

**Report 113**  
**PROJECT ON BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE**  
**MUSLIM WORLD**

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This week report dwells much on Yahoo/AP/Reuters News, BBC, New York Times. The report remains a compilation of strategic political, economic, socio-cultural and Geo-strategic issues around North America/Canada, Western Europe, Latin America/Southern Europe, Southeast Europe and Oceania. It obviously begins with a summary of the whole report, a breakdown of easily comprehensible short notes.

#### Headlines

##### US/Canada

- US, Russia announce new nuclear arms pact
- U.S., Canada crack down on vehicle emissions
- Canada will not go solo cutting industry emissions
- Canadians worry more about money than jobs

##### Western Europe

- Italians hold local elections, test for Berlusconi
- Berlusconi scores political victory in local vote
- Former PM Tony Blair returns to campaign trail
- Britain mulls plans for possible hung Parliament
- Catholic bishops intervene in British election
- End nears for 'special relationship' of UK and US
- UK's Cameron: US disappointing over Falklands
- British protesters demand Pope quits over abuse
- Archbishop of Canterbury comments on abuse scandal
- Anglican, Irish church leaders clash over abuse remark
- Italian politicians rally to pope's defense
- Debate over abortion drug rekindled in Italy
- Dutch court upholds UN immunity in Srebrenica case
- French council advises against total ban on burqa
- Parliament panel in Belgium approves banning burqa
- Muslims try to pray in Spanish cathedral
- Merkel's visit spotlights Turkey's contentious EU bid

##### Southeast Europe

##### Albania

- Tirana's Skenderbej Square sparks conflict between parties
- EU's Fuele urges Tirana to resolve political crisis
- EP rapporteur expects visa-free travel for Albania
- Albania's Basha vows strong measures against traffickers
- Albanian opposition wants referendum on nuclear plant

##### Bosnia and Herzegovina

- Bosnian Serb parties form coalition ahead of elections
- Canadian troops leave BiH
- Al Jazeera to acquire Sarajevo TV channel

#### Bulgaria

- Impeachment motion against Bulgaria's Parvanov moves to parliament
- Bulgaria's social and economic council agrees on tax changes
- Council defers raising VAT in Bulgaria
- Bulgaria sentences six for embezzling EU money

#### Croatia

- Croatia considers sending more troops to Afghanistan

#### Kosovo

- Kosovo cabinet reshuffle reportedly pending
- Kosovo minister criticises Belgrade-run elections
- US troops transfer powers to Kosovo Police at border

#### Macedonia

- Macedonia sends more troops to Afghanistan
- Skopje protests anti-Macedonian slogans during Greek parade
- Greek ambassador to Macedonia condemns parade chant

#### Montenegro

- Montenegrin opposition files no-confidence motion against government
- Montenegrin parliament to discuss no-confidence motion in April

#### Romania

- Romania's Boc reiterates ceiling on hike in teachers' salaries
- Sudden strike disrupts public transport in Bucharest

#### Serbia

- Serb President: Srebrenica declaration 'historic'

#### Slovenia

#### Oceania

- Australia says will not accept commercial whaling plan
- Australia appoints first population minister

## **Report Summary**

### USA/Canada

#### Political Issue

#### Economic Issue

According to the RBC Canadian Consumer Outlook Index, Canadians have become more anxious about their personal finances but felt a little more confident about jobs. The Canadian economy comparatively withstood the financial shock as compared with the American economy. Nonetheless, joblessness was of the problem encountered by the economy in the wake of the financial crisis.

#### Social/Humanitarian Issue

## Food, Environment and Energy Issue

The two neighbours are working together to ensure the reduction of greenhouse gas as part of the global fight against global warming. The launching of a less gas-emitter vehicle in the United States attended by Canada was a good opportunity for both countries to reiterate their greenhouse policy. Canada meanwhile said it will not go solo in reducing its greenhouse gas; instead Ottawa greenhouse policy will remain parallel as that of Washington.

## Geostrategic Issues

The governments want a world free of WMD, an effort to make that a reality has been on-going even though there has been some degree of unsettledness. The deliberation between the United States and Russia in reducing WMD is making ahead, if ratified the updated Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty could lead to a significant reduction of the two countries' deployed nuclear arsenals.

## Western Europe

### Political Issue

Recent Italian election was expected to decide the residual political clout of Premier Silvio Berlusconi, the result of the election definitely gave a boost to Berlusconi conservative government. The outcome of the election dispelled the notion that Berlusconi and his rightist coalition will face similar waterloo as seen in recent French election. Can the British government repeat Berlusconi's success or replicate the French episode.

Without considering his popularity, ex-PM Tony Blair rallied around his Labour party asking Britons to vote choicely for certain person not an uncertain conservative candidate. Forthcoming British election will be highly decisive and the fear of a hung parliament remains in the air owing to the neck-to-neck status between the Labour and Conservative. How would a hung parliament go well with the people and how well a coalition government will bring a change in the political landscape? Similarly, the run-up to the election is seeing the Catholic Church urging voters to vote wisely for government that supports the traditional family institution and disapprove of abortion. It is quite indicative that such statement might favour the conservative party.

## Economic Issue

### Social/Humanitarian Issue

The reaction of Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the spiritual leader of the Church of England to the sex scandal that rocked the Catholic Church maybe a payback for the recent past skirmishes between the Anglican and Catholic. Dr. Williams said the sex scandal was stunning and thus makes the Catholic Church loses its

credibility, a statement that irked the Ireland Catholic Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, who described such statement as inappropriate amid the current situation.

Despite the on-going humiliation facing the Catholic Church, the Vatican does not believe in silence on critical social issue like abortion. Two conservative Italian politicians disapproving of RU-486 used in abortion were lauded by the Vatican

Yes we want a ban of the burqa from the French public sphere, but it is unconstitutional doing that. The ban of the whole cover by Muslim women in France has been one of the rhetoric of conservative government, but facing constitutional hurdles. If the French secular democracy endorses deprivation of the right of other, then where is the democratic principle of freedom?

Similar move to ban the burqa did not fail in the Belgium parliament, where the Interior Affairs Committee representing all major parties was unanimous on banning the full veil from the public, although that will not include scarf covering the head.

Should Muslims be allowed to pray in the Mosque that was later turned into a cathedral? The necessity for such is evident from the insistence of Austrian Muslim youth tourists that visit Spain and felt they should pray in the Mezquita Cathedral de Cordoba.....Mosque Cathedral of Cordoba. The place is said to be part of UN cultural site, yet what right does Muslims have to pray in their former place of worship

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Where does the UK-US relation lies, should Britons raise their heads a bit as the French did in the 60s. Should the British remind their government that Britain was the world unequalled of the 19th century? On a larger note, can the US do without the UK or Europe at large? What will be the nature of the world if the two sides of the Atlantic shut down the door of relations? What to extent has globalization change the internal continental ties and thus bring about a new kind of friendship.

David Cameron, the hopeful British PM and conservative party leader disapproved of United States handling of the rift between London and Buenos Aires over the status of the contested Falkland Islands. Washington's intention to come in as a third party irritates Cameron and the latter is promising to have a more candid relation with the United States if elected as next Britain primer.

Why should the 15<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world continues to suffer membership of the EU, when far behind countries are allowed into the European bloc. Turkey has reiterated that special partnership status is far from being acceptable as both France and Germany are quite staunch and oppose to Ankara's EU membership.

## Southeast Europe Political Issue

Political tussle between the Socialist party and the ruling party has not reached an end. The country is trying to increase its energy source and nuclear energy is one among the alternatives, but the Socialist party is opposed to it, thus asking for a referendum on such sensitive issue. Despite their differences, they both share similar view that the EU should not be slow in inducting Tirana into the EU visa liberalisation scheme.

In a run-up for the Bosnian October election, three Serb parties have entered into coalition ahead of the polls.

Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov might be impeached by the 162 votes garnered by parliamentarians of the ruling GERB party. Before the impeachment could be finalised it has to pass through the Constitutional Court for a final decision.

Similarly, opposition is mounting against the Montenegrin ruling party. The oppositions have sent the parliament petition of no-confidence for the inability of the government to fight corruption and organised crime

Cabinet reshuffling is likely to take place in the Kosovo; the ruling party has been contemplating this for while, opposition party believes reshuffling is a ploy by the government to cover the allegation of corruption and mismanagement.

How much can Kosovo claim to be totally independent when Serbia has not desisted from influencing affairs in northern Kosovo. The International Civilian Office (ICO) headed by ICO chief Pieter Feith intends to install institutional authority in northern Kosovo with the consent of Kosovo; meanwhile, Serbia also intends to hold election in the north by May. The issue is that the north is largely Serbs but Serbia is claiming that is not part of Kosovo.

Greece and Macedonia have been tussling over the name (Macedonia) Athens has been blocking Skopje-EU integration based on this tussle. Tension between the two countries was further strained as Greek soldiers were reported to have made hate speech against Macedonian and Albanian during a parade of Greek national day. Macedonia and Albania are not taking the issue lightly and would want Athens to investigate the matter.

Belgrade made a courageous step by declaring that the 1995 war that saw the massacre of 8000 Srebrenica Muslims was a crime but fell short to call it genocide. The parliamentary declaration was welcomed by the EU, US and Bosnian Muslim although the latter resented the declaration because genocide was replaced with crime. However, the declaration was also rejected by radical Serbs in Serbia and Bosnia.

## Economic Issue

As part of the measures to making the economy stable and strong, the Bulgarian social and economic council under the auspices of the Bulgarian government is on the move to hike tax as part of the country anti-crisis measure and to balance the budget.

Such move might of course not be so welcoming to the larger public that is slightly recovering from the pain of the financial crisis.

Romanians are saying no to the austerity measure of the government. The teachers are not backing down from the 50% salary increase promised by the previous government and the transport association is also uncomfortable about the measure thus leading to an unexpected general strike by the transport section.

#### Social/Humanitarian Issue

The Arabic-language news network Al Jazeera will take over Sarajevo-based TV channel Studio 99, a move that will likely bring about a large coverage of the region in general and Bosnia in particular.

#### Food, Environment and Energy Issue

#### Geostrategic Issues

Is Croatia and Macedonia soaring their positions in NATO by sending more troops to Afghanistan. The two Balkan countries are seriously knocking at the door of the EU and doing all they could to express their geo-strategic cooperation.

After a long service in the region, Canadian soldiers exited Bosnia honourable

#### Oceania

#### Political Issue

#### Economic Issue

#### Social/Humanitarian Issue

#### Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Australia a member of the anti-Whaling countries is ready to take Iceland, Norway and Japan to the ICJ for killing whales in the Antarctica. Canberra is neither ready to accept limited hunt of the large fish by these countries. New Zealand another anti-Whaling country accepted the proposal of limited hunt because the existing law that bans whale hunt has not stop the three accused countries from further hunting, therefore unrealistic crying over it.

Australian PM Rudd Kevin is preparing for the future of the country as there is fear that the country's population might double in the next 40years. Australia is estimated to be housing around 20million people; if the population must increase there should be a sustainable arrangement for this prospective population. The government is taking into account Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry ministries as important sectors that needed to be facilitated for the future.

#### Geostrategic Issues

## Report Details

US/Canada

Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev agreed to an historic arms-control treaty on Friday (March 26th), calling for a substantial reduction of the two countries' deployed nuclear arsenals. "I'm pleased to announce that after a year of intense negotiations, the United States and Russia have agreed to the most comprehensive arms-control agreement in nearly two decades," Obama said after a telephone conversation with his Russian counterpart. The two leaders are scheduled to sign the pact on April 8th in Prague. It will replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which expired at the end of 2009. The new accord will take effect after ratification by the US Senate and the Russian Duma. Once the agreement is ratified, the two countries have seven years to fulfill their commitments. "With this agreement, the United States and Russia -- the two largest nuclear powers in the world -- also send a clear signal that we intend to lead," Obama told reporters at the White House. "By upholding our own commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), we strengthen our global efforts to stop the spread of these weapons, and to ensure that other nations meet their own responsibilities." Under the deal, each side would have to reduce the number of operationally deployed long-range nuclear warheads to 1,550, which is 30% lower than the 2,200 currently allowed. This amounts to a little more than a quarter of the 6,000 warhead limit set in the original START agreement. Both countries would also be required to bring the number of deployed and non-deployed launchers, and heavy bombers equipped for nuclear armaments to 800. This is down from the 1,600 in the 1991 treaty. The two countries also agreed to limit the number of deployed intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles to 700 each. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said "The steps we are taking add up to something that makes a very clear statement of intent."

Obama said the new START treaty would establish a strong and effective mechanism for verification and monitoring, while maintaining the flexibility his country needs to protect national security and abide by commitments to its allies. The US president noted that the agreement would help the two countries put behind them the "darkest days of the Cold War". "When the United States and Russia can co-operate effectively, it advances the mutual interests of our two nations, and the security and prosperity of the wider world," Obama said. Russia, however, is still cautioning that it could pull out of the deal if the United States goes too far with plans to build a missile defence system in Eastern Europe, to which Moscow is strongly opposed. "The treaty is being concluded when both sides have corresponding levels of strategic offensive and defensive systems," the *Wall Street Journal* quoted Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying. "Any change of those levels gives each side the right to consider the question of its further participation in reductions of strategic arms." Friday's agreement, meanwhile, brought praise from top international officials, including UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

In a statement, Ban voiced hope that the agreement "can be ratified without delay so as to allow its expeditious implementation".

WASHINGTON/OTTAWA (Reuters) – The United States on Thursday finalized its first greenhouse gas emissions rules on automobiles and significantly boosted fuel efficiency standards for the first time since the 1970s, moves Canada jointly imposed on its industry. The U.S. rules will first apply to 2012 model cars, rolling off production lines next year. They are part of President Barack Obama's goal to cut emissions of greenhouse gases by about 17 percent under 2005 levels by the year 2020. Obama wants Congress to pass a long-delayed climate bill, but to push it along, he has also set in motion steps for the Environmental Protection Agency to begin regulating emissions from cars and large polluters like power plants. The EPA determined late last year that emissions of the gases blamed for global warming harm human health. The agency's authority to do so has been challenged by industry groups and lawmakers in courts and in Congress. Thursday's emissions rule marked EPA's first move to cut output of the chemicals. "We've developed a clean cars program that is a win for automakers and drivers, a win for innovators and entrepreneurs, and a win for our planet," said Lisa Jackson, the administrator of the EPA, which finalized the fuel rules with the Department of Transportation. The efficiency rules, which car-makers knew for months were coming, require that cars and trucks get on average 35.5 miles per gallon (15 kilometers per liter) by 2016, up 42 percent from current rules, of just under 25 miles per gallon.

The EPA spelled out on Thursday for the first time that average vehicle emissions will be limited to 250 grams of carbon dioxide per mile by 2016, down from 295 grams in 2012. Canada's government also finalized fuel efficiency rules on Thursday. Canadian Environment Minister Jim Prentice said Canada and the United States "will effectively share common standards" for limiting vehicle greenhouse gas emissions. The two countries are working together on proposed standards for tractor-trailer trucks, which should be released in the next few months, Prentice said. The North American auto industry is highly interlinked, and Canada has said its strategy for emissions also hinges on U.S. policy because of the two nations' integrated economies.

