



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

SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE AT A GLANCE



SOUTHEAST EUROPE DIRECTORATE

“SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE AT A GLANCE” 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, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Greece, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey. However Greece enjoys its own weekly review for a more detailed presentation of its current affairs (GREECE AT A GLANCE).

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

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ALBANIA: April 23rd, a group of former Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë - PD) officials set up a new party called “*Democratic Conviction*” promising they will participate in the upcoming local elections scheduled for June 30th, 2019. Led by Astrit Patozi, a former Deputy Chairman of the main opposition PD, the new party says it hopes to be the main electoral alternative to both the Government and the opposition. “*Our political system is based on mutual guarantees provided for each other by the two main rivals, which aim is to subdue any democratic spirit in their respective camps,*” Patozi wrote in a social media note as he announced the new party. “*We are not living under a parliamentary democracy but under a system in which the party in power controls everything. We are living under a party regime,*” he added. Meanwhile, PD signed protocols to create a coalition with several smaller parties, including Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim - LSI), a nominally left-wing party. PD leader Lulzim Basha said the coalition will refuse to participate in the elections and called for Prime Minister Edi Rama’s resignation. “*There will be no fake elections,*” Basha said. Responding to Basha’s statement, Rama said in a social media post that the elections will go ahead as planned on June 30th, 2019 despite any boycott. “*A coalition against the elections is another form of political suicide,*” Rama wrote. “*Elections will not be stopped, nor they will be postponed,*” he added. PD, which represents the main opposition in Albania, decided to withdraw its MPs from Parliament last February and has staged several major protests, some of which ended in violence. However, since it left Parliament, some of its candidates have agreed to take their seats in

Parliament and created a new parliamentary group. Led by Rudina Hajdari, daughter of Azem Hajdari, a legendary PD leader who was murdered in 1998, the group has currently about 14 MPs. However, Hajdari dismissed speculation about an alliance between PD and the new “*Democratic Conviction*” splinter party. If opposition refuses to participate in the coming elections, it will be the first poll boycott in the country’s recent history. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- April 25th, the Democratic Party of Albania (Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë - PD) leader, Lulzim Basha said during a protest that there will be no elections on June 30th, 2019 and that the opposition cannot be cloned or invented. “*There will be no elections on June 30th. Even Rama knows it. Opposition cannot be cloned, it cannot be invented by Rama’s mercenaries,*” Basha declared. “*The only ones who will go to prison,*” Basha said responding to Rama’s statement that whoever tries to stop elections will face the law, “*will be Vangjush Dako, Damian Gjijnuri and all of the other political collaborators of Edi Rama, who were caught stealing the votes of Albanians,*” Basha emphasized. In the meanwhile, opposition hardens its protests by blocking main national roads and paralyzing the country. Through this form of protest, the opposition aims to reiterate its message that the protests will be escalated if its conditions for an interim Government and Rama’s resignation are not met. Media sources reported the opposition’s upcoming national anti-government – the fourth protest on a national scale – rally will be held on May 11th, 2019 (www.top-channel.com)

- April 26th, the OSCE Office in Albania has welcomed the extension of work for the Special Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Reform voted with consensus in Parliament. The OSCE presence urged Committee to improve legislation according to the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations made after the 2013, 2015, and 2017 elections and offered its support on technical review of the electoral system in Albania. The term of the Electoral Committee was extended for one month and the deadline foreseen by the legislation on its work is until May 6th, 2019. (www.albaniandailynews.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Albania has entered in a period of political turmoil and fragile political stability not only because opposition organizes huge protests against the Government, but mainly because opposition MPs decided to abandon Parliament and resign aiming at blocking Parliament's works. Such decision was strongly criticized by the international community namely the EU and U.S putting at risk the opening of accession negotiations in June 2019. While opposition hardens its protests by blocking national roads, Albanian politics become more complicated since a new parliamentary opposition emerged by former PD and SMI members who replaced the resigned MPs. The Government highlights that the Parliament is fully functional,, while PD leader Lulzim Basha calls it "fake opposition." Local elections scheduled for June 30th, 2019 is the milestone of rapid political developments in the country. The ruling socialists push by any mean to conduct the elections, while opposition declares that there will be no elections. Escalation of tension including violent incidents is highly expected as we approach to the election

date. PD and LSI leaders, Basha and Kryemadhi respectively pushing for the Government's topple and snap elections. International community strongly supports Rama urging opposition to follow parliamentary procedures avoiding its unconventional practices. It is not normal for a stable country seeking to enter the European club to face such situation of political abnormality. Opposition MPs' resignation aiming at forcing the Government in collapse is not a reasonable political strategy for a functional and stable democracy. It is assessed that Rama is stabilizing situation eliminating possibilities for snap elections. The new party, "Democratic Conviction" stemming from PD's body is a sign of the latter's weakness. The Government is accused of having links with organized crime and current situation raises questions over the power of "Albanian mafia" in the country and its influence in state's politics. Undoubtedly, corruption and organized crime remains the most significant state's problem undermining its strategic goal of opening accession negotiations with the EU. The Netherlands decision to request from the EC the suspension of visa free for Albanians due to increased criminality is a hard "slap" against the state and the Government's image. The EU closely monitors progress of reforms especially in justice sector. Commissioner Hanh urged the EU leaders to start accession negotiations with Albania (and North Macedonia) underlying that other forces namely Russia, China, Turkey, and Arab countries may increase influence in the region. The final decision for opening Albania's accession negotiations in June 2019 is up to the EU Heads of Governments. One should underline that unofficial concerns have already been raised regarding this date due to current political instability. Failure of opening accession talks

with the EU it will further destabilize the country toppling the Government. Albania monitors Kosovo – Serbia negotiations and definitely has a role as a “mother nation.” The state maintains its leading role in the Albanian world providing guarantees and support to Albanian population in the region namely Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and F.Y.R.O.M. In this context, the Albanian Prime Minister and his Government work on promoting Kosovo interests in international community using any forum they have access. Possible border changes may engage Albania in dangerous situations taking into consideration that it has the role of “protector” of Albanians in the region.



BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA:

April 24th, the Parliament of Republika Srpska (RS), Bosnia's Serb-majority region, included the issue of recent murders on its territory in the agenda of its regular session but decided to keep the discussion behind closed doors. The RS National Assembly will not convene in a special session to discuss the murders but will talk about the issue in a regular session set to take place on Thursday, the parliament's leadership decided. RS Internal Affairs Minister Dragan Lukac informed the lawmakers about the Police activities and the results of ongoing investigations into the recent murders of Police Officer Sladjenko Tubin and businessman Slavisa Krunic and his bodyguard, who left one of the attackers dead as well. Minister of Interior Dragan Lukac asked for support to the Police in shedding light upon the circumstances around these two events. *“Large-scale actions do not bring big results; it is necessary to work in a systematic manner,”* he said. (www.ba.n1info.com)

- April 24th, after the Parliamentary Security Commission of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina's session, Commission's President Damir Masic announced the conclusions as a response to the Draft Law in Republika Srpska (RS), which, among other things, foresees the formation of a reserve Police Force in that BiH entity. Masic said that the Security Commission requested from the representatives of the international community, primarily the OHR, which has an executive mandate to immediately stop the Anti-Deyton activities of the RS Police by disturbing citizens' security. It is asked also from BiH Security Authority to assess the security situation after the adoption of the RS Draft Law. Security Commission invited the Government of FBiH and recommended to the cantonal Governments to complete the active composition in accordance with the Rulebooks and to seek the adequate equipment of active Police institutions. In addition, if the activities on the RS Law on Reserve Component are not suspended or stopped, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina will take all measures to protect citizens' safety. (www.sarajevotimes.com)

- April 27th, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Deputy Director Vaughn Bishop expressed support for Bosnia's efforts to confront its security challenges and said his agency will continue to support Bosnia's institutions with information exchange, Bosnia's Intelligence Agency, OSA, said in a statement. The senior official of CIA met with OSA Director Osman Mehmedagic on Friday, where he reportedly expressed satisfaction with the strong partnership between the two agencies on issues of common interest. Bishop later had lunch with US Ambassador to Bosnia, Eric Nelson, Bosnia's Security Minister Dragan Mektic, the Director of

Bosnia's State Police (SIPA) Perica Stanic, Deputy Director of the Border Police, Fahrudin Halac, the Head of Bosnia's Directorate for Coordination of Police Bodies, Mirsad Vilic, Director of the Foreigners Affairs Service Slobodan Ujic, Interior Minister of the country's Serb-majority region Dragan Lukac, Interior Minister of the other semi-autonomous region Aljosa Campara as well as the Directors of both Police Forces in the entities, Darko Culum and Ensad Korman. (www.ba.n1info.com)



OSA Director Osman Mehmedagic meeting with CIA Deputy Director Vaughn Bishop
(Photo source: www.osa-oba.gov.ba)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political instability and uncertainty continues in Bosnia because it has not formed a Government since October 7th, 2018 general elections. The three main parties representing the three constituent entities (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats); HDZ (Bosnian Croatian party), SDA (Bosnian Muslim or Bosniak party), and SNSD (Bosnian Serbian party) have reached an agreement to cooperate in forming a Government and next days it will be officially announced. It seems that the three parties achieved to bypass their different views on main issues and especially Bosnia's

accession process towards NATO. Bosnian Serbs insist that the country should remain neutral staying out of NATO, Bosniaks remain committed to NATO accession as a precondition for supporting a Government, while Bosnian Croats appears neutral on the issue wishing to overcome the deadlock. 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. Croatia and Serbia keep on intervening in Bosnia's internal affairs destabilizing the state. Of course, both entities (Croats and Serbs) take in advantage "Dayton Peace Agreement" weaknesses and malfunctions. Russia pays special attention in Serbia and Bosnia in order to maintain its influence in the region. Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Albania, and Montenegro have already entered NATO, while North Macedonia would join the Alliance within 2019. These two countries (Serbia and Bosnia) are the only "vehicles" for Russia to maintain a narrow influence in Southeastern Europe. Apart from external influence and intervention the country has to confront several internal "threats" which undermine its sovereignty, cohesion, and viability. Establishment of auxiliary Police Unit by RS raised tension between the FBiH and the Serbian entity emerging the mistrust between the state's communities. Election of ultra nationalist pro-Russian Serb Milorad Dodik in the tripartite Presidency is a strong sign of more nationalistic rhetoric and more obstacles towards Bosnia's EU and NATO (mostly) integration. Dodik is a person who does not actually believe in B&H viability and is expected to promote (actually, he has already started) his own political agenda. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey approach the country mainly through "investments" and/or funding

ethnic or religious groups according to their interests.



