



**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 24th, the EU Foreign Ministers decided today in favor of opening accession talks with Albania and Northern Macedonia. Immediately after decision the EU Ambassador to Tirana, Luigi Soreca reacted by stating that the EU would continue to stand by Albania, and also congratulated the country on the big step towards the EU, calling it an “historic day.” In his post, Soreca said that from today Albania has a new status vis-à-vis the EU, as a series of new rules will be implemented which will help the Albanian people to join the European family as soon as possible. He pointed out that besides the work of the Government an effort of the whole society is required, which will need cooperation of all institutions, the opposition and civil society. (www.top-channel.com)

- March 27th, On Thursday, the EU leaders endorsed the decision to open EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The political decision was taken on Tuesday by the General Affairs Council, which comprises of Ministers of Foreign and European Affairs of the EU. The European Commission is now expected to draft a negotiation framework for Albania and North Macedonia with specific guidelines for negotiations, which should start as soon as possible after the framework is approved. Unlike North Macedonia, Albania will have to show progress in a number of areas before negotiations start in practice at the first intergovernmental conference. (www.exit.al)

- March 28th, the number of people infected with COVID-19 in our country has jumped to 197 after 11 new cases were registered in the last 24 hours. Silva Bino from the Institute of Public Health stated “Epidemiologists in every local health care

unit from north to south, are doing a tremendous job of identifying contacts in a timely manner, after verifying the suspected cases. During the last 24 hours two patients have died in the Infectious Disease Hospital, a 67-year-old man from Tirana and a 72-year-old woman from Vlora. The Ministry of Health expresses condolences to the families of the deceased. There are currently 74 hospitalized patients, 4 of which in intensive care. The rest are in stable condition until this moment,” Bino said. (www.top-channel.tv)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

With the COVID-19 epidemic on full evolvement Albania celebrated a positive decision by the European Council to start accession negotiations with the EU. Nevertheless, Europe’s decision on Albania is not absolutely clear since reforms should be implemented before the first intergovernmental session. In other words, the EU acknowledges that Albania is not 100% ready to start the negotiation process due to open issues such as fight against corruption and organized crime, reform of public administration and adoption of legislation on protection of national minorities. COVID-19 did not leave much space for political celebration. The Government, opposition and citizens are focus on tackling the pandemic. Despite the positive decision of the European Council, 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.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

March 23rd, International Administrator in Bosnia, Valentin Inzko, urged Bosnian authorities on Monday to promptly adopt a regular state-level budget for 2020, thus helping the unhindered fight against the spread of the new coronavirus in the country. The international community's High Representative, in charge of overseeing the civilian implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia, said he fully supports coordinated measures taken by the authorities at different levels of Government in BiH to fight the coronavirus pandemic. These challenging times have shown that political and institutional leaders can effectively work together for the same purpose, he added. Inzko noted that *“these measures include, first and foremost, ensuring the uninterrupted, adequate financing and unimpeded functioning of Bosnia's institutions. To that end, it is the responsibility of the Bosnia's Council of Ministers, Presidency and the Parliamentary Assembly to promptly adopt a regular state-level budget for 2020,”* he said in his statement. He argued that this would remove limitations arising from temporary financing that can seriously impact Bosnia's ability to adequately respond to

the COVID-19 crisis or any other extraordinary situation that the country may confront. *“The absence of a budget would also affect the ability of Bosnia's institutions to discharge their constitutional and legal obligations, including the organization of the October 2020 Municipal Elections, as well as numerous other important issues,”* the statement said. *“Politicians should under no circumstance use this crisis to push other agendas,”* the statement added. Also, he said, unilateral and uncoordinated activities have limited value to fight the COVID-19 crisis. On the contrary, they drain attention and resources from areas where their presence and assistance could be of real use for the citizens, Inzko argued. The High Representative also urged citizens to fully follow the instructions of the authorities. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 29th, the Civil Protection Administration of the Bosniak-Croat shared Federation entity amended its previous curfew order on Sunday, loosening it by two hours, but it also introduced an additional measure of face masks. The curfew order was changed from the previous 6 pm – 5 am, to 8 pm – 5 am and a new order was introduced for people walking outside the curfew. From now on, everyone walking in the streets or outside of their apartment must wear a face mask or a cloth covering their mouth and nose. Apart from the mask, all citizens must keep a minimum of 1.5 meters distance between them. These orders will be effective immediately, the Civil Protection Administration said. The total number of confirmed cases in Bosnia and Herzegovina is now over 320. On March 28th, 2020 Republica Srpska (RS) has declared a state of emergency over the coronavirus pandemic, aimed at making the decision-making process faster and easier.

During the 12th emergency session of the Republika Srpska (RS) parliament, the MPs adopted the decision on State of Emergency for the territory of this entity due to the epidemiological situation in this entity where 162 patients are confirmed to have contracted the new coronavirus. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- March 29th, Bosnian Security Minister, Fahrudin Radoncic commented about the migrant crisis, stating that Bosnia and Herzegovina is maximum responsible when it comes to humanitarian part, and sent a message to people who are worrying about the status of illegal migrants to put a pressure on Governments of European countries to accept them, Srna reports. *“I have free-of-charge advice for all people worrying about the status of illegal migrants – pressure on Governments of European countries to accept migrants and demonstrate much more solidarity,”* Radoncic told Srna commenting on the writing of the British Guardian about Bosnia’s attitude towards migrants. Radoncic has said that illegal migrants did not come to BiH to stay but are on their way to Western European countries. The British Guardian wrote about two crises that hit BiH, the migrants and the coronavirus, saying that the fear from infection led to urgent measures and relocation of those people to tents in a remote camp Lipa, which does not guarantee safe life, reports the Klix internet portal. The paper saw a document in which the city of Bihac civil defense headquarters asked that the move be carried out *“in order to take urgent measures to prevent the onset of the disease caused by Covid-19,”* the Srpska Times reports. The paper says that the setting up of a camp in Lipa, a village about 25 km from the border with Croatia, started a few days ago, prompting panic among asylum seekers

and volunteers, who fear the measure will not guarantee any assistance to migrants. The paper says that among the main problems is the concern over access to water, heat and electricity, as well as a feeling that the move marks a further deterioration in their living conditions. The British paper says, among other things, that the decision to move migrants to Lipa has sparked a row in the country, with representatives of Serbs, who returned to Bosnia’s Federation entity after fleeing during the war, complaining that the Muslim migrants living in the new tent camp near the village could be a threat to their livelihoods. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

