



**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.

“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE

“HERMES” Institute of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy (“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE) is an independent, non – governmental, non – profit organization, consisting of scholars dedicated in the research and analysis of international affairs in regional and global level. The Institute aims at providing objective, scientific, and reliable research analysis through a variety of studies contributing effectively and constructively in the public dialogue and the evolution of scientific knowledge.

Copyright © 2019

“HERMES” Institute for Foreign Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy

All rights reserved



ALBANIA: December 9th, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's promise to Prime Minister Edi Rama to build 500 houses for earthquake affected families might also include the building of mosques as per local media reports. Turkish Ambassador to Tirana Murat Ahmet Yoruk did not deny the possibility of Turkey building mosques in earthquake affected areas when asked by a Tema TV journalist. Last Friday, speaking after a meeting with Albania's Minister of Culture Elva Margariti, also Coordinator for Planning Reconstruction Projects, Yoruk replied to the journalist's question about the possible building of mosques by saying that reconstruction projects will include different kinds of facilities. *"Construction of these buildings might necessitate the building of some facilities for social needs, let's say, for example, this project includes a children's park, business facilities, and parking lots. That is to say, everything that is needed for a comfortable living will be included in the project,"* Yoruk said. The Ambassador added that the project design has not been completed and it will be agreed with the Albanian Government. Deputy President of the Turkish Housing Agency Levent Sungur said they will start their first construction project in Lac, about 50 km north of Tirana, the capital. Yoruk said the projects will be fully implemented by Turkey but the design will have to get the Albanian Government's approval. Turkey forced the project design and is currently building the Tirana Grand Mosque, which will be the largest mosque in the Balkans. Rama travelled to Turkey on Sunday to attend an investors' conference from Muslim-majority countries. On December 8th – 9th, 2019 Turkey organized the *"High Level Public and Private Investment Conference,"* with

57 member countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, where Erdogan promised Rama to ask these countries' help for Albania's earthquake relief. (www.tiranatimes.com)

- December 12th, the US Embassy in Tirana published in social media a video that explains how the Special Prosecution Against Corruption (SPAC) will be operating, targeting high-level corruption. The Embassy posted a video in which they explain that the 2 million dollars support by the USA will be used to make sure that SPAC will be established and will operate independently. The USA is dedicated in the fight against corruption and respecting the rule of law around the world. The fight against corruption is a priority of the US Embassy in Tirana. SPAC will become fully operational on December 19th, 2019 replacing the Prosecution of Serious Crimes which will be dissolute. (www.top-channel.tv)

- December 13th, Albania's Socialist-controlled Parliament has pushed forward with two controversial laws aiming to regulate the online media despite strongly worded opposition from the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, the UN Development Program and local human rights groups. On Thursday, Mark Marku, Dean of the Department of Journalism and Communications in the University of Tirana, told MPs debating the laws in the Parliament's Commission on Media and Education that *"nobody in his right mind could possibly support such laws."* Several MPs have protested; some making slurs. But Marku refused to apologize. Instead, he summarized the situation as such *"Not a single organization supports this law. The only interested party here is the Prime Minister [Edi Rama] and you are doing this law for him. You, as representative of the people, are*

inept to face him ... who would prefer to stop even the dogs from barking.” His protest echoed that of 15 Albanian rights organizations, including Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) Albania, and seven international bodies, including the European Federation of Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists. They have issued several statements in the last four days and have also appeared before several hearings in the Parliamentary Commissions, trying to impress on MPs the need to keep online media free from state regulation. Prime Minister Rama has, however, announced plans to have the laws fully approved by December 19th, 2019. Deirdre Kevin, an expert for the Council of Europe, told parliamentarians at a hearing on November 25th, 2019 that *“the core of the aim of this law is problematic and is not compactable with the standards of freedom of expression of the Council of Europe.”* She advised *“Take a step back and start the process from scratch.”* Monika Bylaite, Deputy Chief of the EU Delegation in Tirana, emphasized that the approach of the EU *“is based on self-regulation,”* while Irina Radu, from the OSCE, underlined that *“critiques should not be considered defamatory.”* The two laws, first proposed in December 2018, have been revised many times since then and criticized repeatedly. If approved, they will create an administrative body able to criticize media content for matters of dignity of citizens and privacy and fine them up to 15,000 euro. Rama has not hidden the fact that he personally pushed for such laws in the first place, claiming that the country needed to *“discipline”* the online media. Kristina Voko, Director of BIRN Albania, told the parliamentarians on Wednesday *“We oppose both draft laws in entirety because we cannot accept that the Audiovisual Media Authority and Albania Communication Board, the two institutions that*

have been criticized in all kind of reports for political bias, cannot control the content of online media.” Voko said the proposed changes amounted to a censorship package that is unprecedented in democratic countries. *“I have not seen your model, that the media should be regulated by state administrative bodies, anywhere except in Russia of [Vladimir] Putin,”* she added. Confronted with such criticism, Socialist MPs have said they welcome *“a diversity of views,”* but vowed to push forward with the changes. The Government has indicated it has no plans to withdraw the laws. Asked by Voice of America Albanian Service, Government spokesperson Endri Fuga said only that it was *“a matter that should be decided by the Parliament.”* (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama and his Government focus on the next day of the deadly earthquake and reconstruction of destroyed buildings. The Government will allocate 160 million euro for reconstruction, while there are several donations from various countries. However, main opposition party PD leader, Lulzim Basha strongly criticized Rama for failure to relief citizens from the earthquake. According to him, the state has failed to offer the necessary support (shelter, food, medics etc) to the victims. Needless to say that this tragedy might become a key point in the political struggle between ruling Socialists and opposition. It is assessed that the country moves rapidly towards early parliamentary elections since it is estimated that Rama will hardly remain in power. In the ongoing political crisis and the natural disaster it should be added the controversial law regarding control of online media which may provoke serious

reactions not only in Albania, but also in international community. These two laws promoted by the Government are considered as a direct effort of Rama to fully control online media. Reforms should continue more intensively if the state seeks to get an accession negotiation date with the EU. Corruption, organized crime, money laundering, drug and weapon smuggling and links between politics and organized crime are the main problems Albania should address effectively. Relation between Albania and Kosovo with its newly elected Government under Albin Kurti as the Prime Minister is a good question. However, Albania continues to act as the “motherland” of all Albanians around Southeast Europe. In this context, Albanian Foreign Minister, Gent Cakaj promotes Kosovo’s integration in the A5 Adriatic Charter seeking to get international recognition through participation in international organizations.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

December 9th, no country is immune to corruption, but what makes a difference is how a country combats corruption, US Ambassador to Bosnia, Eric Nelson, wrote in his latest blog post published on Monday. “The citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, like all citizens around the world, deserve good governance and the confidence that public funds – the money that comes from the sweat of their labor – are devoted to improving their day-to-day lives,” the Ambassador wrote on the occasion of the International Anti-Corruption Day marked on December 12th. He wrote that Bosnians are constantly talking about stories of corrupt politics; “that the justice sector is increasingly captured by political influence; and that people lack hope that

things will improve.” “In despair, the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are voting with their feet – leaving the country to pursue their futures in the European Union, the United States, or elsewhere. One hears they are not ‘leaving with their families,’ but ‘for their families.’ These are people who do not believe their leaders are committed or able to improve governance, the economy, or their lives, or that they themselves are able to demand change,” he wrote. He recalled the US support in the fight against corruption and said that they invest in supporting good governance, improving the rule of law, and preventing and combating corruption in the country. “We have Prosecutors, investigators, development workers and diplomats from the State Department, USAID, the FBI, the Department of Justice and throughout our Embassy dedicated to this mission every day,” he said. “We provide training, equipment and specialized know-how to your Police, Prosecutors and Judges to investigate and prosecute corruption. We work through international organizations like the OSCE to track and evaluate anti-corruption criminal cases to promote best practices and identify problem areas. And we use financial sanctions and visa restrictions to crack down on political and commercial impunity and send a message that corruption should not be tolerated,” Nelson added. Talking about the results of their aid, the Ambassador wrote that the top judicial institution in the country which has the power to elect and sanction Judges and Prosecutors, the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, has become ineffective, but noted that “real progress will not come until the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina demand it of elected leaders. Now is the time, as a new Council of Ministers takes charge, to demand needed reforms – especially in rule of law. As the