OTTAWA (Reuters) – Canada will not unilaterally impose limits on greenhouse gas emissions from industry, saying on Thursday that it will work in tandem with the United States, as it is doing with vehicle standards. "We don't anticipate doing this alone. Industrial regulations will require the same kind of collaboration that we've had with the United States on the transportation sector," Environment Minister Jim Prentice told Reuters. Speaking after unveiling new automobile emission standards in conjunction with Washington, Prentice said it was important to move in parallel to maintain competitiveness. "We maintain our position that we need to do this on a continental basis because the risk ... in terms of loss of jobs and investments in Canada to the United States is significant," he said. Canada and the United States announced on Thursday they had finalized common rules governing greenhouse gas emissions from cars and light trucks, with rules governing heavy trucks expected in the near future. Prentice said it appears increasingly likely the United States will not enact a cap-and-trade system to limit industrial carbon emissions because of resistance in the Senate. He expects Washington to likely go the route of limiting emissions by imposing regulations on business. "Essentially, the United States is moving more in terms of a regulatory framework for industrial emissions," Prentice said, adding that Ottawa had already done a great deal of work on setting up a regulatory framework. Despite the uncertainty over how to approach

regulating the industrial sector, Prentice earlier told a news conference that Canada stands by plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 17 percent from 2005 levels by 2020.

TORONTO (Reuters) – Canadians became more anxious about their personal finances in March -- enough to lose sleep over the issue -- but felt a little more confident about jobs, a consumer confidence survey found on Thursday. The RBC Canadian Consumer Outlook Index dipped to 108 points in March from 109 in February, signaling that overall sentiment has barely budged. The index has been edging up and down since its launch in December, reflecting opinions that the country's economic recovery will be a bumpy one. "There are risks to the outlook that Canadians are still a bit worried about," said Craig Wright, chief economist at Royal Bank of Canada. He cited weakness in the U.S. economy, the impact of a stronger Canadian dollar, and concerns about global exit strategies from extraordinary stimulus measures used to combat the credit crunch. Sentiment on the overall economy remained in positive territory, with 54 percent of respondents describing it as good and 46 percent describing it as bad.

However a higher number of respondents expect the economy to worsen over the next 12 months: 20 percent in the latest survey compared with 13 percent in February. Canadians were slightly less fretful about the job outlook; with 22 percent saying a member of their household is worried about being laid off, down from 25 percent the month before. On overall personal finances, 33 percent think their situation will improve in the next three months, up from 30 percent in February.

But the survey also found 65 percent are losing sleep over finances.

It found 27 percent of respondents are concerned about paying off debts, followed by 18 percent who are worried about having enough for retirement, while 16 percent fret about having no emergency fund.

The survey also revealed that 34 percent were not confident about any aspect of their financial situation. More than two-thirds of Canadians, or 69 percent, expect interest rates will rise in the next six months, up from 65 percent in February and roughly in line with market expectations. The Bank of Canada has pledged to keep interest rates at record lows until the end of the second quarter, assuming inflation remains tame. Recently, there has been talk that interest rates could be lifted sooner because of a string of very firm economic numbers, though yields on overnight index swaps suggest the market sees the tightening cycle starting on July 20. "Bay Street is interpreting the data and upwardly revising their growth forecasts, and Main Street is telling us to be a bit more cautious," said Wright. The RBC index is based on an online survey of 1,020 Canadians, ages 18 and over. It was conducted by Ipsos Reid between March 9 and 15, 2010.

## Western Europe

ROME – Voters began casting ballots Sunday in Italy's regional elections, which are being seen as an important test of popularity for Premier Silvio Berlusconi. The conservative leader campaigned relentlessly for the Sunday-Monday ballot, urging his supporters to vote and avert the risk of low turnout. He has seen his popularity eroded amid rising unemployment, a corruption scandal and an investigation into his alleged attempts to influence TV coverage. The ballots were being held in 13 of Italy's 20

regions, as well as in a handful of cities, and the outcome would not have direct consequences on the stability of Berlusconi's 20-month-old government.

But with some 41 million Italians eligible to cast ballots — out of a population of 60 million — the elections were seen as a barometer of the country's support for its leader.

A defeat for Berlusconi might alter the balance of power within the government, especially if the premier's allies do well — and possibly lead to a Cabinet shuffle. A strong showing will give Berlusconi momentum to push through controversial reforms, such as one of the justice system. Berlusconi's conservatives were expected, however, to keep the two regions in elections they held going into the vote, and possibly snatch two away from their center-left rivals. Significant races were being held in Lazio, the region that includes the capital and where a registration mixup excluded a Berlusconi list, and Piedmont, an affluent northern region currently held by the center-left and seen as very close contest.

ROME — Premier Silvio Berlusconi emerged as the victor in regional elections held across Italy and widely depicted as a test of his popularity, final returns showed Tuesday. Berlusconi's coalition won crucial races and wrested control of four regions from the opposition. The Northern League, an anti-immigration party and government ally, also fared very strongly, and will likely see its national influence significantly increase. Overall, the conservatives won six regions — compared with the two they controlled going into the vote — while the center-left opposition held on to seven.

For Berlusconi, the success means a strong popular endorsement for the remaining three years of his mandate. It gives the Italian leader momentum to push through controversial reforms, including overhauling the justice system. "This result is the best recognition for the work done by the government," Berlusconi said, and an encouragement "to carry out, in this second half of the legislature, reforms that are necessary to modernize the country." The most resounding success for Berlusconi came overnight in two races that went down to the wire: Lazio, which includes the capital; and Piedmont, a big region in the country's industrial north. Both were previously held by the opposition. Final turnout stood at 64 percent — high by the standards of many Western democracies, but 8 percent down from the last Italian regional elections in 2005. Around 41 million people were eligible to cast ballots in the country of 60 million. Analysts had predicted that a low turnout would hurt the governing power — as it did with French President Nicolas Sarkozy in recent regional balloting in France.

LONDON — Former Prime Minister Tony Blair made a dramatic pre-election return to domestic British politics Tuesday with an attack on the policies of David Cameron, the smooth young Conservative leader sometimes nicknamed "Tory Blair."

Blair's return, weeks before a national election, came in a speech urging voters to give his Labour Party a fourth term in office. "In uncertain times, there's a lot to be said for certain leadership," Blair said, dismissing the Conservative campaign slogan "vote for change" as "the most vacuous slogan in politics." Blair has made few appearances in Britain since he quit as prime minister in 2007, though his January testimony defending his actions in Iraq to the country's inquiry into the war marked a return to the limelight.

In more comfortable mode in a room full of Labour supporters in his old constituency, it was as if he'd never been gone. Here was the easy smile, the friendly crowd at the

Trimdon Constituency Labour Club in northeast England — and the gaggle of protesters outside as a reminder of Blair's unpopular decision to go to war in Iraq.

Blair remains a divisive figure, but Labour leaders are calculating that despite lingering anger over the war, his record of having won three consecutive elections makes him an asset in the tight race. An election must be held by June 3, and is widely expected to be on May 6. Blair praised the record of his successor, Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and attacked Cameron's Tories as a party without principles.

He praised Brown's stewardship of the economy, saying that 18 months after the near-collapse of the global banking system, "we are not out of the woods yet, but we are on the path out." "At the moment of peril the world acted. Britain acted," Blair said. "The decision to act required experience, judgment and boldness. It required leadership. Gordon Brown supplied it."

Blair has a famously tense relationship with Brown, who succeeded him as prime minister in June 2007. For most of the time since then the Conservatives have held a double-digit lead over Labour in opinion polls. But in recent months the race has tightened, raising Labour's hopes of clinging on for a fourth term.

Cameron, the fresh-faced, 43-year-old Conservative leader, has often been likened to Blair, who won power in 1997 after dragging his party to the political center and rebranding it "New Labour." Blair rejected the comparison and accused the Conservatives of lacking principles. "They look like they're either the old Tory party but want to hide it, or they're not certain which way to go," Blair said. "They seem like they haven't made up their minds about where they stand, so the British public finds it hard to make up its mind about where it stands." The pro-Labour Daily Mirror newspaper crowed about the return of the "Blair Force," but Britain's former leader also comes with baggage. Reg Keys, whose son Lance Cpl. Tom Keys was killed in Iraq in 2003, said Blair "is more of a liability than an asset in a campaign." "Iraq is a very controversial issue and it has divided the country," Keys said.

