



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

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

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

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ALBANIA: March 19th, in a social media post, Democratic Party of Albania's (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë – PD) leader, Lulzim Basha said that his party headquarters will publish today “*shocking facts*” about how the Government has given 52 million euro in payments and tenders to friends and clients over the past two weeks. “*Meanwhile this is an example of how this money could be used for the 10-day socio-economic assistance package the PD has proposed. For the self-employed and small businesses, the Government should pay 300 Euro for each month due to the closed businesses,*” Basha wrote. “*The cost of this measure ranges from 20 – 25 million Euro per month. For employees in manufacturing businesses, call centers, and tour operators who are obliged to stay at home the Government should cover at least the minimum wage when they are not paid at all. For those who pay the salaries, the cost of the salary should be calculated as a deductible expense. These are fully affordable budget expenditures when just one kilometer of the tendered road at Astiri area costs about \$20 million,*” he wrote. (www.top-channel.com)

- March 20th, the Armed Forces were today on the ground to observe situation and assist the state Police in enforcing traffic stop orders for all citizens as part of the measures taken against the COVID- 19 epidemic. Across the country, citizens are allowed to move only in two time slots 6.00 – 10.00 and 16.00 – 18.00. These rules are generally enforced but there are also those careless and disobedient citizens who violate the order and go out on banned hours. For this reason the Army went on the ground to assist the Police.

With a convoy of armored vehicles, the Armed Forces entered each district of Tirana, and will be divided into 5 different areas. Any citizen who is found not to comply with the timetables and rules already made public, will be dealt with through administrative measures, i.e. fines. (www.top-channel.com)

- March 21st, another 6 people have been infected by coronavirus over the past 24 hours throughout Albania. The Ministry of Health explains among other things that 59% of the infected are men while 41% are women. According to data from the Ministry regarding the health status of 37 hospitalized patients, 4 of them are in intensive care, in unchanged clinical state. (www.top-channel.tv)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

COVID-19 epidemic has fully covered every political, economic and social aspect of life. Albania has strengthened its protective and precautionary measures aiming to prevent the COVID-19 spread. Citizens have seen the Army to be deployed in the state's streets. Situation looks under control so far. Although COVID-19 has overshadowed everything, political and institutional crisis remains active. The Government has a significant responsibility that the country is still without an independent and functional justice system and is incompetent to provide the basic constitutional rights to its citizens. They are not able to address the state's top Courts, the Constitutional and High Court. Apart from that there are serious concerns over judicial independence in the country since the “vetting process” has become more or less a measure of pressure against judges. Media freedom is questioned in the country, while Rama

himself does not hesitate to attack them. Corruption, smuggling (weapons, drugs, people etc), money laundering and link between organized crime and politics are dominating in the country and the state's authorities are not very keen on fighting them. Albania seeks to get a positive recommendation in 2020 (March or May 2020) and the messages from Brussels are positive so far. However, it should work intensively to restore a transparent and credible justice system, to establish rule of law and to strengthen fight against corruption and organized crime.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

March 18th, the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina held its 58th extraordinary session on Wednesday and adopted a Decision on the engagement of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the purpose of assisting civilian authorities in preventing the spread of COVID – 19 in special facilities (tents) to accommodate people coming to Bosnia and Herzegovina from abroad, Vijesti.ba news portal reports. The Minister of Defense of Bosnia and Herzegovina will, by his order, determine the necessary personal and non-combat material resources. During implementation of the tasks under this Decision, the BiH Armed Forces will establish full cooperation and coordination with the competent civilian authorities at all levels of government in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Authorization to engage the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina shall be valid for 30 days and the decision of the BiH Presidency shall enter into force on the day of its adoption. *“Current situation in the fight against the spread of coronavirus primarily requires the engagement of*

the health system in BiH, while the engagement of the Armed Forces BiH will be defined by special decisions of the Bosnian Presidency, at the request of the competent institutions. So far, the Bosnian Presidency has not made a decision on the use of the Armed Forces of BiH resources,” the statement reads. The Ministry of Defense of BiH points out that the Armed Forces of BiH will put at disposal all of its capacities. *“The engagement of the Bosnian Armed Forces would entail the setting up and maintenance of tent checkpoints at border crossings and other planned locations. We are currently preparing the personnel, material and technical means for setting up the tents at specific locations, which needs to be approved by the Bosnian Presidency as the Commander-in-Chief through a special request,”* it is stated in a press release. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

- March 20th, regarding media or political announcements and controversy that Republika Srpska entity Police will allegedly be deployed at the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it should be precise and state that such an option does not exist, Bosnian Security Minister Fahrudin Radoncic wrote on social media. *“In situations of excess words or politicization, it is best to act institutionally. Bosnian Border Police Director Zoran Galic this morning sought a written explanation from the RS Interior Ministry and received an official response from Darko Culum, RS Police Director. I make public the response of Mr. Culum to Mr. Galic's request and Galic's subsequent act. The statement at the end of Culum's act, as well as the last paragraph of the Galic memo, perfectly explains that both police agencies work exclusively within the law and that there is no exit at the border or entity line,”*

Radoncic wrote. Members of the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina have begun setting up tents for self-isolation at the Izacic border crossing near city of Bihac, Federal News Agency reports. The specific location is close to the border crossing checkpoint, and all should be completed by the end of the day. The reception capacity of the tents for self-isolation is up to 100 people, who at this border crossing request entry to Bosnia and Herzegovina, given that all passengers have been issued with 14-day isolation order. Tents for self-isolation should be ready as of tomorrow for the potential reception of individuals, while in the coming period the issue of sanitary facilities and nutrition of people who might possibly reside in this area will be addressed. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

- March 22nd, another resident of Konjic has tested positive for COVID-19, bringing the number of cases in the town to 17 and across the country to 125. The number of COVID-19 cases in Bosnia has rapidly increased throughout the past week and the country saw its first coronavirus-related death on Saturday. (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

COVID-19 has activated political reflexes of state's officials, who make decisions on addressing the epidemic. Needless to say that COVID-19 has forced politicians of the three entities to common action agreeing on issues that they would never dare in the past. At the moment, situation is not uncontrolled. Nevertheless, Bosnia continues to suffer from political and institutional crisis. Tension may be escalated anytime. As long as Bosnia is not a full member of the Euro-Atlantic structures, namely the EU and NATO,

Russia will try to exercise influence promoting its strategic interests in the region. In general, current political crisis confirms that the Dayton peace agreement is a problematic one and it is time to be amended. One could claim that "Bosnia is a captured state due to Dayton peace agreement." It should be underlined that Serbia and Croatia play a crucial role in current crisis enjoying the power of influencing situation. Taking this into consideration, situation is sensitive threatening not only Bosnia's peace and stability but of the whole region. Political instability, poor economic performances, entities' rivalries, and problematic framework of state's structure (due to Dayton Accord) have left Bosnia far behind other Western Balkan countries towards the EU. Furthermore, nationalistic rhetoric and actions from the three entities creates certain conditions of mutual mistrust and work as a factor of potential destabilization. Neighboring Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs, while Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran maintain a permanent presence through financial donations and investments.