Priebe report made clear, this will require a new law on the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council. The report states, 'The HJPC is often perceived by citizens and even by members of the judicial community as a center of unaccountable power in the hands of people serving the interests of a network of political patronage and influence'," the Ambassador wrote. He concluded that he stands with Bosnian institutions, businesses, civil society, investigative journalists, and brave citizens in their efforts to improve the lives of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- December 11th, the EU Council welcomes the Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's application for membership of the EU and acknowledges that Bosnia and Herzegovina currently does not sufficiently fulfill the Copenhagen political criteria, and needs to dedicate considerable efforts to strengthening its institutions in order to guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. As regards the economic criteria, Bosnia and Herzegovina has achieved a certain degree of macroeconomic stability, whereas it is still at an early stage of establishing a functioning market economy and of becoming competitive within the common market. Bosnia and Herzegovina's track record in implementing its obligations under the Stabilization and Association Agreement needs to improve. The country is overall at an early stage regarding its level of preparedness to take on the obligations of EU membership and needs to significantly step up the process to align with the EU acquis and implement and enforce related legislation, it is stated in the first conclusion of the European Council. Bosnia and Herzegovina needs to make

sustained efforts, in particular with regard to the implementation of the fourteen key priorities set out in the Commission's Opinion. These key priorities, focusing on the areas of democracy and functionality of the state, rule of law, fundamental rights, and public administration reform, need to be fulfilled. The Council notes that the opening of accession negotiations will be ultimately considered by the European Council, in line with established practice, at a time when the Commission has assessed that Bosnia and Herzegovina has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria and has met in particular the key priorities set out in the Commission's Opinion. The Council also invites the Commission to focus its annual reports on Bosnia and Herzegovina, starting with the one in 2020, on the implementation of the key priorities which need to be addressed. The Council welcomes the nomination of the Chair of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and urges executive and legislative bodies at all levels of Government to start addressing the key priorities identified in the Commission Opinion, in line with the legitimate aspirations of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina to advance towards the EU. The Council reiterates its unequivocal commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU perspective as a single, united and sovereign country, EU Delegation in BiH announced. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

- December 13th, the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina will procure new US multipurpose helicopters to modernize their fleet, mainly made up of Russian aircraft, and an agreement to that end was signed in Sarajevo on Friday by BiH Defense Minister Marina Pendes and US Ambassador Eric Nelson. The agreement covers

the procurement of four Huey II helicopters made by US company Bell which can carry up to 13 people or a little over two tones of cargo. The agreement is worth 38.5 million US dollars and BiH will pay only 4.36 million US dollars. The rest was secured by the US Government via the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and Foreign Military Financing programs for friendly countries. The agreement covers the training of pilots and technicians, the delivery of reserve parts over two years, and the delivery of land equipment and technical documentation. Pendes said the US was a key and concrete partner to BiH and its Armed Forces on the country's Euro-Atlantic journey. She added that the purchase of new helicopters was the BiH military's biggest investment project since its establishment and that it would significantly affect its operational capabilities. This will also enable us to contribute to regional cooperation projects and strengthen our position as a reliable partner in international relations, Pendes said. Nelson said the BiH Armed Forces were a positive element in the country in which it was necessary to invest, and called on BiH authorities to earmark additional funds for this and similar projects. This is a joint project of the BiH and US Governments. The BiH Armed Forces are an example of what the nations in BiH can achieve when they jointly focus on the future, he added. The Armed Forces development plan for the 2017-27 period envisages the procurement of eight medium transport helicopters and 15 light multipurpose ones, but implementation is delayed due to lack of money. The procurement should cost at least 170 million US dollars. (www.hr.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

The new Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Zoran Tegeltija is working for forming the new Government. The country is on the path of political normality by getting a new Government after more than a year of the last parliamentary elections (October 7th, 2018). State institutions will become functional again allowing the country to move forward with major reforms and economic growth. However, international community keeps sending warning messages regarding state's function. The EU Council released a report claiming that Bosnia is too far from opening of accession negotiations due to lack of democratic rules, human rights, corruption and lack of functional free market. Moreover, the US Ambassador in Bosnia noticed that the country needs a justice reform since it has a non functional system. Political situation in the country remains alarming and at the moment Bosnia is considered as a potential source of instability in the region. It is not a secret that all entities question the Dayton Peace Agreement aiming to set their own political agenda. 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. Russia tries to "penetrate" in Bosnian affairs through Republika Srpska maintaining its influence in Southeastern Europe. Country faces several functional and institutional problems. Consequently political fragility maintains permanent uncertainty and institutional mistrust blocking any attempt for economic growth and major reforms. As it was forementioned EU path is too long for Bosnia and only for geopolitical interests it could have chances entering the EU.



BULGARIA: December 9th,

Bulgaria's Government held a special sitting at the weekend to discuss and approve a bill of amendments to the Penal Procedure Code, which would create an inspectorate for the Prosecutor's office, while its Head would have the powers to investigate the Prosecutor-General and Deputy Prosecutor-Generals. For decades, Bulgaria has been criticized for keeping the communist-era structure of the Prosecutor's office, where the top officials could not be independently investigated, because they had the authority to shut down any investigation into any alleged criminal activity. The bill creating the Prosecutor's office inspectorate is aimed to address such criticism and "*creates the legal guarantees*" that the Prosecutor-General or a Deputy Prosecutor-General could not interfere in investigations against them, the Cabinet media office said in a statement. Under these amendments, the Head of the inspectorate would be appointed for a period of seven years by a two-thirds majority of the Prosecutors College in the Supreme Judicial Council and would require to be nominated by at least three members of the college. To dismiss the Prosecutor in charge of the inspectorate, the same conditions apply – such a proposal must come from three members of the SJC Prosecutors College and would require a two-thirds majority, or eight out of 12 members. The bill has already come under criticism, as opponents have questioned whether the amendments did not contradict the Constitution, which says in article 126 that "*the Prosecutor General shall exercise supervision as to legality and shall provide methodological guidance regarding the work of all prosecutors.*" Additionally, critics have said that the Prosecutor-General has too much

influence over the election of the members of the SJC Prosecutor College, pointing out the unwavering support that outgoing Prosecutor-General Sotir Tsatsarov has received from the College over the years. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- December 12th, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov has hit back after President Roumen Radev's latest sharp criticisms of the Government, leveled on a December 11th, 2019 television interview. On issues from Bulgaria's credit rating, Government debt, the judiciary and military modernization – regarding all of which Borissov takes pride – Radev was scathing. The President, who was elected on a ticket backed by the opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya - BSP), said that he saw the "*sunset*" of Borissov's administration. Commenting on Borissov having pointed to S&P Global Ratings having become at the beginning of December the latest to raise Bulgaria's credit rating, Radev said that the most important rating of a Government should not come from outside. The most important rating of a Government was the prosperity and well-being of its citizens, he said. "*When the Prime Minister with eagerness and enthusiasm reads the letters of credit agencies, his subordinates must tell him that there is history on the websites of the Ministry of Finance and the National Statistical Institute.*" Radev said He said that Bulgaria had a higher credit rating from 2006 to 2008, and in 2019 it had barely managed to recover its credit rating from 2013. Radev said that Borissov pointed to the great achievement of combating debt and it was true that Government debt was being reduced, but Borissov had tripled Government debt between 2009 and 2016. Radev went on to criticize the Government's ideas on

judicial reform and the process by which the new Prosecutor-General had been appointed, as well as the Government's idea of creating the post of "supreme Prosecutor" to oversee the Prosecutor-General. He said that he would have been opposed to the handling of the fighter jet acquisition process irrespective of whether the Government had chosen the F-16s or the Gripen. Hitting back on December 12th, Borissov described Radev as an opposition leader who had not said a good word about the state in the 40-minutes. *"His hatred, his malice is already overflowing so much that I do not need to comment on an opposition leader,"* Borissov said. *"To speak with such hatred for only one party and one person out of fear or envy is beyond the dignity of the presidential institution,"* the Prime Minister said. *"I do not understand why Roumen Radev, without being provoked by anything, goes to television studios, quarrels with party leaders and talks about pros and cons. If we could add to the budget balance the billions we paid after the Oresharski Government and the Corporate Commercial Bank bankruptcy, we would get a few benefits to our credit rating,"* Borissov said. He said that he had just watched the first minute of the interview before giving up and going off to play football, because Radev was not speaking in the name of the people. *"Radev is a two-faced man, one day people will understand what kind of person they have elected as President,"* Borissov said. (www.sofiaglobe.com)

- December 13th, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg praised Bulgaria's contributions to collective security in a meeting with Prime Minister Boyko Borissov at NATO Headquarters on Thursday. *"This year we celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of Bulgaria joining this Alliance; and*

we are so grateful for your support to different NATO missions and operations," Stoltenberg said. The Secretary General welcomed Bulgaria's troop deployments in Afghanistan and Kosovo, as well as the country's strong support for Black Sea security, and for enhancing peace and stability in the Western Balkans, NATO said in a press release on its official website. (www.novinite.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT █ :

Boyko Borissov Government is stable. The state's President Rumen Radev strongly criticized Borissov and his Government. It is not a secret that Radev is supported by the opposition BSP, but as the Head of the country he should be more careful in inter-party struggles maintaining a national profile and not a party one. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles for the country's development and should be addressed decisively. The country pays special attention to energy security developing several projects. Modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc). However, military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards.



