



**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.

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 9th, Albania is set to have its first hydrogen plant, as per a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between companies SAIPEM and ALBORAN HYDROGEN. (www.exit.al)

- March 11th, the Prime Minister Edi Rama has promised to launch mass vaccination this year, and complete the construction of four airports and two ports if his Socialist Party of Albania (Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë – PS) wins the April 25th, 2021 elections for a third term. (www.exit.al)

- March 11th, the EU Ambassador in Tirana, Luigi Soreca, through a status on social media has called for the implementation of the decriminalization law on electoral lists. Soreca stressed that after the political parties, it is the turn of the Central Electoral Committee and the General Prosecutor's Office to verify all candidates and ensure the implementation of the decriminalization law. (www.exit.al)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Albania is getting closer to the April 25th, 2021 parliamentary elections which are considered as the way out of the long political crisis of the country. International stakeholders exercise much pressure on Albanian authorities and parties to secure transparency in electoral process and to ban candidates with criminal records from the elections. Albania has made significant progress in the institutional level of fighting corruption, organized crime and smuggling by adopting several laws, but Albanian political actors and state's officials refuse to implement them. Consequently, the country suffers from high corruption, links between politicians and

organized crime, drug smuggling and extensive money laundering. Of course the country faces several problems in public administration, rule of law, media freedom and democratic rule. Under these circumstances the first intergovernmental conference between Brussels and Tirana is not seen on the near horizon. It is assessed that the EU has decided to hold the conference after the parliamentary elections in Albania. The longtime institutional and constitutional crisis has affected the state's reform progress and the implementation of several laws that have been adopted by the Parliament. The case of the Italian "Ndrangheta" mafia group could bring a political "earthquake" in Albania.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

March 9th, the Ambassador of Iran Reza Ghelichkhan visited Bosnia's Foreign Investment Promotion Agency (FIPA) Tuesday and met with Director Milica Markovic to discuss investment opportunities, Fena news agency reported. Ghelichkhan stated that Iranian companies are especially interested in investments in the field of energy, agriculture, metal processing and automotive industry. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 10th, Defense Minister Nebojsa Stefanovic and Bosnia & Herzegovina state Presidency President Milorad Dodik said on Wednesday that the two countries' Armed Forces will conduct joint exercises "as soon as the right conditions are in place." (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 10th, the National Assembly of Bosnia's Republika Srpska entity adopted several conclusions Wednesday regarding the evaluation of the work of the High Representative, the implementation of Annex 10 of the General

Framework Agreement for Peace, at a time of talks on the appointment of a new High Representative in BiH. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 11th, the EU Special Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina Johann Sattler said that 2021 is the year for electoral and constitutional reform, and that focus should be on recovery and cooperation instead of divisive rhetoric. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 11th, perhaps it is time for Bosnian institutions, like many other countries in the EU, to start dealing with the issue of a kind of hybrid war against BiH and its institutions and the deliberate placement of false information, often in the interest of malignant foreign influences, BiH Foreign Minister Bisera Turkovic said Thursday. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 11th, the Embassies of France, Germany, Italy, the UK and the US, as well as the EU Special Representative BiH, reaffirmed their commitment Thursday to the territorial integrity and fundamental structure of BiH as a single, sovereign state with two entities, which have no right to secede from BiH. (www.ba.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Nationalist rhetoric in Bosnia is on the rise once again; a favorite habit of the Bosnian politicians. Republika Srpska Assembly adopted several conclusions by which the Dayton Peace Agreement has been put under question. The Bosnian Serb Parliament demands the abolishment of the Office of High Representative; the international community envoy with extensive powers in Bosnia's internal affairs. Moreover, they ask for the end of mandate of the

international military force of operation "ALTHEA." Finally, the Bosnian Serb leader, Milorad Dodik has spoken openly for Republika Srpska's secession adding that a referendum will take place "sometime." Political leaders of the other constituent peoples rejected Bosnian Serb conclusions underlying that such rhetoric threatens peace and stability of Bosnia. The international community also reacted in diplomatic level stressing that the Dayton Peace Agreement framework cannot be violated by any constituent entity and consequently Republika Srpska cannot secede by its unilateral decision. Despite seriousness of such actions and decisions it is assessed that Bosnian politicians use nationalism for their internal political games knowing very well that changing of the existing status quo in the Balkans could become a very dangerous situation which could turn into an armed conflict. Bosnian Foreign Minister spoke for hybrid war and disinformation in the country by foreign actors confirming that the struggle for influence in Bosnia is ongoing. Persistent nationalism, poor economic performances, absence of an effective public administration, problematic decision-making system, and corruption put Bosnia in the tails of European countries making the Euro-Atlantic integration a far dream.