High Representative, Valentin Inzko underlined the need for adopting the state budget for 2020 as a necessary step towards fight against COVID-19. Although, the pandemic forced politicians from the three entities to work together and make decisions for the good of public health, Inzko’s statement highlights the problems on decision-making process in the country. In simple words, the country has not adopted the state budget for 2020. 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 23rd,

Bulgaria's Parliament voted to approve the President, Rumen Radev's veto on the State of Emergency Measures Act. The law was passed on March 13th, 2020 and provided for regulating the measures and actions during the month-long state of emergency introduced in connection with the coronavirus epidemic, BNT reported. The MPs voted to accept the removal of the two provisions, vetoed by the Head of State. Radev had vetoed a state regulation on the prices of goods and services while the state of emergency is in force. On March 20, the law makers adopted an amendment to the Consumer Protection Act, moved by the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya - BSP), which would oblige all business entities to sell goods and services to the public at the same prices as before the state of emergency was declared. The amendments provided for sanctioning the breaches by a fine of 20,000 to 100,000 BGN for

individuals and a pecuniary penalty of 5% of the annual turnover for the previous year for legal entities. The other vetoed provision that Parliament dropped on Monday amended the Penal Code to increase the penalty for the dissemination of false information about the spread of a contagious disease, from two years of imprisonment to a maximum custodial sentence of three years and a fine of 1,000 to 10,000 BGN. If significant harmful consequences have ensued from the act, the penalty was envisaged to be up to five years of imprisonment and a fine of 10,000-50,000 BGN. (www.novinite.com)

- March 24th, between February 20th and March 20th, 2020 the number of people to have registered as unemployed rose by 0.3%, Bulgaria's Labor and Social Policy Ministry said citing preliminary data from the Employment Agency. The figures were released a day after comments in a television interview by Labor and Social Policy Minister Denissa Sacheva about the increase in unemployment in the context of the COVID-19 situation in Bulgaria. The Ministry's statement said that between March 16th and 20th, 2020 a total of 6,894 people, including people who had returned from abroad, had registered at the Labor Bureau as unemployed. During the same period, 3,221 registered unemployed had got jobs. Since the beginning of March, a total of 11,871 job vacancies have been announced at the Labor Bureau. The Ministry said that between March 16th and 20th, 2019 a total of 5,190 people had registered at the Labor Bureau as unemployed and 6,085 people had got jobs. Of those who had registered as unemployed between March 16th and 20th, 2020 this year, 16.6% had been employed in manufacturing, 14.3% in trade and repair of motor vehicles, 8% at hotels and restaurants, and 7.3%

in Government. The total number of registered unemployed at the Labor Offices as of March 20th was 203,615. That was 635 or 0.3% more than on February 20th, 2020 when the figure was 202,980, the Ministry said. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- March 28th, Bulgaria welcomes the accession of North Macedonia as a full member of NATO, the Foreign Ministry in Sofia said. *“This historic act, together with the expected start of EU accession negotiations, will make the country a credible ally with a contribution to the security and democratic progress of the region and the Euro-Atlantic area,”* Bulgaria’s Foreign Ministry said. This is also an important event for NATO, for its efforts to expand the area of security and stability and to realize the vision born in 1989 to build a united, free and peaceful Europe. It also sends a strong signal to other candidate countries on the continuation of NATO’s open door policy and the importance of efforts to implement internal reforms and preparation for membership, the statement said. The accession of North Macedonia to NATO is a special moment for Bulgaria as well, the Foreign Ministry said. *“It is a success for our consistent policy in support of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries of the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region, and the expansion of the area of security, stability, shared values and prosperity around our borders. Our southwestern neighbor assumes its share of responsibilities and obligations stemming from membership, including collective security and defense. Its membership in the North Atlantic Alliance gives a new dimension to our allied security and defense relations, while addressing global and regional problems and challenges in the Euro-Atlantic area,”* the Ministry said. Bulgaria expects joint activities

between its Armed Forces within NATO to contribute both to the development of defense capabilities and interoperability, as well as to help overcome the stereotypes and prejudices towards Bulgaria that have been historically imposed on society, the statement said. *“We will continue to look for results in strengthening the rule of law, freedom of the media, reforming the security sector, especially with regard to the transformation of special services and the complete breaking of ties to the totalitarian past, bringing the Armed Forces into line with NATO standards, and concrete steps for the good faith implementation of the Treaty of Friendship, Neighborliness and Co-operation in such a way as to guarantee its irreversibility,”* the Ministry concluded. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The President, Rumen Radev’s veto on emergency state regulation was approved by the Parliament. 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 26th, Croatia repatriating 105 troops who have completed their tour of duty in Afghanistan as part of NATO's Resolute Support peace mission. The Government decided on Thursday that Croatian military personnel would be flown back by Croatia Airlines after their return was temporarily delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Repatriation of the 11th Croatian contingent from Afghanistan was scheduled to take place on March 27th, 2020. A total of 140 troops are returning from Afghanistan, including 105 Croatians and 35 soldiers from allied partner countries Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania. According to the Ministry of Defense, the contingent has already transferred its duty to the 12th contingent which comprises 108 soldiers. Defense Minister Damir Krsticevic said that any further delays in the repatriation of the 11th contingent would represent a health and safety risk, saying *“the safety of every Croatian soldier is an absolute priority.”* (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- March 28th, the Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said on Saturday the economic damage caused by COVID-19 would be worse than the 2008 global economic crisis and that Croatia would put forward new measures to help the economy. *“We responded promptly with 63 measures, very clearly presenting what is most important at this time, facilitating all we can, notably for the private sector. Next week we will propose another set of measures,”* he told reporters in Laz Bistricki. Given that there are no indications when a vaccine will be available, we do not know how much time we will need to acquire immunity, so *“all that puts us in special circumstances,”* Plenkovic said. The Government

