Bosnia-Herzegovina, to implement the General Framework Agreement for Peace and its annexes in full, to protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to care for the

interests and equality of all peoples and citizens. Deputy Ministers of the BiH Council of Ministers also took oaths. More than a year after the presidential and parliamentary elections, state parliamentarians have finally appointed a new convocation of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia-Herzegovina. At the session, Deputies confirmed the appointment of Bisera Turkovic [Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije - SDA)] as BiH's Foreign Minister, Stasa Kosarac (SNSD) as BiH Economic Affairs Minister, Vjekoslav Bevanda [Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH)] as BiH Finance and Treasury Minister, Vojin Mitrovic (SNSD) for BiH Minister of Communications and Transport, Ankica Gudeljevic (HDZ BiH) for BiH Minister of Civil Affairs, Josip Grubesa (HDZ BiH) for BiH Minister of Justice, Fahrudin Radoncic [Union for a Better Future of BiH (Savez za Bolju Budućnost BiH - SBB BiH)] for BiH Minister of Security and Sifet Podzic [Democratic Front (Demokratska Fronta - DF)] for BiH Minister of Defense, Klix.ba news portal reports. (www.sarajevotimes.com)



The new Council of Ministers of BiH

(Photo source: www.vijeceministara.gov.ba)

- December 23rd, Bosnia-Herzegovina has officially submitted country's Reform Program to NATO Headquarters in Brussels on Monday, Klix.ba news portal reports. Just an hour

after the appointment of the new Council of Ministers, as agreed in the Presidency, the agreed Reform Program to NATO was submitted. Although it was expected that the Reform Program would be delivered by Tuesday, it was done immediately. It is interesting that the National Assembly of Republika Srpska considered the reform program already submitted, at the request of BiH Presidency Member Milorad Dodik. A final assessment of the Reform Program, the importance of the document and its content will be given in the coming months by NATO members, when it will finally be determined whether BiH has taken the most important step under the Membership Action Plan (MAP). However, most military-political experts are closer to the view that the Reform Program is essentially the Annual National Program (ANP), although the document does not prejudice future membership, which will require a new decision by the BiH Presidency. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

- December 27th, “*Serbia did not have to write in its Defense Strategy that it would protect the Republika Srpska as their vital national interest, because only we decide on our fate,*” Bosnian-Serb leader and Presidency member Milorad Dodik said on Friday at the Day of Republika Srpska (RS) entity reception in Banja Luka. “*Not only was Sarajevo annoyed by it [the Serbian defense strategy], but I was annoyed too by the fact that they wrote in the strategy they would support the RS which remains within Bosnia and Herzegovina. I do not think they had to write that. I will ask them to remove it if they can; not so we would cause a strife, but to show that we are the ones controlling our fate,*” Dodik said at a reception attended by the RS President Zeljka Cvijanovic from Dodik's Alliance of Independent

Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata - SNSD) party, Radovan Viskovic (SNSD), the RS Prime Minister, and other dignitaries. Of all the previous years, Dodik said he believes this was the year when they least wondered what would happen to the RS and that everyone is now convinced that this Serb-majority part of Bosnia is an “*unavoidable political factor.*” According to him, the RS authorities plan to intensify the implementation of strategic projects, one of which is the Doboj-Bijeljina highway construction and the construction of several hydropower plants. This year, he said, the RS provided 1.5 billion euro for these projects, while they plan to provide additional 4 billion euro in 2020. Serbia's Defense Minister, Aleksandar Vulin, presented on Tuesday the document which says that the preservation of Republika Srpska (RS), one of Bosnia's two semi-autonomous entities, is among Serbia's top foreign affairs priorities. (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The Council of Ministers of BiH officially established on December 23rd, 2019 ending a long period of “political gap” in the country's governance which inevitably affected political stability, economic growth and reforms progress. As the High Representative of Bosnia, Valentin Inzko said, it is expected that the new Government will accelerate reform process especially in the field of economy, rule of law, human rights, and fight against corruption. Adoption of the 2020 state budget is a significant step that the Council should forward in order to allow the state's institutions to become functional. Political instability, poor economic performances, entities' rivalries, and problematic framework of state's

structure (due to Dayton Accord) have left Bosnia far behind other Western Balkan countries towards the EU. NATO is a feasible goal but only due to geopolitical and geostrategic reasons (mainly because of the Russian threat of penetration in the region) and not because of achieving the Alliance's standards. In this context, the new Council of Ministers submitted, with Milorad Dodik's approval, to NATO the Bosnia's Reform program which is a sign of compromise by the Bosnian Serb leader regarding NATO accession of Bosnia. Republika Srpska's opposition reacted claiming that Dodik changed the entity's stance of military neutrality, while the Bosnian Serb member of the tripartite Presidency claims that submission of the program does not mean entrance of the country to NATO. It is assessed that Dodik faced hard pressure from external stakeholders to back down from his strict stance. Despite the Council of Ministers establishment political situation in the country remains unstable due to the complicated decision-making and governance system, which blocks almost every political action due to entity's interests. At the moment Bosnia is considered as a potential source of instability in the whole region of Southeast Europe. Neighboring Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs, while Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran maintain a permanent presence through financial donations and investments. Presentation of the new defense and security strategy by Serbia has caused several reactions to Bosnian parties because it speaks of "the preservation of Bosnia's Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity one of Serbia's strategic goals." This reference is considered as a direct interference in Bosnia's domestic affairs and a threat of the state's sovereignty. Even

Bosnian Serb leader, Dodik was forced to reject the Serbian text claiming that he will ask by Serbia to withdraw it from its institutional documents.



BULGARIA: December 25th, Economy Minister Emil Karanikolov met with Turkish Deputy Minister of Trade Riza Tuna Turagay, said the Press Office of the Ministry of Economy. The two Ministers discussed the increased traffic and traffic control at Kapitan Andreevo border crossing. The meeting held at the border checkpoint was attended by representatives of the Customs Agency, the Bulgarian Food Safety Agency, the Border Police and the State Road Traffic Safety Agency. The Turkish side proposed that new inspection booths at Kapitan Andreevo border crossing should be opened helping to improve flow of goods. Karanikolov and Turkey's Deputy Minister agreed that every effort would be made on both sides to ease traffic. A new meeting was scheduled for late January to discuss progress on the implementation of the proposals discussed at the meeting. Karanikolov and Turagay also discussed the forthcoming first meeting of the Joint Bulgarian - Turkish Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation and the Bulgarian - Turkish Business Forum, which will take place in early 2020 in Turkey. (www.novinite.com)

- December 26th, a large-scale investigation into the water crisis in the Bulgarian town of Pernik is being led personally by Interior Ministry Chief Secretary Ivailo Ivanov, with all Police in the town mobilized to assist. For weeks, Pernik has been subject to serious water restrictions, given low levels of supply available to the town. Residents have held protests about the restrictions

and current situation. Ivanov arrived in the town following orders by Prime Minister Boiko Borissov and Interior Minister Mladen Marinov. Prosecutor-General Ivan Geshev has mobilized Prosecutors to assist in the investigation, with interrogations and inspections in the coming days, it was announced. While Ivanov, along with regional and local officials, were visiting the site of the Stomana factory on December 26th, several leaks in the pipeline running through the territory of the plant were found, Bulgarian National Radio said. Earlier, Borissov, Economy Minister Emil Karanikolov and Deputy Minister Nikolay Nankov inspected the Stomana plant, meeting water supply and sewerage team working on eliminating leaks in the pipelines. Borissov ordered that situation be dealt urgently and ordered further supplies of mineral water to be delivered to residents of Pernik, as well as whatever materials were needed to deal with the water crisis. Separate reports said that four people in Pernik had been treated in hospital after drinking tap water contaminated with E.Coli. Bulgaria's Chief State Health Inspector Angel Kunchev told the media that it was not a matter of an epidemic, there was no cause for alarm, and no further infections were expected. During Borissov's visit to the city, he was told by local authorities that one of the causes of the crisis in the town was the outdated water supply network, which had not been overhauled since 1954. Borissov also ordered national Police Chief Hristo Terziyski to commission an investigation by the Economic Crimes Squad into the water crisis in Pernik. The Prime Minister inspected the emergency construction activities aimed at increasing the inflow into the Studena Dam, a main source of water for Pernik. Given the large losses of water in the network, a survey is being

carried out to find undetected leaks and illegal diversions of water. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- December 27th, interviewed by BTA, Economy Minister Emil Karanikolov said over 1,200 million leva (600 million euro) were invested in new plants and extensions to existing ones this year, and more than 8,000 jobs are expected to be created because of that. He noted that most investments were made in plants which will turn out high value-added products. The automotive industry soaked up the largest investments. Sizable investments were also made in metallurgy and the ICT industry. The average value added growth rate of the ICT sector is over 25%, which attracts many large companies. Bulgaria attracts serious investor interest as evidenced by the applications for certification filed with the Invest Bulgaria Agency in 2019. Nearly 40 new projects with planned investments exceeding 700 million leva (360 million euro) are in process of certification. Expectations are that 3,000 jobs will be created, said Karanikolov. He stressed that the Industrial Zones Bill envisages incentives to investors who use green energy. Bulgaria's GDP will reach a record high of 120,000 million leva (60 million euro) this year. In the third quarter of 2019, GDP increased by 3.7% compared to a year earlier. This year unemployment rate hit a 30-year low. In the first ten months of the year, export increased by 4.2% compared to January - October 2018. The Economy Minister expects a pay rise in the public sector and the increase in teachers' salaries to boost consumption in 2020. The minimum wage will rise from 560 leva (286 euro) now to 610 leva (311 euro) in January. Karanikolov also dwelled on the Government's measures to promote business. Nearly 2,500 small and

medium-sized businesses have been supported with funds from the Operational Program Economy and Competitiveness 2014-2020. So far, 1,200 million leva (600 million euro), 45% of the program's budget, have been paid out, and some 78% of it has been contracted. The Economy Ministry has been active in reducing the administrative burden on companies and individuals. More than 85 measures transforming the administrative service model were implemented in 2019, which concern the activity of the Economy Ministry and the second-level spending units subordinated to the Economy Minister. (www.bta.bg)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