BULGARIA: March 21st, Bulgaria's Parliament passed the COVID-19 State of Emergency Measures Act. The act was earlier discussed by President Rumen Radev and Parliament Speaker Tsveta Karayancheva. On March 20th, 2020 MPs conclusively passed the State of Emergency Measures Act. The law sets out the measures taken during the state of emergency to limit the spread of coronavirus. (www.novinite.com)

- March 21st, there are 163 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Bulgaria, 103 of them in capital

city Sofia, crisis staff Chief Major-General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski told a briefing. The national total of 163 includes the three elderly people who died between March 11th and 19th and three patients who had recovered and had been discharged from hospital. Eight people in Bulgaria between the ages of 20 and 50 have severe symptoms. “No one has ever claimed that this virus does not strike young people,” he said. Mutafchiyski criticized what he called a carelessness still observed on the streets and in the centers of cities. Mutfachiyski said that he could not say when the peak of the Covid-19 disease in Bulgaria would be. Interior Minister Mladen Marinov said that there had been an increase in the number of people violating their quarantine. More than 7000 people had been quarantined and there currently were more than 60 pre-trial proceedings for breaking quarantine. Marinov said that those under quarantine included police officers. At this stage there were only a few. “Our people are on the front line, all leave is stopped,” he said, expressing thanks to the police now on the street and on duty. “We have no room to retreat and in order to make it, we need the mobilisation and energy of all of society,” Marinov said. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- March 22nd, Bulgaria's President Rumen Radev has imposed a partial veto on the State of Emergency Act which was passed in Parliament on Friday. The reason is that the law requires emergency measures against the coronavirus outbreak which Radev regards as inadequate. “Bulgarians do not need threats but support,” the Bulgarian Head of state firmly said in a special address to the nation today, BNR reported. Radev calls for taking convincing measures by using protective mechanisms and assist those who are

most affected but not to restrict businesses. “No battle has ever been won with fear. A total blockade will only exacerbate the crisis. There is no definition of false information. Self-censorship and restriction on freedom of expression are now being enforced, he continued. Restrictions will remain in force after the state of emergency is over. The Army is entrusted with power-enforcing functions beyond its constitutional authority. The law is overgrown with unnecessary clauses,” the President said. (www.novinite.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

COVID-19 became another source of political tension between the President Rumen Radev and the Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's Government. The Parliament approved the state of emergency due to coronavirus spread but Radev refused to decree it. It is rather disappointing to watch hesitation and political distance in such difficult situation. Delays on decisions may be detrimental for public health. Migration crisis due to uncontrolled refugee and migrant flows from Turkey is closely monitored by Bulgarian authorities but currently there is no pressure in Bulgarian borders since flows are directed towards Greek borders. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles for the country's development and should be addressed decisively. The country pays special attention to energy security developing several projects. 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: March 16th, in spite of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ) held its intra-party elections on Sunday. Following Sunday’s intra-election Andrej Plenkovic has secured another mandate to lead HDZ. Plenkovic, who currently leads the HDZ-led coalition Government, took 79% of the vote, ahead of challenger Miro Kovac with 21%. The HDZ leader and his team also won the five remaining senior positions up for grabs at the poll. As such Plenkovic's Deputy within the party will be current Veteran's Affairs Minister Tomo Medved, who won 71% of the vote to beat his challenger Ivan Penava (29%), while his four Vice-Presidents will be Oleg Butkovic, the current Maritime Affairs, Transport and Infrastructure Minister, Ivan Anusic, the current Osijek-Baranja County Prefect, the chair of the HDZ bench in Parliament, Branko Bacic, and MP Zdravka Busic. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- March 22nd, the Head of National Civil Protection Authority, Interior Minister Davor Bozinovic, said on Sunday that the coronavirus pandemic was a bigger challenge to authorities and citizens alike than the earthquakes which rocked Zagreb early this morning. *“On behalf of the Croatian Civil Protection Authority, I guarantee that we will continue to communicate as we have until now, both on the coronavirus crisis, which is ongoing and which, according to our estimates, is the bigger challenge, and this crisis now with the earthquake,”* Bozinovic said. The National Civil Protection Authority will continue to rely on the positions and suggestions of professionals. *“What is specific to this situation is that the novel, coronavirus is full of question*

marks and we know from before that earthquakes are not something to which science can provide an exact answer. It is therefore essential that we have full coordination of all services,” the Minister said. The Army is already clearing up the rubble in downtown Zagreb, he added. *“Everything at Croatia's disposal will be coordinated and put into use. This is a double crisis currently focused only on Zagreb and the surrounding area. The rest of Croatia is primarily dealing with the coronavirus epidemic,”* the Minister said. *“Together we will come out of this, do not worry,”* he added. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- March 22nd, in Croatia 254 people have been infected with the coronavirus, which is 19 more than data presented this morning. Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic presented the number after a meeting of the state leadership at the National University Library. *“The coronavirus epidemic is serious, for now we have reached a total of 254 infected. We have a combination of two crises that are contradictory to one another. The coronavirus epidemic is serious,”* Plenkovic said. He reiterated the importance of social distancing and appealed to citizens to take this into account. *“Social distancing gives us more healthy people than sick people,”* said the Prime Minister. Health Minister Vili Beros announced that an additional 19 people have been infected in relation to data provided at 9am this morning. *“The system for detection of those positive with the virus was not functioning for a short time. Now it is functioning. We are still on the climbing part of the epidemic’s curve,”* Beros said. He noted that social distancing is the most effective mechanism for preventing further coronavirus infection. *“Social interaction must decrease,”*

repeated Interior Minister Davor Bozinovic adding that it is not easy to implement. “Judging by everything we will have to implement stricter measures,” said Bozinovic. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Croatia suffered last week from a double hit. On one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic and on the other, an earthquake in Zagreb. The state authorities work on both issues to tackle the problem. Croatia enjoys political stability in a difficult period due to coronavirus spread and the threat of new migrant flows. Croatian authorities are thinking of the Armed Forces engagement in the border control if migrant flows are increased. It is a sensitive issue which needs special institutional provisions to become legal. However, it is assessed that Croatia is not under imminent increase of migrant waves. Croatia currently holding the EU Presidency expressed its solidarity for Greece in securing the European borders. Croatia – Slovenia border dispute remains active and it should be noticed that Croatia needs Slovenia’s support regarding its accession in the Schengen Zone and OECD. Under these circumstances, Croatia is forced to start thinking of dialogue and compromise since its stance has repercussions in state’s national interests. 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. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces’ modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Currently, the Ministry of Defense has

restarted its efforts for acquiring 12 modern fighter jets since Croatia is a NATO member without operational Air Force.