will adopt decisions in the best interest of Croatian citizens, *“finding liquidity and funds in every way possible, both on the domestic and the international market,”* he added. Everything will depend on the duration of this crisis, he said, reiterating that Croatia would receive 1.16 billion euro from the EU's coronavirus investment plan and that part of the first installment of 240 million euro would arrive early next month. We will use all the European funds at our disposal to fight the pandemic and try to explain, after calculating the damage, all that can help us at European level to deal with the effects of last Sunday's earthquake in the Zagreb area, Plenkovic said. Asked if the law which envisages covering only 5% of the damage caused in an earthquake would be amended, he said the relevant Ministry was working on the amendments. We will try to find a solution that takes into account the specificities of this earthquake, which was big and has affected a huge number of people, he added. Reporters also asked him if Croatian companies were complying with coronavirus precautions and if employers had ensured sufficient protective equipment for their workers. *“Yesterday I spoke with Chinese Prime Minister Li; they will give part of their donations. The rest we ordered from big Chinese companies, materials, protective equipment, primarily for hospitals, but also for all other services which must have it, the Police, firefighters, customs officials, inspectors, the Army. There will be enough given that we want to have supplies for an extended period of time for all who need it,”* Plenkovic said. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- March 29th, Fifty-six new COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in Croatia, which puts their total number at 713, and a sixth patient has died, the

National Civil Protection Authority said on Sunday. *“The current satisfactory situation is a result of joint efforts by medical professionals, the Civil Protection Authority and citizens. If we keep fighting against the epidemic this way, I believe that we will have as few harmful consequences as possible, which is why responsible behavior is key to success,”* Health Minister Vili Beros said at a news conference. Six patients suffering from COVID-19 have died. A total of 5,900 samples have been tested, 26 patients are on respirators and 52 have recovered. A plane from Shanghai carrying 13 tons of protective equipment is expected to land in Zagreb around 2.20 p.m. today, and it is the first in a number of planes that will be bringing the necessary deliveries to Croatia in the coming weeks, Beros said. (www.hr.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Earthquake hit in Zagreb two weeks ago (March 22nd, 2020) has caused several damages, while 30 people got injured and a fifteen year old girl died. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread, although situation in Croatia is controlled. The Prime Minister, Andrej Pljenkovic announced that it might be followed by an economic crisis harder than the 2008 one. Croatia currently holds the EU Presidency. 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 23rd, according to Halkin Sesi the so-called “Minister of Interior” Eisegtoul Baibars held a meeting yesterday in the occupied Trikomo regarding the fate of the 175 immigrants who arrived yesterday on the shores of the occupied Karpasia. Baybars said it had contacted Turkey’s Immigration Office, but Turkey did not allow migrants to enter the country due to anti-coronavirus measures. She said that during the meeting it was decided to accommodate these people in local hotels. He also noted that they have been in contact with the UN because some immigrants want to go to Republic of Cyprus where their families are located; but at this stage it does not seem possible to be accepted because of anti-coronavirus measures. According to SigmaLive, the ship was stopped on March 20th, 2020 by Cypriot Coast Guard & Naval Police off the coast of Cabo Greco. After food, water and fuel were offered, they were asked to leave the Republic’s territorial waters, informing illegal immigrants that the border was strictly closed due to the international coronavirus epidemic. The ship left occupied by Turkey areas of Cyprus. On March 21st, 30 to 40 Arab relatives of the migrants went to the closed roadblock on Ledra Street asking duty Police Officers about

their relatives who arrived in the occupied territories. (www.sigmalive.com)

- March 29th, Famagusta Reference Hospital and Sheba Medical Centre in Israel, will cooperate and exchange expertise amid the COVID-19 pandemic. An announcement issued by the Health Ministry in Cyprus says that cooperation is taking place following a suggestion by the Dean of the Medical Faculty of the University of Nicosia and the Director General of Sheba. The ICUs of the Nicosia General Hospital and the Sheba Centre will also begin the exchange of treatment protocols and expertise to better support the patients. It was announced on Thursday that Cyprus would be sending a quantity of chloroquine, which was not specified, to Israel in return for 50 respirators to the island. Only days before, the Times of Israel reported that Israeli generic drug company Teva would provide 10 million doses of the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine free of charge to US hospitals. The anti-malaria drug is being trialed in a number of countries after a handful of studies indicated it could mitigate the effects of COVID-19. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- March 29th, the Health Ministry announced one new death and 35 new cases of COVID-19 bringing the death toll to 6 and the total confirmed cases to 214, five of which are in the British bases. It was the highest jump so far in numbers. Thirty-one of the cases were from contact tracing and two concerned people whose history was being investigated. Two of the new cases were people who had been in Europe recently. The death involved a 68-year-old man who was in the Nicosia hospital ICU. Member of the Government's advisory body on the pandemic, Dr Leontios Kostrikis, who announced the latest

numbers, said that it was difficult to predict the curve at this time. At the same time, he emphasized that many of the incidents were transmitted through a family environment and said people should avoid large family gatherings. Tougher measures to restrict contacts could not be ruled out, he added. In the same time, Turkish Cypriot authorities confirmed two more cases of coronavirus were recorded in the north on Sunday, bringing the total to 64, while it was confirmed the first death due to the disease. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Measures against COVID-19 remain active in Cyprus. It is noticed current de-escalation of Turkish provocations against Cyprus due to COVID-19 spread. However, violation of Cypriot sovereign rights by Turkish research vessels has become "normality" 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. It is assessed that when the ENI – TOTAL consortium will start drills in block 6 tension will rise again in the region. 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 25th, in a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry on Wednesday, Greece accused Turkey of undermining stability in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. The statement was seen as a response to the submission earlier this month by Turkey's permanent representative to the UN Feridun Sinirlioglu of a document that contained geographical coordinates based on the contentious maritime boundaries accord signed between Ankara and Libya's Tripoli-based Government in November. "[Turkey] once more insists on not recognizing the Republic of Cyprus, which is a member of the EU and the UN, on not recognizing the sovereign rights of the Greek islands, [and] on blatantly violating the International Law of the Sea," the Ministry said. It said Greece will "continue to respect international law as the cornerstone of peace and stability across the world." "It continues to demand respect for the islands' sovereign right to a continental shelf and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and to emphasize that illegal and invalid agreements do not produce any legal effect," it said. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 27th, despite the apparent evacuation of a makeshift camp set up by migrants at the border region between Greece and Turkey, forces will remain in the area to ensure that nobody attempts to break through the fence, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said in a teleconference with Cabinet Ministers on Friday to discuss situation at