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



CROATIA: December 23rd, Croatia's tight presidential race will go to a runoff vote in two weeks, after exit polls and initial returns indicated that none of the candidates had won the office outright. With nearly 90% of the ballots

counted, state election authorities in Croatia reported that left-wing politician Zoran Milanovic led the first round of voting with nearly 30% support. President Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic had almost 27%, followed by right-wing singer Miroslav Skoro in third place with around 24%. Milanovic and Grabar Kitarovic now will face each other in a second round of voting on January 5th, 2020. As polls closed on Sunday evening, election authorities said turnout was higher than during the last election in 2014, with some 100,000 more voters having cast ballots by mid-afternoon despite bad weather. The presidential election was tight, with the ruling conservatives seeking to keep their grip on power days before the country takes over the EU's presidency for the first time. Some 3.8 million voters in the EU's newest member state had to pick among 11 candidates, but only three were considered to be the front runners while the others are lagging far behind. Conservative incumbent Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic is running for a second term, challenged by leftist former Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic and right-wing singer Miroslav Skoro. Though the post is largely ceremonial in Croatia — the President formally commands the army and represents the country abroad — keeping the presidency is important for the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ) party as its Government is set to assume the EU rotating chairmanship on January 1st, 2020 that will include overseeing Brexit and the start of post-Brexit talks. Grabar-Kitarovic had started off stronger than other candidates but her position has weakened after she made a series of gaffes during the campaign. She is still believed to have a slight lead going into the election, followed closely by Milanovic. Skoro is trailing third, chipping away right-wing

votes from Grabar-Kitarovic. Analysts believe that Grabar-Kitarovic and Milanovic — who represent two main political options — will face each other in the January 5th, 2020 runoff, but they have not completely ruled out an upset by Skoro. After voting in Zagreb, leftist former Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic predicted there would be a runoff. *“We have done all we could, I have done my best,”* he said. *“People could see that and now it is up to them to decide,”* he added. Though it has recovered since the 1991-95 war that followed the breakup of former Yugoslavia, Croatia still has one of the poorest economies in the EU and corruption is believed to be widespread. Critics have blasted the Government for setting the election three days before Christmas when many people travel abroad. (www.euronews.com)

- December 23rd, the Italian company SAIPEM has expressed interest in investing in geothermal energy in Croatia, the Croatian Hydrocarbon Agency said on Monday, announcing that it would soon invite bids for three more locations. At a recent meeting at the Croatian Hydrocarbon Agency, representatives of the Italian energy and engineering company SAIPEM, which until 2016 was a daughter company of the ENI energy giant, expressed interest in making investments in renewable energy in Croatia, notably in geothermal energy. The Agency's representatives acquainted them with Croatia's new regulatory framework that recognizes for the first time the great potential of geothermal energy. Agency Management Board chair Marijan Krpan pointed to the example of the first geothermal power plant in Velika Ciglena, a pilot-project that has brought to Croatia the experience based on which new and similar projects can be planned in the future. *“We*

have been recognized as a country that has great geothermal potential and the steps that have been made to activate it have been yielding the first results in the past 12 months,” Krpan said. SAIPEM has been developing its first geothermal energy exploitation project in South America, and Croatia has been recognized as the next step, SAIPEM official Paolo Carrera said. Global production of energy from renewable sources will grow around 2.3% annually in the period until 2040 and SAIPEM will play an important role in that process, he said. He said that currently a global search was underway for renewable sources other than sun and wind, which could be used for competitive energy production, noting that geothermal plants were an excellent example as the technology in question meant clean energy production. *“Considering your geological potential, I believe that it will have an important role in Croatia's energy transition, hopefully with SAIPEM as a partner,”* Carrera said. Its officials say that bids will be invited for three locations; Merhatovec (Medjimurje County), Pcelic (Virovitica-Podravina County) and Ernestinovo (Osijek-Baranja County), where temperatures exceeding 140 degrees Celsius have been registered, which is suitable for energy production. Domestic and foreign investors are expected to be particularly interested in the Pcelic project, with the location having a temperature of more than 207 degrees Celsius at a depth of more than 5,000 meters, the Agency says. It recalls that since 2018, when the Agency was put in charge of geothermal potential, five tenders have been published for the allocation of areas for the exploration and exploitation of geothermal water for the purpose of energy production. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- December 28th, Foreign and European Affairs Minister Gordan Grlic-Radman was in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina on Saturday for talks with Dragan Covic, the Chairman of the House of the Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina and leader of the Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine - HDZ BiH). Grlic-Radman said that Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress towards joining the EU was of strategic interest for Croatia due to the long land border and was one of the priorities of its upcoming EU presidency. As Chairman of the HDZ's Committee on foreign and European affairs, Grlic-Radman met with Covic, to talk about the priorities of Croatia's EU presidency in the first half of 2020. *“It is very important for us to open prospects for candidate countries and open negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. Croatia will work very hard to send a clear message by May to the countries of Southeast Europe, i.e. the Western Balkans,”* Grlic-Radman said. Covic said he expected the Council of the EU to invite BiH to open accession negotiations in May, 2020, adding that he hoped the country could launch the negotiations together with North Macedonia and Albania. *“Croatia, with its abilities in the field of foreign policy, can assist Bosnia and Herzegovina on our European path,”* said Covic adding *“particularly during their EU presidency in the first six months of 2020.”* Grlic-Radman added that Croatia would continue to strongly insist on equality for Croats living in BiH; namely promoting amendments to the election law that would guarantee that political representatives were no longer elected by the larger ethnic groups in the country. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The country enjoys political stability. First round of presidential elections was concluded normally without major problems or incidents. Incumbent President, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic backed by the ruling HDZ was defeated by the former Prime Minister, Zoran Milanovic backed by SDP, while independent Miroslav Skoro got the third place. A second round will be held on January 5th, 2020 and although it is expected Grabar-Kitarovic to win the runoff it is not unlikely for Milanovic to become the next Croatian President. Although the President has narrow powers it would not be “convenient” for the Prime Minister and leader of HDZ, Andrej Plenkovic to have a President backed by the opposition. Croatia, the youngest member of the EU, is preparing to take over the EU Presidency from January 1st to June 30th, 2020. In this context, the Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Bosnia where he met the leader of the Bosnian Croat HDZ and Chairman of the House of the Peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dragan Covic discussing various issues. Croatia is frustrated claiming that Bosnian Croats do not enjoy equal electoral rights with Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) and consequently are not able to elect their own representative. More specifically, election of Bosnian Zeljko Komsic (with the votes of Bosniaks) instead of Covic in last general elections was an unexpected defeat for Croatian and Bosnian Croatian interests in the neighboring country which failed to elect their own candidate. The country received a positive recommendation by the European Commission for implementing all necessary criteria for entering the Schengen Zone. However, the final political decision by the member states requires a unanimous vote and it is

expected to become a field of confrontation between Croatia and Slovenia. Slovenia has already expressed its intention to block Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area due to their border dispute. However, Croatia expresses confidence that finally it will get full support (Slovenia including) for entering the Zone. However, Croatia insists on claiming that the arbitration rule is not valid and the dispute should be resolved through bilateral negotiations; a position which is unacceptable for Slovenia. Croatia implements a hard-line foreign policy with its neighboring countries maintaining open disputes with Bosnia, Slovenia, and Serbia. Top officials do not hesitate to openly interfere in Bosnian domestic affairs in the name of Bosnian Croats as forementioned. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Failure to complete successfully the purchase of a modern fighter jet maintains a long period of an ineffective and weak Croatian Air Force.