BULGARIA: April 22nd, the replies of states sent following a request by the Ministry of Defense to submit a proposal on the project to acquire two multi-functional modular patrol vessels for the Navy opened on April 22nd, 2019. All proposals submitted to the shipbuilding companies “*Fr. Lurssen Werft GmbH & Co.KG*” (Germany), “*MTG – Dolphin*” (Bulgaria), and “*FINCANTIERI*” (Italy) opened to the public by the Interdepartmental Working Group appointed by order of the Prime Minister. It is chaired by Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Velichkov and Vice-President of the Navy Rear Admiral Mitko Petev, and there are representatives of the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Agency for National Security. (www.novinite.com)

- April 25th, the Bulgarian MPs have unanimously adopted amendments to the measures against money laundering Act at First Reading. Focus News Agency reported. The bill was supported by 88 MPs with no votes against and abstentions. The bill was tabled by the Chair of the Internal Committee and European Development of Bulgaria (Граждани за европейско развитие на България – GERB) party MP Plamen Nunev and a group of MPs. One of the main goals of the bill is to reduce the administrative burden. With the changes, the internal rules and regulations will not be validated by the Financial Intelligence Directorate of the State Agency for National Security (SANS). Instead individual SANS’ bodies will be able to carry out documentary checks. Another main objective is to take effective transposing measures in respect of

lawyers which take into account the specificities of the national legal system. (www.novinite.com)

- April 28th, port of Baku gives much importance to the cooperation with foreign partners to increase the transport and logistics potential of the region, reported AzerNews. The Bulgarian Ports Infrastructure Company (BPI Co.) and the Baku International Sea Trade Port will discuss the current state of transport and logistics in the Caspian region, Mariela Ganchovska, Head of Public Relations and Protocol Department at BPI Co. told Trend. “*We met with Taleh Ziyadov, Director General of the Baku Port, in Bulgaria last year, when Ziyadov visited the ports of Varna and Burgas. We have scheduled another meeting with him at the IAPH World Ports Conference in China, which will be held on May 6-10 this year, where we will hold discussions about Belt and Road Initiative: new opportunities for ports,*” she said. Ganchovska also touched upon the upcoming meeting with Vahid Aliyev, Deputy Director General of Baku International Sea Trade Port, that will held at the first exhibition and conference titled “*Caspian Ports and Shipping 2019*” in Aktau in May 2019. She noted that there will be an opportunity to discuss the current state of transport and logistics in the Caspian region and the development of multimodal transportation along the Trans-Caspian international transport route. The Head of department added that BPI Co. will continue to make efforts to support the application of the Baku Sea Trade Port to obtain the observer status in the European Sea Ports Organization. Being headquartered in Sofia, BPI Co. manages the infrastructure of the public transport ports of national importance and provides transportation management and cargo delivery services. The company has four territorial and three specialized divisions in

Burgas, Varna, Lom and Ruse. Port of Baku is an important participant of both East-West and North-South corridors which are in the interest of Bulgaria in terms of having an access to Central Asia. (www.novinite.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although the Government claims that there is no parliamentary crisis and possibility of snap elections, BSP absence from parliamentary sessions it is not a good sign of democratic function and the Government always has a responsibility about it. However, one should claim that Bulgarian politics follows the Balkan trend (Albania, Montenegro, Serbia etc) of leaving the Parliament; a strong sign of democratic and parliamentary immaturity. It is assessed that Bulgaria has not entered yet in political instability but it could be evolved into a potential major crisis. On the other hand, the junior partner of the ruling coalition, United Patriots remains the vulnerable and unpredictable piece of the inter-governmental stability; none could predict when a new incident or dispute will break out. Thus, Bulgaria has entered in a period of rather stable political situation. The President Radev grabs every opportunity to criticize the Government (and the Prime Minister Borissov) highlighting his different political affiliation (Radev is backed by the opposition Socialists). Opposition BSP tries to push further Borisov and his Government by strengthening its rhetoric and having tabled three motions of no confidence so far. The country strengthened its efforts towards entering the Eurozone achieving a positive decision of the Eurogroup. However, the EC made clear that Bulgaria could not enter the Eurozone before 2022. Fitch upgraded Bulgarian economy from

stable to positive; a good sign of economic function. Apart from that the European Parliament adopted a resolution for the accession of Bulgaria (and Romania) in Schengen Zone. However, it is questioned if the European Council will receive a unanimous final decision for Bulgaria under the current migration pressure. Corruption and organized crime remain significant obstacles and should be addressed decisively. Although modernization of Armed Forces is a top priority for Bulgaria and huge armament projects are ongoing (fighter jets, armored vehicles, vessels etc) military operational capability of the state is questioned especially in the Air Force. Bulgarian Armed Forces are far from NATO standards. Security situation stable; no major threats.



CROATIA: April 23rd, President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, the Supreme Commander of the Croatian Armed Forces, awarded the Supreme Allied Commander Europe of NATO Allied Command Operations US General Curtis Michael Scaparrotti, at a ceremony in Zagreb. The President awarded Scaparrotti, with the “Order of Prince Trpimir with Ribbon and Star” for his contribution to the promotion of Croatia and its Armed Forces. “Not once have you ever betrayed the trust bestowed upon you by Croatia, nor any other NATO member country,” said the President during the award ceremony. Upon receiving the honour, General Scaparrotti said it is the “unity of NATO and the contribution of its nations that ensures our security.” He praised Croatia for modernizing and strengthening its forces, “and it contributes, I think, in every mission that NATO has ongoing today.” (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- April 23rd, the presidency of the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica – HDZ), the leader of the coalition Government, held a meeting on Tuesday regarding a criminal complaint filed against Milijan Brkic, the party's Deputy President. Milijan Brkic and three others stand accused of hacking into his ex-wife's emails. HDZ President Andrej Plenkovic and the party's Secretary General Gordan Jandrokovic spoke following the meeting. *“He presented his position on the issue and we decided that Croatian institutions should continue with their work,”* said Plenkovic, *“legally and independently.”* He added that the party would keep a close eye on the situation and how things would unfold moving forward. Meanwhile, Secretary General Jandrokovic said the most important thing was that dialogue regarding the accusations had been opened. The party reiterated its *“strong support for Croatian institutions”* and their ability to work independently and to the best of their abilities. Prior to the meeting, Brkic spoke briefly to the media, adding that he is confident his role in the HDZ was not in question. *“As far as I know, this is the Croatian Democratic Union, not the Communist party - thank God,”* said Brkic. *“In democracies,”* he added, *“there exist state institutions responsible for persecutions, and they are definitely not political parties.”* Brkic also denied accusations that he had earlier insulted state institutions. *“All I said was that I do not want to participate in this affair. And that is still my position now,”* he concluded. (www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- April 27th, Moody's Investors Service changed Croatia's outlook to positive from stable and affirmed the country's long-term local and foreign currency issuer and senior unsecured debt ratings

at Ba2. The credit rating agency recalled that in 2017 Croatia recorded the first budgetary surplus of 0.8% of GDP and that the positive momentum *“was confirmed in 2018, although the surplus was lower (0.2% of GDP), in large part due to the activation of the state guarantee regarding the Uljanik shipyard.”* Moody's underscored that *“the improved fiscal performance is mainly attributable to a significant reduction in the structural deficit, meaning that public finances are strengthening in a durable way.”* The agency expects a solid surplus of the primary balance to be maintained in the coming years. It noted that the Government's debt reduction has progressed steadily since the 2014 peak (84% of GDP). *“Under its base case scenario, Moody's expects that continued fiscal prudence and positive economic growth will allow public debt to continue its downward trend and reach around 70% of GDP in 2020,”* the report on Croatia said. The document recalled that the set of measures contained in the new Fiscal Responsibility Act which was approved by the Croatian Parliament at the end of 2018 should strengthen the existing fiscal framework. All that will bring Croatia's framework closer to the European standards. *“Furthermore, in the medium-term, the pension reform enacted in late 2018 will contribute to the fiscal sustainability of the system while ensuring better pension adequacy,”* Moody's said. The credit rating agency also underscored that the growth prospects may benefit from recent reforms. Following a 6-year long recession between 2009 and 2014, the Croatian economy rebounded in 2015, with real GDP growth averaging 2.9% since. Moody's expects positive economic growth to continue in the coming years, although GDP growth will decelerate somewhat against the backdrop of a more challenging international environment. Moody's believes that

economic activity will also benefit from the future euro area formal candidacy application, as this will continue to support sound macroeconomic policies and stronger institutions, providing a policy anchor. (www.hr.nlinfo.com)