BULGARIA: March 9th, Bulgaria's economy shrank by 4.2% last year, based on preliminary data, the country's National Statistics Institute (NSI) said. In real terms, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019 was 118.6 billion leva (60.6 billion Euros) in current prices. (www.sofiaglbe.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

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Only three weeks have left before the parliamentary elections of April 4th, 2021. Pre-electoral campaign continues without any major incident or turbulence. Corruption, media freedom and independence justice remain the main challenges for the ruling force will emerge from the elections. Economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is also a main issue for Bulgaria and it is expected to absorb most of the new Government's energy. Under current circumstances, Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen Zone, Eurozone and OECD is almost impossible for the near future and only after 2026 could become possible. Modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc). Military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force.



CROATIA: March 9th, INA has been given a go-ahead to acquire a stake in the East Damanhur (Block 10) exploration concession in the onshore part of Nile delta in Egypt. Under the contract, Croatia's oil and gas group will have a 20% stake in the project, the company reported on Tuesday. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- March 11th, Croatian Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Gordan Grlic-Radman said during a visit to Cyprus on Thursday that Croatia wanted to join the Med7 group. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- March 12th, the Portuguese presidency and Commissioner Ylva Johansson informed the Council that Croatia had successfully completed the Schengen evaluation procedure which began in June 2015 and ended in May

2019, the Ministry of Interior said in a press release. (www.hr.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Croatia enjoys political stability. The country completed the evaluation process for the accession in the Schengen zone and now it is in the hands of the political will of the Schengen member states to approve the entrance of the country to the mechanism. Illegal migration in borders with Bosnia remains a major problem for the country, despite the significant reduce of migrants last two months. With the weather getting better and warmer it is expected an increase on the migrant flows which seek to enter the EU zone through Croatia. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards.



CYPRUS: March 8th, Cyprus, Israel and Greece signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation in relation to the EuroAsia Interconnector, taking another step towards the implementation of an ambitious project to link the electricity grids of the three countries. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 9th, the EASTMED pipeline could be in place within five years, Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said on Tuesday, describing it as an extremely important project. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 12th, Cyprus took part in the annual aeronautical exercise "Noble Dina 2021" which took place in the west of the island between March 7th and 11th with forces from Greece,

France, USA, and Israel, the host country. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 14th, a video conference on EuroAfrica Interconnector project is expected to take place before the end of March between officials from the relevant Ministries of Cyprus, Greece and Egypt, in order to finalize the text of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), according to CNA sources. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 14th, following nine years of stop-start talks, the understanding reached earlier this week between Cyprus and Israel over developing the Aphrodite gas field was hailed as a “breakthrough.” (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Consultations continue in Cyprus in view of the 5+1 informal meeting for the Cypriot question scheduled on April 27th – 29th, 2021. Cypriot President, Nikos Anastasiades had a phone talk with the Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis for coordinating their actions. Greece joins the meeting as guarantor power together with Turkey and UK. Athens and Nicosia are in full line for the talks following the doctrine “Cyprus decides; Greece supports.” Expectations are very low since the two sides go to the meeting with substantial disagreements. Cypriot side advocates the solution of a bicomunal – bizonal federation with decentralized competencies for the federal parts, while the Turkish Cypriot community supports the idea of two independent and sovereign states. Increased activity was recorded last week in energy issues showing that Cyprus is determined to move forward its energy plans. Sign of MoU between Cyprus, Greece and