CYPRUS: December 23rd, Denia village on Monday reported to the UN and the Government the entry into the buffer zone of farmers from the north who started cultivating land which Greek Cypriots are using. Community leader Christakis Panayiotou told media on Monday that at around 2pm Greek Cypriot farmers cultivating land in the buffer zone saw that tractors had arrived with a truck and started cultivating fields. The same fields are being cultivated by Greek Cypriots. *"We spoke to them, we notified the UN that asked them to leave,"* he said, adding however that as soon as the peacekeepers left, they returned, this time

escorted by Turkish soldiers and continued to work. Panayiotou said he and the Greek Cypriot farmers spoke to the Turkish Cypriots who said they pay money to the authorities in the north to be allowed to cultivate the fields in question. He said both the UN and the Foreign Ministry gave them instructions on how to deal with the incident. *"We too agreed that we should be calm, not create tensions,"* he said. Panayiotou said the Ministry would send someone to the village on Tuesday to discuss situation. This incident follows several that started in November 2018 and continue until today. The Denia community leader had said at the time that the Greek Cypriot farmers have been cultivating those fields for the past five years with permission from the UN. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- December 27th, Foreign Minister Nicos Christodoulides discussed with several Chief diplomats situation in Libya, following the security and maritime accord between Tripoli and Ankara, while Cyprus' Energy Minister Giorgos Lakkotrypis struck a defiant note by reiterating Cyprus will forge ahead with its gas exploration plans. According to the Cyprus News Agency, over the past two days, Christodoulides spoke on the phone with at least five counterparts whose states either have skin in the game in the eastern Mediterranean or are concerned over the recent pact struck between Turkey and Libya. Christodoulides held telephone conversations with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov; Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry; United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan; Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi; and Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Cyprus' top diplomat is said to

have underlined to his counterparts the need to create conditions de-escalating the Libyan crisis after the stakes were raised even higher with Ankara's recent pledge to militarily back the internationally recognized Government in Tripoli. Earlier in the week, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his country will be sending troops to Libya at the request of Tripoli as soon as next month. Libya's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) has been struggling to fend off General Khalifa Haftar's forces from eastern Libya, which have been supported by Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Jordan. Last month, Ankara signed two separate accords with the GNA, led by Fayeze al-Serraj, one on security and military cooperation and another on maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean. The maritime deal ends Turkey's isolation in the East Mediterranean as it ramps up offshore energy exploration that has alarmed Greece and some other neighbors. The military deal would preserve its lone ally in the region, Tripoli. Moscow has voiced concerns over a possible Turkish military deployment to Libya in support of the GNA. Turkish and Russian officials held talks in Moscow this week to seek a compromise on the issues of both Libya and Syria, where Russia backs President Bashar al-Assad. In the Mediterranean, Turkey is at loggerheads with Greece, Cyprus, Egypt and Israel over rights to resources off the coast of the divided island of Cyprus. Athens says Ankara's maritime deal with Tripoli violates international law. This year Turkey dispatched two drillships to three locations inside Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone, in areas which Turkey says either fall within its own 'continental shelf' or else are claimed by the breakaway state in northern Cyprus. But Lakkotrypis told the state

broadcaster that Cyprus would be pursuing its energy program regardless. The state broadcaster also said a new round of gas explorations is slated to kick off early next year, with nine drills planned over a two-year period. At least two of the drills would be taking place inside block 10, licensed to a consortium of ExxonMobil and Qatar Petroleum. Meanwhile, on January 2nd, 2020 Cyprus, Greece, and Israel are to sign an agreement for the construction of the EastMed pipeline, seen as a response to the Turkey-Libya maritime deal. The 7-9 billion dollars pipeline would have to cross the planned Turkey-Libya economic zone. Cyprus has tried its hand at regional geopolitics by entering into several loose trilateral alliances with neighboring nations – except Turkey – but to date the policy has failed to yield the desired results, the main opposition party warned on Friday. *“Certainly the trilaterals are useful...but let us not cultivate delusions that our partnerships with neighbors will shield us militarily,”* said Progressive Party of Working People (Ανορθωτικό Κόμμα Εργαζόμενου Λαού - ΑΚΕΛ) leader Andros Kyprianou. *“We need to take stock of this policy, to assess whether our conduct has drawn us closer or farther away from a solution to the Cyprus problem,”* he added. On the upcoming signing of the EastMed deal, Kyprianou advised against blowing it out of proportion. *“The agreement has political meaning and nothing more, it lacks heft. It is the companies which will decide, based on their bottom line, if the EastMed gets built. And the Government should make this point clear, rather than pull the wool over people's eyes,”* Kyprianou said. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- December 28th, a possible involvement of Turkey in the Libya crisis with the deployment of

troops in the country will mean the complete destabilization not just of Libya, but the whole region, was the message sent by Libyan House Speaker, Aguila Saleh who was in Cyprus on Saturday. He also wants Foreign Minister Nicos Christodoulides, to convey the message to the EU, the semi-state Cyprus News Agency (CNA) reported. Christodoulides had a meeting on Saturday with Saleh who arrived on Friday at the invitation of House President Demetris Syllouris. He was accompanied by a number of other officials. Democratically elected in 2014, the Libyan House of Representatives was the country's internationally recognized Parliament prior to the advent of the now internationally-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA). Last month, Ankara signed two separate accords with the GNA, led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, one on security and military cooperation and another on maritime boundaries in the eastern Mediterranean. Turkey promised to step up military and other assistance to Sarraj. The GNA, based in the capital Tripoli, has been fighting since April to push back an offensive by the eastern-based Libyan National Army forces led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. Libya's eastern-based Parliament is aligned with Haftar, and has rejected the accords reached with Turkey. Haftar is backed by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia. Syllouris said Saleh's visit to Cyprus was not to just exchange pleasantries but was one *"of substance"* as it would pave the way to closer cooperation between Cyprus and Libya. According to Syllouris, there were two conflicting approaches in the Eastern Mediterranean and the wider Middle East; one seeking war and one seeking peace and prosperity. In a joint statement issued after the meeting, Syllouris and Saleh said, inter alia, that the recent signing of a maritime

MoU between Turkey and the GNA constituted a blatant violation of international law and lacked any legal basis, since it overlooked the provisions of the UN Law of the Sea Convention and has not been ratified, as required, by the House of Representatives of Libya. Saleh said among other things that the agreement between Turkey and the GNA was void as per international law, and the Libyan Constitution, courts and the Parliament which has not ratified it. He said Sarraj, who leads the GNA, was not authorized to sign the agreement. Saleh said that the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan took advantage of the split in Libya intending to intervene in Libyan internal affairs. *"His aim is to provoke the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and to intervene in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), without taking into account the sovereignty of these states at their maritime and air borders,"* he added. Saleh also said he asked Syllouris to help them make clear what is going on in Libya to the EU arguing that the internationally recognized GNA had failed completely in governing the country given that it has not received the confidence of the House of Representatives. He also said that a communication Committee had been set up between the Cypriot and Libyan Parliaments while he also called on Cyprus-based companies and businessmen to visit Libya. Following the meeting in Nicosia on Saturday, Syllouris and Saleh said in a joint statement that they oppose moves by the Turkish Government, *"which contribute to escalating tensions and destabilizing the wider Mediterranean region."* They also reaffirmed the legitimacy of the elected Libyan House of Representatives. They also expressed their support for the UN Special Representative in Libya for his efforts to achieve peace and reconciliation, in accordance with his mandate.

The two House Presidents also underlined the need to fight terrorism in order to ensure security and stability in Libya. “We consider the Turkish Government’s intention to send troops to Libya unacceptable,” they said, adding that this was interference in the country’s internal affairs. Earlier in the week, Erdogan said his country would be sending troops to Libya at the request of Tripoli as soon as next month. The Turkish Parliament is set to meet on January 2nd, 2020 to approve the motion – the same day Cyprus, Egypt and Israeli are to sign the EastMed pipeline deal with Greece in Athens, which has also angered Ankara. Moscow has voiced concerns over a possible Turkish military deployment to Libya in support of the GNA. Turkish and Russian officials held talks in Moscow this week to seek a compromise on the issues of both Libya and Syria, where Russia backs President Bashar al-Assad. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

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

and it reinforce it with modern systems such as UAVs. Lift of arms embargo by the US administration and the US greenlight on EASTMED pipeline between Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel and Italy may escalate tension in the near future. The participating countries in the project are planning to sign the construction of the pipeline on January 2nd, 2020 in Athens; the same day that Turkish Parliament will approve (or not) deployment of troops in Libya. Turkey continues its invasion in Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) with YAVUZ drillship challenging the state’s sovereignty. Lack of military power and more specifically aeronautical power is critical for Turkish uncontrolled action within Cypriot EEZ. As long as tension remains in eastern Mediterranean, there is always a high risk of an armed “hot” incident or a conflict. It is certain that Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. Next trilateral meeting of Cyprus, Egypt and Greece is planned for early January in Cairo, while France announced it will join the session. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty. The USA lifted the arms embargo of Cyprus which is a considerable action in a difficult period of the island. However, criteria for implementing such a decision are rather tricky; Cyprus should forbid Russian Navy vessels to have access in its ports for refueling and servicing. A condition which may create reactions from Russian administration affecting their bilateral relations.