CYPRUS: March 17th, elections in the north for the next Turkish Cypriot leader were on Tuesday reportedly postponed for six months due to the coronavirus crisis. According to media in the north the decision was taken during a meeting under Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci in which the “parliamentary” political party leaders and officials participated. The elections were scheduled to take place on April 26th, 2020. It was announced that “parliament” would now launch the necessary procedures to ratify the decision. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 18th, the new Chief of the National Guard, Lieutenant General Demokritos Zervakis was sworn in by President Nicos Anastasiades on Wednesday at the presidential palace. Observing social distancing protocols during the ceremony, Anastasiades said the appointment coincides with a critical period for the country. “The decision to appoint you rested on the excellent training and knowledge you possess, your long and distinguished service and presence both in the Armed Forces of Greece and on missions of the European Union and the United Nations,” the President said. “Your tenure coincides with a decisive period, on the one hand, for the ongoing integrated reform plan of the National Guard, which requires increased oversight and hard work, and on the other hand for the situation in our country.” Zervakis pledged to serve with honor. “I have a deep sense of gratitude to the Cypriot people especially at this time of many challenges,” he said. “I pledge that I will do whatever is required to fully meet the

requirements of my duties,” he underlined. (www.cyprus-mail.com)



The new Chief of National Guard, Lieutenant General Demokritos Zervakis
(Photo source: www.army.gov.cy)

- March 22nd, eleven new cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in Cyprus, the Health Ministry announced on Sunday, bringing the total up to 95. The new cases concern two people who had been in contact with confirmed cases, four people who are linked to the Paphos general hospital, four people who returned from abroad (Britain and Mexico) who had symptoms and contacted authorities and one person whose history is being investigated. There are possibly a further two cases, which have tested positive in a lab check but await confirmation from the Cyprus Institute of Neurology and Genetics. Contact tracing for the 11 confirmed cases has begun, the Health Ministry said. Of the 95 cases in Government controlled areas, three were at the British bases and 50 had been through contact with a confirmed case. A total of 35 cases have been reported in the north. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Cypriot administration is trying also to address the COVID-19 problem. In the occupied north, elections were postponed for six month due to the coronavirus. Increased waves of migrants raise concerns in Cyprus with the President Nikos Anastasiades to imply that there is an organized plan from Turkey to send migrants in Cyprus. Cypriot Government presented last week an integrated plan for tackling migration problem. Violation of Cypriot sovereign rights by Turkish research vessels has become “normality” and nobody speaks about it; it is a routine. Cypriot administration lacking of military force is unable to forbid hostile actions in its waters so far. The Turkish goal is to deter international energy giants from investing in Cypriot fields and starting research activities. End of March or beginning of April the ENI – TOTAL consortium schedules a drill in block 6 and this will be a strong test for Cypriot energy plans. 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. 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. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



GREECE: March 19th, Greece's anti-terrorism service detained 26 people and seized heavy weaponry including anti-tank arms in a large, ongoing counterterrorism operation in central Athens on Thursday to dismantle a suspected far-leftist militant group, Police sources cited by state-run news agency ANA-MPA said. Officers believe the suspects are members of the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C), an outlawed group blamed for attacks and suicide bombings in Turkey, the report said. The ongoing raid included a house on Avlonos Street in the district of Sepolia and the offices of a rights committee for Kurds, called "*Solidarity Committee for Political Prisoners in Turkey and Kurdistan*," housed in Tzavella Street in Exarcheia. Nine of the suspects were detained in Sepolia and 17 in Exarcheia, while officers have also discovered a tunnel with stashed weaponry, Police said. All 26 are being held in the Greek Police headquarters. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 21st, as Turkey's recent activity near the Evros land border with Greece and the course on Friday of its "*Oruc Reis*" research vessel in the Aegean, accompanied by two support ships and a frigate, sailing up to 50 nautical miles southeast of Kastellorizo, is viewed in Athens as another example of Ankara's bid to test its resolve. Moreover, according to the NAVTEX 0114/20 issued by the Antalya Hydrographic Station, the "*Oruc Reis*" was to survey an area containing blocks 4 and 5 of Cyprus' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), but on Friday, it sailed up to 100 nautical miles west of Cyprus. The research vessel's moves are being closely monitored by Athens due to concerns it may cause an incident during a period when Greece is distracted by the

battle to contain the coronavirus. Athens is also keeping tabs on the situation at the Evros border, wary of the possibility of another attempt by migrants, with the backing of Turkey, to break through Greece's defenses and enter the country. Greece's concerns have been further fueled because, despite reports of the gradual dismantling of migrant camps set up on the Turkish side, no evidence of this can be seen from the Greek side of the border. More specifically, the information provided by Turkey regarding the organized return of migrants and refugees on the Turkish side to Istanbul has yet to be confirmed by Greece. Ankara had closed the border with Greece earlier in the week to stop the spread of the coronavirus into Turkey. With this in mind, Greek authorities remain on alert, as it was only as recently as Wednesday morning that some 350 migrants tried to cross the border, with the help of Turkish forces. There is also the added concern that a mass breach of the border could further spread the coronavirus in Greece. Meanwhile, in light of the measures for the coronavirus, Greece has opened diplomatic channels with other neighboring states (Albania, North Macedonia), with the aim of coordinating moves so that, despite the bans, there will be no problem in trade and the transportation of goods. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 22nd, in a televised address to the nation on Sunday evening, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis announced a full lockdown, starting from 6 a.m on Monday, aimed at curbing the further spread of the coronavirus. The ban applies to "*all unnecessary movement by citizens*," Mitsotakis explained, stressing the need for "*bold and timely initiatives*." Mitsotakis thanked the majority of Greeks for acting responsibly and

self-isolating to avert the spread of the virus. “*But I will not allow a frivolous few to undermine the safety of the majority because a few irresponsible people can harm thousands of responsible citizens,*” he said following reports of many Greeks leaving cities for their villages over the weekend. “*We have to protect the common good, our health,*” Mitsotakis said, noting that the lockdown is “*perhaps the last step of an organized, democratic state.*” “*We should not reach the point of having to choose who lives and who dies,*” he added. In a press conference later on Sunday, Government officials clarified that, under the new restrictions, citizens planning to leave the house must inform authorities of the reason for their exodus. Police will be out in force from Monday to ensure that restrictions are being observed and to issue fines of 150 euro for each offense. All citizens must carry Police identity cards or passports. Just before the Premier’s speech, the Health Ministry announced 94 new cases of coronavirus, bringing the total to 624, with deaths rising to 15. Of those infected with the virus, 124 are hospitalized and 34 in critical condition, the Ministry said, adding that the average age of those hospitalized is 64 years old and of the dead 77. Meanwhile there are concerns about the healthcare system’s ability to cope. One worry is that the frequency with which doctors, nurses and administrative staff at hospitals are testing positive for the virus is growing, with dozens positive for COVID-19 and more than 300 in isolation. (www.ekathimerini.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Greece has strengthened measures against COVID-19 aiming to limit its spread. Tension in land borders between Greece and Turkey remains

with thousands of migrants to push forward for entering Greece. However, it is leaked by Turkey that migrants will move in coming days back to Turkish mainland de-escalating tension in the borders. Greek security forces remain in high alert seeking to deter any migrants’ attempt to enter Greek territory. Turkey insists on provoking the Greek forces in the Aegean Sea, both in the air and in the sea. There is always a significant possibility of an armed incident which could be escalated into a crisis. Greece enjoys political stability which is a major asset for a country which faces several security challenges. Under the current situation in Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Sea Greece is obliged to strengthen and modernize its Armed Forces operational capability.