Israel for cooperation in the EuroAsia Interconnector project links the electricity grid of Israel with the EU via the Greek and Cypriot grids. Moreover, the EuroAfrica interconnector project is in full progress for linking the Egyptian electricity grid with Europe. In short, Cyprus is becoming a hub of electric power in Eastern Mediterranean and actually the mediator of linking Europe with Middle East and North Africa. In the natural gas sector there was a major progress since Cyprus and Israel have reached an agreement (on technical level) for developing the Aphrodite - Yishai field is a cross-border natural gas reservoir between the two countries and its exploitation was a thorn in relations of Nicosia and Tel Aviv. It should be noted that CHEVRON’s (which acquired NOBLE ENERGY) role was catalytic for pushing the two Governments to resolve the problem. Information for Turkey – Egypt approach on delimitating maritime zones could undermine not only the close relationship between Nicosia and Cairo, but also the energy plans of Cyprus. Nevertheless, Israel appeared determined to move forward with the EastMed pipeline; the Israeli Energy Minister claimed that the pipeline could become functional in five years. Turkey maintains a significant military force on the island (Army Corps seize). 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 8th, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias on Monday met with his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry in Cairo to

discuss bilateral relations. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 8th, Turkey criticized Greece again on Monday for keeping Navy ships in “demilitarized” islands of the eastern Aegean and sending a vessel to the small island of Kastellorizo, which is near Turkey, according to Turkish state-run Anadolu news agency. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 10th, Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) Spokesman Omer Celik has accused Greece of forging regional alliances aimed against his country. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 11th, the Greek Foreign Ministry announced on Wednesday that the 62nd round of exploratory contacts with Turkey will resume on March 16th, 2021 in Athens. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 12th, it emerged Thursday that Turkish soldiers fired shots into the air in two incidents on the land border in Evros on March 5th and 7th witnessed by Greek and German border guards patrolling the area under the umbrella of the EU’s border protection agency, FRONTEX. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 12th, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has dismissed Greece’s call for the return of the Parthenon Marbles to the country, arguing that the 2,500-year-old cultural treasures are “legally owned by the British Museum’s Trustees.” (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 12th, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis proposed on Friday reforms of the Police amid accusations of heavy-handed Police

tactics to quash street protests against Government policies. Greece is bracing for possible further protests amid concerns over the condition of Dimitris Koufodinas, a leftist terrorist serving multiple life sentences for murder who has been on hunger strike for more than two months. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 13th, the presence of the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean has provided the Hellenic Armed Forces with the opportunity to conduct several exercises with their American counterparts. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 14th, convicted terrorist Dimitris Koufodinas has ended his hunger strike after 66 days. Koufodinas, who is serving 11 consecutive life sentences plus 25 years for murders he committed as the main hitman of far-left terrorist group “November 17th” had begun the hunger strike demanding to be transferred to a prison of his choice. (www.ekathimerini.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Geopolitical challenges are demanding for Greece in a rather dynamic environment. Rumored approach between Ankara and Cairo has activated Greek foreign policy reflexes forcing the Greek Foreign Minister to travel in Egypt where he met his counterpart Sameh Shoukry. Dendias trip approved successful, since the two sides continue their close relation without setbacks. They also confirmed their bilateral agreement on maritime zones. Greece enjoys its upgrading role in the region as a reliable and stable ally of the US. Athens is seeking to further strengthen this relationship as a strategic priority for the country’s security. Furthermore, the

country is promoting a multilateral foreign policy on the basis of building strong cooperation models in the fields of economy, technology, defense, and energy. The 2nd round of the exploratory talks between Greece and Turkey will be held on March 16th – 17th, 2021 in Athens but still expectations are low. However, a qualitative change has been identified since the Turkish side has spoken for “political consultations” instead of “exploratory talks” (as the Greek side insists). Political consultations include a rather more free and flexible agenda which could consist of several issues (Muslim minority in Thrace, demilitarization of the East Aegean islands etc). The Greek Government implements an ambitious project for strengthening the Armed Forces seeking to strengthen the Navy and Air Force power by purchasing new frigates and fighter jets. Leftish terrorism is considered as a major threat in Greek security since there are several active cells (linked with one way or another) which could attack in state’s officials or infrastructure.



