

D.S.M. WEEKLY REPORT - Main Political and Military Developments - WEEK 14 of 2019

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I. NATO. The Foreign Ministerial North-Atlantic Council in Washington.

Held between April 3rd and 4th and meant to celebrate 70 years since the Alliance was established, this NAC session provided the stage for reaffirming the unity, but also for highlighting the differences that erode NATO. Security in the Black Sea region was also discussed, on the backdrop of a rise in Russia's military assertiveness in the area and an aggression against Ukraine. For these issues, certain solutions have been decided. However, the most important problems surfaced where they were not planned: Turkey's stance within the Alliance, and Washington's vision regarding NATO's global role, together with the recurring issue of the Europeans' limited military spending. In the wake of this NAC, there is the Europeans' fear that President Trump is not heart and mind with the Alliance, as well as the Americans' mistrust in the Europeans' contribution to common defense.

The highlights of the NAC session held in Washington were the Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's speech delivered to the US Congress, and his meeting with President Trump at the White House. The speech in the Congress was an opportunity for J. Stoltenberg to insist on the Russian threat and the need for trans-Atlantic solidarity. While this speech was regarded as a loud spoken support by the US Congress to NATO, meant to compensate President Trump's reservations, the meeting at the White House was meant to save the face. However, the conclusion is the same: the European allies must increase their military spending. As for Russia, President Trump offered the same Chamberlain-type appeasement: "I think we'll get along with

Russia". Moderation is good coming from a person who is little prone to moderation, but at what cost[1]?

Regarding the INF, the Alliance has one voice: Russia breached the treaty. Jens Stoltenberg called again on Russia to comply with the INF stipulations, now beyond the "unacceptable destabilizing behavior". He specified that NATO would not mirror Russia's actions, and reiterated that NATO would not deploy ground-launched nuclear missiles in Europe.

The NAC focused on Russia and the Black Sea region, in the context of the Ukraine conflict and the Kerch Strait incident. Jens Stoltenberg asked Moscow to free the Ukrainian sailors and Ukraine's warships captured by Russia. In NATO's vision, the Black Sea must remain a sea of peace, free navigation and cooperation, not one country's backyard of influence. In principle, NATO will increase its presence in the region and will support its partners. The Foreign Ministerial approved measures to "improve NATO's situational awareness in the Black Sea region".

However, there is a difference within NATO's commitment. While before the Foreign Ministerial NAC there were discussions about more measures, including a larger presence of NATO warships in the Black Sea waters, at the end of the day there was only measures for improving "NATO's situational awareness in the Black Sea region", which is quite little in size and non-committing for the Alliance. US ELINT aircraft already fly close to Crimea, and American officials have mentioned the development of maritime surveillance systems in NATO nations of this region. Also, during this very period, the presence of a NATO naval group is noticed in these waters (and Russia responded in force, by its own exercises, including launching missiles).

Why this lower key NATO's declared commitment? First, there are only two nations who openly require increased NATO presence in the Black Sea region: Ukraine and Georgia, none of them a NATO member. Turkey has, of course, a peculiar position: it opposes a NATO increased presence in the Black Sea, considering its special relations with Russia: competition and cooperation. Bulgaria has a "neutral within NATO" position, preferring to make sure it is protected by the Alliance without perceiving Russia as a threat. Romania, who used to request an increased NATO presence in the region, displays now a more restrained position, at least considering the way the press communiqués changed their tune after the meeting between the Romanian Foreign Minister and the US Secretary of State: The former's wording lacks any reference to the threat – i.e. Russia. Therefore, when not requested, not received, especially since the nations in the area are not strong (except Turkey), and their governments are not sure what

they want. Additionally, Romania and Bulgaria are insignificant, and Turkey is absent in the NATO – Russia game in the Black Sea.

On the other hand, a reduced / gradual NATO presence in the region has also tempering effects: a mere *temporary* presence of NATO warships and aircraft would disturb if not provoke Russia (who already protested, of course). Meanwhile, a more assertive presence would not help littoral NATO nations too much, as long as they do not possess enough will and military capacity to oppose the threat themselves. Thus, first of all, these nations should first state what they want, and then they should coherently implement a security policy, including clearly identifying the threat and taking effective defensive measures to provide more substance to an increased NATO presence in the region. The opposite course of action means staying put, in a seemingly comfortable position, but with dangerous perspectives, because the Black Sea is, in fact, the main battleground between Russia and the West.