CROATIA: December 10th, the National Security Council held a regular session at which it discussed security threats and risks to national security and interests, notably in the context of Croatia's presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2020, the Office of the President of the Republic said. Participants in the session, called by President and Armed Forces

Supreme Commander Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, also adopted annual guidelines for the work of security-intelligence agencies in 2020 and approved a plan of work of the Coordinating Committee for the system of homeland security for 2020. The Council also approved the establishment of cooperation between Croatian security-intelligence agencies with foreign services, in line with the agencies' needs. The co-chairs of an Interdepartmental Commission in charge of the purchase of multipurpose fighter jets informed the Council of the current status of their activities and steps taken so far at the national level and internationally. The Council supported the project as well as Croatia's commitment to maintaining and upgrading its strategic defense capabilities, the statement said. (www.hina.hr)



National Security Council Session

(Photo source: www.predsjednica.hr)

- December 11th, an international training center of the Multinational Special Aviation Program (MSAP) was inaugurated on Wednesday at the Zemunik barracks near Zadar, and Defense Minister Damir Krstičević said that MSAP center could become a new NATO center of excellence. This confirms that Croatia is a trustworthy member of the Alliance, the Minister said at the ceremony. *“We are building new capabilities for*

the Croatian Army, for Croatia and for NATO and what is more important, we are building the future together with our partners and allies,” Krstičević said. He said he was proud of the fact that at Zemunik the best pilots would be trained to carry out special aviation forces' operations, which, he added, was proof of the power and respectability of the Croatian Armed Forces. The 11 million euro center will provide training for helicopter crews from Croatia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovenia. The MSAP program is intended for multi-purpose helicopter crews for special air operations and consists of theoretical and multi-week flight training programs for the implementation of unconventional special air force tasks. The Croatian Armed Forces Chief of staff, General Mirko Sundov, said that the establishment of the MSAP created prerequisites for conducting training in complex and diversified conditions, which would enable the achievement of the goals defined for each of the countries-contributors to MSAP. NATO's Assistant Secretary General for Defense Investment, Camille Grand, said that the development of capabilities of special air forces showed NATO's ability to develop new capabilities. (www.hina.hr)

December 12th, at its session on Wednesday the Government gave a green light to the Defense Ministry to procure four UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters for the Croatian Armed Forces - two helicopters will be donated and two will be purchased, of a total value of 1.167 billion kuna (almost 157 million euro). The helicopters will be procured in the period from 2021 to 2026 in partnership with the US Government. The US will donate two Black Hawk helicopters with spare parts and equipment and Croatia will purchase another two identical helicopters from the US.

The partnership includes pilot and ground crew training as well as logistic support. The US donation amounts to 360.64 million kuna (48 million euro). The remaining 804.23 million kuna (almost 109 million euro) will be secured from the state budget in the period between 2021 and 2026. Krsticevic said the procurement of the helicopters was unanimously supported by the relevant Parliamentary Committee. (www.hina.hr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

The country enjoys political stability, while it is moving ahead for the presidential elections, scheduled on December 22nd, 2019 (first round) and January 5th, 2020 (second round if necessary). Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic achieved to sign agreement with worker's unions (mainly teachers) resolving an ongoing social crisis with the presidential elections ahead. Croatia received a positive recommendation by the European Commission for implementing all necessary criteria for entering the Schengen Zone. However, the final political decision by the member states requires a unanimous vote and it is expected to become a field of confrontation between Croatia and Slovenia. Slovenia has already expressed its intention to block Croatia's accession to the Schengen Area due to their border dispute. However, Croatia expresses confidence that finally it will get full support (Slovenia including) for entering the Zone. However, Croatia insists on claiming that the arbitration rule is not valid and the dispute should be resolved through bilateral negotiations; a position which is unacceptable for Slovenia. Croatia implements a hard-line foreign policy with its neighboring countries maintaining open disputes with Bosnia, Slovenia, and Serbia. Top

officials do not hesitate to openly interfere in Bosnian domestic affairs in the name of Bosnian Croats. Croatia implements a policy of Armed Forces' modernization trying to form a reliable and well equipped force according to NATO standards. Failure to complete successfully the purchase of a modern fighter jet maintains a long period of an ineffective and weak Croatian Air Force.



CYPRUS: December 12th, the US House of Representatives has passed a defense bill that includes a conditional lifting of the arms embargo on Cyprus. In a 377-48 vote early Thursday morning local time the lower house of Congress green-lit the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) 2020 providing for 738 billion dollars in military spending. The bill is now poised to go to the Republican-controlled Senate, where it is likewise expected to pass and head to President Donald Trump's desk for signature. The embargo on Cyprus would be lifted once the bill is signed into law. Trump said he would sign the bill as soon as it passes. The embargo on sales of arms and defense-related materiel to Cyprus has been in place since 1987. Although both chambers of Congress had passed two separate bills last July, it was not possible to agree on a single document due to differences between Republicans and the Democrats on the wall which the US President wants to build along the US - Mexican border. In both texts, the wording concerning the lifting of the embargo was identical. Under the NDAA 2020, the US President will have discretion over the arms embargo on Cyprus. The bill allows for the conditional lifting of the embargo on Cyprus by requesting that the US President certify at least

once a year that the island meets certain conditions. Current US policy spells out a denial for exports, re-exports, and transfers of defense articles listed on the United States Munitions List. Whereas the embargo shall remain in place, the bill gives the US President the leeway to make an exception by certifying that Cyprus is satisfying Washington's criteria on money laundering regulations as well as thwarting Russian influence in the eastern Mediterranean. Unless the US President cites an exception on national security grounds, the bill calls on Congress to confirm with the White House that the Cypriot Government continues to cooperate with the US in implementing anti-money laundering reforms and financial regulatory oversight. The bill also requires that the island continue to take steps to deny Russian military vessels access to ports for refueling and servicing. In late June, President Nicos Anastasiades expressed surprise at a last-minute amendment to a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee bill requiring Cyprus to deny docking facilities to the Russian Navy. At the time Anastasiades said he was "*saddened*" by the amendment which "*affects the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Cyprus to a large extent.*" (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- December 13th, the contract for the development of 290 million euro Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) infrastructure, one of the largest energy projects in Cyprus, was signed in Nicosia on Friday. "*The signature has laid the foundations for the implementation of a multi-year effort, which is the commitment of the President of the Republic to his governance program,*" Energy Minister Yiorgos Lakkotrypis said in his address at the ceremony. The Minister said that according to calculations of the Cyprus Electricity Authority

(EAC), using natural gas in power generation is expected to reduce Cyprus' environmental footprint by 25 to 30%, since gas is a cleaner form of fuel than the polluting liquid fuels used today. "*In addition, we have been sponsored by the EU for one-third of capital spending, and the favorable low-cost lending environment allows us as a country to develop our own infrastructure,*" the Minsiter said. The deal is between the Natural Gas Infrastructure Company (EFTAF), a subsidiary of state natural gas company DEFA, and the international joint venture JV China Petroleum Pipeline Engineering Co. Ltd, and Metron SA., with Hudong-Zhonghua Shipbuilding Co Ltd and Wilhelmshen Ship Management Limited. The LNG terminal will include a LNG floating storage and re-gasification unit (FSRU), a floating unit pier, a pier duct and other related infrastructure. The total value of the project amounts to 290 million euro. EU funding of 101 million euro has already been secured under the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) funding program. The EAC will pay 43 million euro, while the rest will be financed through the European Investment Bank or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The signing of the contract followed a lengthy and complex tender process overseen by DEFA, in cooperation with external industry experts. The top ranked bidder had to satisfy a series of qualitative, quantitative and financial criteria, so as to be able to demonstrate an ability to perform at the high standards set by DEFA regarding the development of the Cyprus natural gas market infrastructure. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- December 14th, Turkey's decision to fly drones out of an airport in Lefkoniko are yet another destabilizing action, Government Spokesman

Kyriacos Koushios said on Saturday, after reports that Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), both unarmed and armed, will start to take off as of December 16th, 2019. Commenting on the reports, Koushios said *“It is clearly another destabilizing action by Turkey in the area, which is already facing serious stability issues.”* He added Turkey’s latest action fails to help the already tense situation and is another example of how Ankara is interfering in and controlling the occupied areas. *“It is another action which causes issues to the already tense situation and it does not help in de-escalating the situation.”* On Friday, reports said efforts to base the drones had taken some time, adding that a team of experts from Ankara considered the commercial airport a suitable option. Turkey began seeking oil and gas off the coast of Cyprus earlier this year, dispatching two drill ships and an exploration vessel with UAVs escorting them. Commenting on actions Cyprus will take, Koushios said *“We will look into it, because it is a new development. The issue will be discussed with the Foreign Minister and decisions will be made,”* he said. The EU has called Turkey’s oil and gas search in Cyprus’ Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) illegal and has readied sanctions against Turkey in response. Ankara says that some areas Cyprus operates in are either on the Turkish continental shelf, or in areas where the breakaway Turkish Cypriot state has rights over any finds. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Situation with Turkey becomes more complicated and tense, despite the latest tripartite meeting under the UN Secretary General auspices. Turkey decided to send unarmed and armed UAVs in

north occupied part of Cyprus in another provocative and aggressive action which increases further tension in the region. Turkey continues its invasion in Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) with Yavuz drillship challenging the state’s sovereignty. Lack of military power and more specifically aeronautical power is critical for Turkish uncontrolled action within Cypriot EEZ. Cyprus continues to work by diplomatic means on resolving the crisis but the fact is that Turkey has consolidated its presence in the Cypriot waters (and this would be another “asset” during the negotiation process). 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. The USA is about to lift the arms embargo of Cyprus which is a considerable action in a difficult period of the island. However, criteria for implementing such a decision are rather tricky; Cyprus should forbid Russian Navy vessels to have access in its ports for refueling and servicing. A condition which may create reactions from Russian administration affecting their bilateral relations.