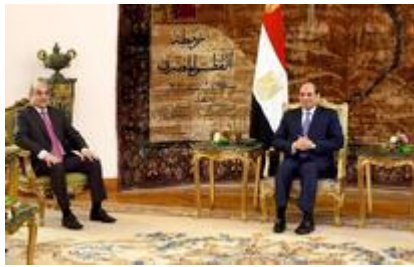
COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Croatia follows a tough regional policy with neighboring countries. It is openly intervene in Bosnia's internal affairs, while it maintains open disputes with Slovenia, Serbia, and Bosnia. It is estimated Croatia tries to establish a leading role in Western Balkans not only as an EU and NATO member state but also as a rising "local" (Western Balkans) power. One should take into consideration that Croatia shows its military strength and capabilities quite often not only in international, but also in national level sending strong messages to neighboring countries. Apart from that, Croatia pays special attention in energy strategy and security announcing ambitious projects. The state enjoys political stability. Concerns have been raised over media freedom in Croatia and one should focus on the Government's action on this matter. Border dispute on Piran Bay remains active and Slovenia's initiative to file a lawsuit against Croatia adds a new chapter between the two countries conflict. The state accelerates its efforts towards accession in Schengen zone, while the EC sends good news regarding Croatia's fiscal policy. 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: April 22nd, House of Representatives' President Demetris Syllouris, who was on an official visit to Egypt, has announced that the Speakers of Parliament from Cyprus, Greece, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq will have a meeting in Nicosia in the next couple of months (most probably on June 12th – 13th, 2019). In the context of his official visit, following an invitation by President of the Egyptian Parliament, Ali Abdel-Aal, Syllouris had a meeting with his counterpart and a large parliamentary delegation at the Egyptian Parliament. In statements after the visit concluded Abdel-Aal said that the talks confirmed "*the strong ties connecting our two friendly countries.*" He stressed once more Egypt's position on the Cyprus problem expressing his country's unwavering support of Cyprus' "*just struggle to restore its sovereignty in the entire territory of the Republic of Cyprus.*" He also expressed "*our support for Cyprus' right to discover and exploit natural resources in the Mediterranean Sea within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).*" He continued pointing out that "*we convey this support not only when we talk among us but also in international forums, where Cyprus does not participate, in particular at the Organization for Islamic Cooperation and elsewhere.*" Abdel-Aal also thanked Cyprus for its support on Egyptian positions in forums where Egypt is not represented and in particular at European Parliament level. On his part, Syllouris said that discussions continued in a very practical manner and that the matters discussed were a follow up from a trilateral conference which took place in Cyprus earlier this year between Cyprus, Greece and Egypt and had to do with education, energy, commerce and security. He further announced that "*we have agreed that following a trilateral*

conference between Greece, Jordan and Cyprus which took place in Amman a few days ago, there will be one with the participation of five countries, namely Greece, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and Cyprus, in Cyprus, before the summer.” The Cypriot delegation was also received by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi and Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly. (www.cyprus-mail.com)



Meeting of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi and Cypriot House of Representatives’

President Demetris Syllouris

(Photo source: www.parliament.cy)

- April 22nd, President Nicos Anastasiades is waiting to see how the UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy Jane Hall Lute will continue to relaunch the negotiations, Government Spokesman Prodromos Prodromou said. Responding to journalists’ questions on whether there has been any development either with the UN Secretary-General’s report or with Lute’s initiative, Prodromou said the report should be discussed by the UN Security Council soon. *“Our side is in constant contact with Ms Lute and we look forward to seeing how she will choose to continue this initiative for the resumption of negotiations,”* he said. He recalled that, apart from the fact that the President has been ready for the immediate resumption of negotiations on the basis of the six parameters proposed by the UN Secretary-General, he has also responded to the ideas put forward by Lute. *“We are therefore waiting to see what the choice will be, how the*

initiative will continue, because, of course, our side means that the negotiations must definitely start again,” Prodromou said. On whether Lute’s proposal concerns a meeting abroad with the composition of the Conference of Cyprus in Crans-Montana in the summer of 2017, the Spokesman said that Anastasiades has put forward thoughts and ideas to help Lute’s work, but has also responded positively to ideas she has developed. *“We are now expecting Ms Lute to see what the continuation will be,”* Prodromou said. Media reports said that the UN would like to see progress on the Cyprus problem by June so that it can be recorded in the report on the UNFICYP’s mandate. Politis daily reported that sources within the UN confirmed that the aim of the UN is to repeat a conference with all parties involved during the summer. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

- April 25th, China considers Cyprus a strategic partner, President Xi Jinping said during a meeting in Beijing with President Nicos Anastasiades, expressing at the same time its *“unwavering support”* for a solution to the Cyprus problem. A Cyprus presidency statement said that during the meeting, the relations between the two countries were reconfirmed and bilateral agreements signed. Anastasiades is in the Chinese capital to participate in the Belt and Road forum, an initiative of the Chinese President. The Chinese President said his country supported and would continue to support the Cyprus positions that include maintaining the presence of UNFICYP on the island. He said his country is interested in studying the trilateral partnerships Cyprus has forged in the Eastern Mediterranean, noting that the two countries could extend their partnership in sectors such as renewable energy, telecommunications and culture. He also said that soon China intended to create a cultural centre on

the island and underlined that his country wished to strengthen relations with Cyprus in all sectors. Cyprus, he added, is a reliable partner and good friend of China and there is deep understanding on a number of issues between the two countries. At the same time, he said Cyprus contributes to healthy relations between China and the EU. He thanked Anastasiades for his work for the “Belt and Road” Initiative and pointed out the significant geographic position of Cyprus at the crossroads of three continents. Xi described Cyprus a “strategic partner,” noting prospects to deepen bilateral relations in various sectors. In November a Cyprus delegation will be in China to take part in Expo. Anastasiades briefed Xi on the Cyprus issue and thanked China for its unwavering support. In the framework of bilateral cooperation agreements were signed on education and cultural cooperation between the Education Ministers of the two countries for the period 2019-2020 and on Cooperation in the Framework of the Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. (www.cyprus-mail.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Cyprus works systematically in order to become a major part of the East Mediterranean energy hub. It is favored not only by its natural gas deposits, but also by its strategic position in the “heart” of East Mediterranean Sea and of course of being an EU member state. The strategy of multilateral cooperation seems to be fruitful. At the moment, Cyprus is engaged in three different trilateral formations which also include strong features of strategic cooperation and alliance; Cyprus – Egypt – Greece, Cyprus – Israel – Greece, and Cyprus – Jordan – Greece. The last two are highly improved due to the US engagement. At the moment Cyprus is promoting a fourth model of

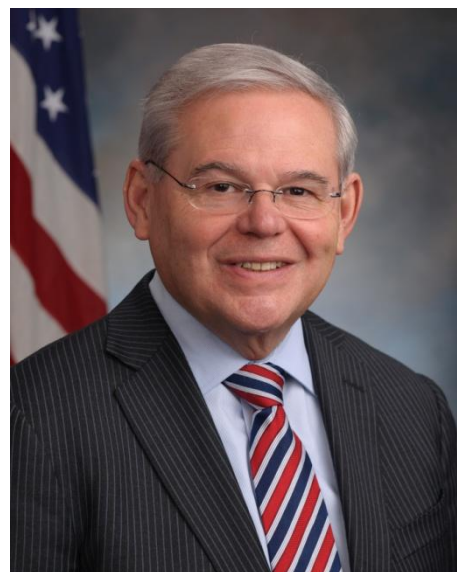
cooperation between Cyprus, Greece, and Lebanon. Apart from that, participating countries in these trilateral models seek to start interacting; it was announced that the meeting between Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt will be widened including Jordan and Iraq. In other words, Cyprus is becoming the “leading link” between the Middle East and the Arab world on the one hand and the EU on the other. Cyprus seeks to negotiate and reach agreements with its neighboring countries regarding their EEZ expanding maritime cooperation and energy security. Turkey looks like being isolated from the energy game and it is a good question how it will react since it is certain that it will not accept “fait accompli” in a region considered as part of its strategic interests. It is assessed that Turkish provocative actions may be intensified either by Turkish gas and oil drills within the Cypriot EEZ, or by military actions. It is a fact that Cyprus has a significant deficit of military power which is (externally) balanced by regional cooperation. Furthermore Cyprus improved its bilateral relations with the U.S, strengthened its defense cooperation with France, UK, and lately develops its defense and security relations with Germany. One could say that Cyprus strengthens defense cooperation with NATO leading countries. The US administration promotes abolishment of the arms embargo against Cyprus allowing it to improve its military capabilities. Conduct of aeronautical exercises in cooperation with other countries (Israel, Egypt etc) sends various messages of defense capability, readiness, and determination. Although the UN Secretary General appears optimistic for a new round of talks between the two communities, it is assessed that talks could not be resumed earlier than summer 2019. President Anastasiades promotes the scenario of a “bizonal, bicomunal

decentralized federation”; an idea which is in principle accepted by the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community and enjoys support from the U.S. However, there are a lot of disputed issues in which both parts should compromise; the most important is considered the decision-making process. As long as part of Cyprus remains under Turkish occupation and Turkish troops (equipped with heavy weapons) are deployed in the island, Cyprus faces an existing direct threat against its national security and sovereignty.



