

2020 REPORT



BRIEFS ON CENTRAL & EASTERN EUROPE

Russia Ukraine Belarus Moldova
Georgia Armenia Azerbaijan Visegrad Group

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RUSSIA'S 2020

The End of Russkiy Mir?

Maximilian Feske



Russkiy Mir – An Ideology to Legitimize Foreign Policy

When analysing Russia's foreign policy of the recent years, one concept especially stands out: *Russkiy Mir* – namely, the "Russian World". It was first prominently used by President Vladimir Putin in a meeting with creative artists in 2006. Within the concept, language serves as a binding element between citizens within the Federation and the Russian diaspora abroad. Additionally, *Russkiy Mir* encompasses elements of the philosophies of Ivan Ilyin, for example, emphasizing vaguely defined 'spiritual-moral values' to distinguish Russian culture from its supposedly decadent and inferior Western counterpart¹. In 2007, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation was created as a public diplomacy agency to promote the cultural concept abroad², operating in a similar manner to the Confucius Institutes of the People's Republic of China.

The concept was transformed from a cultural project to a political ideology during the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. The Russian intervention in South Ossetia was legitimised by President Dmitri Medvedev by referring to the necessary protection of Russian citizens – most

South Ossetians carry a passport of the Russian Federation. During the national holiday in 2013, Putin stated that *Russkiy Mir* is not exclusive to ethnic Russians, but it is open to anyone who identifies themselves as a part of Russia. The ideology was also used to justify the annexation of Crimea in 2014, again citing the protection of Russian citizens and the 'defence of truth and justice' as reasons. Furthermore, *Russkiy Mir* is an integral part of the pro-separatist narrative of the war in eastern Ukraine and appears four times in the preamble of the constitution of the self-proclaimed People's Republic of Donetsk. Finally, it has indirectly found its way into Russia's national security strategy of 2015, which dedicates an entire chapter to the role of culture³. Since 2008, the ideology of *Russkiy Mir* has proved to be a potent and often employed tool for legitimising Russia's assertive foreign policy as regional hegemon of the post-soviet space.

Observing the Near Abroad – Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Nagorno-Karabakh

However, when examining Russia's foreign policy in 2020, the regional ambitions connected to the *Russkiy Mir* and the ideology itself seem to have

¹ Schmid, U. (2016): *Russki Mir*, <https://www.dekoder.org/de/gnose/russki-mir>, 2020-12-18.

² *Russkiy Mir* Foundation (2008): *About Russkiy Mir Foundation*,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130921054100/http://www.russkiymir.ru/russkiymir/en/fund/about>, 2020-12-18.

³ Schmid, U. (2016): *Russki Mir*, <https://www.dekoder.org/de/gnose/russki-mir>, 2020-12-18.

disappeared. At Russia's borders, two national crises and a war erupted: The massive protests following the Belarusian presidential election in August, the Kyrgyz revolution in October and the reignited war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, from September until November.

In the beginning of the protests in Belarus, it might have seemed as if the post-soviet region could witness another 'colour revolution'. Four months later, there is no end in sight to Alexander Lukashenko's rule, which has already lasted for 26 years. There were moments of uncertainty during which the Kremlin signalled its readiness to intervene in case of mass unrests, but ultimately kept its head low. Although Russia blocked the West from mediating through a 'national dialogue' supervised by the OSCE and claimed the mediator role for itself, it did not employ the Russkiy Mir ideology and could not benefit from the crisis. For example, Moscow did not pressure Minsk into finally realising the Union Treaty of 1999 to create an economic and monetary union, which would expand the Kremlin's geopolitical

power, but has hitherto only existed on paper.

The toppling of Sooronbay Jeenbekov's government in Kyrgyzstan has seemingly caused even less of a reaction on Russia's side. After the revolution, the Russian government decided to freeze the \$100 million in assistance that had been promised to Jeenbekov's administration⁴. However, briefly afterwards the Russian News Agency TASS announced that \$8 million will be sent to Kyrgyzstan to ensure food security⁵, which indicates a slow return to the status quo ante. The passively observing role of the Kremlin is again clearly noticeable. There was no action or rhetoric indicating an intervention to restore political order and stability after the revolution in the post-soviet Central Asian state, which is slowly becoming part of China's sphere of influence due to Kyrgyzstan's massive debts to the People's Republic⁶.

Even when the 'frozen conflict' of Nagorno-Karabakh turned 'hot' in September, the historical protecting power of the Caucasus decided not to intervene directly to stop the bloodshed. Russia did not rush to aid Armenia, with whom it

⁴ Pannier, B. (2020): New Kyrgyz Leadership Gets A Cold Reception From The Kremlin, <https://www.rferl.org/a/new-kyrgyz-leadership-gets-a-cold-reception-from-the-kremlin/30926407.html>, 2020-12-20.