KOSOVO: March 9th, the EU’s High Representative Josep Borrell said on Tuesday that it is time to conclude the Belgrade - Pristina dialogue, recalling that the process was started 10 years earlier. (www.n1.info.com)

- March 11th, State Department special representative for the Western Balkans Mathew Palmer said on Thursday that Washington wants to see a strong Government in Pristina as its strong partner. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 14th, Kosovo officially opened its embassy in Jerusalem on Sunday the Radio Free Europe reported citing the statement of Kosovo’s

Foreign Affairs and Diaspora Ministry. (www.n1.info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Parliamentary elections of February 14th, 2021 have elected LVV and its leader, Albin Kurti as the undisputed winners of the Kosovo politics. Kurti will form a strong Government and actually his election signaled the end of Kosovo old politics. LVV triumph has provoked several chained reactions and changes in traditional political forces. The west does not trust Kurti and his radical political views which could be described as «destabilizers.” His political stance of downgrading dialogue with Serbia and his public call for unification with Albania are considered as dangerous for regional peace and stability. It could be assessed that the short life of the previous Kurti Government was a result of external actors’ pressure to overthrow it from power. Despite the new Government of Kosovo will be strong, it is assessed that it will face the EU and US pressure as long as Kurti appears as a hardliner. International stakeholders have already started to send their messages to Prishtina that Kosovo – Serbia dialogue must reach an end; a successful end meaning mutual recognition and normalization of relations between the two countries. According to Kurti, the new Government will focus on justice reform, fight of unemployment and management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Organized crime, corruption, money laundering, weak public administration, absence of rule of law, controlled justice, transactions between politicians and criminals are persistent “open sores” for Kosovo.



MOLDOVA: March 10th, the Socialist leader Igor Dodon said the overcoming of the political crisis faced by Moldova is possible only by dialogue between the Action and Solidarity Party (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS) and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM). The two parties should come to terms and invest a temporary Government or should adopt vital laws for the country. Amid the large-scale health crisis experienced by Moldova, the discussions about the swift organization of snap elections are cynical, IPN reports. (www.ipn.md)

- March 11th, Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM), Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) and Pro Moldova have reached a political consensus for the necessity of investing a Government with full powers that would manage the pandemic and economic crisis. (www.ipn.md)

- March 12th, if a Government is invested, elections this autumn will not be held, the president of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM) Igor Dodon stated, IPN reports. In such a case “elections will take place next March or April or in 2023 already,” Dodon said. (www.ipn.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political crisis and stalemate continue in Moldova affecting the country's stability and ability to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. Moldovan political forces are wasting their full

energy in a struggle for political power ignoring society's needs. The President, Maia Sandu appears isolated due to her political decisions by which she ignores the Parliament's competencies and undermines the state's constitutional order putting the country under the risk of bringing chaos. Currently, former President and leader of PSRM, Igor Dodon taking in advantage Sandu's mistakes appears as the “voice of responsibility” who puts the social interest above political struggles. It is certain that Dodon's political goal is to avoid snap elections by any mean depriving of Sandu the chance to capitalize its presidential victory by gaining political control of the Parliament. Constitutional Court has a central role in this political struggle by maintain constitutional order in the country. Dodon unveiled that PSRM, PDM, Pro Moldova and PPDA are held talks for the formation of an interim Government with full powers aiming to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Dodon, in such a scenario elections will not be held before spring of 2022 or in 2023. It could be assessed that Dodon despite his defeat in presidential elections he still is the main political actor in the country controlling political developments. Political crisis in the country might be in its beginning and more developments could occur in the near future. There are people who “dream” a Moldovan “orange revolution”, while there are international circles who are willing to support it. While the country faces a political anarchy society suffers from the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recession and social insecurity. Moreover, Moldovans are fed up with corrupted political elite which is interested only in its privileges ignoring social needs and demands. Moldova is a field of rivalry between the west and Russia and this affects the country's

stability and growth. The “Transnistrian case” is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: March 12th, the Italian - Russian consortium ENI - NOVATEK is to start the first exploratory drilling on March 25th, 2021. It is expected to show whether there is oil in the Montenegrin seabed, Minister of Capital Investments Mladen Bojanic and the State Secretary at the Ministry Marko Perunovic said at a press conference. (www.cdm.me)