GREECE: April 22nd – 25th, the American senator Robert Menendez was in Athens as part of a regional tour promoting the Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019, bipartisan legislation introduced by Menendez and Senator Marco Rubio earlier this month that would allow the US to fully support the trilateral partnership of Greece, Cyprus, and Israel through energy and defense cooperation initiatives; including by lifting the embargo on arms transfers to the Republic of Cyprus. President Prokopis Pavlopoulos received on April 22nd, 2019 Menendez in a meeting that was also attended by US Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt. Later on, Menendez reiterated in the 15th Manuel Chrysoloras keynote speech on security cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean in Athens “*I have been a stalwart supporter of the deep American bonds with Greece, Cyprus, Israel and others in the region.*” Menendez went on to say that Turkish interference in Cyprus’ exclusive economic zone is “*unacceptable,*” and continued violations of Greek airspace over the Aegean are “*dangerous, reckless and could result in a miscalculation that plunges the region into conflict.*” On April 22nd, 2019 Greece’s Defense

Minister Evangelos Apostolakis also met with Menendez in the presence of Pyatt. Greek Foreign Minister George Katrougalos met with Menendez on April 23rd, 2019 and discussed US-Greek relations, a bill on US strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean and developments in Venezuela, according to state-run news agency ANA-MPA. According to diplomatic sources cited by the news agency, the two officials agreed that there is “*consensus of views*” and “*alignment of interests*” in the region of the Eastern Mediterranean. Finally, on April 25th, 2019 Apostolakis met with Pyatt for a second time in a week to discuss security in the Eastern Mediterranean and other issues of bilateral interest. (www.ekathimerini.com)



US Senator Robert Menendez

(Photo source: www.menendez.senate.gov)

- April 25th, the Russian Embassy in Athens suggested that Washington is meddling in Greece’s domestic affairs, pointing to the recent visit by US Senator Robert Menendez, who referred to Greek-Turkish relations and slammed Ankara’s intention to purchase the Russian S-400 weapon system. “*American senators are once again lecturing others about morality, this time*

on the theme of 'which countries to be friends with and which ones you should not be.' Is not this precisely interference in Greece's domestic affairs?" the Embassy said in a series of social media notes in Greek. Interestingly, the Greek Foreign Ministry, the Greek Embassy in Moscow, the Russian Embassy in Cyprus, as well as Greek journalists and analysts were tagged in the notes. The Embassy said the "real aim" of the US is not to prevent Turkey from buying modern air defense systems, but to convince Ankara to acquire them (such as the F-35 fighter jets and Patriot missiles) from American companies. "Everything else is nothing more than sensationalism," it said. "Despite the illegal sanctions of the US and the European Union, Russia remains open to expanding military-technical cooperation with Greece," it said, adding that the sale to Turkey of the S-400 "is not directed against third parties." Russia, it said, supports international law and is against actions that promote tensions in the region. "Russia, unlike some other countries, views the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as of fundamental importance to resolving any kind of dispute," the Embassy said. (www.ekathimerini.com)

- April 26th, Turkish fighter jets conducted a total of 39 violations of Greek air space on Good Friday, despite it being an important day on the Greek Orthodox calendar. Sixteen Turkish jets, two of which were armed, conducted unauthorized flights over the northern, central and eastern Aegean, Greek military authorities said. All the Turkish jets were identified and chased out of Greek air space, according to international rules of engagement, while two mock dogfights were also reported. (www.ekathimerini.gr)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political situation in the country is rapidly evolving and it is assessed that early parliamentary elections will be held on May 2019 (although the Prime Minister Tsipras insists that his Government will complete its mandate by October 2019). The country has entered in pre-electoral period due to EU elections scheduled for May 26th, 2019 and local elections scheduled also for May 26th, 2019 and June 2nd, 2019 (second round). A long pre-electoral period first of all may polarize society with unpredictable results and secondly it hurts national economy. The Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras focuses on approaching the center-left voters and weakening KINAL (former PASOK). Moreover, the ruling SYRIZA intensifies its efforts to gain the electoral body by announcing social care measures and benefits. Political uncertainty emerged in a period where Greece faces several diplomatic, security, and economic challenges. Internal terrorism is considered as a major unresolved problem of national security undermining stability of the state. Although Greek Defense Minister announced mutual efforts with his Turkish counterpart for confidence-building measures the latter insists on a provocative rhetoric undermining de-escalation efforts between the two countries. Lately, Akar requested demilitarization of eastern Aegean islands which rejected by the Greek Foreign Ministry. Turkish fighter jets intensified their activity regarding violation of Greek airspace and issue of NAVTEXs within Greek territorial waters for military exercises (including fires). Strengthening of military cooperation between Greece and the U.S upgrades Greece's strategic role in Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East as a western (US, EU, NATO) forward military base. On the other

hand, Greece is concerned that this upgraded relation with the US may reinforce Turkish aggression in the Aegean Sea. Furthermore, 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. Security situation is of significant risk due to an accidental or preplanned incident by Turkey.



KOSOVO: April 23rd, the Vetevendosje (Self-Determination Movement), a political party founded by Albin Kurti in Kosovo, 2004, was registered in Albania with the status of a NGO. The announcement of Vetevendosje said that this is a continuation of their several year activity in Albania, to engage with the century-old aspiration of Albanians for the unification with Kosovo. *“Our inspiration derives from the image of creating the future of a country that enables different social groups and individuals to develop their potentials by defending and improving the joint and individual economy through justice, democracy, transparency and decision-making responsibility,”* the Vetevendosje announcement said. (www.top-channel.tv)

- April 24th, scheduled local elections in four northern mainly Serbian districts of Kosovo were thrown into crisis when the Central Election Commission, (CEC), failed to certify candidates from the main Serbian party in Kosovo, Srpska Lista. The candidates did not receive the necessary support from the CEC, meaning their candidacies have been rejected. CEC members from the opposition Vetevendosje [Self-determination] party abstained from the vote, noting that several of the candidates used to be Mayors of the northern municipalities, and had

resigned for unlawful and unconstitutional reasons. Vetevendosje also called on Srpska Lista to distance itself from the content of the resignation letters of the former Mayors, where they referred to Kosovo by the Serbian term as *“Kosovo and Metohija.”* *“The CEC’s purpose is to organize the elections but we have to respect other laws and the constitution too,”* said Adnan Rustemi, a CEC member from Vetevendosje. *“We also expect them [the would-be Mayors] to distance themselves from the promise that they will withdraw [from office] immediately [if they win the elections],”* he added. After the vote, Stevan Veselinovic, from Srpska Lista, said the decision of Vetevendosje to abstain represented a political attack on the Serbs in Kosovo. Members of the CEC from the Democratic League of Kosovo (Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - LDK), did not support Vetevendosje, saying politics is not the job of CEC. Kosovo President Hashim Taci called the elections for the four northern Serbian municipalities after their local Mayors resigned in protest against a Government decision to impose 100% taxes on imports from Serbia and Bosnia. Srpska Lista has 24 hours to complain about the CEC decision to the Election Complaints and Appeals Panel (ECAP). The CEC meeting to certify the candidates for the elections was due to end on Tuesday, but, owing to disagreements, was extended to Wednesday in an attempt to reach an agreement. Candidates from the Democratic Party of Kosovo (Partia Demokratike e Kosovës - PDK), and Vetevendosje were already voted on and accepted on Tuesday. (www.balkaninsight.com)

- April 24th, after a group of 110 people were repatriated from Syria last Friday, a Kosovo Court has placed ten of the women under house arrest pending possible trial, while the rest are expected

to go before the court on this week. Court placed the 10 women under one month of house arrest, saying it suspected they had committed the crime of joining a foreign military or police force. If they are found guilty, they could face up to 15 years in prison. Court in Pristina said there was well founded suspicion that the defendants had been in the conflict zone of Syria-Iraq from 2014 until April 20th, 2019, when they were returned. A total of 110 citizens of Kosovo were repatriated from Syria last Friday, of whom 74 were children, 32 were women and four were men. Nine children returned without parents because they were killed in the fighting in the Middle East. Special Prosecutor Syle Hoxha told Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) that all 32 of the women returnees were now under investigation by the special Prosecutor's office. The three adult male returnees, Arijanit Kryeziu, Visar Qukocvi, Agon Misini, plus a minor named R.T. were immediately detained by Police on returning and sent to the high security prison in Dyz, also for one month. Arijanit, from Ferizaj/Urosecav, is suspected of having taken part in terrorist activity in Syria. There has been an international warrant for his arrest since 2018. The request submitted by the Prosecutor for custody, which BIRN has seen, said the Kosovo Police received evidence from the FBI in the US the moment the group returned to Kosovo. Since 2014, the Kosovo prosecution has filed indictments against 119 Kosovo citizens for terrorism-related charges, while 156 others are under investigation, Chief Prosecutor Aleksander Lumezi told the media on Saturday. At least 400 citizens of mainly Muslim Kosovo ended up in the conflict zones in Syria and Iraq, where Islamic State, ISIL, was attempting to create an Islamic Caliphate. Around 80 of them died there, as BIRN has reported. Since the collapse of the so-called caliphate,

Syrian authorities have been attempting to repatriate captured foreign fighters to their home countries. (www.balkaninsight.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Kosovo leaders, President Hashim Thaci and Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj are ready to join the Berlin summit scheduled for April 29th, 2019, where German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and French President Emmanuel Macron seek to restart dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Haradinaj's decision to impose 100% tax on Serbian and Bosnian products has led negotiation process into a deadlock. The international community namely the EU and U.S have put a lot of pressure on the Government to suspend taxes. There are rumors that unofficial secret talks are ongoing before the Berlin summit where the German – French leaders will present a draft agreement without border changes. It looks like (or at least it is spread through friendly media) the Kosovo President Hashim Thaci and Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj go to the Berlin summit with different stance which seems to be a major negotiating problem (if it is true). Only through normalization of relations with Serbia it will be able to move forward namely to enter the UN, NATO, EU and to achieve a normal status of a state. The state's authorities show a tendency of escalating tension with Serbia undermining a peaceful resolution of the case. By imposing 100% tariff on Serbian (and Bosnian products), establishing Kosovo army, executing Special Forces operation in northern Kosovo, arresting Serbs, and requesting special court for Serbs it is created a climate which does not facilitate dialogue and the establishment of confidence between the two parties. The question of border exchange or simply change continues to divide