Finally, we should be grateful for what NATO is offering now to the Black Sea nations^[2]. However, we should be careful that *the time of verbal engagement, like “defend us, while we are busy doing something else” is already gone*. And this is dangerous when major changes appear, ranging from President Trump’s cold shoulder to NATO to the emergence of new threats. As for Ukraine and Georgia, they will have to defend themselves, as NATO cannot interfere directly in case of a new Russian military aggression, as it happened in 2008 in Georgia.

Other two big problems dominated the NAC session: Turkey and the US position regarding NATO, from globalization to the Europeans’ shyness to increase their defense contribution. Turkey was tossed off from the F-35 program, with multiple consequences, including the transfer of part production from Turkey elsewhere. If the delivery of the now three aircraft purchased by Ankara was expected, the way the issue unfolded reached an unprecedented high: Turkey as a part of the Western world was questioned, although President Trump declared that a way out of the woods was going to be identified with Ankara. The current situation made the Turkish foreign minister ask the US not to make Turkey choose between the West and Russia. The American response came as bluntly, Vice President Mike Pence stated that Turkey really must choose. In fact, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government has already chosen, being anti-West by the political values it promotes. The new detail, that the Trump Administration shows a radical approach does nothing else than reveal more obviously Turkey’s divorce from the West (although President Trump seems benevolent to dictators, but not to Islamists). We just witnessed another phase in Turkey’s departure from the West, a process set to continue as long as R.T. Erdoğan and his AKP party are in power, considering also that this regime has a solid ideologic and social basis^[3].

Regarding NATO's role, Washington brought its concerns to the table: global threats and the need that NATO addresses them. But can the Europeans follow this lead, when they are not able to defend the old continent themselves? What is the Chinese military threat to Europe? Nothing, except for the UK, linked to the Anglo-Saxon world – Canada and Australia. The Europeans see China as an economic threat, and the idea that NATO would take a role in the Middle East (where the US leaves now), is the same illusion like... Brasil joining NATO. This was also suggested by President Trump, because Brasil is now governed by a populist regime.

However, the issue of globalizing NATO, proposed by the US, is fundamental, as Washington considers it is natural that the Europeans, who have been and still are defended by the US, be prepared to support the US against the global threats, from China to Iran. And all this comes with an American flavor (size and manner), while the Europeans do not agree with the US approach on Iran at least, or regarding the Palestinian problem. There are different approaches on Russia as well: the Europeans expect to be defended by the US from Russia, while they spend less for defense, but continue to close profitable deals with.. the same Russia. The best example is Nord Stream II, where the US has singled out Germany as profiteer. Of course, the US approach is not balanced either, the same President Trump is friendly to Russia but presents this gas pipeline as being a threat to Germany and Europe writ large. But, in fact, the American argument is purely business: the Russian gas spells competition for the American Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG).

While the Europeans asked themselves how far the Trump Administration would go to defend Europe, Washington has raised quite different issues: the financial contribution and extending NATO's area of operations. The German press suggests the problem became serious: it focused not on criticizing the Trump Administration, this already became a reflex in a more and more anti-American Germany. No, the German press focused on... the need to increase German military spending! The gap is obvious, the trans-Atlantic rift widens and the solution does not come handy: no Trump Administration with a unilateral view can be totally right, and also the "big Europeans" who propose multilateralism (without or even against the US!), but ask to be defended by the same US, as an everlasting free ride. Fallen into this rift between the big ones, the small and vulnerable face an ever more complicated conundrum.

As about the American announcement that Washington is prepared to extend the F-35 program to purchase by Poland, Greece, and Romania, for the moment this has rather a geopolitical relevance than a practical meaning. The US says that, after Turkey is practically lost, the *limes* is transferred back to the Greece – Romania – Poland line, with Greece gradually returned to pro-NATO and pro-US sentiments, in the same pace Turkey departed from the US and got closer to Russia. In fact, only Poland has the money to buy F-35 aircraft; Greece has major financial

problems; and Romania has not only financial problems, but also structural difficulties of absorbing such technological leap.