GREECE: December 12th, the Head of Libya’s eastern-based Parliament on Thursday said he disagreed with the accord between Libya and Turkey establishing maritime boundaries which has infuriated Athens. Greece expelled the Libyan Ambassador last week over the November

27th, 2019 accord establishing a sea corridor between Libya and Turkey and in areas where Greece considers it has maritime rights. *“We are here to stress that this specific agreement is rejected, it is invalid,”* said Aguila Saleh Issa, Speaker of the Libyan House of Representatives. *“Those that signed it do not have any legal authority to do so, since the Government itself was rejected. It did failed a confidence vote twice and has not been legally sworn in at the House of Representatives,”* Issa told reporters in Athens through an interpreter. Issa is aligned to General Khalifa Haftar who controls the east of the country which opposes the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. Turkey says the accord aims to protect its rights and is in line with international law. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that the accord will allow Turkey and Libya to hold joint exploration operations in the region. On Tuesday Athens said it had lodged objections with the United Nations, saying the accord violated international law. Since 2014 Libya has had competing Governments based in Tripoli and the east. Saleh’s House of Representatives was Libya’s internationally recognized chamber at the time of a UN-backed deal in 2015 that led to the formation of the GNA, but the chamber has since fragmented. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- December 13th, Greece plans to acquire three Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) from the US with surveillance capabilities ranging from the Black Sea to Libya, Greece's Defense Minister Nikos Papagiotopoulos said on Friday, as reported by state-run news agency ANA-MPA. *“And do not tell me that we should not inspect the region as far as Libya and that we should only go from Evros to Crete, considering the latest*

developments,” he told lawmakers during a debate on a draft bill for the upgrade of Greece's F-16 and Mirage fighter jet fleet. Panagiotopoulos was referring to the recent Ankara - Tripoli maritime border deal, which Greece has denounced as invalid and illegal. The Minister also told MPs that Greece's Council for Foreign Affairs and Defense (KYSEA), has tentatively approved the acquisition of two more drones, made in Israel, as a separate program. The Government is also in contact with Thessaloniki's Aristotle University (AUT) to produce drones locally. *“Taking advantage of the talent and ingenuity of the AUT research team, European funding opportunities, our defense industry and a specific timetable, we will soon have a Greek UAV,”* he said, adding that AUT professors and students have already developed 3-4 prototypes while one more will be tested this summer in Thessaly, central Greece. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- December 14th, buoyed by the European Council’s statement of solidarity on Friday to Athens and Nicosia regarding Turkey’s behavior in the Eastern Mediterranean, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said that Greece’s sovereign rights will not be compromised if Ankara seeks to use the migrant issue as leverage. Speaking in Brussels after the European Council’s declaration condemning the Ankara - Tripoli maritime border deal, Mitsotakis said that if there are negative consequences for the migrant issue due to *“blackmail”* by Turkey over the accord, then *“Greece will not make the slightest compromise on these matters.”* Hailing the *“full support”* that he received from his European counterparts at the Council, Mitsotakis said that his Government will continue to defend Greece’s rights *“in any way that is appropriate,”* noting that Turkey is

“irritated” because it is “desperately isolated after signing its memorandum of understanding with Libya.” He also singled out the support given to Greece by French President Emmanuel Macron. The French leader told a news conference in Brussels on Friday that, “as I did at the NATO summit, we expressed yesterday our full solidarity with Cyprus and Greece given the Turkish provocation in the Eastern Mediterranean.” Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias also lauded the EC statement, saying, “The country is extremely satisfied.” Meanwhile, despite the European Council’s condemnation of the MoU between Tripoli and Ankara, Turkish Energy Minister Fatih Donmez announced on Friday that Turkey will soon conduct seismic research within sea zones included in the accord. Donmez reportedly told the Turkish Parliament that the agreement with Libya has become the “law of the land” after being ratified by lawmakers earlier this month and that his Ministry is working on delineating blocks where seismic surveys will be carried out “immediately after New Year’s.” “Have no doubt that we will do what must be done,” he reportedly said. (www.ekathimerini.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Greece enjoys political stability. At the moment, migration is the main security problem of Greece. Control of migrant flows coming from Turkey is a critical point for Greek national security and consequently EU’s security. The Government announced strict measures aiming to control the problem but also seeks to the EU solidarity to address the problem. Moreover, the state promotes a new single mechanism of border control and surveillance including personnel from

security and defense sector under the central coordination of the Deputy Defense Minister, Alkiviadis Stefanis. Turkish – Libyan Memorandum of Understanding surprised the Greek administration and currently there is increased tension. Greek – Turkish rhetoric is typical example of initial stages of tension before is turned into a crisis. Greece launched last week a well coordinated diplomatic campaign achieving to get verbal support by its EU member states. The US also approached the Greek arguments regarding validity of Turkish – Libyan MoU. Finally, Greek Government sent a strong and clear message that if Turkey violates Greece’s sovereign rights by seismographic or drill ships it will use violence (according to the Government’s Spokesman “we will sink it [the ship]) to stop them. It should be noted that Greece has followed a good reaction strategy so far in order to deter Turkey from its plan by appearing as the champion of international law. However, next step is more difficult; what will happen if Turkish vessels will appear after New Year’s eve South of Crete. The warning should become action, or you lose credibility. It should not be excluded a “hot” incident in the Aegean Sea or within Cypriot Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) since Turkish political and military leadership has the advantage of surprise. Greece is concerned due to Turkish intention to search for hydrocarbons within its EEZ near to Kastelorizo region. Turkey has targeted the wider area of Kastelorizo (and Northeast Aegean Sea) issuing several NAVTEXs for naval exercises with live fires. Moreover, Turkish fighter jets massively violate Greek airspace, while Turkish drones fly over Greek islands or islets. Greece seeks to modernize its Armed Forces by receiving US military aid. It is a fact that Greek military force

has been affected by the long economic crisis threatening the balance of power with Turkey. Currently, Greece is in talks with France for purchasing two advanced frigates BELHARA. Not only that, but the country pays special attention in acquiring UAVs from the US and Israel. Taking into consideration the ongoing provocations in the Aegean Sea and the complicated current situation in Cypriot EEZ, security situation is of high risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident by Turkey.



KOSOVO: December 11th, Kosovo

President, Hashim Thaci, answered statements of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic who asks compromise with Kosovo, excluding mutual recognition, Gazeta Express reports. Thaci said Wednesday that he considers Vucic's statements as provocations, adding that the two countries will sit at the negotiation table as equal. *"Messages from Belgrade that we have to compromise without recognition of Republic of Kosovo are provocations. Independence of Kosovo is a compromise. Dialogue only possible on a principle: two countries recognizing each other as equal neighbors, moving towards Euro-Atlantic family,"* Thaci wrote in social media. Vucic during a visit to Greece gave an interview with the Athens-based Kathimerini saying that Belgrade is ready to negotiate on finding a compromise solution, but as he said, without recognizing Kosovo. (www.gazetaexpress.com)

- December 13th, the two leading parties in Kosovo, Self-Determination (Vetevendosje) and the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK) failed to reach an agreement to form a new Government. Pristina media reported earlier that an agreement had been

reached by their leaders Albin Kurti and Isa Mustafa but Spokesmen for the two parties said after a meeting of more than two hours that the talks would continue on Saturday because of slight disagreements. Media in Pristina said earlier that all disputed issues had been resolved and the Ministries had been divided equally with the Ministry for Communities and Return going to the Serb List (Srpska Lista) and the Culture Ministry to other minority communities and LDK MP Vlosa Osmani taking the post of Parliament Speaker. Talks to form a Government have been ongoing since the elections on October 6th, 2019. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- December 13th, leader of Kosovo's Self-Determination (Vetevendosje) Movement and likely next Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, has said that the Serbian and Kosovo Presidents should no longer run the currently stalled EU-led dialogue between the two countries. Kurti told the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) Kosovo TV show Jeta ne Kosove on Thursday that neither President should take part in negotiations concerning territory, for example. During 2018, talk of an exchange of territories – swapping Albanian-majority areas in southern Serbia for Serb-majority ones in northern Kosovo – arose among some Serbian and Kosovo politicians, including Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and his Kosovo counterpart Hashim Thaci. However, land swaps never became an official topic of discussion in the official EU-led dialogue in Brussels between Serbia and its former province, whose independence it does not recognize. Kurti also denied claims made in the Serbian media earlier this month that he would refuse to meet the Serbian President, saying that *"Vucic was*

supposed to be in the conference in Berlin, he was invited, but he did not come because he went to Moscow.” Turning to the incomplete negotiations on forming a new Government in Kosovo, Kurti said one problem was that the Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK, was demanding the post of Prime Minister – without saying who that new Prime Minister would be. “I am being asked to give blank consent. They have requested the post but did not tell me who their candidate is,” Kurti told the TV show. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Vetëvendosje and LDK did not reach an agreement to form the new Government; so consultations will continue next week. Vetëvendosje leader and potential Prime Minister, Albin Kurti sent the message that if an agreement is not reached with LDK he will ask for new elections. However, Kurti keeps sending worried messages for future dialogue with Serbia. He did not hesitate to set as a precondition for dialogue restart the exclusion of Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic, which is a direct intervention in Serbia’s internal affairs. Moreover, it seems that Kurti’s strategic choice is Kosovo authorities to fully control north. Such opinion is dangerous since the balance of co-existence between Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians is very sensitive. Possible deployment of security forces and the newly established Kosovo Army in the north may become a reason for turbulence and an armed conflict. Although international community namely the US and EU push both sides (Kosovo and Serbia) for reaching a mutual accepted agreement, it is assessed that negotiations restart and an agreement is too far. Increased tension is expected in North Kosovo by