Kosovo political forces and population. The Western Balkan protests “wave” may hit Kosovo door too as Vetevendosje prepares demonstrations against the Government. Mayoral elections in the North (of Serbian majority) scheduled for May 19th, 2019 offer fertile soil for provocations or violent incidents. Rejection of Serbian candidacies for local elections is a strong sign of escalation; CEC’s decision based on political criteria (which it is not its job to decide) may pull the trigger of violence in the North. It is assessed that CEC will “correct” its decision avoiding unnecessary tension. Kosovo lacks determination over its critical reforms which will establish in the country rule of law and modern functional administration. Path towards the EU and NATO will be long and hard. Establishment of Kosovo Army is also a factor of destabilization since there is always a possibility of Police or military engagement with Serbian forces. Kosovo seeks KSF to be operating all over the country pushing NATO towards such direction. The presence of Kosovo Army in the north it is assessed of high security risk which may lead in armed violence. One should take into consideration that the Serb President has already ordered all defense and security stakeholders to take all necessary measures for protecting Serbian population in Kosovo.



MOLDOVA: April 24th, neither the Party of Action and Solidarity (Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate - PAS) nor Dignity and Truth Platform Party (Partidul Platforma Demnitate și Adevăr - PPDA) [components of the political bloc ACUM] is ready yet for serious negotiations on the proposals put forward by the Party of Socialists, maintains the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din

Republica Moldova – PSRM) Secretary for Ideology Ion Ceban. In response to the ACUM’s invitation for Socialists to take part in the April 24th, 2019 meeting of the working group on Moldova de-oligarchy measures, he wrote in the social networks that PSRM had stated publicly its pre-conditions, on which it is ready to begin negotiations on forming a governing coalition and appointing a workable coalition Government that would consist of the representatives of both sides. “The ACUM’s invitation made on Tuesday morning is not adding clarity to whether the bloc is accepting or rejecting the PSRM’s proposals on coalition forming. We are underlining our openness and readiness to form a working group on the level of the leaderships of the PSRM, PAS and DA to negotiate the formation of the Parliament leadership and to discuss the legislative initiatives put forward by both sides. However, such process may be launched only if ACUM is ready to form a governing coalition to be based on the proposals put forth by the PSRM,” wrote Ion Ceban. He emphasized that PSRM proposals are aimed at changing the incumbent power and at preventing an early parliamentary election. “At the same time, we are concerned about some actions and efforts of the unionist character [unionists are adherents to the idea of Unirea – Moldova’s unification with Romania] of last few days, which involved some representatives of the ACUM leadership. Categorically, such actions cannot be accepted by Socialists as an element at shaping the future authorities of Moldova,” wrote Ion Ceban. (www.infotag.md)

- April 25th, the main obstacle to removing the Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM) Chairman Vlad Plahotniuc from power and politics is Moldova President

Igor Dodon, the informal leader of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM), MP Alexandru Slusari of the 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)] said. He analyzed in the social networks the recent (and only) meeting the Head of state had held with ACUM Deputies, during which Dodon criticized the “awful lawlessness” that had accompanied the whole parliamentary campaign, and said he had realized the entire malignancy of the current [mixed] electoral system. According to him, *“Dodon recently summoned several Socialists, who are voicing the bitterest disagreements with his political line, and rebuked them rudely, having stated that they should not be afraid of a snap election.”* Slusari stressed that he has always been and is remaining an opponent to the PSRM, and that *“ACUM shall never form a long-term coalition with the Party of Socialists; this is a red line for us.”* *“In fact, Dodon has already dragged his PSRM into a coalition with the Democratic Party by putting forward an unrealizable demand to form an alliance with ACUM for 4 years or otherwise an early parliamentary election as an alternative. It is exactly Plahotniuc who desires an early election so badly, and who fears very much that we may become able to really weaken his power within a short time. The Parliament may and must work for two more months, as a minimum. If the Socialists overcome their 'Dodon syndrome', then we all will come to have a potential for working for our citizens' good. If not, we will receive an early parliamentary election to be held by the rules imposed by Plahotniuc and Dodon. But we*

will have something to tell our compatriots,” promised Slusari. (www.infotag.md)

- April 26th, the Constitutional Court considered the request from three independent members of the Moldovan Parliament and decided that in case of early parliamentary elections, the voting will be conducted on the basis of mixed system. *“The Parliament may change the election system only during one mandate [4 years]. The new voting system may be implemented only in case of regular parliamentary elections, while the changes may be conducted at least a year before elections,”* the CC decision said. According to the Court, frequent change of the election system may damage citizens, parties, and other election competitors, as well as leads to risks of violating citizens' right to elect and be elected. As Infotag has already reported, three independent MPs, elected to the new Moldovan Parliament, Ion Groza, Alexandru Oleinic and Viorel Melnic, addressed to the CC. Their address is connected with the right-wing opposition's intention to achieve change of the voting system. Authors of the request maintain that the change of election system for conducting early elections violates the principles of the law-governed state, the right of free and democratic conducting of elections, as well as recommendations of international organizations. The returning to proportionate election system is a part of election package on Moldova de-oligarchy, proposed by the right-wing 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)]. According to representatives of the bloc, the adoption of the mixed system, on the basis of which the current parliament was elected, is a mistake as it is advantageous only to the

Democratic Party of Moldova (Partidul Democrat din Moldova - PDM). The mixed election system was adopted in Moldova in late August 2017 by votes of MPs from the PDM and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (Partidul Socialiştilor din Republica Moldova – PSRM). Meanwhile, Socialists do not deny the possibility of returning to the proportionate system, while the Democratic Party is categorically against it. (www.infotag.md)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political deadlock continues in Moldova after parties failed to form a ruling majority so far. Although PSRM and ACUM block “try to communicate”, the hard line of the latter makes thinks complicated. However there are chances of a Government between the two parties. Otherwise, snap elections are ahead. President Dodon benefits from political gap promoting a closer relation between his country and Russia. Moldova is between the Euro-Atlantic structures on the one hand and the Russian influence on the other. Political situation in the country is alarming and the EU has hardened its policy towards Moldova pushing for more reforms which will strengthen state’s transparency, accountability, and democratic values. The current Government has walked into dangerous paths which support corruption and organized crime and deep and determined justice reforms are needed. The U.S, EU and IMF express their major concerns. The ongoing crisis between Russia and Ukraine may affect Moldova; First of all Russia maintains military forces in Transnistrian ground and secondly it shares common borders with Ukraine which cannot go unnoticed by international stakeholders. The “Transnistria case” is always a “running sore”

for the country working as a potential factor of destabilization.



MONTENEGRO: April 23rd, the Democratic Front (Demokratski Front - DF) and its leaders will fully claim responsibility for the actions that will take place in case politically motivated verdict is stated to DF leaders in the attempt coup case. The verdict to the suspects for terrorism attempt on the day of parliamentary elections in 2016 is scheduled for May 9th, 2019 while new protest of “*Odupri se*” movement had been previously scheduled for that day. In the meantime, the protest on May 9th, 2019 has been canceled. “*The Democratic Front informs the public that, at yesterday’s meeting, the leaders of the parliamentary opposition and the ‘Odupri se’ movement agreed to cancel peaceful protest that was scheduled for May 9th, the day of the verdict in the mounted state coup process,*” announced. “*On that day, the DF will have its own separate activities with clear, concrete and precise actions in the case verdict to DF leaders is politically motivated. These activities will be significantly different from the protests organized by the ‘Odupri se’, and the responsibility for that day will be fully taken over by the DF and its leaders,*” the DF noted. (www.rtcg.me)

- April 27th, Businessman Dusko Knezevic announced that he is going to establish a political party named “*European Movement for Freedom*” (EPS). Knezevic, for whom the Montenegrin Interpol issued an international arrest warrant, talked to his followers on Social media and said he would set up a serious European Movement. He claimed he had people and experts as well as a clear goal for his political party. “*The opposition in Montenegro does not know how to act and it is pretty much scattered.*

Of course, I am not against them, but I will have my own political fights and my own way. Everything will be on my own. I wish the opposition all the best. In case our interests are the same, it is totally fine with me but if not, each one of us will have our own way,” said Knezevic. He has become a political reality of Montenegro and there was not one single reason for him not to become a politician. *“I do not have problems with continuing the political fight and war against Milo Djukanovic. I will figure out the way in which to do it. The Movement has already been set up, I have elected people and its goals are soon to be determined. The Movement will include people from other parties as well,”* Knezevic explained. Knezevic claimed the leader of Social Democratic Party of Montenegro (Socijaldemokratska Partija Crne Gore - SDP), Ranko Krivokapic, has been one of the most serious opposition leaders, possessing the strong international reputation. *“Along with Igor Luksic and Andrija Jovicevic, Krivokapic is a politician that the West is counting on in the future. They all have strong international connections and are well known at the international political scene as people capable of bringing changes,”* Knezevic said. (www.cdm.me)