LONDON – Britain's political class is making feverish plans for a possibly murky result from the upcoming general election. With the specter of a hung Parliament rising in the run-up to the vote, the government's Cabinet Office said it would soon publish guidelines for dealing with a postelection landscape in which no party commands an absolute majority in the House of Commons. One option would be to give Prime Minister Gordon Brown up to 18 days to keep his job by forming a coalition government with smaller parties, even if his Labour Party wins fewer seats than the opposition Conservatives, according to British media Wednesday. "They're saying 18 days should be enough time to know whether you can put a government together," said analyst Leighton Vaughan Williams, director of the Political Forecasting Unit at Nottingham Business School. If Brown cannot form a stable coalition in that time, he would have to resign, giving Conservative Party leader David Cameron a chance to form a government, the analyst said. The government would not confirm the 18-day detail, saying only that it would release the contingency plan within days, after final proposals and comments are considered. Civil servants are right to be studying the options now, Vaughan Williams said, as "we don't want to start thinking about it the day after the election."

For months opinion polls had put the Conservatives far in the lead, but recent surveys suggest the party may not win a clear victory.

While Britain's political scene is dominated by Labour and the Conservatives, several smaller groups are likely to win seats they could then use as bargaining chips in coalition talks. The centrist Liberal Democrats — the country's third largest party — are seen as potentially vital dealmakers if a hung Parliament develops. But its leader, Nick Clegg, has said he would not play a decisive kingmaking role if no clear winner emerges. "It should be abundantly clear who has the strongest mandate," Liberal Democrat spokesman Simon Waddington said. Brown has yet to announce an election date, though the ballot must take place by June 3 and is expected on May 6. As a result it is still unclear when the new Parliament would hold its first session.

LONDON – Senior Catholic bishops are urging British worshippers to carefully consider candidates' policies toward marriage and abortion when they vote in the looming national election — a move likely to benefit the opposition Conservatives. In a guide to the election, Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols urges voters to back lawmakers who "support marriage as a key building-block of a stable society" and who oppose abortion and euthanasia.

Although Nichols insists the Roman Catholic Church does not endorse any individual party, the document is critical of the record of Prime Minister Gordon Brown's Labour Party, which has held office for 13 years. The vote has not yet been set, but must be held by June 3. It is expected to be May 6. The guide criticizes the "growth of regulations, targets and league tables," in public services and an "excessive emphasis" on individualism. It calls on Britain's next government to put "a new sense of service to others at the heart of our institutions." A Catholic checklist for voters suggests reviewing candidates' and party stances on abortion, marriage, poverty, religious freedom and migrants. "The fundamental question we each need to ask ourselves in deciding who to vote for is not who will best serve me, but who will best serve the common good," the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales said in a joint statement accompanying the guide. Opposition Conservative Party leader David Cameron is most likely to benefit from the church's intervention — he has pledged tax breaks for married couples and previously backed attempts to lower from 24 weeks to 20 weeks the limit in Britain for a fetus to be aborted. The Catholic election guide also urges volunteer groups and charities to take a greater role in solving social problems, a key plank of the Conservatives' manifesto. In a video message, Nichols chastised lawmakers over an expenses scandal and bankers over the financial meltdown — but also said Catholic clergy had failed the public over sex abuse cases. "We know the damage that can be done when trust is betrayed," he said

LONDON – The "special relationship" is not so special any more. That's the word from a committee of lawmakers in Britain who say the phrase coined by Winston Churchill to describe the country's close ties with the United States should no longer be used because it fails to reflect a true picture of relations between the two countries. Parliament's Foreign Affairs Select Committee said the government should be "less deferential" toward the Americans and take a more realistic view of the relationship. In a report published Sunday, the committee said that, while ties with America remain close, it is important to recognize that Britain is just one of many countries with important U.S. links. "The overuse of the phrase by some politicians and many in the media serves

simultaneously to devalue its meaning and to raise unrealistic expectations about the benefits the relationship can deliver to the U.K.," the committee said in its report.

Churchill used the phrase shortly after World War II to describe the shared cultural, political and historic ties that helped defeat Nazi Germany, and the fears of the looming Cold War. But in recent years, the timeworn expression has often been derided — suggesting that Britain was subservient to the United States. That was particularly the case in what was seen as Britain's unquestioning support of former President George W. Bush during the Iraq war. "The perception that the British government was a subservient 'poodle' to the U.S. administration leading up to the period of the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath is widespread both among the British public and overseas," the report said. "This perception, whatever its relation to reality, is deeply damaging to the reputation and interests of the U.K." The committee suggested Britain should be more pragmatic in U.K.-U.S. relations, and accept it may not enjoy the same sway on Washington as in the past. "Over the longer-term, the U.K. is unlikely to be able to influence the U.S. to the extent it has in the past," said the committee chairman, lawmaker Mike Gapes.

LONDON — Britain's opposition chief — and possible next leader — said Wednesday the failure of the United States to back London in a dispute with Argentina was disappointing, as he promised a more candid relationship with Washington if he wins office. In an interview with The Economist newspaper, Conservative Party leader David Cameron — whose party leads in opinion polls ahead of an election expected in May — hinted that he'd take a tougher stance with allies including President Barack Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Cameron said he was disappointed that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attempted recently to facilitate talks between London and Buenos Aires over the status of the contested Falkland Islands. Argentina and Britain went to war in 1982 over the islands — which are claimed by Buenos Aires, but have been occupied by Britons since the early 1800s. The two countries recently have been caught in a new spat over the exploitation of vast energy reserves beneath waters in the South Atlantic.

"I think it was disappointing, frankly, but I've always said the special relationship should be a frank and a candid one, and I think you should frankly and candidly say we're disappointed," Cameron told the newspaper. Clinton offered to help Argentina and Britain resolve their dispute and said the United States was willing to be a go-between, a move which angered some in the U.K. Cameron suggested that, under his rule, Britain may seek a more modest international role — saying the U.K. could no longer act as the "equal partner" of the U.S. "We are the junior partner in that relationship, and I think part of getting the relationship right is understanding how best to play the role of the junior partner," Cameron was quoted as saying. He insisted that ties to the U.S. will remain Britain's most important relationship, but claimed "we don't overstate it and don't ever think that it's a sort of equal partnership because it isn't."

Cameron has twice held talks with Obama and could potentially take a place on the world stage at a G-20 summit scheduled for Canada in June, if his party wins the looming election. He has said Afghanistan will be his chief foreign policy priority and pledged to set up a dedicated war cabinet, but indicated that he's been unimpressed with Karzai. "I think at his best he can do good things, but we have to be very clear about the need to cut out corruption," Cameron told the newspaper.

LONDON – British protesters called on Pope Benedict XVI to resign Sunday as they staged a demonstration over the Catholic Church's handling of clerical sex abuse cases. Demonstrators gathered outside Westminster Cathedral to call for action over the scandal, carrying placards displaying messages including "Pope? Nope!" and "Don't Turn a Blind Eye," though fewer than 50 people joined the rally. Revelations of the sexual abuse of children by priests at Catholic institutions have swept across Europe, including in the pope's native Germany. Benedict has been criticized over a case dating to his tenure as archbishop of Munich, and his actions when head of the Vatican office responsible for disciplining priests. "The buck stops with him and he should resign," human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell said at the London rally. "The pope has played a direct personal role in covering up sex abuse." However, Benedict won support from Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols who insisted the pope wouldn't — and shouldn't — quit. "The pope will not resign, frankly there is no strong reason for him to do so," he told BBC television. "In fact, it is the other way around. He is the one above all else in Rome that has tackled this thing head on."