Kosovo Serbs if a newly formed Government led by Albin Kurti implements his announcements for Serbian List and its exclusion from Kosovo Government (against Constitution provisions). Only through normalization of relations with Serbia, Kosovo will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish in the country rule of law and modern functional administration. Kosovo unresolved status, political instability, corruption, and organized crime are not encouraging factors for its future within European community. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard.



MOLDOVA: December 11th, the Transgaz fuel transportation company of Romania wants to triple the volume of gas exports to Ukraine to be offered for booking as of January 20th, 2020, reported the international information and analytical agency ICIS, specializing in analyzing energy market prices. According ICIS, at the nearest auction of the regional platform RBP to be held on December 16th, 2019 Transgaz will most probably offer to sale in that direction 14 million cubic meters as on January 20th, 2020. “The same monthly volume Transgaz has proposed for reverse gas flows from Bulgaria and Romania at the ‘Negru Voda 1-Cardam’ contact station. The capacity of the trans-Balkan gas pipeline at the ‘Isaccea 1-Cardam station’ (on the border with Ukraine) will be allocated not independently but proposed together with the capacities at the Negru Voda 1-Cardam station,” said the ICIS press release. Initially, Transgaz was going to offer only 4.4 million cubic meters per day for each of the above-mentioned two border

stations, but relevant sources reported that such a volume cannot satisfy Ukraine's and Moldova's demands; Moldova needs 9-10 million cubic meters a day and the Odessa Oblast [region] of Ukraine – 4-5 million cubic meters. ICIS presumes that with new contracts, Ukraine will be able to preserve its transit to Central European countries, but will lose its transit to Southeastern Europe and to Turkey, where Russian gas will start coming through the TurkStream, which official launching has been scheduled for January 8th, 2020, though it is not known yet if the trans-continental pipeline will start pumping fuel straight from the beginning of 2020. As soon as the TurkStream starts working, the Russian gas will be pumped from Turkey over to Bulgaria and Romania and then to Ukraine, from where, namely through the Isaccea 1-Orlovka station, the fuel will be coming to Moldova and to a part of the Odessa Oblast of Ukraine. (www.infotag.md)

- December 11th, MPs of Andrei Nastase, leader of the Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Co-Chairperson of the parliamentary pro-European political bloc ACUM [Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) and Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS)], stated on the local television on Tuesday night that he will be a sheer nightmare for President Igor Dodon in his struggle for a second presidential office. *“We all must spare no effort to prevent Dodon from winning his second mandate. And I will be doing my utmost for this. Dodon is the greatest threat for the country, so I will be a sheer nightmare for him in his campaign. I know whom he is afraid of, and I see whom he and his Socialists attack. So, I will be responding*

accordingly,” Nastase said. Despite such an articulate challenge, Nastase nevertheless refrained from answering concretely about whether he will run for the presidential post or will support the candidacy of the PAS Chairperson Maia Sandu. He only hinted evasively that he *“may take part”* in the 2020 presidential elections. *“I stand for preserving the unity of our ACUM bloc. But, simultaneously, I must work to strengthen the DA Platform's positions, must not I?”* he said. On December 22nd, 2019 the PPDA will hold its congress, at which we will discuss our participation in the presidential election. *“We have time yet to take a correct decision,”* Nastase said. The PPDA leader sees no problem in taking part in the presidential election despite his losing the recent Mayoral election in Chisinau. In his words, he would have necessarily won the Mayoral election, had he not agreed to become Interior Minister shortly before that. He voiced regret that the Sandu Government had worked only 5 months, so most of de-oligarchization projects, the justice reform and many high-profile investigations could not be brought to a logical end. (www.infotag.md)

- December 13th, the Prime Ministers of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, taking part in a Summit of *“The Organization for Democracy and Economic Development GUAM,”* being held in Kiev, are discussing the possibility of establishing a zone of free trade between these countries. Ukraine Prime Minister Alexei Goncharuk said at a news conference on Thursday that GUAM is *“an organization focusing on deepening of economic cooperation, and the representatives of our 4 countries have agreed about focusing precisely on this.”* *“There are two priority directions we can see. The first one pertains to the*

creation of a free trade zone between the GUAM states. All the four countries share the opinion that we should not have trade borders or barriers. Businesses should feel free. This can create advantages not only in trade ties between the 4 states but also in trade with other countries. The second ambitious project is the creation of a transport corridor that may eventually develop into a good trade way that should substantially build up our trade turnover. All this will facilitate the economic development of our countries and, naturally, will permit to better develop together,” said the Ukrainian Premier.



GUAM Summit

(Photo source: www.guam-organization.org)

Goncharuk said that at the Kiev Summit, the GUAM countries signed 2 documents – Protocols of Intentions pertaining to the work of the 4 Customs Services. The first one is the Protocol of Intentions between the Customs administrations on the reciprocal recognition of plenipotentiary economic operators. The second one is the Protocol on the using of block-chain technologies at verification of certificates of the origin of goods transported across the GUAM countries’ borders. Moldovan Prime Minister Ion Chicu said “We all understand that the making of such zone a reality will mean a growth of trade turnover not only between the GUAM countries but also attraction of investments from other states. I guess that during the year 2020 we can complete

this process, and we should embark on this work without a delay.” (www.infotag.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Newly formed Government, fully controlled by the President, Igor Dodon has become functional trying to control state’s institutions and powers. Opposition ACUM Block seeks to new elections aiming to come back in power. As Andrei Nastase said the strategic objective is to forbid a new term for current President Igor Dodon who is considered as the main threat for pro-western ACUM block. The new Government strengthens relations with Russia changing Sandu’s policy, although Dodon and Prime Minister, Ion Chicu claim that Moldova will continue its pro-EU orientation. Russia is closely following political developments in Moldova as it is considered a pivotal country for Russian national security. The “Transnistrian case” is always a “running sore” for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: December 9th, at tonight’s session, the Government of Montenegro passed the Draft Law on investing in consolidation and development of the national airline ‘Montenegro Airlines’ (MA), which foresees recapitalization of the national airline by investing 155 million euro over the next six years for covering the MA due liabilities to creditors and investment in development. This proposal, according to the Government, creates basic preconditions for market operations of the Montenegrin national air carrier and therefore numerous positive effects on state’s entire economy. “This amount also includes the allocation of up to 50 million euro net for the

purchase of new Montenegrin crafts,” the Government stated. Discussion emphasized that the Montenegrin national airline annually generates about 70 million euro in revenues and that it carried more than 660,000 passengers this year, which beside the direct revenue makes a great positive impact on Montenegro’s entire economy. *“Therefore, the eventual bankruptcy or liquidation would lead to a series of cumulative negative effects across the entire national economy and numerous direct negative consequences including the loss of 33.7 million euro in repayments for aircraft and slots at foreign airports,”* they said. Considering the alternative scenario of bankruptcy or liquidation of MA, the Government concluded that such a scenario would be extremely unfavorable not only for the national airline but for the entire Montenegrin economy, especially having in mind tourism as a strategic branch of development. (www.cdm.me)

- December 11th, security situation in Montenegro is stable. In international frameworks, the country is considered to be a very safe destination, owing to efficient work of the Police and all subjects in the security system, pointed out Director of Police Department, Veselin Veljovic, on the occasion of laying foundation stone for the new facility for Special Police Unit. *“With diligent and professional work, the Police will bravely work on creating safer environment for safe future of our children and incoming generations,”* Veljovic said. The new Special Police Unit facility will finally solve the problem of accommodation capacities for elite units of Montenegro’s Police that have been performing the most complex security tasks throughout their history. *“Special Police sector and operational structures of the*

Police which will be using capacities of this important capital project will have the privilege to perform part of their tasks in the state-of-the-art conditions and space. But they will also assume greater responsibility for continuing the maintenance process and improving high level of expertise and professional training of their members,” Veljovic said. *“Complex specialized training, joint training sessions and mastering skills together with Police Units in the region and beyond, are reason enough to state that Special Police are equipped to face the most complex security challenges,”* Veljovic said. Members of the Special Police are constantly achieving great sport results in the arenas in the country and abroad, which makes them Ambassadors of Montenegro. (www.cdm.me)