II. UKRAINE. The first round of presidential elections.

The results of March 31st first round of Ukrainian presidential elections were expected. However, the figures were surprising by the big gap between the forerunner, Volodymyr Zelenski, with 30.24% of the ballots, and the runner-up, incumbent President Petro Poroshenko who won only 15.95%. The two will compete in the second round, scheduled for April 21st. Yulia Tymoshenko only won 13.40%, and the pro-Russian opposition representative, Yuri Boyko, 11.67%. Y. Tymoshenko contested the results but did not call for street protests. V. Zelenski won in the south, center and eastern Ukraine, except districts adjacent to separatist regions, and areas like the Bugeac (the south-western salient into former Romanian territory along the Black sea shore and reaching the Danube) – these areas were won by the pro-Russian Y. Boyko. Poroshenko won in western Ukraine, except districts favorable to Y. Tymoshenko. The regional results were expected, as V. Zelenski spoke to the moderate electorate, concerned with current domestic issues: the economic situation, fight against corruption. Meanwhile, Petro Poroshenko voiced a patriotic message, speaking to the nationalist electorate, living mostly in western Ukraine.

Now the big question is who will win the second round – decisive, regardless the means they will use, because, in the former Soviet realm, manipulation has a weight almost equal with the national approach, in the final electorate decision, disenfranchised and pushed into a limited capacity to discriminate between promises and realities. Zelenski has the first chance because he sends an anti-power message and promises peace, justice and prosperity, although he does not offer any practical solution to any of these problems. Zelenski played this card and his campaign was an ongoing show, avoiding both direct word battles and any concrete addressing of the country's problems. Petro Poroshenko has the second chance because he is compromised: he represents the current political and administrative elite in power, corrupt and irresponsible, who did nothing to change the politics in the country, except stabilizing the situation during the dire straits of Russian aggression. Petro Poroshenko counted on that and presented himself as the supreme commander who saved the nation from the war waged by Putin's Russia. The two candidates will continue to bet on the same cards, considering that the electorate will accept this manner of campaigning, with promises and unknowns rather than viable solutions.

Volodymyr Zelenski's room has many dark corners, from his luxury villa in Italy to his companies in Russia and his relations with the oligarch Igor Kolomoiski, who found sanctuary in Israel after many of his businesses, some illegal, were investigated by the prosecution institutions controlled by the other oligarch... Petro Poroshenko. But the biggest unknowns are linked to what Zelenski will do when he becomes president and his current clowning ends: how will he face Russia, how will he solve Ukraine's social and economic problems, and how will he lead the fight against corruption with the Ukrainian oligarchs (many of whom see Zelenski only as Kolomoisky's puppet).

The math says that Zelenski will have enough ballots coming from Boyko's electorate and part of Tymoshenko's. However, the nationalists might prefer Poroshenko and forgive him the domestic failure for the sake of having resisted Russia. Additionally, anti-Semitism may factor in, as Zelenski has Jewish ancestry. Also, part of the electorate might think whether Zelenski can really bring something else than show and good intentions, or it is just chaos, because he is up against the whole present elite (the power operators, ranging from oligarchs to the *siloviki* – state administration officials). Zelenski must provide guarantees that he has both solutions and the capability to implement them.

On the other hand, Poroshenko has many unknowns himself, not too palatable either: an oligarch turned president by rising at the moment's expectations, but nothing more. Poroshenko did nothing to reform the system across the board, from absence of any effort against corruption to lack of any economic reform. Without these changes, the democratic progress failed to bring prosperity. Except some cosmetic changes, the same people who prospered under president Viktor Yanukovich are still the basis of Kyiv's power. The Maidan Square events shook Ukraine but did not shake them, and President P. Poroshenko was the one who tolerated this game. He keeps making promises, but who believes him anymore? Beyond promises and the leader image, Poroshenko can bring only stagnation, but also stability facing the Russian aggression. What is the point though, since stagnation will only lead to failure on the long run?