- March 14th, the European Team for Niksic, comprising of the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore - DPS), Social Democrats (Socijaldemokrate - SD), Liberal Party of Montenegro (Liberalna Partija Crne Gore - LP) and Patriotic Komitas Union of Montenegro (Patriotsko-Komitski Savez Crne Gore - PKS CG), won the majority of seats in today's local elections in Niksic, followed by the bloc For the Future of Niksic – Democratic Front (Demokratski Front - DF) and Socialist People's Party of Montenegro (Socijalistička Narodna Partija Crne Gore - SNP) - which won 11 seats, Momo Koprivica – Peace is Our Nation – Democrats 10 seats, Dritan Abazovic – Black on White – Niksic Can Do It – 1 seat, Miodrag Daka Davidovic – People's Movement won 1 seat. The Niksic Assembly has 41 seats. (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Local elections in the second largest city of Montenegro, Niksic were a strong stress test for the country's political parties. The ruling

coalition achieved a great victory since they get 23 seats of the 41 seats Assembly leaving the President, Milo Djukanovic's (Niksic is his hometown) DPS with 18 seats. The result shows that the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian ruling coalition maintains its political power since the 2020 parliamentary elections, while the opposition DPS also retained its political influence in the same levels of 2020 elections. It is considered that Serbian SNS engaged actively in the elections by supporting the pro-Serbian DF. The Montenegrin Government is following a pro-Russian and Pro-Serbian policy although it looks like is trapped between its political desires and the pro-western orientation of the country as it has established so far. Montenegro is a member of NATO and a candidate for accession in the EU. However, these two organizations have started to show signs of mistrust towards the Montenegrin Government suspecting that the ruling coalition is promoting a secret agenda. Turbulence and political provocation against the Government motivated by foreign circles aiming to topple the ruling coalition could not be excluded. Montenegro needs 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. Montenegro is closer to the EU accession than any other Western Balkan country but current political situation puts at risk its European future.



NORTH MACEDONIA: March 9th, the Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev said that his grand coalition call is extended to all parties “and starts from now, after the local elections, after the

regular parliamentary elections or whenever.” Zaev committed himself in adopting a European model of governance helping the country to move forward and expediently in order to better serve the state’s citizens. (www.mia.mk)

- March 11th, leader of the main opposition party Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE), Hristijan Mickoski sent a letter to the Ambassadors in the country proposing that census should be postponed until September and local elections to be held from November 1st to 15th, 2021. (www.mia.mk)

- March 12th, European Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi called on North Macedonia to resolve the dispute with Bulgaria as soon as possible, so that it may be allowed to open EU accession talks. (www.republika.mk)

- March 12th, during the 11th session of the North Macedonia’s Security Council, its members discussed the Army’s strategic procurement in the coming period. (www.mia.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev after received a confidence vote for his Government he launched a rather ambiguous move by calling all political forces to join the ruling coalition; even the main opposition party DPMNE-VMRO. His call has provoked disputed reactions and actually it was considered as a sign of fear and weakness. He tried to rebut claiming that he visualizing a European perspective of governance and he did

not mean a coalition with all political forces of the country. Some experts believe that Zaev is trying to reach consensus between political forces in the country aiming to boost the state’s reforms and to become closer to Europe. Zaev’s move is assessed rather as a political maneuver than a substantial political initiative. The EU pushes North Macedonia to compromise with Bulgaria in order to boost its accession negotiations. European Enlargement Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi with his public statements transferred the burden of the Skopje – Sofia dispute to the North Macedonia’s administration. Besides, the former Yugoslav country is the one which is seeking to enter the EU, while Bulgaria is already a member of it.



ROMANIA: March 10th, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) will be completed in a few days and will be presented publicly, the Prime Minister Florin Citu said at the Parliament Palace. (www.nineoclock.ro)

- March 10th, the Social Democrats submitted, in the Senate, the simple motion against the Minister of Economy, Claudiu Nasui titled “*A Romania in agony with Nasui in the Economy.*” (www.nineoclock.ro)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The Government is preparing the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) aiming to put Romania back in the route of economic growth after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, opposition is complaining for lack of transparency regarding the plan requesting presentation of the project in the Parliament.