- December 11th, Montenegro’s Prime Minister, Dusko Markovic, said today that decision of the Democrats to abandon the Committee on Electoral Legislation was an obvious political marketing. MPs of the Democratic Montenegro (Demokratska Crna Gora - DCG), Momo Koprivica, and Danilo Saranovic, abandoned yesterday the meeting of the Committee and confirmed they would not take part in the work of that body until Proposal for the Law on Freedom of Religion was withdrawn from the parliamentary procedure. *“This is political marketing. I do not know whether the Committee will go on with its activities, but the Government must do its job,”* Markovic said. He added that the law had been referred to the Parliament. He said that Montenegro needed such law, as every other democratic state. He explained that no monastery or church was attacked by means of the proposed law. *“We do not want to seize anybody’s property,”* Markovic said and added that the law

should be obeyed. Commenting on the attack on businessman Miodrag Davidovic, Prime Minister said that every attack should be considered a cruel and impudent act. “I learned of it from the media. Luckily, there were not tragic consequences. I hope that investigation authorities in Serbia will solve this case,” Markovic said. (www.cdm.me)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political tension and abnormality continues as ruling DPS insists that there is no need for a transitional Government rejecting opposition's request. Opposition appears divided strengthening ruling DPS's power. A possible boycott by opposition of the next parliamentary elections will have negative impact in country's political stability, consolidation of democracy, and economic growth. Montenegro claims readiness to open Chapter 8 of EU accession negotiation process but it is still doubtful if the coveted invitation letter from Brussels will arrive in Podgorica. Although the Government tries to appear calm, the fact is that concerns have been raised in the country for its EU route. The Government promotes state's political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. However, the state needs more concrete reforms in the field of justice, rule of law, fight against corruption, money laundering, and organized crime, public administration transparency and accountability in order to become a stable and attractive investment environment. Russian influence continues to be considered as a “threat” against state's national security. Moreover, Serbian intervention in Montenegrin internal affairs is considered also as a notable problem which needs to be resolved. Serbia refuses to abandon the view

that Montenegro is the “natural extension of the country.” In this context, the Government promotes a controversial law regarding religious freedom which may become a source of turbulence if the law is come in effect. Montenegro Orthodox Church sees the law as a threat against its property and will fight back. It is assessed that Montenegro Government approaches the Church as a “long hand” of Serbia and Russia in the country and so it tries to cut it out. The country focuses on strengthening its Armed Forces by purchasing modern equipment and reducing the average age of its military personnel (currently 37 years old).



NORTH MACEDONIA:

December 9th, North Macedonia has increased exports to Kosovo a year after Pristina decided to impose 100% customs duties on products from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Ministry of Economy data show that for the five months since November last year, when Kosovo imposed the 100% tariff on Serbian products, North Macedonia exported 103,3 million euro worth of goods to the Kosovo market. Compared to the same period last year, this represents an increase of exports by 25.7 million euro, or 33%. The Ministry of Economy expects that the exports to Kosovo with which North Macedonia has achieved a surplus in the trade will continue to increase in the following period. They claim that there is no re-export of Serbian products through the market of North Macedonia. According to data released by the Kosovo Bureau of Statistics, imports from North Macedonia to Kosovo in October were 6,9%, when in the previous month, just before the introduction of customs duties, imports from the country amounted to 5.1%.

“This trend we think is good, but not satisfactory, since Serbia’s total imports from Kosovo to Kosovo were around 16%, and now Serbia’s imports to Kosovo are almost 0.1%, which means there is opportunity and space for us, so we must use it even more,” says Nebi Hoxha, president of the *“Economic Chamber of Northwest Macedonia.”* In terms of CEFTA countries, North Macedonia is the first importer of Kosovo, with 6.9%, Albania is second with 6.3% and Serbia is third with 0.1%. (www.nezavisen.mk)

- December 9th, Venice Commission conclusions to revise the Law on Languages Advancing Use of Albanian Language have ignited the political scene and have sparked debates in North Macedonia. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev urges that the recommendations of Venice be respected and that he warns against revising the law. *“Since we have also debated the adoption of the Law, we have said that we will wait for the Venice Commission and respect it. It is good that the European language usage limit has been overcome, but certain rights are still violated,”* Zaev said. But the Democratic Union for Integration (Demokratska Unija za Integracija - DUI) coalition party is not in line with Zaev. *“If this law is reopened, then we will reopen the Ohrid Agreement and go back before 2001. The main reason why the law was sent to the Commission was to assess the dilemma of whether bilingualism should be part of the banknotes and military uniforms. The Commission’s assessment is positive for these provisions. Regarding the remarks on the use of the language in the judiciary, I think we should continue to build capacities so that the Albanian language can be applied as soon as possible in the judiciary and other segments of the administration,”* said Bujar

Osmani, Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration. Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) demands that the law should be removed immediately. *“A new law should be made, involving all ethnic communities in the Republic of Macedonia, and a law according to the size and representation of all, without favoring certain ethnicities to the detriment of everyone else,”* said VMRO-DPMNE Spokesman Dimce Arsovski. The the Alliance of Albanians (Aleanca për Shqiptarët – AA) emphasized that Albanians are not a minority and that the Albanian language should be regulated by the Constitution. *“To begin with, the law should not have been sent at all because it is in line with the Constitution. We Albanians are not a minority here, but we are a constituent community above 25%. As an Alliance for Albanians we insist on making constitutional changes and make Albanian an official language,”* said AA Secretary General Arben Taravari. The Venice Commission recommends abolishing the use of the Albanian language as a second language in the judiciary, restricting the use of the Albanian language to internal and inter-institutional communication, restricting official written communications, or has postponed it until proper implementation of this provision. The Venice Commission considers that the law extends the use of the Albanian language by transposing in some respects the European standards of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. (www.nezavisen.mk)

- December 13th, in what looked like a closely coordinated move, the junior partner in the coalition Government in North Macedonia, the Democratic Union for Integration (Demokratska Unija za Integracija - DUI), and the main opposition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) party, on Thursday submitted thousands of amendments to the proposed change to the electoral law. The motion to change the law submitted by smaller parties but supported by the main ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija – SDSM), envisages scrapping the current six electoral districts in favor of one single unit. The two parties have submitted more than 6,000 amendments to the motion. The DUI submitted 5,000 while the rest came from the former ruling VMRO DPMNE party. This means that the proposed changes will almost certainly not pass ahead of early general elections due on April 12th, 2019. Parliament must disband 60 days ahead of the elections, in February 2020. Although the Prime Minister and SDSM leader, Zoran Zaev, on Thursday said the planned changes were the “best way of improving democracy,” the mainly ethnic Albanian DUI clearly disagreed. It justified its filibustering move by arguing that “a one-sided change to the election model just few months ahead of the elections could create a dangerous precedent.” VMRO DPMNE issued a similar statement, saying that such “changes should be made with a wide political consensus and as far away as possible from actual elections.” (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Early parliamentary elections are scheduled for April 12th, 2020, while an interim Government is expected to be formed on January 3rd, 2020. However, it is not still certain that ruling SDSM and Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev will follow the forementioned timetable, citing the need for a functional Parliament to ratify the NATO accession process. Opposition will not accept a postponement of the interim Government and elections without reactions. It seems that Zaev faces problems with his cooperation with Albanian DUI after the Venice Commission conclusions on the Law about the Languages in the country. Albanians see the Commission’s assessment as an effort to blockade their language as an equal one in the country. It is considered as a sensitive issue which may become a source of inter-ethnic tension within the state. Moreover, ruling SDSM promotes a rapid change of the electoral law only a few months before elections provoking strong reactions not only by opposition, but also from its coalition partner DUI. It is assessed that Zaev makes spasmodic moves having early parliamentary elections ahead threatening a stable political climate. It is obvious that he does not feel politically safe and he is trying to gain time. Undoubtedly, North Macedonia has entered in political uncertainty and instability. The country should focus on reforms regarding justice, rule of law, fight against corruption and money laundering, administration, and respect of human rights in order to accelerate its European integration process. North Macedonia’s politics are still shaken by a series of corruption and extortion scandals undermining not only country’s political stability, but also its European perspective. Fancy

names such as “Extortion”, “Empire”, “Racket”, “Titanic”, “Monster” are nothing more than scandals involving politicians, businessmen, criminals, and judicial servants demonstrating that corruption, absence of rule of law and non transparency dominate in state’s function. It should be noted that Justice moves slowly towards full investigation of these scandals.