Probably Russia would prefer V. Zelenski, who might fail to cope with the challenge and thus open the door to Moscow to put Ukraine on its knees by implementing the Minsk agreement in sync with Russian interests. But in long-term, should Zelenski manage to make a good president, the perspective changes: what if Zelenski really implements reforms, fights corruption and dismantles the oligarchic networks that captured the country? Such Ukraine, truly democratic and prosperous would mean a danger to Russia: it would bring at Russia's doorstep an example that democratic progress is possible in the post-Soviet Slavic world; then, Russia's dictatorship model of a "sovereign democracy" would show its true colours, a construction meant to mask the power

high-jacking by secret agencies in league with oligarchs. On the other hand, the current enemy, P. Poroshenko, might hamper Moscow's aggressive plans, but he is the guarantee that nothing will change in Ukraine, and the certain extended stagnation assures that the social and economic situation will only worsen until the next elections. At the end of the day, there is about the same oligarchic system in both countries, the difference being that the oligarchs in Kyiv must trick the voters every four years, while in Moscow the power has no historic hick-ups.

Either way, Ukraine steps into quick sands for a long time. Should Zelenski win, we will have the transition uncertainties and a comedian forced to exert the power responsibilities under the double pressure from within and from Russia. Should Poroshenko win, we will have the no-change stability, but, on the long run, stagnation will bring worse instability. The West is likely seeking to get from both candidates the guarantee they will implement necessary reforms to keep Ukraine afloat. However, it is not sure whether either winner will be willing and able to do it. Zelenski has the first chance, but Poroshenko can snatch the victory provided he can convince that Zelenski is not at the height of responsibilities of the good president that Ukraine needs. Hence the show with a word wrestling in the arena and other measures of the kind, between the election comedy and the aftermath tragedy. Zelenski wants the show to go on, and Poroshenko wants to end it by bringing the game towards his reality. However, Ukraine's great victory is there: the elections were free and fair.

III. SLOVAKIA. Electing a new president.

The presidential elections held in Slovakia, on March 30th, were won by the liberal attorney at law Zuzana Čaputová. On the backdrop of an anti-corruption attitude dominating in Slovakia, she is among the few cases when the Liberals win elections nowadays, against the European trend of increased populism. A minor pro-European politician, Z. Čaputová defeated the current European commissioner (in charge of energy and space) Maroš Šefčovič by 58% to 42%.

Zuzana Čaputová, member of the Progressive Slovakia party (not in the parliament!), was supported by the opposition parties and by one of the governing coalition parties, the one representing the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. She was also supported by the out-going president, Andrej Kiska. Her counter-candidate, Maroš Šefčovič was supported by the main governing party, Smer.

Z. Čaputová's main campaign issues were the fight against corruption and changing the way politics is conducted, on the background of the public reaction to the murder of investigation

journalist Ján Kuciak and his girlfriend, one year ago. The investigation in the Ján Kuciak case led to the arrest of businessman Marián Kočner and to the resignation of prime-minister Robert Fico, the leader of Smer party. It is interesting that Z. Čaputová, as a lawyer, confronted for 14 years M. Kočner's company, which had built an illegal garbage dump in his city, and she eventually won the trial.

Z. Čaputová's message was explicit: ending what she called the capture of the state "by people pulling strings from behind". This banner appealed to the electorate, especially the youth. The target was the Smer party leader, the very prime-minister R. Fico. Although in Slovakia the president has limited powers, he still is the one who appoints the prime-minister and can use a veto right on the appointment of higher prosecutors and judges. Z. Čaputová's election complicates R. Fico's plans to become the president of Slovakia's Constitutional Court.

In the same time, her success provides an impulse to the opposition, thus increasing its chances to oust the Smer party from power during the next general elections, although Smer is currently the most popular political party in Slovakia. The power mobilized after Čaputová's victory, with Fico calling to fight against the Liberals, whom he named "people without values". Fico's party presents himself as Social-Democrat, but has conservative positions and is euroskeptic, being populist with roots in the post-communist elite.