- April 28th, opposition's desire to run the state without previously held elections is unreal and unfeasible, the Montenegrin Parliament Speaker, Ivan Brajovic, told in an interview with Pobjeda daily. *“MPs from the opposition parties, DF, SDP, SNP, Demos and those belonging to the Specific Parliamentary Club, mostly participate in the work of the plenum and other domestic and international activities of the Parliament. The Democrats and part of URA are not involved at all if we do not count that they still*

get salaries, use the parliamentary premises and other logistical support,” noted Brajovic. According to him, the opposition's involvement in the work of the Parliament generally contributes to the quality of discussions despite inappropriate parliamentary communication. When it comes to the international support, he emphasized that he has established regular communication with the in-country and international officials at several levels and never heard of any other expectation but the one saying that the political views of citizens' representatives should be expressed in Parliament, while the will of voters should be expressed only via election. As for the protests in Podgorica, Belgrade and Tirana, they all have one thing in common; a political not social connotation. *“This does not mean the entirely negative connotation but it is important to identify things and use right words to describe them,”* Brajovic said. (www.cdm.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Massive protests against the President and high officials disturbed a period of “euphoria”, emerging state's problems such as corruption, media freedom, and nepotism. Protest movement and opposition parties reached an agreement to join forces for toppling the Government ensuring fair and free elections. Of course, under these circumstances polarization of political situation could not be excluded undermining the EU process of the country. One should keep in mind that on May 9th, 2019 Court verdict on DF members engaged in 2016 attempt coup will be released and DF implies strong protests and reactions. The EP assessment was positive praising the state's efforts to implement major reforms, but on the other hand it underlined the problems of the rule of law, media freedom,

corruption, money laundering, and organized crime. However, the EP stated that Montenegro under certain conditions may be able to access the EU by 2025. It is assessed that the EU and U.S strongly supports the President Djukanovic and the Montenegrin Government despite corruption accusations as being the only loyal partner committed to the Western orientation of the state. In other words the west is closing its eyes in lack of democratic values and rule of law due to geopolitical interests namely Russian influence. The Government promotes state's political and economic stability which creates an almost ideal investment environment. Although the Government takes concrete measures against corruption, organized crime, and money laundering it is assessed that a lot should be done to reach such a level of economic activity; mainly in the field of public administration, public sector corruption, and money laundering. Imprisonment of opposition MPs is a worrying and alarming sign regarding rule of law and democratic values in the country. Montenegro shows activity within NATO trying to prove that it is an equal partner of the alliance with military capacity according to NATO standards. Moreover, it tries to modernize and strengthen its operational capabilities and in this context it raised its defense budget aiming at purchasing new assets such as armored vehicles.



NORTH MACEDONIA: April 24th, Albanian voters in North Macedonia are considered to be decisive in the second round of presidential elections that will be held on May 5th, 2019. Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija - SDSM) candidate, Stevo Pendarovski and Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party

for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство - VMRO-DPMNE) MP, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova have launched a campaign which aims at attracting votes from the second biggest community in the country. Turnout of Albanian voters in the first round of elections was only 25%. However, presidential candidates have called on Albanian voters to come out and vote in the second round. “We want a society where there is equality between Macedonians, Albanians and other communities. We offer development and integration, while our political opponents offer isolation,” Pendarovski said. “I am offering Albanian voters the same thing I am also offering to Macedonian, Turkish, Roma, Serbian, Vlach, and Bosnian voters,” said the other candidate, Siljanovska-Davkova. Meanwhile, the Albanian presidential candidate, Blerim Reka, who could not move to the second round, has decided not to offer his support about any of the two candidates who will face each other in the runoff. (www.nezavisen.mk)

- April 25th, “The country has a Government that listens to the citizens, instead of listening on their phone calls, a Government that knows when a message has been sent, instead of punishing for such messages,” Defense Minister Radmila Shekjerinska said. “The Prime Minister said the message has been received. And it is this message that is prompting us to undergo a reshuffle of posts right after the elections, according to the law. This coming reshuffle will not be limited only to the Government, it will also affect officials of the executive branch,” Shekjerinska told reporters. According to the Minister, the Government has been focused on major state issues. “After the elections, the reshuffle efforts

will show that when there is freedom and when the media and citizens do not feel afraid to say what they think, Governments function better and the country is prospering,” Shekjerinska noted. (www.nezavisen.mk, www.mia.mk)

- April 26th, European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Commissioner, Johannes Hahn warned in an interview with the German news agency DPA that a delay of opening accession negotiations with countries that delivered, such as North Macedonia, could destabilize the whole Western Balkans region. *“Delay or failure to acknowledge the objective progress of candidate countries would have dramatic consequences for the countries and the region in general. This will result in a negative domino effect,”* Hahn said. He expects the EU Commission to give a positive recommendation by the end of May for the opening of accession negotiations of North Macedonia and Albania, based on the criteria unanimously adopted by member-states. Hahn said EU’s credibility is at stake and a possible delay or non-acknowledgment of progress would have a devastating effect. *“It would be especially dangerous if North Macedonia’s opening of membership negotiations is denied or delayed,”* Hahn said adding that there is a threat of internal destabilization that would reflect on the entire region if the country would face disappointment despite ending the 30 years name dispute and the reforms it has implemented. (www.mia.mk)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Ratification of NATO accession protocol by the member states proceeds rapidly. However, there is concern for Turkey’s ratification due to the fact that it tried to connect the North Macedonia

accession process to NATO with its demands over FETO persecution. Presidential election is a little bit complicated since main candidates received almost the rate in the first round. Although, the ethnic Albanian candidate Reka who did not achieve to enter the second round announced that he will not support any of the two final candidates, the second largest community in the country (ethnic Albanians) may determine the result. Another crucial factor is the turnout which was too low in the first round. Ruling SDSM appears skeptic following poor results in the first round of presidential elections. Prime Minister Zaev and Defense Minister Shekjerinska have already spoken about a possible Government’s reshuffle after the second round of presidential election in order to “receive the voters’ message.” Possible victory of VMRO-DPMNE candidate may force Zaev to call for early parliamentary elections creating a political uncertainty and undermining the opening of accession negotiations with the EU on coming May or June. It seems that the “Prespes” agreement and the positive prospect of the Euro-Atlantic future of the country did not create the necessary climate for a clear victory for SDSM candidate in the first round. Polarization of state’s political life including low scale violent incidents could not be excluded during the pre-electoral campaign towards the May 5th, 2019 elections and especially in the election day. The EU did not hesitate to send the message that coming presidential elections would be a stress test for state’s opening of accession negotiations. The fact is the country is more stable and more coherent watching its future in a more optimistic way. One could claim that North Macedonia is a country in “identity transition”; name deal with Greece oblige it to change institutional documents, while the law on the use of languages

also obliges the state's institutions to implement changes that are brand new for public services. Too many changes in too little time. The country should focus on its economy and major administrative reforms aiming at reaching the EU standards. Needless to say that in a period where border questions are raised again in the Balkans F.Y.R.O.M achieved to strengthen its political stability and growth prospects.



ROMANIA: April 23rd, Romania's President Klaus Iohannis rejected the resignations submitted by three Ministers, including Justice Minister Tudorel Toader, blocking the Government's reshuffle, which he sees as "*a farce*." He made it clear that he would not accept the resignations before knowing who will replace the resigning Ministers. The proposed reshuffling has nothing to do with improving governance, or with Romania's agenda, Iohannis stated in a press conference. It is caused by conflicts inside the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD), therefore it is pointless, he added. The three Ministers will probably leave the Government at some time, Iohannis admitted. "*But I cannot agree to the three candidates that have been nominated to replace them,*" the President said. He added that he already talked to the Prime Minister Viorica Dancila asking her to come up with other nominations, or come up with proposals for interim Ministers until the Government and Presidency would agree on acceptable permanent replacements. Speaking of the ruling party's plans to replace the three Ministries in the Parliament, through a so-called Government restructuring, Iohannis said "*it remains to be seen whether they will have any success. I would treat this as an attempt to bypass the Presidency.*" The PSD leaders decided last

week to withdraw political support for Justice Minister Tudorel Toader after he refused to promote new amendments to the Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code through emergency ordinance. PSD proposed MP Eugen Nicolicea, who was involved in drafting the controversial justice reform, to replace Toader. The other two Ministers that PSD seeks to change, EU funds Minister Rovana Plumb, and Diaspora Minister Natalia Intotero, are running for seats in the European Parliament on May 26th, 2019 elections. Dancila criticized the President's decision to refuse PSD's proposal for the three Ministries. However, she sent to the President proposals for interim Ministers for the three portfolios, namely Ana Birchall for the Justice Ministry, Finance Minister Eugen Teodorovici for the EU Funds Ministry, and Business Environment Minister Radu-Stefan Oprea for the Diaspora Ministry. (www.romania-insider.com)

- April 25th, Romania's Presidency announced the two questions for the referendum on justice that will take place on May 26th, 2019 the day of the EU Parliament elections. Romanian voters will have to answer Yes or No to the following questions "*Do you agree with banning amnesty and pardon for corruption offenses?*" and "*Do you agree with banning the adoption by the Government of emergency ordinances in the area of crimes, punishments and judiciary organization, and with extending the right to challenge ordinances directly at the Constitutional Court?*" Romania's President Klaus Iohannis signed the decree for organizing the referendum on justice on May 26th, 2019 and motivated his decision saying that Romanian society is increasingly preoccupied with the need to combat corruption and the need for coherent and stable legislation. Iohannis announced at the

end of March that he would convene a referendum aimed at stopping the ruling party's assault on justice. The citizens have the sovereign right to decide whether they let corruption become state policy, Iohannis said at the time. (www.romania-insider.com)