Following the adoption of the 2021 state budget by the Romanian Parliament it is assessed that the PNRR will be the next “battlefield” between the ruling coalition and the opposition. Opposition is strengthening its pressure towards the Government but the Government is stable, despite internal struggles in PNL. Romania suffers from corruption and shortage of rule of law while there is a strong need of reforming public administration and justice system. In other words, Romania should focus on these sectors in order to unblock its accession in Schengen area and the Eurozone. The country enjoys advanced upgrade in US and NATO strategic plans due to its geographical position located close to Russia. Strengthening of Romanian Armed Forces with sophisticated weapons (fighter jets, ground to air defense missile systems etc) is a priority not only for Romania itself but also for NATO. After redeployment of the US military forces from Germany, Romania is upgrading into the advanced bastion of NATO against 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.



SERBIA: March 8th, the representatives of Serbia’s 11 opposition parties and organizations submitted on Monday to the country’s Parliament a joint platform for negotiations on improving the election’s conditions with the ruling coalition under the European Parliament (EP) auspices. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 8th, Serbian Parliament Speaker Ivica Dacic said on Monday that he is not convinced that the European Parliament officials mediating

the inter-party dialogue will be objective. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 11th, Serbia’s Parliament Speaker Ivica Dacic said on Wednesday that the wire-tapping of President Aleksandar Vucic’s phone conversations helped by “system’s logistic” was a coup d’état and the destruction of the Constitutional order. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 12th, European Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi said on Friday that Brussels wants to step up the pace in negotiations with Serbia, adding that they were very slow in 2020 and that Belgrade should use the opportunity to continue dialogue with Pristina, the Beta news agency said. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 12th, a Serbian Parliament press release on Friday quoted US State Department envoy Mathew Palmer as saying that Washington wants a compromise solution found in the Belgrade - Pristina dialogue. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Extra-parliamentary opposition submitted its proposals’ framework for the inter-party dialogue with the ruling coalition under the EP auspices. However, the parliamentary majority expresses its mistrust towards the European mediators, while there is a big question regarding whom the extra-parliamentary opposition represents since does not have joined last elections. Under current circumstances expectations are low for a successful outcome which could normalize Serbian political life. The question is which situation will be configured after a failed dialogue taking into consideration that extra-parliamentary opposition said that protests will

breakout in the country in such a case. Realizing the close relations between Belgrade – Moscow and the strong influence Serbia exercises in Montenegro and Bosnia it is assessed that there are foreign actors which would seek to destabilize or topple the Serbian Government aiming to establish a new political reality in the country. Currently the ruling coalition has unveiled a wire-tapping scandal claiming that a conspiracy was executed seeking to destabilize the President, Aleksandar Vucic. The President himself claimed that a foreign actor is involved avoiding to become more specific. A number of top officials are involved in the case showing a security deficit in the ruling coalition. In dialogue with Kosovo, Serbia is waiting for the formation of the new Government in Prishtina and to evaluate its intentions. Corruption, organized crime, public administration accountability, media freedom are the main internal challenges for the country. Taking into consideration the close relation of Serbia and Russia and the harsh struggle for influence between the west and Moscow, social and political turbulence could not be excluded in the near future especially if “foreign actors” seek to destabilize Serbian political life. 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 10th, the EU Commission Vice President for Values and Transparency Vera Jourova pointed to continuous attempts to undermine the sustainable funding and the independence of the Slovenian Press Agency (STA) at an EU Parliament debate on media freedom in Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. She

also noted that frequent verbal attacks against journalists in the country were cause for concern. (www.sta.si)

- March 12th, the Government adopted on Thursday changes to the 2021 and 2022 budgets implementation act to allow for long-term financing of investments in the Slovenian Armed Forces in line with the long-term program of Army development and the mid-term defense program. (www.sta.si)

- March 12th, meeting over internal tensions for several hours yesterday, the council of the Modern Centre Party (Stranka Modernega Centra - SMC) decided the party is staying in the ruling coalition, according to party leader Zdravko Pocivalsek. (www.sta.si)