GREECE: December 23rd, if the EU approved the Eastern Mediterranean pipeline, then Turkey has no legal justification to block the development of the project, Greek Government Spokesman Stelios Petsas said Monday. Petsas said Athens has been discussing the project for several years and the Energy Ministry has conducted research which shows the pipeline will be viable. *“If it can provide sufficient quantities of gas to Europe at reasonable prices, it will then ensure Europe's energy security by diversifying sources and areas of origin of energy and gas,”* he told Skai radio on Monday. *“It is a perfectly legal, reasonable, economical project and therefore there is no reason for Turkey or anyone else to oppose something that is grounded in International Law,”* he added. The Eastern Mediterranean pipeline, dubbed EastMed with an estimated cost of 6 billion euro, is a planned natural gas pipeline that would directly connect East Mediterranean energy resources to mainland Greece and Italy through Cyprus and Crete, while bypassing Turkey. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- December 24th, a period of intense diplomatic activity is expected in the coming weeks for Athens, which will include France's deeper involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean region, with Paris' participation in the trilateral 3+1 meeting of Foreign Ministers of Greece, Cyprus and Egypt in Cairo at the beginning of the new year, probably on January 4th, 2020. France will be the +1 as the US was in the trilateral meetings between Greece, Cyprus and Israel. In general, the political alignment of French President Emmanuel Macron's Government's with that of Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis on multiple levels has generated mutual

understanding, particularly when it comes to the need for promoting a more active EU foreign policy and common defense. At present, there is no wider European framework that Athens can call on, which is why France appears willing to cooperate with Greece. According to some sources, yet stronger indications of a closer relationship between the two countries are expected in January. By that time Greece, Cyprus and Israel will have signed the agreement for the construction of the East Med pipeline. It remains to be seen when and, primarily, how Italy will get involved in the project for transporting natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean to Western Europe. Of pivotal significance for the regional balance of power are the imminent meetings between Mitsotakis with the US President Donald Trump in Washington and that of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with Russia's Vladimir Putin. Meanwhile, in light of the maritime border accord between Ankara and the Tripoli-based Government in Libya, Athens is trying to move forward as quickly as possible to delimit Exclusive Economic Zones with Italy and Egypt. Contacts with Italy will take place at a technical level on December 30th, 2019, while the relevant consultations with Egypt will be held in Cairo in the new year. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- December 27th, Greece will pay Lockheed Martin Corporation 279 million euro to upgrade the country's fleet of F-16 fighter jets, state-run Athens-Macedonia News Agency reported Friday. The Security of Supply and Information (SSI) Agreement was signed Tuesday between the General Directorate for Defense Investments and Armaments (GDDIA) and the US company on Tuesday. The deal was recently approved by Greece's Parliament. The upgrade, which will

expand the operational capability of Greek F-16s, is expected to be completed by 2027. (www.ekathimerini.com)



A Hellenic Air Force F-16D Block 52+
“Fighting Falcon”
(Photo source: www.haf.gr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Greece enjoys political stability. At the moment, migration is the main security problem of Greece. Control of migrant flows coming from Turkey is a critical point for Greek national security and consequently EU's security. The Government announced strict measures aiming to control the problem but also seeks to the EU solidarity to address the problem. The Greek Government conducts intensive diplomatic activity aiming not only to inform regional and international actors for current situation in Eastern Mediterranean, but also to establish blocks of states against Turkish activity. The Turkey – Libya accord on maritime boundaries creates “fait accompli” in eastern Mediterranean and significantly harms Greek national economic and security interests. At the moment situation is escalating on diplomatic level, but there are concerns that soon Greece will be forced to address Turkish offensive by military power. Besides, Turkey declared its intension to send troops in Libya creating new security and defense conditions due to a potential

military base in the Libyan soil (or Tynisian?) forcing Greece to re-examine its operational defense planning. On January 2nd, 2020 Athens will attract the geostrategic and geoeconomic interest of regional stakeholders since Cyprus, Greece and Israel will sign an agreement on EastMed pipeline (Italy will sign also the agreement at a subsequent date, finalizing the process). The EastMed pipeline connects the Israeli and Cypriot gas fields via Greece and Italy with European markets. It is estimated that Turkey will react in implementation of the project claiming that it violates its sovereign rights as they were formed by the Turkish – Libyan agreement. In short, situation is evolving rapidly characterized by increased tension and uncertainty. There is a large number of internal and external actors involved in the ongoing situation and could easily be transformed into a crisis or armed conflict. It is assessed that soon Greece will be forced to address Turkish provocation within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) South of Crete. Turkey declares readiness to start drills in the region and if drillships will appear then a crisis will be emerged including the threat of armed violence. Greek Government has sent a strong and clear message that if Turkey violates Greece's sovereign rights by seismographic or drill ships it will use violence. Lately, there are more voices including prominent members of the ruling ND party, speaking for the need Greece and Turkey to address the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in Hague for resolving their disputes. However, the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikos Dendias stated that the only bilateral issue between the two countries is that of the continental shelf. It should not be excluded a “hot” incident in the Aegean Sea or within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone

(EEZ) since Turkish political and military leadership has the advantage of surprise. Greece is concerned due to Turkish intention to search for hydrocarbons within its EEZ near to Kastelorizo region. Turkey has targeted the wider area of Kastelorizo (and Northeast Aegean Sea) issuing several NAVTEXs for naval exercises with live fires. Moreover, Turkish fighter jets massively violate Greek airspace, while Turkish drones fly over Greek islands or islets. Greece seeks to modernize its Armed Forces by receiving US military aid. It is a fact that Greek military force has been affected by the long economic crisis threatening the balance of power with Turkey. Currently, Greece focuses on naval units, upgrade of fighter jets, UAVs and follow on support agreements. Taking into consideration the ongoing provocations in the Aegean Sea and the complicated current situation in Cypriot EEZ and eastern Mediterranean in general, security situation is of high risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident by Turkey.



KOSOVO: December 26th, Kosovo's Parliament has elected a new Speaker, amidst a row of the two parties which won October – Self-Determination (Vetevendosje) Movement and Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK) – on sharing responsibilities in the new Government. The two former opposition parties have reached no agreement on forming new Government, which might lead the country towards a political stalemate if no deal is reached within 15 days. Two months after the country's October 6th, 2019 election, the Parliament on Thursday approved Glauk Konjufca of the Vetevendosje as the new Speaker by 75 votes to 29. He was proposed by

the Vetevendosje leader Albin Kurti who is potential candidate to form new Government. The second ranked party in elections – the LDK voted in favor of Konjufca implying that a coalition between the two parties to create majority in Parliament is still possible. Konjufca after assuming his seat as the new Speaker thanked all MPs for constituting the new Parliament, and pledged to carry out his duties as foreseen by the Constitution. Konjufca thanked also citizens who voted the Vetevendosje and closed the constitutive session. He said that the new session of the Parliament will be scheduled soon without elaborating further. In addition to the Speaker, newly elected MPs who took the oath during today's session have elected also five deputy speakers: Kujtim Shala (LDK), Memli Krasniqi [Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës - PDK), Alberije Nagavci (Vetevendosje), Slavko Simic [Serbian List (Srpska Lista)], and Fikrim Damka (non-Serb minorities). Political commentators interpreting the Constitution of Kosovo claim that the President of Kosovo Hashim Thaci needs to take the next move and officially nominate Albin Kurti to form new Government within 15 days. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- December 26th, in an abrupt turn of events in Kosovo, the leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK), Isa Mustafa, on Thursday said his party was willing to vote for a minority Government led by Albin Kurti's Self-Determination (Vetevendosje) Movement, but it will stay in opposition and not join it. The announcement came ahead of Thursday's constitutive session of the Parliament amid fears that no Government would be voted into office and that the country could face another

round of elections. The LDK has now pledged to remain in opposition and not take up any posts in the new minority Government. Several hours before the constitutive session, Mustafa had issued a five-point proposal. It included “*a proportional division of the Ministries, the Prime Minister and one Vice Prime Minister to be from Vetevendosje, the Speaker of Parliament and one Vice Prime Minister from the LDK, with Vice-Speakers of Parliament to be chosen in accordance with the Constitution. The day the new President is elected, one ministerial position from LDK ranks to go to Vetevendosje.*” If Kurti did not accept this proposal, Mustafa pledged in the name of LDK “*to give up all requests for responsibilities and all positions will be left to Vetevendosje. Then the LDK will vote unconditionally with all its 28 MPs for a Vetevendosje Government without the LDK in it.*” He added “*We will give them even the Prime Minister, even the Parliament Speaker and even all 10 Ministries.*” As the next step, President Hashim Thaci is expected to nominate the candidate for Prime Minister. In accordance with the election results, Kurti will have 15 days to form a cabinet and seek the approval of Parliament. The new Government is expected to have ten Ministers from the ranks of Vetevendosje. Two cabinet posts must be from minority ethnic communities, in accordance with the constitution. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- December 27th, Kosovo’s President Hashim Thaci has release a revised schedule of meeting with the Self-Determination (Vetevendosje) leader and candidate for Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, to discuss the Government formation after the latter rejected an invitation early on Friday with the justification that he is out of capital,