- April 27th, in an interview for Euronews, European Commission's (EC) First Vice-President Frans Timmermans, also leader of PES and candidate for the top EC position in the coming term, has had a tough position on the developments in Romania and on Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat - PSD) which the European official said could be kicked out of the Party of European Socialists. A member of the audience asked Timmermans why the EU was tough on Poland and Hungary but less so on Romania, which is currently governed by PSD. "The problem in Romania is the fight against corruption. Politicians are trying to get rid of the pressure they feel in this fight against corruption; this is unacceptable and the Commission will say 'no' and also in our political family we will say 'no' to all of this," Timmermans said. Timmermans added that he would be willing to kick PSD out of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats' grouping at the European Parliament, before May's EU elections if necessary. "It is a fact that if the rule of law is in trouble; if there are no controls and balances corruption will be increased," Timmermans continued, Euronews.com reported. The Chamber of Deputies adopted on Wednesday, as decision-making body, the amendments to the Criminal Code and to the Criminal Procedure Code, stirring reactions from many European officials. (www.romaniajournal.ro)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Political struggle between the President Klaus Iohannis and Government has been transformed into an "open battle" undermining political stability of the country. Iohannis announced the questions of referendum on justice scheduled for May 26th, 2019 (together with the European elections). Iohannis strongly opposes in Government's plans to intervene in judicial system while there are specific signs that the Government works towards controlling state's justice. Under these circumstances, it is assessed that political climate will be fully polarized affecting Romania's political stability. Moreover, the President refused once again to approve resignation of three Ministers blocking another Government's reshuffle. Romania is running the Presidency of the Council of EU facing criticism and non-confidence by the EU member states' high officials. The state looks divided in major institutional issues such as national defense, justice, and security. In this context, one should add the direct European Parliament's warning for activating article 7 of the EU Treaty (suspending certain rights of an EU member state when a country is considered at risk of breaching the EU's core values). One should consider that European voices asking for such activation are multiplying. The state faces political abnormality in many levels which at the moment could be resolved only by early parliamentary elections. The Prime Minister's announcement of transferring Romanian Embassy in Israel from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem harmed the state's relations with Arab world increasing security risk in the country. Romania according to NATO strategic and operational planning has become an advanced base close to Russia. Its strategic importance and role has been upgraded and high

level NATO exercises take place in its territory. Consequently, Russia reacts mainly against the NATO military base in Deveselu where anti-missile defense systems have been deployed. Temporarily deployment of THAAD system, a modern high-capability system, may raise tension in the region.



SERBIA: April 22nd, the Bloomberg Misery Index for 2018 put Serbia at the 10th place among 62 countries with *“the most miserable economies,”* the Beta news agency reported. The Bloomberg Misery Index relies on the age-old concept that low inflation and unemployment generally illustrate how good an economy’s residents should feel. This year’s scores are based on Bloomberg economist surveys, while prior years reflect actual data, Bloomberg said. Latest official data show the unemployment rate in Serbia was 12.9% in the last quarter of 2018, while inflation measured by consumers’ prices was 1.9% in November compared to the same month in 2017. Despite its position in 2018, Serbia had improved compared to 2016 and 2017 when it was listed seventh and eighth, the Belgrade Danas daily quoted Bloomberg. The worst position in that respect is *“reserved”* for years by Venezuela, mostly due to its hyperinflation. It is followed by Argentina, South Africa, Turkey, and Greece. Ukraine, Spain, Uruguay and Brazil are listed worse than Serbia. Thailand, Switzerland, and Singapore are the countries with the least miserable economies according to the 2018 Bloomberg Misery Index. (www.rs.n1info.com)

- April 23rd, *“I absolutely do not expect Belgrade and Pristina to reach an agreement by October, and I have no reason to believe that this can happen,”* the Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic

said. This was her comment on media reports that Belgrade and Pristina are expected to sign an agreement by October. Brnabic said that she had no reason to believe this could happen, *“because we are ever farther away from the dialogue, and consequently from a final solution, as well as from an agreement on normalization of relations.”* Responding to a journalist’s question, Brnabic said that *“delineation”* was never on the agenda, nor have there been any more specific proposals in connection with that; instead it was mentioned *“only as one option.”* She recalled that dialogue was interrupted when Pristina began to make unilateral actions aimed against the talks and at making Belgrade end dialogue. The Prime Minister stressed that Pristina had not fulfilled the only obligation it had from the Brussels agreement reached six years ago, and that the EU that was the guarantor of the deal also did nothing to make Pristina fulfill its obligation. Brnabic pointed out that situation would be different today if Pristina had implemented the Brussels agreement like Belgrade has done, and if the Community of Serb Municipalities existed. On top of that, she said, Pristina introduced its 100% tax on goods from central Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, transformed the security forces into the so-called Kosovo army, and adopted a platform against dialogue. *“Our red line is the tax. Pristina has to withdraw that decision so that the dialogue can continue, and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic has been clear on this,”* said Brnabic. Asked if she is under any pressure, the Prime Minister said she is not *“because our partners now understand that Serbia is not a country that can be pressured, and that any pressure and ultimatums can only be counterproductive.”* Serbia, she said, is ready to talk about as a partner, and stressed that that Serbia is a reliable country. (www.b92.net)

- April 26th, Russian Ambassador Aleksandr Chepurin said the US has turned Kosovo into “Ambassadoristan” and also a ground version of an aircraft carrier. And it is one named “Bondsteel,” the diplomat wrote on social media. The reference concerns Camp Bondsteel; a large US base in Kosovo established after NATO's 1999 war against Serbia. Chepurin also said that Friday's meeting between Serbian and Russian Presidents Aleksandar Vucic and Vladimir Putin in Beijing “confirmed that Russia will continue to vigorously support” what he described as “Belgrade's fair work.” “The (Kosovo) problem cannot be solved without Serbia, or, all the more so, against Serbia,” the Ambassador said in a post on social media (in Serbian and Russian). He added that dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina has been “in a coma” for half a year now due to provocative moves made by Kosovo Albanians, such as a 100% tax (on products from central Serbia), the decision to form an army that violates UN Security Council Resolution 1244, and attempts to usurp Serb property (in Kosovo). “The handiwork of the Kosovo sponsors is evident everywhere,” Chepurin said. (www.b92.net)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Serbia has entered in a period of fragile political stability due to citizens' reactions against governmental practices regarding human rights, media freedom, and elections transparency. However, it seems that opposition protest and reactions lose momentum. June 2019 is a possible time for early elections, but it would be determined by developments on Belgrade – Pristina dialogue progress and especially by Vucic's meetings in China with Chinese and Russian Presidents (April 26th, 2019) and Berlin

summit (April 29th, 2019). France – Germany initiative for restarting Serbia – Kosovo dialogue may change internal political agenda. It was leaked that German and French leaders prepare a draft agreement proposing a status of “dual sovereignty” in north Kosovo. “HERMES” assessed last week that a provocative incident in Kosovo before the Berlin summit could not be excluded. Indeed, the Kosovo Central Electoral Committee rejected Kosovo Serb candidates from participating in the coming local elections raising tension in North Kosovo but also in Belgrade. Serbia has followed so far a successful diplomatic strategy regarding Kosovo achieving to be appeared in the international community as a reasonable voice seeking a compromise resolution via dialogue. On the other hand Serbia strengthens its relations with Russia (and China) seeking stronger support regarding Kosovo case. Security situation is complex and uncertain since Serbia apart from political and diplomatic means has engaged its military and security forces. The Armed Forces are in high readiness alert but Vucic tried to de-escalate situation by stating that war is not a possible solution. However, none could predict Serbia's reaction in a possible accidental or pre-planned (provocation included) incident in Northern Kosovo against local Serbs. One should have in mind that top state officials have said in public that Serbia will protect Kosovo Serbs by any mean including security and military force. Municipal elections in Kosovo Serb dominated north may provoke a violent outbreak engaging Kosovo Police force and KSF with unprecedented repercussions. At the moment, Serbia looks like acting in accordance with the international law aiming at reducing tension in the region. In other words state's leadership is acting in a “reasonable” and “wise” way avoiding mistakes of the past which have isolated

Serbia from the international community. Serbia pays special attention in improving operational capabilities of its armed forces declaring towards all sides that its Armed Forces are the power of the state.