LONDON – The Roman Catholic church in Ireland has lost its credibility because of its mishandling of abuse by priests, the leader of the Anglican church said in remarks released Saturday. A leading Catholic archbishop said he was "stunned" by the comments. It was the first time Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the spiritual leader of the Church of England, has spoken publicly on the crisis engulfing the Catholic church. The remarks come ahead of a planned visit to England and Scotland by Pope Benedict XVI later this year. "I was speaking to an Irish friend recently who was saying that it's quite difficult in some parts of Ireland to go down the street wearing a clerical collar now," Williams told the BBC. "And an institution so deeply bound into the life of a society, suddenly becoming, suddenly losing all credibility — that's not just a problem for the church, it is a problem for everybody in Ireland, I think."

The interview with Williams, recorded March 26, is to be aired Monday on the BBC's "Start the Week" program. His remarks were part of a general discussion of religion to mark Easter. The Catholic church has been on the defensive over accusations leaders protected child abusers for decades in many countries. Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin said he had "rarely felt personally so discouraged" as when he heard Williams' opinions. "I have been more than forthright in addressing the failures of the Catholic Church in Ireland. I still shudder when I think of the harm that was caused to abused children. I recognize that their Church failed them," a statement, posted on the archdiocese's Web site, said. "Those working for renewal in the Catholic Church in Ireland did not need this comment on this Easter weekend and do not deserve it."

Relations between the two churches were strained last year after the Vatican invited conservative Anglicans to join the Catholic Church. How many will take up the offer is still unknown. "I don't think it's going to be a big deal for the Church of England, I must say," Williams said. "I think there'll be a few people who will take advantage of it — and they'll take advantage of it because they believe they ought to be in communion with the Bishop of Rome. And I can only say fine, God bless them." Williams said he would meet with the pope at Lambeth Palace, that he would be welcomed as "as a valued partner, and that's about it." In the interview, Williams said Christian institutions, faced with the choice of self-protection or revealing potentially damaging secrets, have decided to keep

quiet to preserve their credibility. "We've learned that that is damaging, it's wrong, it's dishonest and it requires that very hard recognition ... which ought to be natural for the Christian church based as it is on repentance and honesty." he said.

DUBLIN (AFP) – Anglican and Irish Catholic leaders were at loggerheads Easter Saturday over claims that the Catholic Church in Ireland was "losing all credibility" over the clerical child abuse scandal. Diarmuid Martin, the Archbishop of Dublin, said he was "stunned" by the comments from Rowan Williams, the leader of the world's Anglicans. The Archbishop of Canterbury's remarks risk creating tensions with the Vatican ahead of Pope Benedict XVI's landmark visit to Britain in September.

Williams, the spiritual leader of more than 70 million Anglicans worldwide, said the Irish Catholic Church's disarray was a "colossal trauma", The Times reported, quoting a BBC radio interview to be broadcast next week. "I was speaking to an Irish friend recently who was saying that it's quite difficult in some parts of Ireland to go down the street wearing a clerical collar now," Williams said. "And an institution so deeply bound into the life of a society suddenly becoming, suddenly losing all credibility -- that's not just a problem for the Church, it is a problem for everybody in Ireland."

Ireland, a predominantly Catholic country, has been rocked by two reports in the last year detailing child sex abuse stretching back decades and Church leaders' complicity in covering it up. Martin said Williams' remarks were out of order during the Easter weekend and he had rarely felt so discouraged. "The unequivocal and unqualified comment... has stunned me," he said in a statement. "As Archbishop of Dublin, I have been more than forthright in addressing the failures of the Catholic Church in Ireland. I still shudder when I think of the harm that was caused to abused children. I recognise that their Church failed them. "But I also journey with those -- especially parents and priests - - who work day by day to renew the Catholic Church in this diocese and who are committed to staying with their Church and passing on the faith in wearying times. "Archbishop Williams' comments will be for them immensely disheartening and will challenge their faith even further.

ROME – Italy's foreign minister has rushed to Pope Benedict XVI's defense, while Italian newspapers labeled foreign media reports "attacks" for questioning what the pontiff might have known about the pedophile clergy scandal rocking Europe. Italian politicians predictably have rallied to defend the pope in the face of reports that Benedict allegedly allowed a pedophile priest to do pastoral work while he was Munich archbishop — though even a top Vatican official has complained that a "culture of silence" in Italy may have masked sexual abuse by clergy in what is effectively the Vatican's backyard. Foreign Minister Franco Frattini denounced as "scandalous and shameful" the allegations that the German-born pontiff might have failed to protect parishioners on his watch. Senate President Renato Schifani called the "attacks on the pope unacceptable and unworthy." The church plays an important role in a country chronically short on public services for children, from nursery schools to recreation programs to summer day care. Generations of boys and girls have spent countless hours kicking soccer balls or romping in playgrounds, gardens and auditoriums run by neighborhood priests. But the political class might be out of touch with some of their rank-and-file citizens.

The Catholic voter bloc in Italy is "absolutely not" what it was immediately after World War II, when Christian Democrats dominated Italian politicians, said Frank Coppa, a historian and professor at St. John's University, New York, who has studied the papacy as an institution. "I don't know if they reflect the broad" populace anymore, Coppa said in a telephone interview Monday. And while Italian media referred to the foreign media scrutiny as "attacks," citizens were less critical. "The foreign press is simply stating the truth, something that never happens in Italy when it comes to the Catholic Church," said 23-year-old Florence sales clerk Valentina Cappellucci, sitting Tuesday on the steps of a Jesuit church in Rome. The mainstream Italian media have largely ignored the trial in Rome of an Italian priest accused of sexually abusing seven boys. "While there are priests in prison, and priests on trial, (and) certainly the phenomenon in Italy is very much widespread, part of this phenomenon lies buried by these attitudes toward the church," Nino Marazzita, a lawyer who represents two of the boys, told Associated Press Television News Tuesday. The Vatican's own "prosecutor" for clergy sex abuse, Maltese prelate Monsignor Charles Scicluna, recently acknowledged that he was "worried about a certain culture of silence that I see as still too widespread" in Italy.

ROME – The Vatican has praised a pledge by two newly elected Italian regional officials to halt the distribution of the abortion drug RU-486. The decision by the two conservative officials has rekindled a debate in Italy over RU-486, which was legalized last year. The drug can be administered by doctors in hospitals but cannot be sold in pharmacies. Italian newspapers said Friday that the first batches of the pills were being distributed this week. Monsignor Renato Fisichella, the Vatican's top bioethics official, said the officials' move was "in defense of life and therefore it has my praise." Pope Benedict XVI during a Holy Thursday Mass urged Christians not to accept "a wrong that is enshrined in law — for example the killing of innocent unborn children."

THE HAGUE, Netherlands – Relatives of Bosnian Muslims killed in Europe's worst massacre since World War II lost another round Tuesday in their attempt to sue the United Nations for responsibility. The Hague Appeals Court upheld a 2008 lower court ruling affirming U.N. immunity from prosecution enshrined in international conventions that established the world body, and said the legal protection is an essential foundation of its peacekeeping operations around the world. Lawyers for the family members, known as the Mothers of Srebrenica, vowed to take the case to the Dutch Supreme Court and the European Court of Justice if necessary. "The immunity from prosecution guarantees that the U.N. is not thwarted in the execution of its duties as a result of court cases being instigated against it, possibly for no other reason than to frustrate the U.N.'s work," the court said. "It is in the best public interest that the U.N. can avail itself of its duties untroubled." Some 8,000 men were murdered in July 1995 by Serb forces who overran Srebrenica, which had been declared a U.N. safe zone for the Muslim civilians in the Bosnian enclave. The Dutch U.N. peacekeepers protecting the enclave were undermanned and outgunned, and failed to intervene. International courts have ruled the slayings were a genocide. Lawyers for the Mothers of Srebrenica said the ruling undermines their "fundamental human rights" of access to "effective legal remedies." "How long can the U.N. retain its credibility, striving to protect human rights but at the same time disregarding them itself?" the lawyers said. However, the appeals court said

the mothers do have legal avenues open to them as they are free to sue both the perpetrators and the Dutch government.