the Evros region. Mitsotakis said migrants also seem to have left the area and thanked the Police and the Army for protecting the border over the past month. He said that, although tensions have subsided, the country should maintain a "human, technological and physical mechanism" that will ensure that borders remain safe. Tensions erupted at the border after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan abruptly decided in late February to unilaterally suspend a 2016 accord to halt migratory flows to the EU. Hundreds of migrants headed to the border with Greece where they camped out for about a month, often clashing with Greek border guards and Police in their efforts to get into the country. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- March 29th, by mid-April, we should be in a position to know whether the strict lockdown measures the Greek Government has taken to check the spread of coronavirus – from closing down schools to limiting out-of-house trips altogether – have worked, Health Minister Vassilis Kikilias says. "I know this demands patience and discipline, but I believe no one wants to put his health, or his family's, at risk," Kikilias told TV station Skai Sunday morning. As for the disease itself, it says it is expanding, but at a pace that allows hospitals and the public health system to cope. He warned that April is "a very crucial month" and that there should be no relaxation of measures because it is very easy to envisage "catastrophic scenarios" if people stop staying at home. "No one should let their guard down," Kikilias said, adding that this is the new patriotism. The Health Minister said that over 4,200 hires of doctors and other medical staff in the public health system had been approved and that most had actually taken up their posts. As for the capacity of the system to treat cases, he said

public and private hospitals now have 870 intensive care places “and we continue adding more” and that an order for 600 more ventilators had been placed. (www.ekathimerini.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Greece is doing well with COVID-19 spread avoiding situation such of Italy and Spain. Virus' spread is fully controlled due to early reaction of the Greek Government and state authorities. Turkey forced to withdraw migrants from borders with Greece due to COVID-19 spread de-escalating tension between the two countries. However, Greek security forces are on high alert regarding possible new migrant waves in land borders or the Aegean Sea. In political level, the Government enjoys citizens' confidence due to its policy and reaction in migrant issue and COVID-19. In other words, the center-right Government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis is absolutely successful in “hot” issues such as the refugee case and COVID-19. It is assessed that it is very possible Mitsotakis to call for early parliamentary elections in early autumn trying to capitalize his success. 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 25th, Kosovo Government has lost a no-confidence vote, leading to its collapse. The motion in Albin

Kurti's Government was triggered by junior coalition partner – Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK). A transitional Government is now expected to take over amidst coronavirus pandemic crisis. Kosovo lawmakers brought down the Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) - LDK Government of Prime Minister Albin Kurti late on Wednesday, following a vote of no confidence. The motion was supported by opposition parties. Kurti who was voted on February 3rd, 2020 will remain as a caretaker Prime Minister in the meantime. LDK which was part of the coalition initiated the motion after Kurti sacked the Minister of Internal Affairs, Agim Veliu, a senior member of LDK after a dispute over whether to declare a state of emergency to prevent further spread of coronavirus. Speaker of the Parliament, Vjosa Osmani, who is Deputy Head of LDK has voted against the motion of no-confidence and criticized her party for the initiative. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 26th, Ana Pisonero, Spokesperson for Neighborhood and Enlargement in the European Commission has reacted following Kosovo's Parliament vote of no-confidence in Albin Kurti's Government on Wednesday. She said the vote of no-confidence puts Kosovo in a difficult political situation at a time of an unprecedented crisis caused by coronavirus, Gazeta Express reports. Pisonero said Kosovo needs political stability to tackle the coronavirus crisis. “*What Kosovo needs is stability and to direct all efforts to tackle the coronavirus crisis and protect the health of people,*” she wrote in social media. Further Pisonero urged all political leaders of Kosovo to act responsibly and in the interest of the people of Kosovo. “*All political leaders have now to act*

responsibly and in the interest of the people of Kosovo. The next steps after yesterday's vote should be taken in accordance with Kosovo's Constitution," Pisnero stated. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- March 26th, Kosovo's health authorities announced Thursday 15 new coronavirus cases bringing total number to 86. Despite increase of numbers Minister of Health, Arben Vitia, said that one of the patients has been fully recovered after he was tested twice negative on COVID-19. Country's Institute of Public Health issued a statement saying that they have tested dozens of samples on Thursday, and confirmed that 15 of the cases have been tested positive on virus. *"All cases were known previously and were in self-isolation,"* the Institute said. According to the press release all patients are from Malisheva municipality who were in contacts with one of the patients already confirmed positive with COVID-19. Kosovo Government on Thursday has decided to keep the school closed indefinitely and has taken restrictive measures to prevent further spread of coronavirus. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political crisis in Kosovo overshadowed the COVID-19 spread. Although measures have been taken and spread is not uncontrolled, politics are on the forefront of interest. The Kosovo Government of Albin Kurti collapsed after a confidence motion submitted by its minor partner LDK. At this difficult time with the pandemic on its peak Kosovo needs political stability and cohesion. It seems that the President Hashim Thasi is the winner in a harsh struggle with Kurti. It is assessed that the US had an active role in undermining Kurti's power, as from the very first

moment relations between the Kosovo Prime Minister and the US administration were "frozen". 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 23rd, media NGOs in Moldova signed a common protest on Sunday, accusing the authorities of lacking transparency about the scale of the coronavirus pandemic in the country. *"Non-governmental organizations in the media ask the state authorities and institutions to ensure correct and professional collaboration with media institutions, refraining from unfounded accusations and insinuations against journalists who request public interest information to inform objectively and completely,"* the petition signed by eight media NGOs says. It comes after two cases of infected doctors from different hospitals were reported on March 19th and 22nd, 2020. However, the authorities did not confirm them in the first phase. Only media outlets reported about them. Authorities have also avoided giving out precise data on medical supply stocks and specific numbers related to the pandemic. *"They have blamed the press for criticism but, in fact, they do not offer complete information about the epidemiological crisis ... The Prime Minister and President have responded harshly to reactions of media outlets who were trying to find out more information,"* Cornelia Cozonac, Director of the Center for Investigative Journalism in Moldova,