SLOVENIA: April 23rd, in the last five days, 111 illegal migrants have been detained in Slovenia after illegally entering the country from Croatia, Slovenian Police announced. Thirty migrants have been returned to Croatia as part of the readmission process, 12 have applied for asylum in Slovenia, while procedures for the rest have not been completed yet. Most of the migrants were caught in areas covered by the Police departments of Novo Mesto, Celje i Koper. Among 67 foreign nationals who crossed the border illegally at Novo Mesto, 25 were from Morocco, 11 from Algeria and 11 from Bangladesh. A 37-year-old man, resident in Great Britain, was arrested at Novo Mesto on Monday for driving four illegal migrants from Egypt in a car with Slovenian license plates. The driver will be prosecuted, while the four migrants have been returned to Croatia. In and around the coastal city of Koper, 37 illegal migrants have been detained, 24 of whom have been sent back to Croatia, while the rest have applied for international protection. They are nationals of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Kosovo, Bangladesh, India, Albania and Libya. Police in Celje on Saturday detained three Kosovo nationals after discovering they had entered the border illegally from Croatia. They have been handed over to Croatian police. (www.hr.n1info.com)

- April 24th, Prime Minister Marjan Sarec announced to a group of foreign diplomats stationed in his country that Croatia should implement the arbitration court decision as a

positive message for stability in the region. The arbitration court ruling handed down a ruling that ceded a significant portion of Croatian territory to Slovenia in Savudrija Bay. *“It would be an important message for the region if the arbitration court ruling was implemented. From the very beginning, Slovenia's only goal was to come to a satisfactory implementation of the court's ruling,”* said Sarec at an annual meeting on foreign policy and the future of the European Union with foreign diplomats. The Slovenian Prime Minister criticized the Croatian Government for not accepting the arbitration ruling and for abandoning the proceedings in protest back in 2015. *“Croatia, unfortunately, unilaterally refuses to accept the court's ruling. Such behavior is unacceptable and raises concerns about the rule of law as a basis for protecting other European values,”* he added. Sarec said Slovenia wanted to strengthen relations across the region in order to protect their mutual interests with neighboring countries. (www.sta.si, www.glashrvatske.hrt.hr)

- April 24th, the Parliamentary Committee in charge of foreign affairs and culture has condemned the interference of Hungary in freedom of press in Slovenia. The Committee met less than three weeks after the Hungarian Ambassador Edit Szilagyine Batorfi lodged a verbal note to the Foreign Affairs Ministry after the weekly Mladina ran on its cover a caricature of Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban with his hand raised in a Nazi salute and surrounded by three politicians from the ranks of Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska Demokratska Stranka - SDS). Furthermore, the Committee suggested the Government to protect freedom of expression, to preserve media ownership transparency, encourage free and plural media and

install safety mechanisms to prevent interferences and pressures from other countries. Modern Center Party (Stranka Modernega Centra – SMC) MP Gregor Peric said at the session that Slovenia had faced “*unusual responses by our neighbors*” from contentious statements by European Parliament President Antonio Tajani, to Hungary’s note, and wire tapes indicating Croatian Government attempted to prevent the release of a report about who listened in on Slovenia’s representatives in the arbitration process in 2015. Attending the session, Foreign Minister Miro Cerar said he would react decisively when basic values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and Slovenia’s sovereignty are under attack in the future. In the meanwhile, Culture Minister Zoran Poznic said that the Ministry would draft a media legislation reform by the end of year. (www.sta.si)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Slovenia enjoys a relative political stability. Although the Government is a minority one seeking compromise for survival, Sarec has been proved of being flexible in Slovenia’s politics so far achieving to balance adequately between different political trends. Left party is the key factor for Government’s stability and viability by supporting it in the Parliament. Without the Left’s support the Government would be toppled and early elections should be called. At the moment none of the ruling coalition parties wish snap elections. The Government has to address several internal social issues (increase of minimum wage, health care, pensions etc). Tension has been raised again regarding the border dispute with Croatia over Piran Bay due to Croatia’s Police violation of Slovenia’s territorial waters by boats. It is assessed that such low level skirmishes will

continue without major incidents. Tension has been reinforced by the revealed wiretapping scandal regarding the arbitration process between Croatia – Slovenia. Engagement of Croatian Intelligence Service operating in another country (Slovenia) is a serious accusation undermining their diplomatic relations. Slovenia implies that such actions may affect its decision regarding Croatia’s membership candidacy in Schengen Zone. Slovenia, as it is already known, has filed a lawsuit against Croatia over its refusal to implement the border arbitration. 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 the 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. More attention should be paid on navy (or coast patrol) assets given the open dispute with Croatia on Piran Bay and Slovenia’s weak surveillance and protection capabilities.



TURKEY: April 24th, the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Forces (YPG) established a new armed unit comprising of foreign militants including those of Armenian descent, within territories of Syria. The new unit was named after Armenian Nubar Ozanyan and formed in the wake of France declaring April 24th as a day of commemoration of the events of 1915. The YPG declared the organization's intention to be “*the defense of Rojava against Turkey*,” referring to the predominantly Kurdish northern

and eastern Syria, and that it embraced the “*Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia*” (ASALA) as its precursor. Accordingly, the so-called battalion comprised of 90 fighters will operate in northern Syria's Qamishli, Hassakah, Ras al-Ain, Amude, Tal Abyad and Ain al-Arab. Ozanyan was killed in 2017, fighting for the YPG as the so-called Middle East Commander of the outlawed Communist Party of Turkey/Marxist–Leninist (TKP/ML TIKKO), a sub-group which carried out assassinations, bombings, and clashes with security forces in Turkey. (www.dailysabah.com)

- April 26th, Turkey, Iran, and Russia condemned the US' move to recognize Israeli sovereignty over occupied Syrian Golan Heights in a joint statement after the 12th round of Astana meetings on Syria in Nur-Sultan, the recently renamed Kazakh capital. The three guarantor countries of the Astana process on Syrian peace reaffirmed their strong commitment “*to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic and to the purposes and principles of the U.N. Charter.*” On March 25th, 2019 US President Donald Trump signed a presidential proclamation officially recognizing the highlands on the border with Syria as Israel's territory. Israel seized the Golan Heights from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War. It occupies roughly two-thirds of the wider Golan Heights as a de facto result of the conflict. It moved to formally annex the territory in 1981; an action unanimously rejected at the time by the UN Security Council. The guarantor countries underscored that the UN principles should be universally respected and that no actions, no matter by whom they were undertaken, should undermine them. “*In this regard they strongly condemned the decision of the US Administration*

to recognize Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, which constitutes a grave violation of international law, particularly the UN Security Council resolution 497, and threatens peace and security in the Middle East,” reads the statement. (www.dailysabah.com)

- April 27th, the Turkish Army dispatched additional Special Forces to the border with Syria just a few hours after the end of the 12th round of Astana talks in Kazakhstan's capital Nur-Sultan, on Friday. As part of Turkey's recent military reinforcements, a convoy of armored vehicles arrived in the Reyhanli district, Hatay province on the southern borders with Syria, amid tight security measures. The forces were deployed on Saturday throughout Turkish military points on the border. Observers expected the new reinforcements to be aimed at strengthening Turkish patrols in Idlib or carrying out operations against the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Forces (YPG), which withdrawal from the Syrian province Russia has been demanding under last year's Sochi agreement. Signed with Turkey on September 17th, 2018 the deal calls for enforcing a new demilitarized zone between the Syrian forces and opposition in Idlib and the withdrawal of militant groups along with their heavy weapons, tanks, rockets systems and mortars. In March, Turkey and Russia launched independent coordinated military patrols in Idlib and its surrounding areas. Meanwhile, the 12th round of Astana talks was concluded on Friday with participants failing to reach an agreement on the formation of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. The joint statement reaffirmed the guarantor states' determination to fully implement the agreements on stabilization in Idlib, including the coordinated patrols and effective functioning

of the Joint Iranian-Russian-Turkish Coordination Center. Turkey has been reinforcing its military presence on the border with Syria since President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signaled that Ankara would launch a cross-border operation against YPG in Manbij and east of the Euphrates. It suspended the possible military operation after US President Donald Trump's announcement in December that US troops would be withdrawn from Syria. Trump also proposed establishing a 32-km security zone in northeastern Syria, which Turkey wants to be in control of. Washington wants it to be controlled by European forces from the coalition it leads against DAESH. (www.aawsat.com)

COUNTRY ASSESSMENT :

Although CHP candidate Ekrem Imamoglu received the official mandate for becoming Istanbul Mayor, AKP continues to question the electoral results pushing for revote. Deterioration of Turkish – U.S relations is a major concern for Turkey threatening its political and economic stability. Purchase of Russian air-defense system S-400 is unacceptable for the U.S administration threatening directly Turkey with sanctions. Taking into consideration that Turkey is a pivotal country enjoying geopolitical importance and having one of the largest militaries (the 2nd within NATO) it is hard to believe that the U.S seek a full rift with its NATO ally. On the contrary, there are still open official and unofficial channels of communication working on a mutual accepted compromise. The U.S needs Turkey and the opposite. It looks like Erdogan and his rhetoric is the problem and an “orange revolution” or a “Turkish spring” could not be excluded in the future. Economic recession does not help the Turkish President to strengthen his position

internally undermining his political power. Turkey is heading in a major economic crisis. It seems that economy is the major Turkish problem which may be emerged as the “Achilles’ heel” for Erdogan and his political long reign. It cannot be excluded dramatic developments regarding Turkish economy. Besides Turkish society looks like being fed up with autocratic practices of Erdogan and this was a key point during last local elections. Turkey faces several restrictions in freedom of expression and human rights. Elected MPs and journalists 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. Although Turkey maintains its strategic goal of entering the EU, the EU sends strong messages of suspending the EU – Turkey accession talks. Turkish Armed Forces declares its readiness to intervene militarily in Syria, eastern of Euphrates river but the U.S does not give the “green light” aiming at protecting Syrian Kurds and YPG. Turkey is reinforcing its troops in the Turkish – Syrian borders waiting for the “green light” for establishing a safe zone in Syria but it is doubtful if it will ever get it. There are thoughts of unilateral action within Syria but such a decision may bring Turkish troops against the U.S forces; an unprecedented scenario. 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. Regarding Turkish interests in East Mediterranean Sea, Turkey looks like has been isolated from the energy activities in the region. Cyprus, Egypt Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority have established an energy coalition promoting their interests and isolating Turkey. Turkey has proved so far its decisiveness in protecting its interests and it assessed that it will not give up its role in the “energy game” in Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Turkey is ready to start oil and gas drills within the Cypriot EEZ escalating tension which could not exclude an accidental or pre-planned “hot incident.”

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NOTE

-  Stable situation. No security risk
-  Rather stable situation. Security risk is monitored
-  Major concerns over stability and security. significant security risk in specific regions
-  Imminent major incidents regarding stability and security. High security risk
-  Evolving or ongoing crisis or violent/armed conflict