Pristina. The Vetevendosje told Gazeta Express that Thaci’s invitation scheduling a meeting on Friday at 13:30 hrs, made impossible for Kurti to meet the President under such short notice. After the Vetevendosje publically rejected the meeting, Thaci was forced to send a second invitation with the revised schedule inviting Kurti to a meeting on Friday at 20:00 hrs, when he is expected to receive the mandate from President to form a government. The invitation from the President came only a day after the new Parliament was constituted by electing a new Speaker and its presidency. “*While acknowledging the urgency to form the new Government and in accordance with Constitution, today I invited Mr. Kurti to nominate the candidate for Prime Minister,*” Thaci wrote in social media. “*He has not shown up at my office as expected,*” Thaci wrote adding that “*Our people and our allies expect more.*” (www.gazetaexpress.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although Vetëvendosje and LDK have not reach an agreement officially yet to form the new Government it seems that LDK will back a minority Government of Vetëvendosje without joining ministerial posts. The Kosovo Parliament opened its constitutive session electing its Speaker and the five Deputy Speakers. Vetëvendosje candidate Glauk Konjufca was elected as the new Parliament Speaker enjoying support of LDK in a clear message that it will support Vetëvendosje candidates in institutional posts. Vetëvendosje leader and candidate Prime Minister, Albin Kurti rejected the President, Hashim Thaci’s invitation for giving him the mandate to form the Government. It is estimated that Kurti seeks to make clear that he does not want to cooperate

with Thaci and does not pay respect to him. The new Kosovo Government will be formed within the timeframe of 15 days, according to the Constitution, but it is a matter of question how powerful and efficient will be as a minority one. Kosovo needs political stability in order to focus on dialogue with Serbia resolving its status. Only through normalization of relations with Serbia, Kosovo will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. However, Kurti keeps sending controversial messages regarding his intentions with negotiations with Serbia, the Serbian population in Kosovo and relations with Albania. Needless to say that he appears as a hardliner nationalist, but in last two months after elections he proved that he is flexible and able to compromise changing his stance on several issues (relations with Kosovo Serb party Srpska Lista, etc). It should be noticed that possible deployment of security forces and the newly established Kosovo Army in the north may become a reason for turbulence and an armed conflict. Although international community namely the US and EU push both sides (Kosovo and Serbia) for reaching a mutual accepted agreement, it is assessed that negotiations restart and an agreement is too far. Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish in the country rule of law and modern functional administration. Kosovo unresolved status, political instability, corruption, and organized crime are not encouraging factors for its future within European community. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard.



MOLDOVA: December 23rd, after the approaching January 1st, 2020 Moldova will

continue receiving Russian natural gas along the decades-traditional shortest route; by transit through the Ukrainian territory, President Igor Dodon stated to journalists on Monday following a traditional consultative meeting he holds every Monday with Parliament Speaker Zinaida Greceanii and Prime Minister Ion Chicu. Dodon welcomed the accord reached last week between Russia and Ukraine concerning the gas transit, which means that next year too, the fuel will be coming to Moldova along the traditional route, through Ukraine. Dodon said that he had discussed this question also with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the informal Summit of the Heads of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) States held in Saint Petersburg this past weekend. “*Russia has agreed to extend for 3 years the current ending contract on supplying gas to Moldova. This means that the previous contract terms will be preserved and that the current system will permit us to be receiving gas from January 1st at a substantially lower tariff [173 US dollar per a thousand cubic meters],*” Dodon said. Answering journalists’ questions, Chicu said that the 50 million dollar credit, agreed on with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) earlier this month, will thus remain unclaimed. “*We have signed this agreement with the EBRD in case we need extra means for gas purchase from alternative sources. It was a reserve variant to be on the safe side if the Ukrainian transit route happens to be stopped. But in the current new situation, this credit line will not be opened, and Moldova will not have to pay anything for it,*” the Premier said. (www.infotag.md)

- December 23rd, the Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)

stated in social networks on Monday that the change of Chisinau airport owner [the new beneficiary is Russian businessman, former Top Manager of Gazprom Andrei Goncharenko] is the result of an agreement between the President, Igor Dodon and the former leader of Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) and current fugitive, Vladimir Plahotniuc. *“In this way, one of Moldova’s strategic objects comes under control of a foreign state, creating the risk of transforming the airport into a Russia’s internal air link. This explains the hurry in which the PSRM and the DP dismissed the Government of Maia Sandu; she would have been against such a scenario,”* the PAS maintains. She intends to address to the Prosecutor General’s Office to find out how a Russian businessman became airport beneficiary if the Avia-Invest assets were blocked. *“We consider the possibility to vote no confidence in the Chicu’s Government, which is obviously acting against the Republic of Moldova’s national interests,”* the PAS states. (www.infotag.md)

- December 27th, President Igor Dodon firmly believes that the incumbent Cabinet of Ministers has all chances for remaining in office until the expiry of the incumbent Parliament’s mandate in 2023, he said on the local television on Thursday night. *“There is not a single chance for discharging the Government of Premier Chicu. In the Parliament, there is no majority that would wish such resignation. The Democratic Party [Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM)] does not need this. I do not know how solid the PDM is, but out of its 30 deputies, 27-28 definitely do not want a snap election,”* Dodon stated. In his opinion, at the moment, a snap election would be welcomed

only by Maia Sandu’s Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS) and by the Republican Socio-Political Movement Equality (Mișcare Social-Politică Republicană Ravnopravie – SOR). Dodon claimed *“In case of an early election, the Democratic Party will win much fewer seats in Parliament than it has now. The DA Platform [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA)] will, most probably, remain outside the Parliament. PAS would like the elections because it can win several mandates more than its 12-13 mandates in the forum currently. And Ilan Shor Party [SOR] would like to have the elections hoping that another conjuncture will appear, in which the party will be in a higher demand. Presently, the SOR Deputies play the role of theatrical supernumeraries in the Parliament.”* Dodon confirmed that the question of Government structure change is being discussed by the country leadership, *“and in about February we may decide to consider Premier Chicu’s proposals concerning changing of the Government structure, reorganization of some ministries and a staff reshuffling of them.”* (www.infotag.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

The President Igor Dodon enjoys his political reign in Moldova as the most powerful actor. With his political maneuvers achieved to dissolve the pro-western ACUM Block although it was fully supported by the EU and US. Currently he seeks his PSRM Government to complete its governance by 2023 claiming that almost none political party wishes snap elections except the PAS and SOR parties. It is assessed that PDM is currently a “hostage” of PSRM guarantying

political support in the Parliament. Under these circumstances, Russia is a privileged stakeholder in the country promoting its strategic interests. Besides, Moldova is considered by Russia as a pivotal country for its national security. The “Transnistrian case” is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: December 25th, Turkey’s Ministry of Defense will donate to the Armed Forces of Montenegro equipment worth around 15.5 million euro in the next five years. Modernization of the Armed Forces of Montenegro is not just result of the need for the fulfillment of NATO requirements, but it is first and foremost, in accordance with the national interests. Budget of the Ministry of Defense for 2020 will amount to around 50 million euro. Representatives of the Turkish Embassy say that Montenegro and Turkey have signed many military agreements, inclusive of a Framework Agreement on the Cooperation in Military Training Camps, techniques and science signed in 2014 and Agreement on the Cooperation in the Area of Military Industry, signed in 2017. “In fact, Turkish support started after the NATO integration process, with the improvement of relations between states,” said representatives of the Turkish Embassy in Podgorica. They elaborate on the content of the aforementioned agreements. “Agreement on the Military Financial Cooperation offers around 100.000 million Turkish lira of financial assistance in the modernization of the Armed Forces of Montenegro. Protocol on the Financial Assistance stipulates 3.5 million Turkish lira for the training of the Army. These two agreements

will come into force after the ratification procedure. The funds are intended for the provision of required military and logistic equipment and increase in the level of training,” said representatives of the Embassy. Asked if the donation will be in the form of money or equipment, representatives of the Embassy say that the agreements do not envisage direct transfer of money. (www.cdm.me)

- December 25th, Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic said that he had not discussed in detail the Law on Freedom of Religion with his Serbian counterpart Aleksandar Vucic, and that he had informed him what the point of that law was and what the procedures that the law should establish were. He believes that tensions over the law cannot go as far as to endanger the stability of the country. Djukanovic said he had taken Vucic's interest in the act in a friendly way and in a good faith. “It was the usual conversation where we inform each other, nothing more than that. There was no opportunity for a more detailed exchange of arguments. I have taken his interest in a friendly and well-intentioned way, as the interest of a man who leads a neighboring country in what is happening in Montenegro,” Djukanovic said. “We have not debated. From what I heard from him, I understood that there were reservations and concerns. I tried to explain the law, because there is a lot of manipulation in the media of the region, in the sense that norms are not interpreted quite faithfully, followed by manipulations of some who present it as violence,” Djukanovic explained. Asked in what part of the law is the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS) ready to eventually accept amendments and whether they have been

consulted by an EU representative and what he might have said, Djukanovic said that the DPS *“has never been closed to any initiative that means improving a normative matter. We logically will not accept anything that would be against the spirit and the basic intent of the legislature when it comes to this area,”* Djukanovic said. (www.rtcg.me)