told BIRN. She said journalists are forbidden to ask live questions during press briefings on the pandemic, and even those who are allowed to ask written questions do not get straight answers. *“It is not normal in this crisis. Authorities need to be much more open because they are asking citizens to cooperate as well. We, as journalists, want the authorities to be responsible, and to provide as accurate information as possible and to answer journalists’ questions to better inform the citizens,”* she added. Moldovan media have called on authorities to at least organize video conferences with free Q&A sessions. No response has come as yet to this suggestion. On March 19th, 2020 the authorities opened a free online platform to present the numbers of infected cases in every district of the country, but on Monday, after the technical suspension of the website, it required a user and password. The President Igor Dodon on Monday at a press briefing accused some media of trying to *“make a show”* about public health situation in Moldova. *“For some media sources that lately are trying to speculate and get things out of context – when I said there are 2,000 places ready [in hospitals], then that means there are that many. When we said that there are only 500 [ventilator] machines in Chisinau, someone tried to interpret that as are only 500 [bed] places. It is not correct. Of 94 [coronavirus] cases, only two needed these devices,”* he said. Both Dodon and Prime Minister Ion Chicu and his communication team have repeatedly accused the media of not properly informing population. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- March 25th, decisions taken by authorities on COVID-19 pandemic have been extended to the left bank of the Dniester, and the Bureau for Reintegration discusses daily with Heads of

districts and Mayors of the Security Zone. Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration Cristina Lesnic made the statement today. From March 23rd, 2020 an operative mechanism of cooperation between the Bureau for Reintegration and local public administration in the Security Zone has been implemented. *“Every day, in the morning, the office colleagues have direct communication with the district heads and the mayors of the Security Zone to find out the problems and try to come up with solutions,”* Lesnic said. She noted that it was decided that certain categories of people will not be quarantined when they enter the Security Zone, provided that they will not come into contact with other people. It is about farmers who have land on the left bank of the Dniester, prison officials, Police officers, ambulance employees and firemen, as well as workers from the electricity and gas networks. The official said that during the state of emergency, the activity of the two offices of the Public Services Agency in Răbnița and Tiraspol will be stopped. According to data by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Protection, six cases of COVID-19 infection have been registered to the left bank of the Dniester so far. (www.moldpres.md)

- March 26th, the Head of the Commission for Emergency Situations, Prime Minister Ion Chicu today evening said that, if the dynamic of increase in the number of people infected with COVID-19 is maintained, Moldova would have up to 2,000 people sick with coronavirus till April 10th, 2020. According to the Prime Minister, this number will put Moldova’s medical system to a tough test. Chicu noted that neither the developed countries, which invested much in the medical system, coped with the expansion of the killing virus on these days. *“I tell with quite sincerely; the danger*

is major to our life. If we continue to be irresponsible, many people will die,” he said. The Commission for Emergency Situations has instructed preparation of alternative rooms for hospitalization of new patients; halls, hotels, where improvised hospitals will be arranged, but without the needed level of medical assistance. *“The exceeding of the figure of 3,000 - 4,000 infected people means that we will not be able to provide assistance to everybody,”* Chicu added. The Prime Minister reiterated the call to all citizens to observe rules and bans established by the authorities. Today, the Commission for Emergency Situations approved new restrictive measures for residents, among which the prohibition of the presence on streets of groups of more than three people, if they are not members of a family. (www.moldpres.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Moldova continues its restrictive and precautionary measures to tackle spread of COVID-19. However, there are complaints for controversial methods of the Government regarding media information. The Government is accused of lack of transparency regarding information on COVID-19. 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 23rd, last year and this year as well, Montenegrin Police has filed seven criminal charges against seven people on the grounds of provoking panic and chaos. Experts have different views on whether it is necessary to toughen penalty policy, but there are those who believe it should be toughened. Velimir Rakocevic, a criminologist, said that causing panic and chaos *“produces negative consequences that affect citizens, society and country as a whole.”* According to him, this delict reflects negatively on public order and peace and the implementation of state decisions. *“There is no one single reason for fear in Montenegro because the Government did its best to protect citizens. It is essential that we all stay calm and composed, to get the information about the important elements of prevention of infection and completely obey the orders of the National Coordination Authority,”* Rakocevic says. He thinks spreading misinformation in such situations should be punished more strictly. *“Montenegrin criminal legislation stipulates a fine for such forms of crimes, a prison sentence of up to one year, three years if the crime is more serious,”* Rakocevic

said. On the other side, Gorica Vujisic, lawyer, says that Montenegrin Criminal Code prescribes appropriate punishment. (www.cdm.me)

- March 24th, leader of the Democratic Union of Albanians (Demokratska Unija Albanaca – DSA), Nikola Camaj, announced that the Albanian political parties have been negotiating running on a joint slate in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. In an interview with Dan he also told the Albanian parties do not consider the postponement of the parliamentary elections as the opposition is requiring. Camaj pointed out that the Albanian parties have been negotiating, convinced that it is the right thing to do. *“The Albanian parties are already negotiating the possibility of running for the upcoming elections jointly, and there are some signals they will do it,”* he said. According to him, certain political parties are continuously trying to derail the attempts to implement the election reforms. *“We do not think about the postponement of elections as we hope the current circumstances will stabilize soon. I do not expect we will reach the agreement on the election reform, as certain political parties are continuously derailing any such attempt,”* he added. (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 27th, the Public Health Institute (IJZ) of Montenegro has confirmed a new case of the coronavirus. Thus, the number of patients in Montenegro has increased to 70. Patients being treated at the Clinical Center of Montenegro have stable vital parameters, said the health institution. *“45 samples were analyzed since yesterday’s breakdown at 6pm. The new coronavirus was confirmed in one person while the findings were negative in 44 people,”* the IJZ said. In Montenegro there is a total of 70 infected with the new coronavirus. There are 6,258 people under medical and sanitary supervision in Montenegro. (www.rtcg.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