KOSOVO: March 18th, Prime Minister Albin Kurti has dismissed Wednesday Minister of Internal Affairs, Agim Veliu who is member of coalition partner – Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK). Kurti said the decision was taken after Veliu was “*spreading panic*” at a time the country is struggling to contain further spread of coronavirus, Gazeta Express learned. According to a press release, Veliu in a televised interview late on Tuesday challenged the position of Kurti who was against declaring the country on state of emergency. Late on Tuesday Kosovo’s National Security Council, composed of tops state institutions including the President, Hashim Thaci and Prime Minister, held a meeting to coordinate on measures against spread of coronavirus. Addressing media after the meeting Thaci proposed the Parliament to declare the state of emergency, but the Government said this is

unnecessary and an extreme measure considering that the Government is handling situation created after 19 cases of coronavirus were confirmed in Kosovo. In this open clash between the President and Prime Minister over security measures, Veliu, sided with the President. The Government in a press release said that with his public statements, Minister of Internal Affairs, showed lack of leadership and openly undermines the work of the Government. Appearing late on Tuesday in Klan Kosova TV, Veliu said the *“number of those affected with coronavirus is increased in hourly basis”* and went against Kurti’s position of not introducing extreme measures such as state of emergency. The Government in its statement said that neither Ministry of Health nor National Institute of Health has stated the number of those infected with COVID-19 is increased in hourly basis. *“At these critical moments when the entire public administration is making maximal efforts to minimize damages from coronavirus, leaders of central institutions, including members of Government should demonstrate maturity in taking actions and making statements,”* the Government said. Kurti said that he has already informed his coalition partner –LDK on the decision and asked them in accordance with the agreement on coalition deal to propose a new Minister of Internal Affairs. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 20th, Kosovo Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, said Friday that he has decided to partially lift tariffs on Serbian and Bosnia-Herzegovina goods and the decision will enter into force as of today. Kurti in a statement posted in social media said that following a Government meeting via teleconference, the Government has decided to revoke tariffs on raw materials entering from

Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The decision was taken without votes of Ministers of Government’s junior coalition partner; Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK), which today proceeded to the Parliament a no-confidence motion against Kurti’s Government. The LDK among other things said that they have decided to overthrow the Government they are part of because Kurti is refusing to completely abolish tariffs on Serbian goods, as requested by the US. Kurti said that the decision to lift tariffs was taken with ten votes in favor and two abstentions. *“As of tonight midnight, all border crossings between Kosovo and Serbia will be open for importing raw materials,”* Kurti said in a social media post. *“Whereas as of April 1st the Government of Kosovo will issue another decision to replace 100% tariff with reciprocity measures,”* Kurti said. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 22nd, the first coronavirus death has been reported in Kosovo on Sunday as the total number of people infected jumped to 31. The first victim is a 85-year-old man from the Podujeva municipality. The case has been confirmed by family member of the victim, who published the news that their father has passed away. The victim is the father of a man who contracted coronavirus after arriving from Italy. Authorities announced Saturday that the number of infected people with coronavirus in Kosovo is 31. The Government is calling citizens to stay home and took many measures to prevent further spread of coronavirus. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

COVID-19 has not impact only in citizens’ health condition, but in politics too. It became the reason for an ongoing political crisis due to dismissal of

Interior Minister, Agim Veliu who was accused by the Prime Minister, Albin Kurti of spreading panic to people on COVID-19 pandemic. LDK threatens to withdraw support from the ruling coalition which actually means topple of the Government. Political instability and uncertainty during the pandemic spread is not good for Kosovo. It seems that President Hashim Thaci is too powerful to lose control of Kosovo politics, while the “duel” between the two men is reaching into an end. Kurti’s Government announced that from March 20th, 2020 the partial lifting of 100% taxes on Serbian and Bosnian goods has started; a move that it is also a source of tension in internal politics. Due to Kosovo political instability and the COVID-19 pandemic Belgrade – Pristina dialogue process is slowing down. Fight against corruption, organized crime, money laundering and trafficking, establishment of rule of law, accountable and transparent state institutions, and functional public administration are the main challenges for Kosovo towards its European path.



MOLDOVA: March 16th, the lawmakers of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) and Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) signed the agreement on the creation of parliamentary majority before media representatives today. The document also sees Government reshufflings. Thus, five positions of Ministers in the new cabinet will belong to the PDM. The new parliamentary majority is of social-democratic orientation, PSRM leader Zinaida Greceanii said after the document’s signing. She noted that the agreement signed

today contained the provisions of the political accord signed with the ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)] bloc in 2019. “Today, we witness a historical event. Following more negotiations, we have reached a good agreement between PDM and PSRM, in order to sign a coalition agreement and set up a parliamentary majority. Several candidacies for offices of Ministers will be submitted to the Moldovan President too. We think that, in the new formula, the Government will be more efficient for the country. This agreement will be a good luck and will be long-lasting,” Greceanii said. The Democrats’ leader, Pavel Filip, said he was confident in the new coalition. “PDM ruled to sign this agreement in this complicated moment and to participate in the governance act. We are not afraid of difficulties. I am sure that we will manage well. Together, we will cope not only with the current crisis, but also with other problems. We considered that Moldova needs the Democratic Party now,” Filip noted. Under the decision by the two parties, the following candidacies will be submitted to the Head of state for approval; Cristina Lesnic for the office of Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration, Alexandru Panzari for the position of Defense Minister, Igor Sarov for the post of Education Minister, Sergiu Railean for the office of Economics Minister and Oleg Tulea for the position of Foreign Affairs Minister. (www.moldpres.md)

- March 17th, the Parliament today approved the Government’s draft decision on the declaring of the state of emergency on the entire territory of Moldova on the period March 17th – May 15th,

2020. Under the document, on the period of the state of emergency, the Commission for Emergency Situations of Moldova will issue instructions in order to implement a series of measures such as establishment of a special regime of entrance and exit from the country, establishment of a special regime of movement on the country's territory, introduction of the quarantine regime and taking other compulsory sanitary and anti-epidemic measures, establishment of a special working regime for all entities, ban on the holding of public meetings, manifestations and other mass actions, instruction, if needed, of the rationalization of the consumption of foodstuffs and other essential products, coordination of the activity of mass media, prohibition of employees' resignation, excepting for the cases provided for by the normative acts, for this period, calling on citizens to provide services in public interest, in the conditions of law, carrying out, in the way established by law, of requisitions of assets, in order to prevent and liquidate the consequences of situations which imposed the declaring of the state of emergency, the carrying out of needed actions, in order to prevent, diminish and liquidate the consequences of the pandemic of COVID-19. Decision adopted today sees that the instructions of the Commission for Emergency Situations of Moldova are compulsory and executory for the leaders of the central and local public administration authorities, economic agents, public institutions, as well as for the citizens and other people staying in Moldova. All instructions issued by the Commission for Emergency Situations enter into force starting the moment of adoption. Moldova's Parliament will inform, in a three-day period, the UN Secretary General and the Council of Europe's Secretary General about

the present decision and the reasons for its adoption. Decision entered into force on the date of adoption and will be brought to the knowledge of population through mass media and will be published in Moldova's Official Journal. (www.moldpres.md)