- December 27th, three pro-Serbian opposition Deputies, Andrija Mandic, Milan Knezevic and Milun Zogovic, were brought before Prosecutors in Montenegro on Friday to be charged over an incident in the country’s Parliament before a vote on the new law on religion. Parliament passed the controversial Freedom of Religious Law amid chaotic scenes on Friday, despite fierce objections from the Serbian Orthodox Church, its supporters and pro-Serbian opposition parties. Trying to prevent the vote, MPs from the main opposition Democratic Front (Demokratski Front - DF), rushed at the Speaker of Parliament, Ivan Brajovic some saying they were *“ready to die”* for the Church. Police then intervened and detained the MPs, after which Parliament passed the law. Police detained a total of 22 people over the incident, including all 18 DF Deputies, 15 of whom were later released. The Police said on Friday they had placed the deputies in custody on the request of Prosecutors. *“The Prosecution ordered Zogovic to be arrested on suspicion of committing an official assault during his official duty, and Mandic and Knezevic are suspected of committing the criminal offence of preventing an official from doing their official duty,”* a Police press release said. At a press conference on Friday, DF MP Nebojsa Medojevic condemned the arrests and claimed a *“coup”* had been carried out in Parliament. *“Conflicts in Parliaments are*

normally resolved by internal controls, but only in Montenegro with Police and brutal arrests. A real coup was carried out yesterday,” Medojevic told a press conference. While Serbian Church leader Patriarch Irinej has demanded that the Montenegrin Interior Ministry stop its *“terror”* and release the DF Deputies, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic spoke more calmly, saying only that he was concerned about situation in Montenegro and he hoped that Church property in Montenegro would be preserved. *“In accordance with our diplomatic capacity, we will try to help our people and Church, without destroying the rights of another country,”* Vucic told Tanjug news agency. The Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro meanwhile said Police had attacked *“brutally”* one of its top Bishops, Metodije, on Thursday in northern Montenegro, where he and other believers were blocking a road in a protest against the controversial law. Police said that they had removed Bishop Metodije and citizens who were blocking the road in Pljevlja, but did not exceed their authority. Police Director Veselin Veljovic said on social media that, during the parliamentary session about the law, the Police had generally shown a high level of tolerance and concern for the safety of all citizens. The controversial law, which sparked nationwide protests and road blockades on Thursday and Friday, includes a register of all religious objects and sites that authorities say were owned by the independent Kingdom of Montenegro before it became part of the Serb-dominated Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in 1918, later renamed Yugoslavia. Under the law, religious communities will have to provide clear evidence of ownership in order to retain their properties, a provision that the Serbian Church says is designed to allow the Government to strip it of its holdings. While the

angry debate was taking place inside Parliament, hundreds of protesters rallied outside in the capital, Podgorica, calling on the Government to withdraw the legislation. Police cordoned off the city center and Parliament as MPs were debating the law and stopped the protesters reaching the Parliament building. The rally was headed by Bishops and Serbian Orthodox Priests who held an open-air liturgy that lasted until Friday morning. Meanwhile, people gathered in other cities and towns across Montenegro, protesting against the law and blocking roads. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The ongoing political crisis was escalated due to the controversial law on Religious Freedom which is considered as a reason for “war” by the Serbian Orthodox Church. The law was adopted by the Parliament and signed also by the President. Although there are harsh reactions and protests by the Church and citizens the Government is determined to implement the law. Montenegro political leadership considers the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro as the “long hand” of Serbia and methodically tries to “cut it out”. It is assessed that the law on Religious Freedom is the first step by which the Government seeks to take under the state’s control the Church’s property. The second, more ambitious, step will be the establishment of the independent Montenegrin Orthodox Church. However, such initiatives may become sources of destabilization in the country due to the strong role and influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and support of a wide part of citizens. Besides, it was rather disappointing to see elected opposition MPs to be arrested by the

Police within the Parliament, while Police forces attacked Priests and Bishops. Definitely, these are clear signs of authoritarianism and lack of democratic function of state’s institution. The EU expressed its concern for the long political crisis which does not fit with “a state that seeks to join the EU.” The Government promotes state’s political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. However, the state needs more concrete reforms in the field of justice, rule of law, fight against corruption, money laundering, and organized crime, public administration transparency and accountability in order to become a stable and attractive investment environment. Russian influence continues to be considered as a “threat” against state’s national security. Moreover, Serbian intervention in Montenegrin internal affairs is considered also as a notable problem which needs to be resolved. Serbia refuses to abandon the view that Montenegro is the “natural extension of the country.” The country focuses on strengthening its Armed Forces by purchasing modern equipment and reducing the average age of its military personnel (currently 37 years old). In this context, the country strengthens its defense ties with NATO member states such as Turkey which is willing through bilateral agreements to donate military equipment and provide training to the Montenegrin personnel.



NORTH MACEDONIA:

December 23rd, outgoing Prime Minister Zoran Zaev says he has no doubt that if Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за

македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) wins the elections, the agreements with Bulgaria and Greece will be annulled. Answering a journalist's question on Monday, he said it was an honor for VMRO-DPMNE to explain to citizens the consequences of the annulment of agreements. *"It will bring us out of the EU and NATO. Not to mention that it will drive a wedge between us and our neighbors. What kind of reflection will it have on the economy, on the whole region, and that has to be told. If Mr. Mickoski comes to power, he will annul the Agreement with Greece or the Prespa Agreement and annul the Agreement with Bulgaria. But that is why he will not come to power. It is not possible,"* said Zaev. This morning, VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski confirmed in an interview that if his party secures a three-thirds majority in Parliament, it would proceed to changing the Constitution in order to return the name *"Republic of Macedonia."* His position was also confirmed by the party Secretary-General Igor Jansev. (www.republika.mk)

- December 28th, the Government has accepted Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) proposal for early ratification of the NATO Treaty following Montenegro's example. The Government of North Macedonia, at Saturday's session, approved the text of the Draft Law on Ratification of the North Atlantic Treaty signed in Washington on April 4th, 1949. The Draft Law to be adopted in the Parliament, is foreseen to enter into force on the day of its publication in the state's *"Official Gazette"* after

which it will be deposited in Washington. Spain has ratified the Accession Protocol of North Macedonia to full-fledged membership in the Alliance, reads the Government's statement. Earlier this month, VMRO-DPMNE lawmakers sent an initiative to the Government aimed at speeding up and securing ratification of the North Atlantic Treaty and NATO Accession Protocol by Parliament before it was dissolved to hold early parliamentary elections scheduled for April 12th, 2020. (www.republika.mk)

- December 28th, the Prime Minister and Head of the main ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM), Zoran Zaev, and the Head of the main opposition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE), Hristijan Mickoski, were expected to strike a final deal at the weekend on the formation of a so-called technical Government in January 3rd, 2020; 100 days ahead of the April 12th, 2020 early elections. The formation of the new Government, which would require Zaev's resignation on January 3rd and the inclusion of opposition Ministers and Deputies in several key posts, stems from the 2015 so-called *"Przino"* political agreement. Then, amid a deep political crisis, the rival parties agreed that ahead of every general election, a technical Government would be formed to ensure a fair vote and remove doubts about rigging and political pressures. Under the deal, the post of Prime Minister remains with the ruling party, and the Social Democrats on Friday confirmed that they will nominate current Interior

Minister Oliver Spasovski to replace Zaev. VMRO DPMNE is also expected to soon reveal the names of Ministers and Deputies who will be appointed from its ranks, most notably to the Interior and Social Affairs Ministries, which have been marked in the past as potentially the most likely to conduct electoral irregularities. Talks between the party leaders were expected to go more or less smoothly. Earlier, after the opposition in Parliament used lengthy discussions to block the passage of some 40 laws and regulations proposed by the ruling majority, Zaev threatened not to resign in early January, which would have likely postponed the elections. In his reply, Mickoski warned that, in such a case, the Social Democrats “*would have to deal with the people,*” hinting at the possibility of street protests. Most of these laws tackle finances, social transfers, health issues and agriculture, and have to be passed by the end of 2019 to become effective at the start of 2020, making the Government uneasy about the blockade. But the opposition insisted that the Government was hurrying to pass the laws to bribe various types of voters, as some of them envisage rises in public-sector pay and pensions and various subsidies. The matter was resolved on Friday when the opposition stopped their lengthy debates, so that Parliament was able to pass most of the laws in a shortened procedure. “*If we stand by our word ... there is no need to postpone the elections and thus I will submit my resignation on January 3rd. I believe that the same day the mandate can be given to the new Prime Minister, so that we can elect the Government the same day as well,*” Zaev said on Friday after matters in Parliament were resolved. Zaev called for snap elections in October after the country failed to secure a start date for EU accession talks, due to France’s

opposition at the European Council. Later, political leaders agreed on an April 12th, 2020 election date, some five months ahead of their regular date in autumn 2020. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The country moves ahead for early parliamentary elections scheduled for April 12th, 2020. Ruling SDSM and opposition VMRO-DPMNE are close in an agreement on forming a technical agreement on January 3rd, 2020 allowing the elections to be held on the scheduled date. It is important elections to be held on the date that was announced and the interim Government to be formed on January 3rd, 2020 ensuring political stability and normality of the country. Undoubtedly, North Macedonia has entered in political uncertainty and instability after rejection of opening accession negotiations by the EU in mid-October 2019. The country should focus on reforms regarding justice, rule of law, fight against corruption and money laundering, administration, and respect of human rights in order to accelerate its European integration process. North Macedonia’s politics are still shaken by a series of corruption and extortion scandals undermining not only country’s political stability, but also its European perspective. Fancy names such as “Extortion”, “Empire”, “Racket”, “Titanic”, “Monster” are nothing more than scandals involving politicians, businessmen, criminals, and judicial servants demonstrating that corruption, absence of rule of law and non transparency dominate in state’s function. It should be noted that Justice moves slowly towards full investigation of these scandals.