Electing a liberal president in Slovakia means not a beginning, yet it announces the end of a chapter in the history of this country, the end of transition, with the next phase being the defeat of Robert Fico's "Social-Democrats". Although it looks like a surprise, it really is not, even the general reaction after journalist J. Kuciak was murdered stands proof that the Slovak society is the first to overcome the post-communist transition. Slovakia managed to implement economic reforms, benefitted from western investments, and was the first Central European nation to switch to Euro currency. In this country, there is already a productive middle class, free from an economic point of view, not state-dependent (either by favoritism appointments or budget embezzlement). This middle class also decides the course of the country by elections, and the fight against corruption and against post-communist profiteer populist politicians is a natural attitude of this middle class.

Slovakia is the first nation in Central Europe to reach close to the western standards regarding the political and social life. Slovakia is to be followed, probably, by the proud Czech Republic, lagging a bit behind now, under Andrej Babiš government, but where changes are about to happen too. Maybe Poland will follow after the conservative drift of its ruling PiS party will subside. Hungary will have to get past Viktor Orbán's nationalism in order to keep pace with the

other Central European nations. As about Romania, it is clear that the Central European nations form a group which is far from us in any field – economic, political and social. Natural allies before WWII, Poland and Czechoslovakia, now Czech Republic and Slovakia, do not accept to be considered in the same group with Romania. Even more so this past week, when the tensions between the government in Bucharest and Brussels officials increased significantly.

IV. TURKEY. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan faces a domestic recoil.

The March 31st local elections in Turkey brought the first major defeat to the governing party, AKP, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Although AKP won in most of the communities, and remains the largest party in the country, it lost the large cities, including Istanbul, Izmir and the capital Ankara. While Izmir is the hometown of Turkey's main opposition party, the CHP, the victory in Istanbul makes the shock for AKP and President Erdoğan, as this city is the place where the Turkish president began his political career.

President Erdoğan's AKP party contested the election results in Istanbul, where the opposition representative won by a small margin. AKP attempted to do the same in Ankara. The opposition party, CHP, accused AKP for trying to alter the election results. The European Union sent messages to Erdoğan to observe these results.

The defeat in Istanbul and in other large cities *destroyed Erdoğan's invincibility image*, when these elections are the first after Erdoğan became president with extended powers, and practically established a personal autocratic regime with Islamist basis. Notably, AKP won all elections since 2002. The cause of this defeat is the economy: Turkish Lira lost value, inflation reached 20%, economy fell to recession since 2018, and unemployment is rising. The country is divided, and Erdoğan managed to secure half of the electorate, while the other half sees him as an autocrat.

What did President Erdoğan's regime come to be? At the waters' divide. Erdoğan and the AKP built an autocratic Islamic regime by gradually capturing the state, first together with Feitullah Güllen, then prosecuting the followers of the latter. Justice was captured under the pretext of reform against the "hidden state", measures approved back then by the Europeans, tricked by this pretext of reformation. The military corps' turn came after that, especially following the failed *coup d'état*. R.T. Erdoğan's victory included demolishing Atatürk's legacy, and islamizing the state and its institution. Capturing the media followed next, as Erdoğan's henchmen were

capturing the state and transforming its institutions in handy tools in service of an individual and a party.

Initially, the implication of politics in economy provided positive results, which was a strong argument used by President Erdoğan, by promoting large investment (leading to an increase in Turkey's foreign debt), by building a new layer of businessmen, regime profiteers, and by attracting foreign investments. Eventually though, this very involvement of politics in economy led to the current continuous crisis.

The recent defeat in local elections is not even the beginning of Erdoğan's regime end, but is the first sign that Erdoğan will not be Atatürk, meaning that he did not generate a new Turkey, but only destroyed the legacy of the former and established personal dictatorship, although he also built a legislative scaffold in support. The only democratic feature that Erdoğan regime has preserved so far, i.e. respecting the result of elections, is about to vanish too. The elections were not really free since long ago, because the media pressure and the use of state levers by AKP and R.T. Erdoğan in their campaign were obvious, but elections were fair, at least as far as counting the ballots. That is just probably, because AKP and Erdoğan were winning anyway. But now, the situation changed.