- March 20th, the Presidium of the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet [Parliament] has addressed to the Council of the Federation [the Upper Chamber of Russia's bicameral legislative assembly] and to the Russian State Duma [Lower Chamber] with a request to help resolve the crisis that has evolved in Transnistria - Moldova relations lately. The address said that last half a year, the official Chisinau has been ruining existing negotiation mechanisms, ignoring the accords reached earlier, deliberately building up pressure on and sanctions against Transnistria. *“Moldova would not stop politically motivated criminal litigations against Transnistria residents, most of whom are citizens of Russia. Chisinau violates the agreement on telecommunications signed in November 2017. This makes impossible to organize a direct telephone communication between the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic [PMR] since the Republic of Moldova, does not permit a normal interaction between mobile telephony operators, causes the population's extra financial expenses, and deprives the residents of the two republics from receiving quality telecommunication services,”* wrote the Transnistrian leadership. In their words, the Transnistrian authorities constantly register provocations staged by Moldova in the Transnistria Security Zone, which is a sphere of responsibility of the ongoing joint peacekeeping operation. The Transnistrian Supreme Soviet asked Russian colleagues to give an assessment of

the stagnating problematic situation in the negotiations and to render a comprehensive assistance for lifting the unfounded restrictions imposed by Moldova with respect to the population and economic entities of Transnistria. (www.infotag.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The country declared state emergency from March 17th – May 15th, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic giving extending powers to state authorities. Restrictions on media work raise concerns for the freedom of action. PSRM and PDM have reached an agreement to form a majority coalition which strengthens the Government. PDM has got crucial Ministries such as the Foreign Affairs, Defense, Economics and Education ones. By this agreement, the President Igor Dodon has consolidated his political power in the country, while PDM achieved to come back in power with little casualties since last elections. Under these circumstances, the country enjoys relative political stability. On the other hand, return of PDM in power it is considered as step back in the fight against corruption since the Democrats have been related with serious corruption cases during their political reign. Its former leader, Vladimir Plahotniuc is still a fugitive and he is wanted on an international arrest warrant. The country definitely follows a pro-Russian orientation, although it declares that it seeks to join the EU. Due to its strategic geographic position, Moldova has become a field of rivalry between Russia and the US and NATO. The country lacks economic growth, while corruption is in high rates. Russia maintains troops in Transnistria which are considered by pro-western

forces as violating Moldovan sovereignty. The frozen conflict of Transnistria is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: March 16th,

Montenegro has reached an agreement with Turkey on providing consular protection for Montenegrin citizens. As the agreement stipulates, Montenegro and Turkey, willing to further develop consular relations based on friendly relations between the two countries, have agreed to provide consular protection. It is further said that the agreement was reached with careful consideration of all relevant provisions of the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations and the Vienna convention on consular relations while willing to provide consular protection for Montenegrin citizens who travel to third countries where there is no diplomatic and consular representative office of Montenegro. Turkey obliges to provide consular protection for Montenegrin citizens in those countries. Member of the diplomatic and consular representative office of Turkey can visit arrested Montenegrin citizens at their request. In case of significant distance from the consular representative office of Turkey such visit can be rejected. “*In that case, diplomatic and consular representative office of Turkey will try to obtain information about the status of people and acquaint Ministry of Foreign Affairs,*” the agreement stipulates. If a Montenegrin citizen addresses to diplomatic and consular representative office of Turkey with the request for provision of financial assistance, the representative office will inform the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Montenegro about the request. (www.cdm.me)

- March 19th, in an interview of the new Director of the State Election Commission (SEC), Aleksa Ivanovic for Pobjeda claimed that SEC has not discussed the delay of the elections in Tivat. Law on Local Administration enables cancellation of elections in the circumstance of emergency. The Constitution authorizes the Parliament to declare professionalization of SEC to improve its work and increase trust. Commission has the capacity to organize fair and democratic elections, Ivanovic stressed. He said that the Commission performed all the activities in the lead-up-to the elections in Tivat and that their delay was not subject of discussion. (www.cdm.me)

- March 19th, Institute for Public Health said that analyses had shown another two people had been infected by coronavirus. *“Two new cases have been confirmed. That means there are currently ten cases of coronavirus in Montenegro,”* the Institute said. Prime Minister, Dusko Markovic said that the Government *“is not considering the possibility of declaring state of emergency in Montenegro.”* *“Currently, that is not on the agenda”* the Prime Minister said. Government’s session was devoted to analyzing measures approved by the Defense and Security Council on Wednesday regarding enhanced supervision and control of quarantine locations. Prime Minister also said that he had ordered the Police Department and its special units to engage in controls and surveillance in public places. (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Montenegro has entered last week into the COVID-19 world. However, the state authorities appear calm receiving the necessary measures for stopping the virus spread. Controversial law on

religious freedom continues to be a source of political tension in Montenegro. The Government tries to de-escalate situation by establishing a team of experts for dialogue with the Church. The Government claims that tension is the result of external activity namely Serbia and Russia which seek to destabilize the country. On the other hand, opposition accuses the President, Milo Djukanovic and the Prime Minister, Dusko Markovic of authoritarian behavior claiming that religious law should be withdrawn in order to restore political stability in the country. Djukanovic considers the Church as a threat against the state’s national identity and independence acting as the “long hand” of Serbia. It is true that Serbia interferes in the Montenegrin politics using the Serbian population in Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church influence. It is assessed that Serbia has never gave up the idea that Montenegro is the “natural extension of Serbia” and its (smooth) independence is nothing more than an abnormality. Besides, Serbia enjoys support in Montenegro by a strong pro-Serbian opposition. In this context, the Serbian factor could be under certain conditions to act destabilizing. Corruption, smuggling (especially cigarettes) and money laundering are dominated in the country setting significant obstacles and risks for every investor. Such situation has strongly affected progress of accession negotiations with the EU. Montenegro needs more concrete reforms in the field of justice, rule of law, fight against corruption, money laundering, and organized crime, public administration transparency and accountability in order to become a stable and attractive investment environment. The coming elections in the country should be seen as a democratic stress test. The country focuses on

strengthening its Armed Forces by purchasing modern equipment.



NORTH MACEDONIA: March 17th, the Heads of North Macedonia's main political parties met at the presidential palace in Skopje on Tuesday and agreed to postpone the early elections, which were originally slated for April 12th, 2020. The modalities for the postponement and a new election date have yet to be determined, however. *"We authorized the President, [Stevo] Pendarovski, to summon a group of experts and to find the legal and moral modalities for the postponement of the elections, and for their rescheduling,"* the Head of the main ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) party, Zoran Zaev, told reporters. *"I believe that the consensus we have reached is a serious message to all,"* Zaev said after the meeting, which lasted for more than three hours. He added that he hopes a state of emergency will soon be declared in the country, which currently has 26 coronavirus infections. But 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) party, Hristijan Mickovski, told reporters that his party will keep insisting on a higher level of alert and the imposition of a so-called *"state of crisis"* for 30 days. *"But the experts should have a say on how to implement this,"* Mickovski said. Bilall Kasami, the head of the Besa Movement (Lëvizja Besa), which has two MPs in parliament, said that the decision to

postpone the elections was reached *"unanimously"* but that a new date *"will be up to the legal experts to assess."* Ziadin Sella from the Alliance for Albanians (Aleanca për Shqiptarët), said that the people's health must now take priority over the elections. The Head of the small Democratic Party of Albanians (Partia Demokratike Shqiptare – PDSH), Menduh Thaci, left the meeting early however, saying there was nothing for him to do there because *"the decisions have already been made, and we as Albanian political parties only serve as decoration."*