COVID-19 cases increased in Montenegro but situation is still under control. 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 23rd, the State Electoral Commission stopped work on preparing the early general elections that are planned for April 12th, 2020 after interim Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski said that the Government will use its emergency powers to postpone the elections. Parliament dissolved in mid February and Speaker Talat Xhaferi said it cannot reconvene, leaving North Macedonia in a legislative limbo. The leaders of all major parties agreed to postpone the elections, but a meeting of experts at President Pendarovski's office failed to come up with a sustainable legal option how this should be done. The State Electoral Commission continue to work on its preparations until yesterday, given that the elections have not been canceled, but given healthcare concerns and Spasovski's announcement it has now stopped working. Spasovski says that preparations will continue from where they left off after the state of emergency is lifted. 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 Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) and the right-wing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - 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.republica.mk)

- March 23rd, “starting from today, members of the Military Police will active engage in securing objects of vital importance among which are the Government, the Parliament and the prisons in Skopje. Reorganization is conducted including strengthening the security at the presidential residence with members of the Army. Securing will be conducted with combined teams that include Police units,” the Ministry of Defense informed. The press release also said that the Army members will be securing facilities wearing Army uniforms, and they shall be armed with their formation weaponry. In the past two days, they were getting acquainted with authorizations,

procedures, and duties related to this task. *“Securing these facilities is conducted with total coordination with the Ministry of Interior, and is based upon the Decree for determining the tasks of the Army during the period of state emergency. In this manner, the Ministry of Defense and the Army will be taking a part of MOI’s obligations and will allow the Police forces to focus their capacities on their tasks which primary goal is obeying the declared Government measures to prevent the coronavirus spread,”* the press release said. (www.meta.mk)

- March 24th, North Macedonia is starting the EU accession negotiations, said today the Interim Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski. He said that the EU General Committee has reached a consensus that the country has to start the EU membership negotiations as soon as possible. *“Verification of our efforts, capacities and political will of our institutions to implement the reforms that were set as our goal in 2017 has arrived. We closed the four pillars – the judiciary and the rule of law, reform of the intelligence services, public administration and fight against crime and corruption. We managed to achieve impressive results in all of these areas. This was unanimously verified by the EU member countries. Without the Prespa Agreement and the Good neighborly Agreement with Bulgaria the today’s success would not have been possible. This success is the end of our 15 years of waiting since we were granted the status of a country candidate. Waiting is over, the reforms have lifted the barrier, the road is open,”* Spasovski said. He also said that the NATO membership and the start of the EU accession negotiations represent a new phase in the country’s development. The Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs, Bujar

Osmani said that we have traversed a long, difficult and heavy road in order to reach this moment. He said that the European Commission received a *“carte blanche”* to start creating the so called negotiation framework for North Macedonia that will help organize the first inter-government conference that will denote the negotiations’ official start. The Foreign Affairs Minister Nikola Dimitrov stressed that despite the difficult circumstances created by the coronavirus *“we are grateful that the EU gave credit for the accomplishments.”* (www.meta.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

State politics overshadow the COVID-19 spread. The country received a positive recommendation by the European Council to start accession negotiations with the EU. It was a positive decision which may affect internal political atmosphere. More specifically, the outgoing Government of SDSM gained valuable time due to the COVID-19 and postponement of early parliamentary elections. So it achieved finally to accomplish its two strategic goals; accession to NATO and opening of accession negotiations with the EU. Now, it will have the necessary time to capitalize its achievements with the elections ahead. The country continues with a caretaker Government including members from both SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE. Political uncertainty and instability remains as long as the country does not have a stable Government. 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 23rd, the alliance of reformist parties in Romania, Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salvați România - USR) - Freedom, Unity and Solidarity Party (Partidul Libertății, Unității și Solidarității - PLUS), will talk to the other political parties to postpone the elections for the local administration, which were scheduled to take place in June, until autumn or even next year, due to the new coronavirus pandemic, USR President Dan Barna said on Sunday. *“Given the circumstances, the prospect of local elections in June is no longer viable. The Parliament must work and we have demonstrated that it can work well online, while the state institutions, in their turn, must learn to do the same,”* Barna said in an online press conference, local Agerpres reported. He added that, depending on how the epidemic will develop, local elections may be postponed for this autumn or next year. *“Depending on the developments, the first step would be to postpone the elections by the end of the year, for September - October. If situation continues (...) depending on the evolution of the epidemic during the summer months, we will see whether it is necessary to further defer the elections for next year,”* Barna added. According to him, at this moment, a normal electoral process would not stand a chance. (www.romania-insider.com)

- March 25th, Romania’s main opposition party, the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD), has drafted a set of laws that it seeks to pass in Parliament possibly at the end of next week. Some of the proposed measures overlap with measures promised by the Government but not yet enforced partly enforced or that are received with skepticism by

entrepreneurs because of bureaucratic details. The next session of the Chamber of Deputies could be summoned at the end of next week to pass the regulations for the online functioning of the Parliament, as well as other five bills drafted by PSD, announced the Head of the Social Democrat caucus, Alfred Simonis local G4media.ro reported. Scheduling the said bills for vote in the Chamber also depends on the work of the Senate that has to review some of the bills, Simonis explained. He added that several projects have been submitted, including those concerning the repayment of bank loans; the capping of prices of food, medicines and sanitary materials; fiscal facilities for companies and citizens; the deferral of utility bills for three months; the modification of the emergency ordinance (OUG) 29/2020 regarding the technical unemployment and the exemption of the payment of the rent for natural and legal persons. He added that there will be extensive debates in the expert committees on these projects, with the committee meetings being held online as well. *“We hope that all 5 initiatives will pass through the Senate early next week and will be voted by the Chamber of Deputies at the end of the week. These will be adopted as a matter of urgency in order to help the Romanian economy and the Romanians,”* Simonis added. (www.romania-journal.com)