ROMANIA: December 9th,

President Klaus Iohannis said on Monday that he wants Mayors to be elected in two rounds and that if the draft laws under the Parliament’s debate fail, then it would be “a reasonable approach” the Government to take responsibility. “I want Mayors to be elected in two rounds. I would like a partnership between central administration, through the Government and the local administration, through Mayors. We have to go back to electing Mayors in two rounds. If the Parliament fails to pass the bills, then it would be a reasonable approach for the Government to take responsibility before the Parliament,” Iohannis said while attending the General Assembly of the Cities Association in Romania. Deputy Prime Minister Raluca Turcan also said on Monday that, in case the draft law on electing Mayors in two rounds fails in Parliament, then the Government will take other measures. On the other hand, Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) and Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România - UDMR), which are not favored by potential two-round local elections, threatened the Orban Cabinet with a censure motion. Leader of UDMR Deputies, Attila Korodi had previously announced the Union will endorse a potential censure motion against the Executive

if Orban Cabinet issues a GEO on electing Mayors in two rounds and assumes responsibility on it. PSD interim President Marcel Ciolacu had said on Sunday that they will file a no-confidence vote in case of such an ordinance. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

- December 10th, Romania’s Senate endorsed a simple motion filed by the opposition Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) against Finance Minister Florin Citu, with 59 votes for the motion, 56 against, and two abstentions, G4media.ro reported. PSD blamed Citu for having served electoral purposes by his statements as Finance Minister. In response, Citu accused former PSD Finance Minister Eugen Teodorovici of having been aware about the public deficit heading toward 4% of GDP this year. He also implied PSD was not really willing to enforce the 40% pension hike next September and that he would come up with evidence in this regard if necessary. Simple motions have no formal effects and Prime Minister Ludovic Orban defended Citu. Orban blamed PSD for petty politics, after the Social Democrats have ruined the public budget for the past three years. He said that he has a very good cooperation with Citu and under no circumstance would he ask him to resign. The new Finance Minister inherited a 2.8% of GDP budget deficit in the first 10 months of this year plus many unpaid bills to the private sector. The Government recently amended the budget for this year to cover all expenses until the end of this year, which resulted in a budget deficit projection of 4.4% of GDP for the full year. (www.romania-insider.com)

- December 11th, the Head of Prime Minister’s Chancellery, Ionel Danca, has announced that the Government had adopted in its Tuesday sitting the

three draft laws for which it is to take responsibility in Parliament, namely the amendment of the justice laws, of thee GEO 51 on pupils' transport and to pass the Ceiling Law. The amendment of the justice laws eyes to delay the early retirement of magistrates, to push the seniority to join the National Institute of Magistracy and to amend situation related to the three-judge panels. *“Considering the serious disruptions to take place in the act of justice the Government will take responsibility on these aspects in Parliament,”* Danca said. He mentioned the other bill is related to provide inter-county transport to solve the issue of the pupils living in the villages who have no means to get to school. More precisely, the bill will enable the current transport operators who have transport license to take over pupils and old people or disabled. As for the Ceiling Law, Danca said the adoption of this bill is vital in order to have the 2020 budget draft law adopted by the end of the year. *“It is a bill based on which local authorities can draft their own budgets and kick off the investment projects,”* the Government's representative said. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■■■ :

The Government in cooperation with the President, Klaus Iohannis has shown considerable activity last week aiming to resolve several legislative issues. Besides, Iohannis seeks to degrade PSD control in state's institutions. Bringing important draft laws in the Parliament such as justice law, state budget and local administration electoral law would be a critical test for the minority Government of PNL. Elections should not be expected before spring 2020, giving the necessary time to PSD to be reorganized and even to take in advantage a

possible wear of former ruling party. The country enjoys advanced upgrade in US and NATO strategic plans due to its geographical position located close to Russia. Consequently, Russia reacts in this close military cooperation between the two countries perceiving it as a threat against its national security. Romania keeps strengthening its Armed Forces seeking to achieve NATO standards.



SERBIA: December 10th, on Monday evening at the UN General Assembly in New York, Serbia voted against the resolution calling on the Russian Federation, *“as the occupying power,”* to withdraw its military forces from Crimea and to end its temporary occupation of Ukrainian territory. Serbia was the only Balkan country to vote against the resolution, with the others voting in favor, apart from Bosnia and Herzegovina, which abstained. It was adopted with 63 countries voting in favor and 19 against. The resolution, entitled *“Problem of the militarization of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as well as parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov”* also calls on Russia to return all equipment and weapons to Ukraine that were taken from three ships seized by Moscow's forces which were later returned. It further condemns visits by Russian officials to Crimea. This is not the first time Serbia has been the only Balkan country to stand by Russia at the UN. In December 2017, Belgrade backed Moscow over a UN General Assembly resolution put forward by Ukraine which condemned the human rights situation in Russian-annexed Crimea. Russia and Serbia historically have warm relations, based on Slavic ethnic ties and common fealty to the Orthodox

Church. Most Serbs view Moscow as one of their biggest international allies, especially in the battle to prevent international recognition of the independence of the former province of Kosovo. Russia has regularly condemned Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008, and has since voted against the membership of Kosovo in international institutions in line with Belgrade's policies. In turn, Serbia has refused to join Western sanctions on Russia for its perceived role in fomenting the conflict in Ukraine, despite numerous calls from Brussels reminding Serbia that – as an EU candidate country – it needs to align its foreign policy with that of the EU. *“There is no document that Russia would vote for if it were against Serbia's interests, just as Serbia did not and would not vote against Russia's interests,”* Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said at a press conference with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in Sochi on December 4th, 2019. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- December 10th, during the intergovernmental conference in Brussels, the EU agreed on Tuesday to open Chapter four on the free flow of capital in the accession negotiations with Serbia, the FoNet news agency reported. That is the second Chapter opened in 2019, making it the 18th out of 35 chapters to open, with two preliminary closed. Oliver Varhelyi, the EU Enlargement Commissioner, said the new chapter brought Serbia closer to the bloc. The Finish Minister of European Affairs Tutti Tuppurainen, whose country chairs the EU, said the enlargement was the strategic investment into peace, stability in the European development. Jadranka Joksimovic, Serbia's Minister of European Integration, said that *“today's opening shows that Serbia has made progress in the rule of law in addition to its*

economic reforms.” Serbia's authorities were ready to open Chapter 2 on freedom of movement for workers, 21 on trans-European networks and 14 on transport policy but political agreement had been reached only for Chapter 4. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- December 14th, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Branabic said Saturday that she personally asked Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic to postpone the election date as much as possible but in accordance with the law and the Constitution. Brnabic added that the President was against it, but that he accepted her request. Speaking at a press conference, she noted that Vucic felt it was better for the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka - SNS) to have the election as soon as possible and that it was better for the citizens, but that they wanted to meet part of the opposition and MEP's demands. She explained that calling the elections was the exclusive right of the President of Serbia and that she sought the postponement as a show of goodwill to the opposition so they would have extra time, but added that a nine-month delay was not in accordance with the Constitution. The Prime Minister said that since the beginning of the EU-mediated inter-party dialogue, the Government did everything the partners or the opposition asked for. According to her, improving the election conditions is not an empty promise, but that there are 17 recommendations from the dialogue that are yet to be implemented and that more than 70% of earlier recommendations have been fully implemented. (www.rs.n1info.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

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

of elections delay could bring more reactions, but it is assessed as a “clever” political maneuver by ruling SNS to gain time and to be appeared as seeking compromise with opposition. On the other hand, opposition should become more productive because to reject everything “is not a political stance.” General elections were scheduled for April 2020 but under latest developments it is still doubtful when they will take place eventually. Serbian – Russian close relations continue despite latest incident of spy case. Serbia was the only Southeast Europe country which supported Russia against a UN resolution on Crimea. It is assessed that Russian influence and presence has been established in Serbia through various routes including economic, cultural, defense and diplomatic cooperation. Russia is the most valuable ally for Serbia especially in the Kosovo case. However, one could claim that it is the West which has sent the country in the Russian arms. The EU has raised serious concerns over Serbia’s effectiveness on independence and accountability of the judiciary, freedom of expression, prevention of corruption and the fight against organized crime. Regarding Kosovo, Serbia is waiting to see initiatives and actions of the new Government which will be formed (most likely) with Vetevendosje leader, Albin Kurti as the Prime Minister. A possible deployment and permanent presence of Kosovo security forces in Serb majority north Kosovo would bring tension and turbulence. However, the US and EU are increasing pressure on both sides to restart dialogue. According to information the US mainly seek to forward talks between the two parties before the Serbian elections but it is very unlikely to see this happens. Serbia insists that taxes should be revoked for joining dialogue. One should have in mind that top state officials have

said repeatedly in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its Armed Forces declaring towards all sides that they are the power of the state. It implements an ambitious armament program mainly supported by Russia.