President Stevo Pendarovski meets leaders of parliamentary parties

(Photo sources: www.pretsedatel.mk)

As the number of infected people continues to rise, North Macedonia recently declared a state of emergency in two most affected municipalities in the west of the country, Debar and Centar Zupa. The country also closed its border crossings to foreign citizens and urged its diaspora not to travel home without dire need. The April elections were to see a harsh battle between the ruling alliance led by Zaev's pro-western SDSM and the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE, which insists that the country's recent Euro-Atlantic breakthroughs were made at the expense of national interests, like the country's name change in its agreement with Greece. Meanwhile the country has been led since the start of the year by

a caretaker Government, incorporating Ministers from both blocs, which was originally tasked with holding the elections. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- March 19th, “I want to inform you about an extremely positive news that arrived late last night from Brussels. The Council of Permanent Representatives has reached a consensus about a decision to start accession negotiations with Republic of North Macedonia, unconditionally. We expect this to be confirmed, and on March 24th, on part of the European Ministers and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Summit of Prime Ministers that is expected to occur on March 26th – 27th,” announced the Deputy Minister for European Affairs, Bujar Osmani during a press conference. He also said that the Government has coordinated with the EU regarding the COVID-19, and have agreed, North Macedonia as a candidate to be a part of the EU’s Solidarity Fund so it can use the assets to fight coronavirus. Osmani named the first measures that were sent to the European Commission on behalf of the EU Commissioner, Oliver Varhelyi. In the end, Osmani informed about Norway’s decision to approve 3.2 million euro in urgent realization through the UNOPS program for North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, for acquiring medical equipment, materials and assets. (www.meta.mk)

- March 20th, the number of newly infected people with the coronavirus until 10 am today was 10 and with it the total number of infected people in North Macedonia has reached 67. As was announced by the Ministry of Health, yesterday afternoon and during the night, 71 people were tested for the coronavirus. Out of them, two people were tested positive. One is from Skopje and is a contact of one confirmed and diagnosed

patient from Skopje, and the other is from Ohrid, a person who arrived from Brescha, Italy, and was in contact with coronavirus patients in Italy. “Most of the tests were done through the Institute of Public Health and are part of an early screening of people with wider indications. At the Zan Mitrev clinic 17 more patients were tested positive and they shall be confirmed during the day,” the Ministry of Health announced. (www.meta.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

North Macedonia is receiving measures against COVID-19. Coronavirus has a direct impact in state’s politics since early parliamentary elections scheduled for April 12th, 2020 were postponed. It is encouraging that there was a consensus of the two biggest parties; SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE. The country continues with a caretaker Government including members from both SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE. Although there is an agreement between the major parties for the postponement of the elections due to the COVID-19, the country moves in political uncertainty. Decision of the Council of Permanent Representatives to start negotiations between the EU and North Macedonia and Albania is very encouraging for the country signaling a positive decision on the coming summit of the EU member states Heads on March 26th – 27th, 2020. The country should focus on reforms regarding justice, rule of law, fight against corruption and money laundering, public administration, and respect of human rights in order to accelerate its European integration process.



ROMANIA: March 16th, “We are in a situation that humanity has not faced in recent

history. We will go through this difficult test if we take the most drastic measures immediately and we all understand that their severity is as serious as the period we are going through,” Romania’s president Klaus Iohannis stated as he officially declared the state of emergency in Romania for a period of 30 days. *“The pandemic caused by the spread of infections with the new coronavirus can only be stopped with exceptional measures, which have proven to have positive effects in countries severely affected by the evolution of the virus. These measures are aimed at supporting public health, social and economic domains, but also come with restraining the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms. No matter how hard we try to adapt to these limitations, this is the only way we can save the lives of our loved ones, the lives of those around us!”* Iohannis said. He also explained some of the consequences of the state of emergency and how this situation will change the citizen’s lives in the next period. In the economic sector, the Government can adopt measures to support the economic operators in the areas affected by COVID-19 and will announce soon the package of solutions prepared. (www.romania-insider.com)

- March 20th, the mobile medical complex in the courtyard of the “Ana Aslan” Institute erected by the Romanian Army in Otopeni will be operational from an administrative point of view in 5-6 days, after which it will be certified and authorized to treat light to medium cases of COVID-19, stated, on Friday, the Spokesperson of the Ministry of National Defense, Oliver Anghel. *“It will practically be a military campus – the mobile medical facility type ROL 2 and a tent camp. The capacity will be established depending on the case. In this medical facility*

light and medium cases of COVID-19 will be treated. In this medical unit specialists from the Carol Davila Central University Emergency Hospital of Bucharest will be working, having also the role of preparing medics who will serve in this facility,” Anghel explained to the press. He mentioned that this medical campus comprises over 35 containers and over 30 tents, with the latter to house people who are in isolation or quarantine. The way in which the patients are to be sent to this hospital will be established by the National Committee for Special Emergency Situations. The medical complex is being built by servicemen with the 96th Engineers Battalion, Oliver Anghel mentioned. According to the Ministry, the ROL 2 type medical formation comprises, amongst others, triage, laboratory, radiology, sterilization, and decontamination area units.



Military personnel from the 96th Engineers Battalion during the hospital construction
(Photo source: www.mapn.ro)

The ROL 2 medical formation of the Defense Ministry has also functioned as an external section for infectious disease in the fight against the Ebola virus and was a component of the NATO exercises “SABER GUARDIAN 19” and “VIGOROUS WARRIOR 19” – the largest exercise with a focus on medicine organized up to now by the North Atlantic Alliance, which took

place last year in Romania. From within the MApN, the activity has the support of the Medical Directorate, the Carol Davila Central University Emergency Hospital of Bucharest, the General Staff of the Land Forces, the General Staff of the Air Forces, the Joint Logistics Command and the Communications and Information Command. (www.nineoclock.ro)

- March 22nd, after local mass media complained that authorities do not report information about coronavirus cases in their localities, the Government explained that there is “a risk of confusion.” Local authorities have stopped releasing situation of the coronavirus cases in each county, have blocked the public access to the interactive map and have removed the charts with the county report. Prefects have been trained to release no information about the tests and people who tested positive for COVID-19 in their counties. The Strategic Communication Group argued “There is a risk to generate confusion for those communities and to induce the wrong perception about the current state of affairs.” “Reporting the distribution on each county of the COVID-19 cases does not show the presence of the respective people in communities, as it hints such a report, because the report is made according to the residence address. According to the medical protocol, people who tested positive for coronavirus are admitted in the hospitals destined to such cases, in strict isolation (for instance, a person from Suceava is hospitalized in Iasi),” says the Strategic Communication Group. “At the same time, as for reports on situation of hospitalization depending on the medical unit, we determined there is the risk to generate confusion for the respective communities and to induce a wrong perception as against the current situation.