President Erdoğan must decide whether he accepts that the opposition won in the large cities, fact that will entangle his political plans to put the economy back on tracks, or whether he removes the last democratic feature of his regime, by altering the election results. On the economy, anyway, the investors are leaving because they have little chances of success, and the new "deep state" built by Erdoğan and the businessmen raised by him do not accept free market competition. Maybe R.T. Erdoğan will attempt to trick the election results, while saving the appearance in the process. The West will react, but, for a long time already, Ankara has not been feeling obliged to listen to the West. Thus, Erdoğan's only reservation is towards the domestic opposition's capacity to oppose the regime.

Corroborated with domestic developments, Turkey's trajectory leads to internal instability and foreign policy reorientation, with President Erdoğan having too few friends abroad. The developments recommend caution.

V. Developments to track this Week 15 of 2019.

- **UKRAINE.** The next weeks are decisive for the presidential election outcome. Considering the major role that the president plays in Ukraine, the election result is crucial for this country, more than the parliamentary elections. Ukraine must choose between unknown and stagnation.
- **UNITED KINGDOM.** Theresa May asked for a new extension, on short-term, and the Europeans will decide, although they would prefer a long-term postponement. Theresa May attempted to open dialogue with the Labor opposition, but there are only slim chances to reach an understanding. Nothing can be ruled out, not even Blind Brexit. The negative signal comes from European nations like France, apparently joined by Spain and Belgium, who would like the Brexit saga to end swifter.
- **ISRAEL.** The April 9th parliamentary elections might be lost by Likud, but won by its leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, who might build a right-wing - far-right coalition. At the peak of his career, but also pressed by piling up dossiers, Netanyahu has the chance to remain prime-minister. However, the counter-candidate Ganz did not have his last word yet, and his argument is that he will continue all Netanyahu's foreign policy and security achievements. However, he would do that without dividing the nation, because he is a responsible retired general. Netanyahu seeks to demonstrate that Ganz is a weak leader, unable to rise at the level of a leader in control of Israel's security. This is a bit difficult to demonstrate, as Ganz, however, is a former Chief of Defense – the highest-ranking soldier in the country. Last minute blows cannot be ruled out, ranging from media operations to... air strikes in Syria or Gaza. Netanyahu already overbid by promising he would annex the West Bank colonies. Isn't it a bit too much though?
- **REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA.** After the visit paid to Moscow by President Igor Dodon and Zinaida Graceanyi, the question is: what did the Kremlin decide? Does it approve the Socialists alliance with Vladimir Plahotniuc's Democrats, or it will rather go for snap elections? Beyond this decision, which weighs as much as Plahotniuc's decision on future developments, it is important to note that President Dodon and his Socialists have no independence from Moscow whatsoever. This is if Plahotniuc does not scare them more than Moscow does.
- **NORTH AFRICA.** The developments in Libya and Algeria will have a direct impact on Europe, both on migration and on energy. The Europeans' incapacity to solve the situation in Libya allowed other players (Russia and Saudi Arabia included) to support Haftar, who attacked the Tripoli recognized government troops, even supported by Turkey and Qatar. The United Nations interfered, but what is its real capability to avoid a military confrontation? In Algeria, the military got involved in the situation and forced President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's resignation, but will they have the power to secure transition and maintain stability?

[1] Shocking, Defense News published an article by a Russian analyst saying that the only problem hampering the relations between Russia and the West is... NATO. We all know Russia wants NATO to disappear and offer Moscow the chance to make Europe its playground but reading this in an American mainstream paper raises big question marks.

[2] One should not forget that it is not the danger of a large scale Russian military aggression looming large (only the B 52 aircraft flights above Romania is enough to deter such course of action), but the lesser danger of actions meant to limit the nations' sovereignty over the Exclusive Economic Zone, or the lesser danger of small provocations. Such aggressions fall beneath the level of Article 5, which means that we should deal with them ourselves, with our own means, military capabilities and manpower, both in quantity and quality. And the Ukrainian lesson is simple indeed: should Russia see that you are a mess, it has no restraint to attack, and has no mercy for the victim.

[3] This is not a simple improvisation, like the "anti-Westerners within the West", the case of post-communist profiteers in Eastern Europe, with totalitarian behavior, but no ideologic basis other than their preservation instinct and parasite way of life.