PARIS – France's highest administrative body warned Tuesday that a total ban on full-body Islamic veils in public risks being found unconstitutional but that rules requiring the face to be uncovered could be justified.

Even a limited ban on the full-body veil would be difficult to enforce, the Council of State said in a study of the legal possibilities for a broad application of a ban on burqa-like garments that was commissioned by Prime Minister Francois Fillon earlier this year. A total ban risks violating the French constitution and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the report said.

The report is the latest development in President Nicolas Sarkozy's efforts to ban face-covering veils after he told the French in June that such garb was "not welcome" in France. A parliamentary commission examined the issue for six months last year before making 15 recommendations in a report in January. That panel refrained from recommending a ban on face-covering veils.

Determined not to give up, Fillon asked the Council of State, the body which determines whether laws conform to the French constitution, to further study the issue as a precaution to make sure that any possible bill would be legal even before it were voted by parliament. The council determined that "no indisputable legal basis for a general and absolute ban on wearing a complete face-covering veil as such could be found," the report said. The council also concluded that a ban on covering the face regardless of the type of dress also would run into legal hurdles. Wearing a full-body veil already is forbidden in some cases: for public servants exercising their duties, in schools or in businesses where it would interfere with work, for example. Beyond that, the council found that presenting an uncovered face could be required and would have a solid legal foundation in other cases: including situations involving public security; in places where the sale of certain items requires age verification such as courts, polling stations, city hall, or the exits of schools when children are being picked up, among others. The full-body veil issue is divisive in France, with many conservatives such as Sarkozy favoring a very restrictive ban, while others say women should be free to wear what they want.

BRUSSELS – A parliamentary committee unanimously voted Wednesday to ban the wearing of face-covering veils in public, a major step in the legislative process that could make Belgium the first European country to impose such a religious prohibition. The full House of Representatives is expected to vote on the issue late April. The Interior Affairs Committee representing all major parties was unanimous Wednesday in backing the bill. The six parliamentarians from the MR french-speaking liberal party said the principle of "recognize to know" trumped other considerations in the issue. "We cannot allow someone to claim the right to look at others without being seen," said Daniel Bacquelaine, who proposed the bill. "It is necessary that the law forbids the wearing of clothes that totally mask and encloses an individual," he said, adding he was not targeting the classic headscarf worn by many Muslim women. The parliamentarians are specifically targeting the body-covering burqa and face-veiling niqab, which are still very rare features in Belgian public life. "We have to act as of today to avoid (its) development," Bacquelaine said. "Wearing the burqa in public is not compatible with an

open, liberal, tolerant society," he said. In Belgium, the proponents of the ban argue that such all-covering garb poses security issues as well as threatens democratic values. Some feared, however, that the bill would not stand a legal challenge. In France on Tuesday, the Council of State, the nation's highest administrative body, warned that a prohibition on full-body Islamic veils in public risked being found unconstitutional. President Nicolas Sarkozy said last year that such clothing was "not welcome" in France. Such a ban could also be challenged at the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights.

MADRID – A group of Muslims tried to pray inside a Roman Catholic cathedral that was originally a mosque and then scuffled with security guards and police who tried to stop them, a Spanish official said Friday. Two of the tourists were arrested after the incident Wednesday night in the southern city of Cordoba and a police officer and a cathedral security guard were slightly injured, National Police spokeswoman Rosa Ortiz told The Associated Press. The Great Mosque of Cordoba was built after the Moorish invasion of Spain in the 8th century. Cordoba is known as the City of Three Cultures because Muslims, Jews and Christians lived there in harmony during medieval times. The mosque was transformed into a cathedral in 1236 when King Ferdinand III captured the city from the Moors. Since then, except for rare exceptions, Muslim prayer rites have been forbidden inside. The building still retains exquisite red and white arches and gleaming marble columns from the original mosque. It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1984, and is one of Spain's most popular tourist sites.

Ortiz said a group of 120 Muslim tourists from Austria entered the mosque Wednesday evening and a handful of them — six or seven, she said — started to pray. Security guards told them to stop, but the small group insisted and argued with the guards, so National Police were summoned. Two of the people praying insisted even then, and got into a shoving match with officers, after which they were arrested for disobeying and threatening law enforcement officers, Ortiz said.

She declined to name them saying only they were men aged 23 and 19. The detainees were to appear before a judge in Cordoba on Friday. Ortiz said had never heard of an incident like this before. The bishop's office in Cordoba said the larger group had acted in a coordinated and aggressive fashion, but Ortiz downplayed that idea.

Mansur Escudero, a Spanish Muslim leader, said he has been pressing the Catholic church for years to let Muslims pray in the mosque, but to no end. Over the past few decades exceptions were made, at the request of King Juan Carlos, and members of the Saudi royal family were allowed to pray in the mosque, Escudero, who is president of the Islamic Commission of Spain, told the newspaper El Mundo. Spain has a Muslim community of about 1 million, out of a total population of 45 million. The building's official title is the "Mezquita Cathedral de Cordoba" — the mosque cathedral. Escudero said the name should be changed to ex-mosque cathedral. "Or just cathedral. If it is not a mosque, they should not call it a mosque," he was quoted as saying.

ANKARA (AFP) – German Chancellor Angela Merkel visits Turkey on Monday with the two countries in deep disagreement over the mainly Muslim country's faltering bid to join the European Union. Merkel also flies into Turkey for the two-day stay amid differences linked to the huge Turkish immigrant population in Germany, where the world's largest Turkish diaspora is located. The run-up to the visit has exposed the EU rift

between the two countries, with Merkel underlining her opposition to granting Turkey membership and Ankara hitting back. In remarks recently published in Turkish newspapers, Merkel said she would insist on a "privileged partnership" for Turkey instead of EU membership during her visit. On Saturday, Turkey snubbed Merkel's proposal. "The privileged partnership just does not exist," Turkish European Affairs Minister Egemen Bagis said. "This does not have any legal basis in the European Union." A spokesman for Turkey's foreign ministry has said there "is no option for Turkey other than full membership."

Since starting membership talks in 2005, Turkey has succeeded in opening only 12 of the 35 chapters that candidates are required to complete in order to join the bloc. The process has also been slowed by Ankara's sluggish pace of reform and its refusal to allow EU-member Cyprus -- a country it does not recognise -- access to its ports under a customs union accord with the union. France has also been vocally opposed to Turkey's EU aspirations. The two EU heavyweights believe that a vast, relatively poor country with a mainly Muslim 71 million-strong population has no place in Europe. Another contentious issue between the two countries involves the estimated 3.5 million Turkish immigrants and their descendants in Germany, the country's largest ethnic minority and the world's largest Turkish diaspora. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan caused a row in 2008 by saying he was against the assimilation of Turkish immigrants in Germany. In remarks published on Thursday, he called for the opening of Turkish secondary schools in Germany. "In Turkey, we have German high schools -- why shouldn't there be Turkish high schools in Germany?" he told the German weekly *Die Zeit*, also complaining that Germany did not allow dual citizenship. Merkel hit back at the proposal, saying: "I do not think this brings us forward, as I think that Turkish children and pupils should go to German schools." During her visit, Merkel will also discuss Iran, the Middle East peace process and economic relations with Turkish leaders. Merkel has held out the possibility of further sanctions against Iran over its nuclear programme, while Erdogan has rejected the idea.

## Southeast Europe

TIRANA, Albania -- The restoration of Skenderbej Square in Tirana has sparked a new row between the Democratic Party (DP)-led government and the opposition Socialist Party (SP) whose leader, Edi Rama, is mayor of the capital. On Sunday (March 28th), Rama officially inaugurated work on the 4.3m-euro restoration project, financed by a donation from Kuwait. But Transport Minister Sokol Olldashi of the DP said the project will be halted because it does not comply with urban planning.