- March 14th, Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska Demokratska Stranka - SDS) President and Prime Minister Janez Jansa has announced in a letter to the party membership that the party will work in realizing the commitments from the coalition agreement, and he expects the same from partners. “Once a decision has been adopted, bringing it down or eroding it with help of opposition votes in the National Assembly is not acceptable. The SDS will not allow this anymore,” the letter says. He added that the majority of the opposition is destructive like nowhere in Europe, saying its acts in this time of great distress were hateful towards the homeland, nation and state. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The minority Government of Janez Jansa survives enjoying support from the opposition SNS and ethnic minorities’ MPs. Fragile stability of the

Government could be overthrown anytime forcing to collapse and early elections to be called. It is difficult to rule and forward reforms and hard political decisions under such circumstances. Taking into consideration that the Janez Jansa Government is considered (together with Hungarian and Polish Governments) as a “thorn” of the EU due to his alleged authoritarian practices and euro-sceptic approaches, it would not be a surprise a potential collapse from power. The EU continues to express its concerns for media situation in the country. The Slovenian Armed Forces face problems mainly in the field of modern equipment and manning. Their operational readiness is under question and it is assessed that they cannot accomplish their mission.



TURKEY: March 9th, Turkish military aircraft carrying a contingent of Somali commandos who had completed their training in Turkey landed in Somalia’s capital Mogadishu on Monday. The trainees will join the famous and most effective Army force called Gorgor (The Eagles) in the country, all trained by Turkey. (www.dailysabah.com)

- March 9th, Libya’s Prime Minister-designate Abdul Hamid Dbeibah said the Turkish - Libyan maritime agreement in the Eastern Mediterranean is in the interest of his country, as he urged all mercenaries to leave the country. (www.dailysabah.com)

- March 10th, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg highlighted the critical importance of Turkey, saying that one can easily see it by looking at the map. Stoltenberg said Turkey “has been of great importance,” citing its geographical

proximity to Iraq and Syria, the progress made in fighting the DAESH terrorist group and bases and airports there. (www.dailysabah.com)

- March 10th, Turkish and Russian officials laid the foundation for the third reactor of Turkey’s first nuclear power plant Akkuyu in the southern coastal city of Mersin on Wednesday. The plant’s first reactor unit is expected to be operational in 2023, the centenary of the Turkish Republic, and the remaining units in 2026. (www.aljazeera.com)

- March 12th, Turkey plans to host Afghanistan peace talks in Istanbul in April, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said, and Ankara will appoint an Afghanistan special envoy. (www.aljazeera.com)

- March 12th, Turkey and Egypt have made diplomatic-level contact after years long hiatus that began with the disruption of relations in 2013, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu announced Friday. (www.dailysabah.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Turkey continues to implement its President political doctrine “the world is bigger than five” meaning that Turkey is searching for its role in the international spectrum as a regional power. In this context Turkey implements a multilateral foreign policy which is strongly support it by military force wherever is necessary. Of course Turkey promotes its strategic interests, but open war fronts costs in human lives and in money affecting the Turkish economy. In the Libyan front, Turkey appears satisfied with the Prime Minister designate stance who said that the Libya – Turkey agreement on maritime zones is advantageous for Tripoli implying that the new

interim Government will continue to honor the agreement promoting the Turkish interests. Ankara is trying to benefit from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan seeking to get involved in the peace process between the Afghani Government and the Taliban. It was announced that peace talks between the two parts will be held in Turkey which will appoint a special envoy for the talks. After a long period of frozen relations the Turkish diplomacy is approaching Egypt seeking to normalize relations and to reach an agreement for maritime zones in Eastern Mediterranean Sea. It is a difficult plan since Egypt has already delimited its maritime zones with Greece, but it seems that Cairo is open in negotiations seeking to gain as much as it can. However, such an approach will take time due to the lost trust between the two countries. Simultaneously, Turkey leaks that Israel is also ready to talk with it. It is obvious that Ankara is seeking to cause a rift in the Cyprus, Greece, Israel and Cyprus, Greece, Egypt cooperation especially in the energy and defense sectors. Actually, Turkey is trying to escape from isolation it has entered in Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey continues its active support in Somali Government by sending humanitarian aid, constructing infrastructure and training the Army. NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg praised Turkish critical role in the western security architecture making clear that it is an integral part of the alliance. 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.

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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.*