It is the reason for which we are trying to prevent the stigmatization and any situation that would prompt unjustified social conducts at local level,” the press release further reads. The prefects received a document on Saturday from the Interior Ministry, informing they are not allowed anymore to release information about the patients infected with coronavirus, neither the number the tests, nor the number of people who tested positive and information about their health condition. The order prompted criticism of the local journalists, who signed a joint protest accusing the Strategic Communication Group of censorship. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Romania has declared state of emergency for 30 days due to COVID-19 spread. Situation regarding the virus is a little bit confused since authorities have decided to restrict release of data to public. The country enjoys relative political stability after the new PNL Government has been established. Romania enjoys advanced upgrade in US and NATO strategic plans due to its geographical position located close to Russia. Consequently, Russia reacts in this close military cooperation between the two countries and the Alliance perceiving it as a threat against its national security. Romania keeps strengthening its Armed Forces seeking to achieve NATO standards.



SERBIA: March 16th, Serbia’s Center for Research, Transparency and Accoyntability (CRTA), a democracy watchdog, said on Monday it had withdrawn its 120 monitors across the country because of the severity of the situation with coronavirus pandemic and appealed with the

state institutions to delay the election process until the limits of human and civil rights were not imperilled, N1 reported. *“Since safety of people is our first concern, we believe that in this situation this is the only right and responsible decision,”* CRTA said in a statement. Serbia has declared the state of emergency on Sunday, and Prime Minister Ana Brnabic even suggested a curfew might be introduced. Brnabic said she suggested to President Aleksandar Vucic to delay the April 26th, 2020 elections. *“CRTA’s members started long-lasting monitoring of the pre-election process in Serbia in line with the international standards for independent civil monitoring of the elections three weeks before they are called. Out 120 people-strong team was on the ground since February 11th, monitoring all the aspects of the election process: from the election administration’s work, parties’ communication with potential voters, functionary campaign and abuse of public resources, potential bribing and pressures on voters. CRTA’s monitors will continue to oversee the media reporting about the campaign and the campaign on social networks,”* the watchdog said in the statement. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 18th, Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vucic and German Chancellor Angela Merkel agreed in a video link conversation on Wednesday that the Belgrade – Pristina dialogue should resume as soon as possible with an aim to reach a comprehensive agreement on the normalization of relations, the Beta news agency reported. The two were scheduled to meet in Berlin, but due to the coronavirus pandemic, they agreed to use modern technology for talks. A joint statement said Merkel welcomed Vucic’s readiness to re-start the dialogue about trade and non-customs barriers

between Kosovo and Serbia under the EU auspices. Dialogue has been on hold since November 2018. According to the statement, the Chancellor also welcomed Serbia’s readiness to implement the Brussels Agreement about integrated managing of the administrative line, while Vucic insisted on the full implementation of the Agreement. He added he would undertake all necessary steps for the successful resumption of the dialogue and avoid moves which could lower the relations so that a constructive and open atmosphere for the negotiations could be achieved. Vucic told Merkel he was grateful for the German and her attention and care for Serbia and the Western Balkans. Apart from dialogue and the issue of Pristina’s 100% taxes on goods from Serbia and Bosnia, the two talked about bilateral relationship, economic links, Serbia’s EU accession process, reforms on that road and situation in the region. The joined statement also said that Merkel and Vucic discussed the challenges in fighting the coronavirus pandemic. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 22nd, by 6 pm on Sunday, a total of 222 COVID-19 cases were confirmed in Serbia, the Ministry of Health said. This is a dramatic increase compared to the situation in the morning when the country had 188 confirmed cases. Of the 61 people tested throughout the day, 34 came out positive for COVID-19. Of those, 21 of them were hospitalized but have not experienced any complications and their condition is stable. The Torlak Institute has performed a total of 761 tests for the coronavirus until now. Serbia already had two coronavirus-related deaths since the virus entered the country. Meanwhile, the Government extended the curfew it introduced to contain the

virus and it is now in effect between 5 pm and 5 am. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Serbia declared state of emergency in an effort to slow down COVID-19 spread. There are thoughts for postponement of the April 26th, 2020 elections due to the coronavirus. Serbia needs political stability since it has a lot of diplomatic, security and economic challenges ahead. Kosovo new Government has a lot of internal problems to resolve before becomes ready for dialogue with Serbia. However, the new Prime Minister, Albin Kurti announced a partial lifting of 100% taxes on Serbian goods which a good step for Serbia to come back to dialogue. Nevertheless, no progress is expected until the Serbian elections. Montenegro – Serbia relations are in low level lately due to the Montenegrin law on religious freedom which is considered by Belgrade as a direct attack on Serbian Orthodox Church and consequently on Serbian population in Montenegro. Serbia is considered by Montenegro as a direct threat of destabilizing the country. Finally, Serbia is engaged with one way or another to the latest crisis in Bosnia where Bosnian Serbs claim that secession may become a possible choice for the entity. The country has developed very close relations with Russia, especially in the field of defense. Russia keeps supplying Serbia with weapons, while both countries conduct common military exercises. Serbia is trying to balance between the west, namely the EU and the US on one side and Russia on the other implementing the doctrine of “neutrality.” However, the latest Serbian arms purchases from Russia met the strong reaction of the US (and the EU) which did not hesitate to

threaten Serbia with sanctions. The EU has raised serious concerns over Serbia’s effectiveness on independence and accountability of the judiciary, freedom of expression, prevention of corruption and the fight against organized crime. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its Armed Forces declaring towards all sides that they are the power of the state. It implements an ambitious armament program mainly supported by Russia.



SLOVENIA: March 16th, Brigadier Miha Skerbinc took over as the new Force Commander of the Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF), after being reinstated following his dismissal under the previous Government in April. In his address at a ceremony at the Vrhnika Army barracks Skerbinc pledged to organize the force in a way as to allow efficient and sustainable support for the country in containing the spread of coronavirus and control situation. Defense Minister Matej Tonin said the injustice was being redressed through Skerbinc's reinstatement. (www.sta.si)

- March 21st, the numbers of confirmed covid-19 cases in Slovenia increased by 42 to 383 and a total of 12,162 tests have so far been performed. By Friday the Health Ministry issued 180 quarantine orders to people who have been in close contact with infected individuals. Prime Minister Janez Jansa visited the town of Smarje pri Jelsah, one of the hotspots of the epidemic where 41 cases have been confirmed, second in number only to Ljubljana. Meanwhile, the Civil Protection distributed 1.2 million pieces of protective equipment to medical and care institutions around the country. This included

surgical masks, gloves, overalls, glasses and sanitizers. (www.sta.si)

- March 22nd, the Krsko Nuclear Power Station (NEK) reported that a preventive examination of systems and equipment had not detected any damage or impact on operations caused by a severe earthquake in Zagreb that was felt in Slovenia as well. The power station, situated near the border with Croatia and hence close to the earthquake's epicenter, is operating normally, said the Nuclear Security Administration. However, a group of Austrian politicians reiterated their calls for the closure of Slovenia's sole nuclear power plant, saying that the plant posed a great risk to the region's security and that its lifespan was coming to an end. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Slovenia has increased number of COVID-19 cases raising concerns for further deterioration. The new Government receives all the necessary measures to tackle the problem. The new Slovenian Government has to address major challenges such as migration, social care, and defense capabilities. On Slovenia – Croatia dispute the latter has started on calling for dialogue but it is doubtful what Slovenia will finally decide to do. Besides, Slovenia could push Croatia on this case taking into consideration that Croatia needs Slovenia's support to enter the Schengen zone and OECD. The issue of illegal migrants entering Slovenia mainly from Croatia is high in the agenda lately. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. The annual report on the Armed Forces operational readiness released by the Armed Forces Chief of Staff is disappointing since it assessed that the Armed

Forces have limited operational capabilities in war time namely they cannot accomplish their mission. The White Book on Defense presented a rather ambitious program of improving operational capabilities of the Armed Forces. It foresees an 8,000-strong professional military force and a 2000-strong standing reserve by 2035, up from 6,400 and 700, respectively. Slovenia's defense budget will finally reach 2% of GDP (a NATO requirement) by 2035.