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele reiterated on Tuesday (March 30th) his concerns about the ongoing political stalemate in Albania. The deadlock is between the ruling Democratic Party (DP) and the opposition Socialist Party (SP). "I expressed concern about the stability of democratic institutions and the lack of political dialogue in the parliament. All laws are adopted here, and there would be no reforms without appropriate legislation," Fuele said in an interview with *EurActiv*. DP has been refusing SP demands to investigate the June 2009 general elections, resulting in an SP boycott of most parliamentary sessions.

TIRANA, Albania -- The rapporteur for Albania in the European Parliament's (EP) Foreign Affairs Commission, Nikolaos Chountis, said on Monday (March 29th) that there are no barriers preventing the country from EU visa liberalisation. During a visit to Tirana, officials briefed Chountis on progress made on basic criteria, such as guaranteeing border security, personal ID documents, fighting crime and illegal trafficking. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Sali Berisha announced on Monday that Albania has completed the questionnaire required to receive EU candidate status, answering nearly 2,300 questions in three months. About 1,200 officials participated in the process, including 28 foreign experts. The questionnaire will be delivered to the European Commission in early April.

TIRANA, Albania -- Interior Minister Lulzim Basha says Albania will continue to fight illegal trafficking and offer unconditional help to victims. At a conference on human trafficking Tuesday (March 30th), he cited Albania's efforts to bring traffickers to justice as well as to confiscate their assets and strengthen legislation to protect witnesses

TIRANA, Albania -- The main opposition Socialist Party (SP) wants to call a referendum on the government's plan to build a nuclear power plant. Lawmaker Besnik Baraj said on Monday (March 29th) that such sensitive initiatives need input from residents before they are launched. The SP also reminded the government that a strategy for energy development adopted a few years ago did not include nuclear energy. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi confirmed earlier this month that Italy will support the construction of a nuclear plant in Albania, in part so Italy can import electricity.

BANJA LUKA, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- Three opposition parties in Republika Srpska (RS) signed a coalition agreement in Banja Luka on Sunday (March 28th), ahead of the October general elections. Signatories included the leaders of the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) and the Serbian Radical Party of RS. All three parties will back Ognjen Tadic of the SDS for president of RS, and a PDP candidate for Serb representative in the tripartite Bosnian presidency. SDS leader Mladen Bosic said after the ceremony that the coalition would welcome other parties willing to support the candidates. The three opposition parties also insist on BiH's and RS's military neutrality.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- The mission of Canadian troops in BiH officially ended on Monday (March 29th) with five officers and one non-commissioned soldier returning home. Canadian Ambassador to BiH Pierre Guimond noted at a ceremony in Sarajevo that Canada was among the first countries to send peacekeepers. He said that BiH is moving in the right direction and Canada's focus for the time being is Afghanistan. More than 40,000 Canadian soldiers have served in Balkan missions since 1991.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) The Arabic-language news network Al Jazeera will take over Sarajevo-based TV channel Studio 99, the Sarajevo City Council confirmed at its session Tuesday (March 30th). Sarajevo Mayor Alija Behmen

said the city has invested about 160,000 euros in Studio 99 so far, which will be refunded by Al Jazeera. He added that the network plans to establish a regional office in Sarajevo.

SOFIA, Bulgaria -- An impeachment motion against President Georgi Parvanov, initiated by the ruling GERB party, was introduced in parliament on Friday (March 26th) after it collected the signatures of 162 lawmakers, well over the required 61. The vote is scheduled for Wednesday. If it attracts at least 160 votes, it moves on to the Constitutional Court for a final decision. The motion was initiated after Parvanov made public a closed-door conversation he had with Finance Minister Simeon Dyankov.

SOFIA, Bulgaria -- The social and economic council, working on the cabinet's anti-crisis plan, reached consensus Saturday (March 27th) on several tax hikes that would boost budget revenues by about 115m euros. The assorted measures still fall short of raising as much revenue as a proposed 2% hike in the Value Added Tax. The goal of the anti-crisis package is to boost revenues and cut spending for a net effect of about 750m euros. Final negotiations are expected on Monday, which would allow parliament to vote on the proposals Wednesday.

SOFIA, Bulgaria -- Participants in the social and economic council working on the cabinet's anti-crisis plan announced on Monday (March 29th) that the standard VAT will rate not be raised by 2%, as initially proposed, but will remain at 20%. They did not rule out a future hike, however, particularly if budget revenues continue to underperform. The main sources of revenue will be privatisation deals and cutting expenses by 10%.

SOFIA, Bulgaria -- A court sentenced six Bulgarians to prison Monday (March 29th) for financial fraud and embezzlement of about 7.5m euros granted the country under the EU's SAPARD programme. Businessman Mario Nikolov and his wife, Mariana, received sentences of ten and eight years respectively. The other four will each spend six years in prison. The court also ordered property to be confiscated with each defendant paying a fine of 15,000 euros. The network, involving 50 Bulgarian and various European offshore companies, was busted in a joint action by Bulgarian, German and Swiss police. Separately Monday, the government announced that prosecutors are investigating ministers of the former Bulgarian Socialist Party-led government and other senior officials over suspected abuse of power in signing deals worth about 1.8 billion euros. The investigation involves 150 public procurement deals and other contracts signed by 13 ministries over the past three years.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- The defence ministry says Croatia could send 20 more troops to Afghanistan by September. Ministry State Secretary Pjer Simunovic said on Thursday (April 1st) that the suggestion will be forwarded to the government. If accepted, it would mean boosting the contingent to 320 soldiers. Thursday marked the first anniversary of Croatia's accession to NATO. Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor noted that by joining, the country has met one of its two strategic foreign policy priorities. The other is EU membership.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Prime Minister Hashim Thaci and representatives of the junior government partner -- the Democratic League of Kosovo -- have reached an

agreement to restructure the government, local media reported on Sunday (March 28th). There are unconfirmed reports that about ten ministers and deputy ministers will be replaced. Speculation about possible cabinet changes has been going on for months now, without any concrete results. The opposition has criticised the coalition for trying to distract the public from alleged corruption and mismanagement.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Efforts by the government and the International Civilian Office (ICO) to install institutional authority in northern Kosovo may be affected by Serbia's plan to hold municipal elections in the area in May. Newly appointed Interior Minister Bajram Rexhepi said on Thursday (April 1st) that elections could indirectly harm the strategy for the north. He added that regardless of what happens, the strategy will be implemented. On Wednesday, ICO chief Pieter Feith said that he is not going to recognise the Serbian elections. State Secretary of the Serbian Ministry for Kosovo Oliver Ivanovic dismissed that, saying "We didn't ask for support to hold the elections, since [Feith] doesn't exist for us."

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- US troops handed over management of the borderline between Kosovo and Macedonia to the Kosovo Police on Monday (March 29th). KFOR said this proves the commitment and willingness of the police to take on greater responsibility for providing security to Kosovo citizens. The hand-over comes as NATO considers downsizing the number of KFOR personnel.

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- Seventy-nine soldiers left on Friday (March 26th) for Afghanistan, where they will join Macedonia's 170-strong contingent within the NATO-led mission ISAF. President Gjorge Ivanov, Defence Minister Zoran Konjanovski and US Ambassador to Skopje Philip Reeker attended the send-off ceremony at the Ilinden military barracks. The Macedonian troops will train Afghan soldiers and police officers and conduct joint peace and stability-maintaining operations in the country.