- March 27th, President Klaus Iohannis signed on Thursday, March 26th, 2020 the decree appointing Nelu Tataru as the new Health Minister in Romania's Government. He is replacing Victor Costache, who resigned earlier the same day. The Prime Minister, Ludovic Orban stated that Victor Costache had resigned from the position of Health minister due to personal and professional reasons. Nelu Tataru was secretary of

state in the Ministry of Health led by Costache. Orban proposed him for the position of Health Minister, saying that Tataru “has been in the front line in the fight against the novel coronavirus” and is familiar with the strategy. During the Government meeting held on Thursday, March 26th, 2020 Orban asked the new Health Minister to take the necessary steps to establish very clearly all the measures that will be taken to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to local Agerpres. (www.romania-insider.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Romania continues to provide limited data regarding COVID-19 spread in the country. 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 25th, Serbian Defense Minister Aleksandar Vulin said on Wednesday that the military will not stop training during the state of emergency which includes its engagement to help fight the coronavirus pandemic. A ministry press release quoted Vulin as saying that the Army of Serbia (VS) must not lose its capabilities because of the new mission it got under the state of emergency. “The new mission includes security at 17 migrant centers and almost all the most important medical

facilities, control of quarantines for people infected with the coronavirus and helping the Internal Affairs Ministry to establish control over border crossings,” he said after touring the Nikinci Arms and Military Equipment Testing Center. Vulin was on a visit to Special Brigade troops doing live fire training with remote controlled weapons platforms. “All VS troops are under obligation to be ready to use new weapons,” he said. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 26th, Tanja Fajon, a member of the European Parliament (EP) said the coronavirus pandemic must not be an excuse for “locking” democracy and that Governments must not be allowed to impose unlimited powers, adding the EU has been the greatest donor to Serbia's health care system with 200 million euro in the last two decades, the Beta news agency has reported on Thursday. “Since many Governments declared the state of emergency to fight a real threat from coronavirus efficiently it is necessary to monitor if that move is balanced and proportional,” Fajon, the Chairwoman of the EP Delegation for relations with Serbia, told the Belgrade Danas daily. She said that Ylva Johansson, the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, “warns that a complete shutting down of Serbia is a huge problem, especially for its citizens who should be allowed to return home safely.” “It is also necessary to protect the chain of supplies and allow travels to ‘basic workers’, as well as transport,” Fajon said. She added it was clear that China was successful in limiting, even stopping the virus from spreading and “that is why we are warmly grateful for their (reciprocal) help, not only to Serbia but also to some EU member states.” Having in mind current relations between Serbia and China, that aid is not surprising, Fajon

says. “Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the EU and its member states are still the biggest donors to Serbia and that Belgrade receives the most donations in the Western Balkans; nearly 200 million euro has been donated to Serbia to improve the health care system in the last two decades, while the amount of loans is even higher,” Fajon said. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- March 29th, according to the latest report by Serbian health authorities, the number of newly confirmed COVID-19 cases rose by 82, and the total number of cases in the country amounts to 741, covid19.rs portal reported. The authorities tested 376 samples of which 82 were positive, the portal said, adding that the national laboratory at the Torlak Institute so far tested 2,462 samples from people suspected of COVID-19, the portal said. Belgrade's University Hospital Center Dr Dragica Misovic also recorded two new COVID-19 related fatalities. According to Dr Darija Kistic-Tepavcevic, the patients are two elderly women, age 82 and 86, who suffered from several other chronic diseases. Thus the number of deaths resulted from the new Coronavirus in Serbia also rose to 13. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Strict measures and curfew continue in Serbia aiming to stop 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. Restart of dialogue with Kosovo is far since the newly elected Government collapsed and political uncertainty reigns in Pristina. 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.” 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 24th, the Government presented a package of economic stimulus measures worth roughly 2 billion euro designed to protect jobs and keep society in general functioning through the crisis. The measures, which will be hashed out in the form of legislation this week, include loan guarantees for companies, purchase of claims to companies, co-financing of social contributions, temporary basic income for the self-employed and allowances for pensioners. Matej Lahovnik, the economist who heads a special task force of economists and

executives advising the Government on the measures, said this was the biggest stimulus ever in Slovenian history. Prime Minister Janez Jansa and Finance Minister Andrej Sircelj assured the public that the funds to finance the package were sufficient, with reliable sources available to tap into. Both the opposition and businesses welcomed the package. (www.sta.si)

- March 27th, Interior Minister Ales Hojs is optimistic a two-thirds majority could be mustered to trigger article 37.a of the Defense Act to temporarily give the Slovenian Armed Forces Police powers. After consulting Deputy Groups, he said he would shortly send them the final proposal updated with some of their proposals so that the Government could adopt it and Parliament pass next week. With the exception of the Slovenian National Party (Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka - SNS), the opposition is reserved towards the proposal, but would make its mind up once it has seen the final proposal. However, today Hojs praised all opposition parties for being constructive. Among their proposals he finds useful he highlighted strictly limiting the territory along the border with Croatia on which soldiers would be allowed to exert Police powers to help the Police cope with illegal migration. (www.sta.si)

- March 29th, two more people died in Slovenia as a result of COVID-19 on Saturday, putting the total number at 11. The number of confirmed cases rose by 46 to 730, with the increase comparing to 52 on Friday and 70 on Thursday, showed data released today. A total of 997 people were tested on Saturday, down from 1,387 on Friday and 1,075 on Thursday. The total figure so far is 20,753. The number of hospitalized patients increased by 11 to 101 on Saturday, 23 of which