ROMANIA: December 24th,

Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România - UDMR) MPs Zsolt-Istvan Biro and Jozsef-Gyorgy Kulcsar-Terza submitted to the Chamber of Deputies a project whereby the Szekler Land becomes an autonomous region with as a legal entity within Romania, informs Mediafax. The Hungarian and Romanian languages will be used by citizens in public institutions located in Szekler. The legislative proposal stipulates that the status of an autonomous region of the Szekler County can be abolished only through a referendum organized in Szekler. The initiators say that the establishment of the autonomous region is an expression of the historical identity of the area and will ensure equal opportunities for citizens and protection of the Hungarian national identity. The initiators specify that the Szekler's autonomy does not threaten the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Romanian state. (www.hotnews.ro)

- December 24th, a Romanian Judge has blocked the extradition to Turkey of Turkish schools Director linked to the man accused by Ankara of orchestrating a failed 2016 coup, hours after the Director was arrested on Tuesday. Fatih Gursoy is the Director of a network of schools in Romania called Lumina and which is linked to Fethullah Gulen, a US-based cleric accused by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of trying to overthrow him in July 2016. The failed putsch unleashed a wide-ranging crackdown in Turkey and a global hunt for so-called Gulenists by the long arm of Turkish law. *"The most important charge against me was that I am the leader of a terrorist organization in Romania,"* Gursoy said

after the Judge's ruling. *"If anyone can come and prove that in these 25 years of academic activity we have damaged the interests of Romania, Turkey or any other state, I am ready to close the institution myself,"* he said. Lumina had earlier issued a statement accusing Ankara of pursuing a *"witch-hunt."* Gursoy's arrest followed that of a 24 year old teacher at a Bucharest high school belonging to the Gulen movement. Within hours of the December 18th, 2019 arrest, a Judge ruled against her extradition and she was freed. In Turkey, roughly 150,000 civil servants, soldiers, police officers, teachers, judges and academics have been fired or suspended, while tens of thousands more have been jailed pending trial. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- December 24th, Romania's Prime Minister Ludovic Orban presented on Monday, to the joint Chambers of the Romanian Parliament, the 2020 budget bill and a bill aimed at reversing the effects of the emergency ordinance (OUG) 114/2018 adopted by the previous Government in December 2018. The Orban Government is taking responsibility for these bills so they can pass without debate and vote in the Parliament, which could change some of their provisions. The Government envisages 4.1% GDP growth next year *"in line with the projections of the state forecasting body and the European Commission,"* Orban stated. However, the European Commission in its Autumn Forecast projected 3.6% GDP growth for 2020 and the state forecasting body CNP is under Government's supervision. Independent analysts, like the chief economist of ING Bank Romania Ciprian Dascalu, see the growth rate in 2020 below 3% (Dascalu mentioned 2.7%). The big problems with the 2020 budget planning come, however,

rather from the unplanned expenditures or lower revenues as an effect of bills passed by the Parliament at the request of the opposition. Parties from both the ruling coalition and opposition have submitted amendments that the Government can include or not in the final version of the bills. The opposition's leader, Marian Ciolacu who serves as head of the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) and Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, announced plans to challenge the bill at the Constitutional Court on procedure issues. The budget bill must be debated by lawmakers, Ciolacu argued. Separately, PSD might challenge the bills on other grounds, he stated. (www.romania-insider.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The Government forwards important draft laws in the Parliament such as the state budget Law, Social Securities Law and the Law revising the GEO 114 through the "responsibility process" (adoption without debate and voting in the Parliament) claiming the need these Laws to be adopted before December 31st, 2019. PNL's minority Government did not want to follow the normal parliamentary process claiming time pressure. However, under these circumstances the Government and PNL carry the burden of their decisions allowing opposition PSD to criticize them. Elections should not be expected before spring 2020, giving the necessary time to PSD to be reorganized and even to take in advantage a possible wear of current ruling party. However, political rearrangements are ongoing since the parties are prepared for the pre-electoral period. The country enjoys advanced upgrade in US and NATO strategic plans due to its geographical position located close to Russia. Consequently, Russia reacts in

this close military cooperation between the two countries perceiving it as a threat against its national security. Romania keeps strengthening its Armed Forces seeking to achieve NATO standards.



SERBIA: December 23rd, the Serbian Defense Ministry has decided to bring back two elite brigades, Minister Aleksandar Vulin told in a ceremony on barracks in Pancevo over the weekend. Under the decision, the Serbian military will get back the 63rd Parachute Brigade and the 72nd Special Operations Brigade. The 63rd was one of the elite units carried over from the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) while the 72nd was a Special Forces unit formed in 1992 in what was then the Army of Yugoslavia (VJ). The two Brigades were merged along with two other special forces units into the Special Brigade in 2006. Both were downgraded to battalion level. Vulin told the ceremony that the decision was taken to "correct the injustice towards the dead and the people saved by those heroes. Only an ungrateful people and Army that is not free and under foreign command would decide to abolish the names of the 72nd and 63rd Brigades, hide them and forget them," he said. Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Milan Mojsilovic said that the decision was taken to strengthen operational reaction and simplify the chain of command for countering challenge, risks and threats. Both Brigades will be deployed in their traditional bases; the 63rd in Nis and the 72nd in Pancevo. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- December 24th, in a lengthy interview with the Belgrade O2 TV, Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic said general elections would be held on April 26th or May 3rd, 2020 although he wanted

them in March, but he accepted the Prime Minister, Ana Brnabic's proposal to postpone them as long as it is possible in accordance with the Constitution, the FoNet news agency reported late on Monday. The President said that he was not confident that Serbia would be accepted by the EU even if Belgrade reached a compromise with Pristina on the normalization of relations, adding his country would stay on the European path. Regarding the resumption of the Belgrade – Pristina dialogue, Vucic said he had no idea when it would happen. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- December 29th, from June 2020 onward, the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka -SNS) will have new leadership, party leader and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said on Sunday, adding that he will not be a candidate for party leader again. "They have put pressure on me, but my decision was not to run for the leader of the SNS," Vucic said after the session of his party's leadership, adding that this does not mean that the position will be filled by someone whom the opposition can "beat more easily." He stressed that he will not allow SNS to become a party of 'local strongmen' and that he will propose leadership "which will be capable of facing the coming challenges and the many difficult issues" the country will have to face. "I am sure that I will convince the majority to accept my proposal," Vucic said. "Young people will be on all SNS electoral lists," he said, adding that the intention is for them to "replace those who got a bit tired and those who intended to be big bosses." (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Serbian political crisis is at its peak with opposition hardening its protests. Elections

should be expected late April or beginning May 2020 (President Aleksandar Vucic said general elections would be held on April 26th or May 3rd, 2020). However, it is a big question if opposition will join the elections. On the other hand, opposition should become more productive because to reject everything "is not a political attitude." By boycotting the elections opposition will become part of the problem instead of the solution. Vucic announced that he will withdraw from party leadership on June 2020 namely right after the elections. However, such announcement may cause internal struggle in the party affecting its pre-electoral campaign. Serbian – Russian close relations continue despite latest incident of spy case. It is assessed that Russian influence and presence has been established in Serbia through various routes including economic, cultural, defense and diplomatic cooperation. Russia is the most valuable ally for Serbia especially in the Kosovo case. However, one could claim that it is the West which has sent the country in the Russian arms. The EU has raised serious concerns over Serbia's effectiveness on independence and accountability of the judiciary, freedom of expression, prevention of corruption and the fight against organized crime. Regarding Kosovo, Serbia is waiting to see initiatives and actions of the new Government which will be formed (most likely) with Vetevendosje leader, Albin Kurti as the Prime Minister. A possible deployment and permanent presence of Kosovo security forces in Serb majority north Kosovo would bring tension and turbulence. However, the US and EU are increasing pressure on both sides to restart dialogue. If elections will be held on late April or early May it is almost impossible for dialogue to restart before the Serbian elections. Serbia insists that taxes should be revoked for

joining dialogue. One should have in mind that top state officials have said repeatedly in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its Armed Forces declaring towards all sides that they are the power of the state. It implements an ambitious armament program mainly supported by Russia. Lately, the Ministry of Defense announced the re-establishment of two special Brigades; the 63rd Parachute Brigade and the 72nd Special Operations Brigade. The Serbian Army is reorganizing its structure paying attention to special units which are flexible, of high readiness and very capable.