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- The foreign ministry has summoned the head of Greece's liaison office in Skopje, Alexandra Papadopoulou, for talks Monday (March 29th) following graphic anti-Macedonian slogans chanted during a military parade in Athens. Deputy Foreign Minister Zoran Petrov will hand Papadopoulou a note of protest demanding a formal apology. Government spokesman Martin Martinovski told a press conference Sunday that hate speech does not contribute to good neighbourly relations. Greek soldiers allegedly chanted "They are Skopjans, they are Albanians, we will make new clothes out of their skins" during a parade marking Greece's national holiday on Thursday. Greek Civil Protection Minister Mihalis Chrysohoidis has ordered an investigation. The chants also sparked a reaction in Tirana, where thousands protested on Saturday outside the Greek Embassy

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- Greek Ambassador to Macedonia Alexandra Papadopoulou on Monday (March 29th) condemned nationalist slogans chanted during a military parade in Athens. She was summoned to the Macedonian Foreign Ministry where Deputy Foreign Minister Zoran Petrov demanded a formal apology. "It should be condemned and it is being condemned. It doesn't represent the people of Greece, its position and mentality," Papadopoulou told reporters after the meeting. Greek personnel

allegedly chanted "They are Skopjans, they are Albanians, we will make new clothes out of their skins" during a parade marking Greece's national holiday last Thursday.

PODGORICA, Montenegro -- The opposition Movement for Changes filed a no-confidence motion against the government on Friday (March 26th). The opposition accuses Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic's cabinet of failing to fight corruption and organised crime and addressing the economic situation. At least two other parties support the initiative, the opposition Socialist People's Party and the New Serbian Democracy party.

PODGORICA, Montenegro -- Parliament will discuss a no-confidence motion submitted by the opposition Movement for Changes (PzP) on April 13th, PzP official Srdjan Brajovic said on Monday (March 29th). Two other opposition parties support the initiative: the Socialist People's Party and the New Serbian Democracy. The opposition accuses the government of failing to fight corruption and organised crime, as well as inefficiency in addressing the economic situation.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Prime Minister Emil Boc reiterated on Saturday (March 27th) that teachers will not receive more than a 17% salary hike due to budgetary constraints. The issue started in 2008, when the previous government, led by the National Liberal Party, decided on the 17% hike. But parliament adopted a change to the law -- initiated by President Traian Basescu, and supported by the now ruling Liberal Democratic Party (PDL) -- boosting that raise to 50%. When elections put the PDL in power, it reneged on the 50% hike, due to the economy, and amended the legislation. Unions representing teachers will not drop the issue and now threaten a general strike, which could make problems this year for graduations.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Buses and trams in Bucharest came to a halt Thursday (April 1st) after thousands of drivers staged a strike without advance warning. They were protesting government austerity measures that would cut their wages and Easter bonuses. The only public transportation that continued was the subway, which had to boost capacity to handle the crowds. Bucharest Public Transport Company Director Gheorghe Aron assured the protestors that basic salaries will not be cut. The company has decided to hike fares beginning May 1st to raise more revenue.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- Serbia's apology for the 1995 massacre of 8,000 Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica could help reconciliation in the war-scarred Balkans and lead to the capture of a wartime general accused of masterminding the carnage, Serbia's president said Wednesday. Boris Tadic said the "historic" parliamentary resolution adopted late Tuesday "clearly shows that Serbs are distancing themselves from that monstrous crime." Parliament narrowly approved the declaration condemning the worst carnage in Europe since World War II allegedly committed by the Bosnian Serb troops led by their wartime commander Ratko Mladic. The country is still divided over Serbia's role in the 1990s conflict, however, and hardline nationalists engaged in an acrimonious debate before the vote with members of Tadic's pro-democracy coalition, which is seeking to distance the country from past warmongering under the late strongman Slobodan Milosevic. Tadic said the apology "shows that Serbia belongs to the European civilization," and its adoption "brings an encouragement to the state to continue to work

to eventually arrest Mladic." Europe's most-wanted war crimes fugitive has been on the run since 1995, when he was indicted by a U.N. tribunal for genocide in the Srebrenica massacre, and for other crimes committed by his troops during the 1992-95 Bosnian war. The European Union says Serbia must capture Mladic and break from past warmongering policies before it can be included into the bloc. On Wednesday, EU officials welcomed the Srebrenica apology. "This is an important step for the country in facing its recent past, a process which is difficult but essential for Serbian society to go through," the EU said in a statement. "It is the key for the reconciliation for the whole region."

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said the resolution represented "a courageous first step" by Serbian politicians toward facing the country's past. U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner called the resolution a positive step toward reconciliation, and said the United States welcomes Serbia's efforts to capture remaining fugitives from the war. Nationalist Serb lawmakers, however, rejected the declaration as "shameful" and "unjust." They insisted fewer people were killed in the eastern Bosnian enclave, and denied Western accusations of mass executions. In Bosnia, the apology triggered mixed reactions. Bosnian Muslims said it was not enough because it did not use the word "genocide," in accordance with rulings by international courts. "The massacre has not been named by its true name," said Munira Subasic of the "Mothers of Srebrenica" victims' association. "Genocide cannot be replaced with the word crime." Bosnian Serbs, meanwhile, were furious the declaration mentioned only Srebrenica and not crimes committed against Serbs by Muslims and Croats. Rajko Kuzmanovic, the president of the Bosnian Serb ministate, said the declaration was "unacceptable and counterproductive."

## Oceania

SYDNEY (AFP) – Australia has expressed alarm at growing support for a plan to allow limited commercial whaling, saying it could not accept the proposal before the International Whaling Commission (IWC). New Zealand, which also opposes whaling, is supporting moves to allow restricted commercial hunts over the next 10 years if it means a big cut to the number of whales currently killed by Iceland, Norway and Japan.

But Environment Minister Peter Garrett said Australia, which has threatened to take Tokyo to the International Court of Justice unless it ceases its annual whale hunts in Antarctica by November, would not accept the deal. "I am alarmed and very concerned that New Zealand would support a proposal that is flawed and represents a huge compromise to pro-whaling nations," Garrett said. "Australia cannot support the 'compromise package' now being discussed in the IWC," he told reporters on Thursday. Garrett said the approach under consideration, which would allow Japan, Norway and Iceland to conduct commercial whaling in exchange for taking a significantly lower catch, was loaded in favour of whaling nations. "It demands too many first order concessions from those of us who are committed to bringing an end to whaling," he said.

Under an IWC moratorium introduced in 1986, commercial whaling was suspended, but Iceland and Norway ignore the edict while Japan uses a loophole allowing lethal scientific research. New Zealand's representative to the IWC, Geoffrey Palmer, said Thursday the ban had been unable to stop the growing slaughter of whales and called for a new approach which could drastically reduce the number of animals killed.

"An emotional attachment to a moratorium that is not working is not in my view realistic," said the former New Zealand prime minister, who chairs an IWC group trying to negotiate a deal. Australia said ahead of IWC talks in the United States last month that the commercial whaling proposal was unacceptable as it did not stop Japanese whaling in the Antarctic.

SYDNEY (AFP) – Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on Saturday announced Australia's first population minister, citing concerns about sustainability as the number of people is tipped to balloon within decades. Rudd, who has previously talked of a "Big Australia", said the government needed to plan for an ageing and growing population which a recent report forecast would jump from 22 million to 35.9 million within 40 years. "Many Australians have legitimate concerns about the sustainability of the population levels in different parts of the country," the prime minister told reporters in Canberra. "Particularly its impact on urban congestion, its impact on the adequacy of infrastructure, its impact on the adequacy of housing supply, its impact on government services, its impact also on water and agriculture. "Our challenge is to make sure that we get our future population levels as right as possible, and... make sure we're planning properly," Rudd said. Rudd said Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry Minister Tony Burke would take on the additional portfolio.

The government has previously warned the economic threat of a booming and ageing population is as grave as that posed by climate change, and would drive up government spending and slow growth. In October Treasury Secretary Ken Henry warned the rapid increase would "test the limits of sustainability" . "Our record has been poor, and in my view, we are not well placed to deal effectively with the environmental challenges posed by a population of 35 million," Henry said. Australia, the world's sixth-largest country by land mass, is the most sparsely populated developed nation with only 2.9 people per square kilometre (7.4 per square mile).