need intensive care. Moreover, the first confirmed case of coronavirus in a prisoner in Slovenia has been confirmed as Slovenia's largest incarceration facility in Dob has said one inmate has fallen ill. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Slovenia has increased number of COVID-19 cases but situation is still controlled. New Government of Janez Jansa enjoys public support for its action against the virus and the President, Borut Pahor praised its efforts. The 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. Lately, there is much talk over the engagement of the Army in Police duties aiming to strengthen border control. 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 23rd, Turkey cannot absorb any more refugees, either from Syria or beyond, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Sunday. Cavusoglu made the remarks in an op-ed he wrote for the Financial Times titled “*EU inaction on Syrian refugees is a stain on human conscience.*” Underlining the EU’s claim to be a world power that stood as a beacon for human rights and international law, he said unless something is done about Greece’s treatment of refugees and the support it still receives from the EU that claim will collapse. “*I have long cautioned the EU not to be complacent about the challenges it faces, including the rise of extremism, xenophobia, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. We have called for a revamped international system to manage the huge displacement of people fleeing conflicts such as Syria’s. We have painstakingly tried to convince the EU to help us resolve such conflicts and address the fragilities that surround Europe,*” the Minister said. Cavusoglu associated situation in Idlib, Syria with Gaza city in Palestine, saying “*nine years into the conflict, the province of Idlib has become a ‘new Gaza’, where 3.5 million people are sequestered.*” He also touched on the Syrian regime’s massive military offensive since last May and Turkey’s operations in northern Syria. “*When Turkish soldiers were attacked in February, we retaliated forcefully and showed what it means to attack a NATO country,*” he said, noting that “*1 million people had begun marching toward NATO and Europe’s southeastern boundary, the Turkish-Syrian border.*” He pointed out the cost of Ankara’s efforts for the Syrian

people in Turkey and in Syria as over 40 billion US dollars saying “*we cannot continue to protect the borders of NATO and Europe alone.*” Stressing the reasons behind Turkey’s decision to open its borders with Greece and Bulgaria to allow refugees to pass into Europe, he said Turkey was never intended as their final destination. “*We cannot force them to stay. Our unheeded calls for the EU to take this wave of migrants seriously, and to comply with the refugee deal it struck with Turkey in 2016, reached the boiling point with the latest Idlib displacement,*” he said. He also criticized the EU for not acting against the exaggerated responses of Greek forces against refugees. “*What followed is a disgrace to the EU and a stain on human conscience. The EU and its parliamentarians did little more than watch on as Greek forces sprayed tear gas and fired on people at their border. Greece also suspended refugee applications. The UN was critical; the EU not. People died, scores were wounded and European prestige was damaged globally,*” Cavusoglu stressed. He pointed out the EU’s failure to “*develop a policy that projects peace, prosperity and dignity to its near-abroad*” and accused the union of not working “*earnestly with Turkey to achieve that.*” “*Building fortresses does not stop people running for their lives. Solidarity with a wrongdoing EU member, Greece, also cannot trump sound policy,*” he said, calling the EU to find common ground to address these problems. “*If the EU really is striving to be a geopolitical union, this is how it could be done,*” he added. He also considered the EU’s demeanor that alienates Turkey, which is the only major European country still aspiring to join the EU, as the biggest policy folly in generations. “*Turkey, the UK and the EU must come together to stabilize our*

common neighborhood, while the EU also expedites Turkey's membership process," he added. (www.dailysabah.com)

- March 26th, the Turkish Central Bank has stepped in to rescue the lira from a new collapse, following sharp drops in the past weeks. The Central Bank said on Tuesday it was opening a 90-day repo auction with a volume of 15 billion liras and an interest rate of 8.25%, 150 basis points below its policy rate. The repo was in addition to its regular one-week repo with a rate of 9.75%. The currency has shed as much as 10% so far this year. The Central Bank's move attempts to support the lira and enable the Turkish economy to deal with the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak. Last week, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced an economic package worth 100 billion liras (around 15 billion US dollars) to tackle the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the Turkish economy. He introduced the Economic Stability Shield Program, which includes temporary tax exemptions, as well as several financial and banking facilities. Meanwhile, a 2% contraction is likely in Turkey's Gross Domestic Product this year, Britain-based Economics said in a research note. They added that the economic damage will be worse than expected, given that production will drop sharply in the second quarter. Even if the pandemic was contained, all economies in the region will see shrinkage this year. Further, Fitch's Director Douglas Winslow said that Fitch Ratings has greater confidence that Turkey's economic growth is recovering in the near term. *"In 2020 we expect a recovery, with GDP growth going to 3.9% this year,"* Winslow added. Pointing to Turkey's recovering economic outlook, he said *"We also expect investment to*

return to growth this year of around 3%." Fitch Ratings rated Turkey at BB-/Stable last February. (www.aawsat.com)

- March 29th, Turkey's deaths from the coronavirus increased by 23 to 131 on Sunday, as the number of confirmed cases rose by 1,815 to 9,217, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said. Some 105 patients have recovered so far. The Minister added on social media that 9,982 tests had been conducted in the last 24 hours, bringing the total number of tests carried out in Turkey to 65,446 since the outbreak began. Tests in the last 24 hours show Turkey has almost reached its target of conducting 10,000 tests per day. Turkey has implemented travel restrictions, limitations on the use of public space, a partial curfew for senior citizens and 15 billion US dollars economic support package to help ailing sectors. The Turkish lira has fallen about 8% against the US dollar this year amid the global sell-off sparked by the pandemic. Turkey's Central Bank expects high first-quarter growth thanks to a strong January and February its Deputy Governor, Oguzhan Ozbas was quoted as saying on Sunday. Despite the comments from Ozbas, ratings agencies have said Turkey could be hit hard by the pandemic. Moody's said Turkey would be hit hard, with growth contracting by 7% cumulatively in the second and third quarters. Fitch Ratings said there were *"large downside risks"* to what was supposed to be a 2020 growth rate of about 3.5%, while both Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank cut their 2020 growth forecasts. Turkey had been at the start of a rebound from a recession caused by a 2018 currency crisis. (www.aawsat.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

It seems that COVID-19 spread is increasing rapidly in Turkey, although there are limited data regarding current situation. It seems that the big “big patient” is the Turkish economy which is being hit hard by the COVID-19. Central Bank is making huge efforts to strengthen Turkish lira, but situation is difficult. Turkey is determined to implement the ceasefire agreement with Russia in Syria securing Turkish interests, although there are some minor incidents between Turkish and Syrian forces. 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. Turkey withdrew migrants from Greek – Turkish land border de-escalating tension between the two countries. 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.


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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.*