SLOVENIA: December 27th, the parliamentary Finance Committee urged the Central Bank to reconsider the recently imposed curbs on consumer lending, an appeal that came at a session called by all five coalition parties after the Central Bank curtailed lending to consumers with the argument that consumer loans would pose a risk to the banking system if left uncontrolled. The Committee said restrictions would have a negative impact on spending and reduce the financial strength of those with the lowest incomes, but Central Bank Governor Bostjan Vasle said action had been warranted to protect financial stability. (www.sta.si)

- December 27th, Slovenia will join two more programs of the European Space Agency (ESA) for a total of five, with one of the new projects involving the Planica Nordic Center, Economy Ministry State Secretary Ales Cantarutti announced in Seville, where he is attending an

ESA meeting. The project, carried within the E3P2 program for human and robotic exploration, will focus on studying the effects of hypoxia and simulated reduced gravity on the cardiovascular, musculoskeletal and thermoregulation system, as well as decompression sickness and the impact on immunology and vision. Slovenia has been an associate ESA member since 2016. (www.sta.si)

- December 28th, Slovenia's National Assembly and the regional Parliament of Italy's Friuli-Venezia Giulia plan to expand ties, in particular to benefit the ethnic minorities on both sides of the border, top parliamentary officials said after their Ljubljana meeting. Speaker Dejan Zidan thanked Piero Mauro Zanin, President of the regional Parliament of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, for his political support for legislation that would ensure the Slovenian minority was represented in the regional Parliament. Zidan announced the Slovenian minority would get back Narodni Dom, a Trieste cultural centre of huge historical importance, in July 2020, 100 years after the building was burnt down by Fascists. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Marjan Sarec's minority Government continues to enjoy support in the Parliament. Although the Prime Minister is reassuring for the Government's stability and sustainability there are questions over its effectiveness. The possibility of snap elections is rather unlikely, however it is not certain what it will happen since the Government bases its viability on opposition support. As the Prime Minister said a lot of compromise is needed. Opposition SNS (and NSi) offered their parliamentary support in the Government, but it seems that at least to SNS it

has affected the party's cohesion. Slovenia – Croatia relations may be tested in coming period due to the latter's effort to join the Schengen Zone. Slovenia appears determined to play the "Schengen Zone card" in order to push Croatia to implement the ruling arbitration regarding the Piran Bay dispute, but it is not sure if it will insist until the end of the process. It might Slovenia be isolated by the other member states; it is not an easy way to veto in EU institutions. It should be underlined that relations between Croatia and Slovenia are in low level and an "underworld war" is ongoing (at political, diplomatic and intelligence context) due to the two countries border dispute. The issue of illegal migrants entering Slovenia mainly from Croatia is high in the agenda lately. The Government deployed military force to support Police tasks. Local communities and municipal authorities in the border with Croatia call for more effective measures against illegal migration. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The annual report on the Armed Forces operational readiness released by the Armed Forces Chief of Staff is disappointing since it assessed that the Armed Forces have limited operational capabilities in war time namely they cannot accomplish their mission. The med-term 2018 – 2023 defense program it could improve situation, but under current political situation it is doubtful if it will be implemented to the end. However, the 2020 and 2021 budget foresees increased funding for defense sector.



TURKEY: December 26th, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has announced military backing for Libya's internationally

recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), now that the North African country requested it. In a speech in Ankara on Thursday, Erdogan said on January 7th, 2020 he will present a bill to the Turkish Parliament on deployment legislation. *"Since there is an invitation [from Libya] right now, we will accept it,"* Erdogan told members of his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP). *"We will present the motion to send troops [to Libya] as soon as Parliament resumes,"* the President said. Following Erdogan's announcement, Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha told reporters in Tunis that Libya's internationally recognized Government will officially request military support from Turkey if the war over the capital escalates. *"If situation escalates then we have the right to defend Tripoli and its residents,"* Bashagha said. Last month, Turkish and Libyan officials, led by GNA Prime Minister Fayeza al-Sarraj, signed a Memorandum of Understanding on security and military cooperation. The GNA's cabinet of Ministers and Turkish legislators have since ratified the deal, but a separate motion is needed to send troops. Al Jazeera's Mahmoud Abdelwahed, reporting from the Libyan capital, said Ankara needed an official request for troops on the ground from Tripoli before a motion could be presented to Parliament. *"The military and security cooperation agreement signed between Turkey and Libya last month does not entail sending troops,"* Abdelwahed said adding *"That is why Erdogan was asking for an official request from the GNA before he can proceed with presenting this to Parliament for an endorsement."* Thursday's announcement came a day after Erdogan met with his Tunisian counterpart, Kais Saied, during a surprise visit to the Tunisian capital to discuss developments in

neighboring Libya. Erdogan told reporters in Tunis that the two leaders discussed ways to establish a ceasefire and bring warring factions back to the negotiating table. Erdogan reiterated Turkey's willingness to send troops to support the GNA, saying Ankara would do so at the Libyan Government's request. (www.aljazeera.com)

- December 28th, Turkey will launch TurkStream natural gas pipeline next month, Energy and Natural Resources Minister, Fatih Donmez said on Friday. *“We will launch TurkStream on January 8th, 2020. We will be indispensable in international markets with natural gas pipelines coming from both the east and north,”* Donmez said.



TurkStream project

(Photo source: www.turkstream.info)

The Nord Stream project - operational since 2011 with an annual capacity of 55 billion cubic meters - brings Russian gas directly to Germany via the Baltic Sea. The Nord Stream 2, spearheaded by Russia's state-owned energy company Gazprom, is nearly completed and has the same annual capacity, running almost parallel to the first pipeline route. Together they will meet the annual gas demands of a quarter of the European continent. The TurkStream natural gas pipeline has a total capacity of 31.5 billion cubic meters, out of which the first line will carry a capacity of 15.75 billion cubic meters of Russian gas to

Turkish consumers. The second line will carry another 15.75 billion cubic meters of gas to Europe via Turkey. (www.yenisafak.com)

- December 28th, a deal between Turkey and Libya guarantees that its maritime freedom of movement is not *“undermined”*, country's Communications Director, Fahrettin Altun said on Friday. *“Our maritime agreement with Libya ensures that Turkey’s freedom of movement in the high seas is not undermined,”* Altun said, adding that the agreement also ensures a strong relationship with the Libyan Government. *“We are committed to stability and peace both in Libya and in the Mediterranean,”* he added. Altun said Libyan Government has requested Turkey's military support. *“As President [Recep Tayyip] Erdogan said, we will of course honor our agreement. We are fully committed to protecting our mutual interests and establishing stability in the Mediterranean.”* Altun stressed that Turkey is supporting the *“internationally recognized legitimate Government in Libya”* and foreign powers must stop supporting illegitimate groups against the Libyan Government. *“As we support the Libyan Government, we do not want Libya to be a war zone. Those regional forces working to reestablish repressive regimes unaccountable to people are active in Libya,”* Altun said, and added *“Their efforts to install client Governments will not succeed.”* On November 27th, 2019 Ankara and Tripoli's GNA signed two separate agreements, one on military cooperation and the other on maritime boundaries of countries in the Eastern Mediterranean. Following the military cooperation deal, Erdogan said Turkey might consider sending troops to Libya if the GNA made such a request. On Thursday, Erdogan said a motion for military support to Libya will be

submitted to the Turkish parliament on January 8th or 9th, 2020 as Turkey was “invited” by Libya. Libya's Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha said in the same day that the GNA will officially demand military aid from Turkey. (www.yenisafak.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Situation in East Mediterranean has become extremely complicated and tense. Turkey is ready to send troops in Libya implementing the bilateral military agreement signed by Tripoli and Ankara. On the other hand, it promotes its agreement with Libya regarding maritime boundaries transforming the Eastern Mediterranean into a “Turkish lake” extended from South Turkey coasts to North Africa. It could not be developed economic or energy activity in the region without Turkish permission. Moreover, Turkey seeks to establish a military and naval base in Libya (or Tunisia?) expanding its strategic lines of communication and exercising control in wide region of Eastern Mediterranean. Trying to analyze Turkish strategy it could be said that it is rational serving the national interests of the country. Turkey combines diplomatic means with military power, while it uses effectively the “tool” of propaganda. Besides, the country develops a multilateral foreign policy engaging in several regional theaters, while it does not hesitate to deploy military forces to promote or defend its interests. Currently, it questions the sovereign rights of Cyprus, while Greece is also in the framework of dispute. It is more than obvious that Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in a region which is considered as vital not only for its national security, but also for its energy security. However, one should pay attention in the “wider picture”; The US – Turkey relations are in the worst level they have ever been. It is questioned

the Turkish orientation; does still belong to the west? Such questions are fake. Turkey definitely belongs to the West and in NATO. Without Turkey the whole western security system based on NATO could collapse bringing global anarchy, instability and armed violence. Turkish reactions could be described as reactions of a “spoiled baby” seeking to get more gains. What are these? Advantaged and upgraded role in the region enjoying the benefits of a regional superpower. It is assessed that its behavior is absolutely controlled and rational within the current international and regional system. However, an armed conflict or a “hot” incident could not be excluded taking into consideration that power and war are integral part of international politics correcting or solving problems and disputes where politics and diplomacy cannot work. In conclusion, “temperature” is rising dangerously in the region and several actions and statements forebode a potential crisis. Turkey 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. 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. Turkey develops an


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


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NOTE

 *Stable situation. No security risk.*

 *Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored.*

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

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

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