SLOVENIA: December 9th, Prime Minister Marjan Sarec is visiting Slovenian soldiers deployed in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo until Tuesday. Meeting top NATO and EUFOR officials in Sarajevo and Prishtina, Sarec heard praise of Slovenian troops. He said EUFOR and NATO presence in Bosnia was important for preserving stability in the region and stressed Slovenia was not considering scaling down its presence. Fourteen Slovenian soldiers are deployed in Bosnia and around 250 in Kosovo. Sarec also regretted the country transforming the Kosovo Security Force into a professional military force without changing the constitution. (www.sta.si)

- December 2nd, Slovenia advocates a comprehensive approach to migrations in the future EU migration and asylum policy. The underlying goal must be to reduce illegal migrations, Interior Minister Bostjan Poklukar told a session of the EU's Justice and Home Affairs Council. It is necessary to relieve the burden on countries in the management of migrations and establish a new European asylum agency. Poklukar also highlighted the costs incurred by local communities along the border, for example damage to infrastructure, and said the EU should make allowance for such damage in its financial plans. (www.sta.si)

- December 10th, nearly two years since Slovenia implemented the course of the border as set by a Hague-based arbitration Tribunal, there is no end to incidents in the Piran Bay, which it shares with Croatia. What is more, a 25% rise in Croatian Police boats sailing into Slovenian waters has been recorded this year. Slovenian Police processed 1,191 cases of Croatian patrol boats sailing into Slovenian waters from January 1st to December 1st, 2019 up 939 year on year, the Government Communication Office (UKOM) said. The Police moreover processed 579 cases of Croatian fishing boats sailing into the Slovenian part of the bay from December 29th, 2017, the day when Slovenia unilaterally implemented the arbitration decision, and the end of November 2019. (www.sta.si)

- December 11th, President Borut Pahor expressed confidence in an interview with Radio Slovenija that in time, border between Slovenia and Croatia will run along the line defined by the arbitration tribunal in 2017. “Imagine what Croatia would give to support its position with a tribunal decision... These small victories, celebrated by Croatia, may be legitimate, but they are futile,” he said a day after it was announced that the advocate general handling Slovenia's case against Croatia over EU law violations at the European Court of Justice deemed the case inadmissible. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Marjan Sarec's minority Government continues to enjoy support in the Parliament. Although the Prime Minister is reassuring for the Government's stability and sustainability there are questions over its effectiveness. The possibility of snap elections is rather unlikely,

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



TURKEY: December 12th, Turkey on Thursday sent its accord with Libya on a maritime boundary between the two countries to the UN for approval, a Turkish diplomatic source said, despite objections from Greece that the agreement violates international law. Two weeks ago, Libya's internationally recognized Government and Turkey signed the maritime delimitation agreement, in a move that escalated disputes over potential offshore gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean. Turkey says the accord aims to protect its rights and is in line with international law. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that the accord would allow Turkey and Libya to hold joint exploration operations in the region. Infuriated by the pact, Greece accused Libya's Government of deception and expelled the Libyan Ambassador to Athens. It also said it had lodged objections with the UN, saying the accord violated international law. Tensions were already running high between Greece and Turkey because of Turkish gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean off the coast of the divided island of Cyprus. The NATO members are also at odds over mineral rights in the Aegean Sea. The EU has readied sanctions against Turkey in response to its actions around Cyprus, which was split in a 1974 Turkish invasion following a Greek-inspired coup. Peace talks on the island have been in limbo since UN-led efforts collapsed in 2017. (www.aljazeera.com)

- December 13th, Turkey's former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has launched a new political party in a challenge to the 17-year rule of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP). Davutoglu, who served as Prime Minister

and AKP Chairman from 2014 to 2016, unveiled the Future Party (Gelecek Partisi - GP) at a news conference in Ankara on Friday, a move dismissed as a non-threat by the President's supporters. Speaking in front of a backdrop decorated with the new party's green leaf logo, Davutoglu pledged to uphold human rights and minority freedoms. *"The primary responsibility of the state is to provide political, cultural and economic conditions that provide a basis for the dignity of its citizens,"* Davutoglu said at the event in Bilkent Hotel. *"There can be no state that neglects human beings and their fundamental rights or reduces them to a secondary position. The basis of a democratic administration is the equal and free use of fundamental rights and freedoms by all citizens."* Criticizing constitutional changes that concentrated power in Erdogan's hands, Davutoglu said the presidential system introduced after a 2017 referendum had led to *"a sharp decline in democratic standards."* Ravza Kavakci, a member of the AKP's Central Committee, said Erdogan had nothing to fear from the new party. However, she stressed the need for the AKP to *"change based on the demands of the people."* Davutoglu resigned from the AKP in September, claiming it was failing to address the country's problems. Another former AKP cabinet member, Ali Babacan, quit two months earlier and is expected to announce his own rival party within weeks. Their resignations reflect discontent within the AKP, according to observers. Harsh economic conditions saw the party lose key cities such as Istanbul and Ankara in local elections earlier this year and Erdogan has come to rely on an alliance with nationalists. *"The ruling party is losing ground and support from its base,"* said Kemal Can, a columnist and political analyst at Duvar newspaper. *"Even if the new*

parties do not exceed the 10% electoral threshold to enter Parliament at the next election - due in 2023 although there is a possibility of early polls - they could attract a significant number of AKP supporters. It might be small but there will be a definite effect on Turkish politics with the establishment of these new parties,” Can said. Davutoglu stressed the diversity of the Future Party's 154 founding signatories, which include members from religious and ethnic minorities alongside former AKP members. Feramuz Ustun was one of many disaffected AKP politicians on the list. He was a founding member of the party in 2001 and served as an MP from 2011 to 2015. He complained that the AKP had lost touch with its roots and become dominated by a cabal of advisers surrounding Erdogan. The Future Party “*will try not to repeat the same mistakes,*” he said. (www.aljazeera.com)



Ahmet Davutoglu, leader of Future Party
(Photo source: www.gelecpartisi.net)

- December 15th, Turkish Naval Forces intercepted an Israeli ship in Cypriot waters and escorted it away as tension over natural resource exploration continues to rise in the region. The ship, Bat Galim, of the Israeli Oceanographic and Limnological Research Institution was conducting research in Cyprus's territorial waters in

coordination with Cypriot officials, Israeli media reported on Saturday quoting Israel's Ministry of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water. According to reports, Turkish vessels contacted the ship, requested an explanation of their activities, and then demanded it to leave that area of the Mediterranean Sea, which it did. The incident took place weeks after Turkey signed a deal with Libya that mapped out a boundary in the east of the Mediterranean Sea that cuts across what Greece views as its islands' maritime territory. Besides national prestige, at stake is the lucrative prospect of hydrocarbon resources. Greece and Turkey have not delimited their Exclusive Economic Zones, which allow countries to exploit undersea wealth. Cyprus, Israel and Egypt, who have delineated their EEZs, have all discovered offshore gas fields that can power their economies for decades. The Turkey-Libya deal fuelled regional tensions with Greece, Cyprus and Egypt over oil-and-gas drilling rights in the region. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the accord would also allow Turkey to carry out drilling on Libya's continental shelf with Tripoli's approval and it was in line with international law. “*With this new agreement between Turkey and Libya, we can hold joint exploration operations in these exclusive economic zones that we determined. There is no problem,*” Erdogan said. “*Other international actors cannot carry out exploration operations in these areas Turkey drew [up] with this accord without getting permission. Greek Cyprus, Egypt, Greece and Israel cannot establish a gas transmission line without first getting permission from Turkey,*” he added. (www.aljazeera.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT ■ :

Turkey is determined to implement its agreement with Libya having the goal to establish its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. As HERMES has assessed tension in the region happens because Turkey refuses to be isolated by the other stakeholders namely Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, and Israel (and Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine). Turkey claims its share not only in the energy game of Eastern Mediterranean, but also in the geopolitical and geostrategic developments in the region. As long as Turkey is not considered as an equal partner by the others, tension will be increased in the region. Besides, Turkey has proven so far that knows how to use hard power to promote and protect its interests. One could say that it is a “rational player” in the international and regional chessboard using effectively soft and hard power. “Temperature” is rising dangerously in the region since none could exclude a “hot” incident between Greek and Turkish Navy not only in south and southwest of Crete, but also in Cypriot waters and the Aegean Sea. Turkey and Russia implement the agreement on Syrian “safe zone” ensuring a relative truce in the region. Turkey continues to face several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs, Mayors, journalists and thousands of citizens are in custody or convicted by the state Courts. Local and international observers claim the country moves towards an authoritarian regime with thousands of citizens being persecuted. Former Prime Minister and ruling AKP prominent member, Ahmed Davutoglu inaugurated a new political platform, the Future Party. His initiative came only two weeks after another former AKP member, Ali Babacan announced his own party. It seems that chained earthquakes are ongoing within the ruling AKP. It is impressive that Davutoglu in his party


declaration has spoken for democratic rules and human rights; it is exactly what Erdogan is accused of constantly ignores or violates. It is a question if these two new parties will achieve in next elections to pass the 10% threshold to enter the Parliament but definitely will attract voters from AKP shrinking its already wounded from local elections power and confidence. The state demonstrates decisively its leading role in the wider region of the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and East Mediterranean implementing its doctrine for a diligent capability development effort to be able to fight two multi-front, inter-state armed conflicts while being able to simultaneously carry on large-scale counterterrorism operations at home and beyond borders. Kurdish question is a major security threat for Turkey affecting stability, peace and even unity of the state. Turkey develops an ambitious armament project aiming at becoming self-sufficient in defense sector; if it succeeds it will set the base to become a regional military super power.


www.hermesresearch.eu


email: info@hermesresearch.eu

Editor in Chief: Ioannis Karampelas

NOTE

 Stable situation. No security risk.

 Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored.

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

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

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