TURKEY: March 16th, Turkey renounced Russia's annexation of Crimea on Monday, in line with the sixth anniversary of the country's illegal takeover of the Black Sea peninsula. "Neither Turkey nor the international community recognizes the illegal annexation of the Crimean Autonomous Republic of Ukraine by the Russian Federation based on an illegitimate referendum which was held six years ago today," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement. "It continues to be a priority for Turkey that Crimean Tatars, as a constituent people of Crimea, continue to live in well-being and security in their historical homeland, have their cultural identity protected and that their suffering as a result of the occupation is brought to an end," the statement added. Turkey supports "the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, a strategic partner of Turkey," the ministry concluded. Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine after an independence referendum was held in 2014, following the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich as a result of the pro-European Union Euromaidan protests in the capital. The U.N. General Assembly later voted to proclaim the Russian action illegal. Along with an overwhelming majority of U.N. member states,

Turkey denied recognition of Crimea as Russian territory. (www.dailysabah.com)

- March 18th, Turkey reported its first two deaths related to the coronavirus pandemic and announced its confirmed cases surged to 191. Turkey's President on Wednesday said the Government had mobilized all resources and vowed to eliminate the threat as soon as possible. He announced a 15.4 billion US dollars fiscal package to help protect the economy from the fallout from the contagion. *"The responsibility lies on every citizen of our nation,"* President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in his first press conference on the COVID-19 outbreak. *"I wholeheartedly believe that, with God's help and our nation's support, we will emerge stronger from this difficult period rather than stumble or fall."* He said the Government will distribute protective masks and cologne, which has natural disinfectant properties, to citizens above 65 years of age in Istanbul and Ankara. Erdogan added Turkey was making rapid efforts to develop a vaccine. *"Such outbreaks have had severe consequences around the world, and have even been the triggers for major political, social, and economic transformations,"* he said. *"We are entering a new era, one in which we are likely to see radical changes in the global economic, political, and social order,"* he added. Minister of Health, Fahrettin Koca said on Wednesday a 61-year-old male patient died. He announced late Tuesday an 89-year-old person also died after contracting the virus from someone who had *"contacts with China,"* where the new coronavirus was first detected late last year. Koca added Turkey had diagnosed 93 more cases throughout Wednesday. *"The big majority of those who tested positive are recovering,"* he said. Turkey's Vice

President, Fuat Oktay said more than 2,800 Turkish nationals were brought home at their request from nine European countries Ankara barred entry from to stem the spread of coronavirus. Oktay said on social media the evacuation was completed at 6am local time (03:00 GMT), adding the 2,807 nationals will be put under 14-day quarantine in large dormitories located in the Istanbul and Kocaeli provinces. Turkey closed last week its border gates to passengers from Germany, Spain, France, Austria, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands. Meanwhile, the Head of Turkey's communications directorate, Fahrettin Altun dismissed on Tuesday rumors that Ankara would impose a state of emergency or curfew and travel restrictions due to the coronavirus. *"Such comprehensive restrictive steps are not on our agenda,"* Altun told state-run Anadolu agency. Altun said the measures taken against coronavirus continue in *"a very transparent, determined and rational manner."* Amid growing coronavirus fears in Turkey, the Turkish lira weakened 0.8% against the US dollar on Wednesday, after having hit its weakest point since September 2018 the previous day. The lira stood at 6.45 to the dollar by 07:00 GMT, weaker from Tuesday's close of 6.3985, which was off that day's weakest level of 6.4945. The lira has lost about 7% of its value against the dollar this year. Turkey's benchmark Borsa Istanbul's BIST 100 stock index dropped 2.3%, or 2,001.17 points, on Wednesday to start the day at 84,776.51 points. (www.aljazeera.com)

- March 20th, planned deployment and distribution of troops in Idlib's de-escalation zone of northwestern Syria will continue and there will be no withdrawals of troops from the region, the Defense Ministry announced Friday. To stop the

bloodshed and humanitarian crisis, and ensure the security of troops as well as the safe return of civilians to their homes, all decisions adopted under the Moscow deal are being implemented with the utmost care, said a statement by the Ministry. The statement further noted “*The Turkish Armed Forces is continuing the planned deployment and distribution of troops in the Idlib de-escalation zone of northwestern Syria, in line with the cease-fire of March 6th. Reports by some media organizations about withdrawals of our troops from the region do not reflect the truth.*” Idlib falls within a de-escalation zone laid out in a deal between Turkey and Russia in late 2018. The Syrian regime and its allies, however, have consistently broken the terms of the cease-fire, launching frequent attacks inside the zone. (www.dailysabah.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Situation in Turkey regarding COVID-19 spread is still not clear since the Government does not provide a clear picture. However, authorities have started to provide some data publically speaking for 2 deaths. Turkey is determined to implement the ceasefire agreement with Russia in Syria securing Turkish interests. In this context, the Ministry of Defense announced that there are no thoughts of withdrawing military forces from the Syrian front. Turkey is satisfied with the agreement since it secures its military presence in the Syrian ground and ensures that Syrian refugees will be relocated back in the region. Although Russia is the absolute dominant in the Syrian “playground”, Turkey achieved to stabilize situation and to support its interests. Tension in Greek – Turkish land borders continues with daily clashes between Greek security forces and illegal migrants, while Turkish

security forces are engaged directly or indirectly. The continuous military campaigns in several fronts have a direct impact in the already “wounded” economy. Due to the latest situation in Idlib, Turkish Lira faces pressure and it has weakened while inflation is rising. In general, Turkey exercises a multilateral, multifaceted, dynamic external policy ensuring its national interests. Enjoying a pivotal geographic location is engaged in several regional challenges. Despite that, enjoys special relationship with great powers such as the US and Russia. Erdogan made clear publically that “Turkish security is beyond its borders.” This statement summarizes the security doctrine of Turkey; Turkey will be engaged in regional challenges, conflicts and cooperation to ensure its security. Turkish engagement in Syria, Libya, Cyprus, Somalia is explained by this doctrine. The country combines both diplomatic means and “hard” power aiming to achieve its goals. It has conducted hydrocarbon drills in Mediterranean Sea within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and presents its aeronautical power against Greece and Cyprus questioning their sovereign rights. In the east Mediterranean front, Turkey will not accept “fait accompli” in the region and is expected to react violently if balance of power is jeopardized. It is assessed that Turkey’s relations with the US will never reach a “zero point” since Turkey is an integral and critical part of the western security architecture. The country continues to face several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs, Mayors, journalists and thousands of citizens are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Turkey


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


www.hermesresearch.eu


email: info@hermesresearch.eu


Editor in Chief: Ioannis Karampelas


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.*