⁵ TASS (2020): Russia to send \$8 mln humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan, <https://tass.com/economy/1227599>, 2020-12-20.

⁶ Altynbayev, K. (2020): China refuses to defer Kyrgyzstan's massive debt despite COVID-19 crisis, https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/10/19/feature-01, 2020-12-20.

shares a military alliance through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). As a reason for Russia's lack of action, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov pointed out that his country's obligations under the CSTO do not extend to Karabakh, since the region lies outside of Armenia's borders recognised by international law⁷. Instead, the Kremlin watched as Azerbaijan, encouraged by its Turkish brother state, regained parts of Nagorno-Karabakh. The peace deal brokered by Moscow is a decisive victory for Azerbaijan and therefore strengthens Turkey's influence in the region. Turkey's most recent engagement in the region is unprecedented in scope and questions Russia's position as the single stabilising power of the southern Caucasus.

Emergence of a More Mature Foreign Policy

In 2020, there were few traces to be found of Russia's Russkiy Mir ideology, which especially between 2008 and 2015 served as cultural legitimization for the state's assertive foreign policy in the post-soviet space. Yet the disappearance of the discussed ideology indicates a paradigm shift towards a more efficient, rational, and mature foreign policy.

The inactions towards Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Nagorno-Karabakh show a Russian foreign policy that is more aligned with its means and resources than in the years in which the Russkiy Mir ideology was at the zenith of its influence. In the cases of Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, interventions could have triggered additional sanctions by the European Union or caused anti-Russian resentments in the populations, possibly weakening the Russian economy, or its soft power in these countries. By not intervening into the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the former's side, Russia managed to maintain cooperation with Azerbaijan that is necessary to ensure stability along their common border. This region still holds the potential of sliding back into the chaos and destruction it witnessed in the 1990s and early 2000s, which would inevitably create enormous costs for Russia to restore the previous order⁸. Finally, the peace deal allows for a Russian military base in Azerbaijan and 2,000 Russian peacekeepers in the region, leaving the Kremlin as the most important key player in the region, despite Turkey's stronger involvement.

We are witnessing a foreign policy that is coming to terms with the country's economic performance. Whereas the

⁷ Moscow Times (2020): Russia's Security Guarantees for Armenia Don't Extend to Karabakh, Putin Says, 2020-12-20.

⁸ Frolov, W. (2020): Tschüss, Russki Mir?!, <https://www.dekoder.org/de/article/frolov-aussenpolitik-wende-bergkarabach>, 2020-12-20.

annexation of Crimea helped to boost Putin's popularity among his citizens, the population cares more about domestic policies, like the pension reform, than aggressive manoeuvres abroad. With sanctions and COVID-19 since the beginning of this year, this balancing act is becoming increasingly difficult. Russia is starting to establish a foreign policy aimed at avoiding further costs and consolidating

the status quo, since its current economic performance does not allow for pursuing the ambitious goals connected to the Russkiy Mir ideology. The ideology will remain relevant in maintaining the status quo in eastern Ukraine, Crimea and South Ossetia, but without a sudden recovery of Russia's economic power insight, the Russkiy Mir is unlikely to regain its former significance in the near future.

BELARUS

2020: Gateway to a New Future

Gilles de Valk



For Belarus, this year was marked by the mass demonstrations that followed the presidential election on the 9th of August. Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus' self-proclaimed president, continuously responded to the widespread protests with violence. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Lukashenko's main opponent in the presidential election, was forced to flee the country after the flawed election, but has not seized her efforts to mobilise the people of Belarus and to gain support from other countries. While Lukashenko does not intend to give up the power he has had for 26 years, he is weakened by the protests. As a consequence, he lost his international leverage, especially over Russia. However, there is no indication Lukashenko will yield to public pressure, while the impact of economic sanctions and calls by European countries for new, free, and fair elections in Belarus remains limited.

The Rise of the Opposition Movement

One of the factors that caused momentum for the opposition to flourish was the Covid-19 pandemic. The virus was dismissed and mocked by Lukashenko, who advised to avoid it by drinking vodka and going to the sauna, while the country was counting their deaths and people were facing economic hardship due to the

pandemic. Meanwhile, Tikhanovskaya's opposition had a simple goal and a powerful message: to conduct free and fair elections.

Since the start of the protests in August, Lukashenko has attempted to break them by arresting and torturing protestors and opposition figures, by forcing opposition figures to go into exile, and by cancelling accreditation for foreign media, among other things. Local and international organisations are documenting cases of torture and abuse by law enforcement officers. Meanwhile, Lukashenko has been militarising his regime, appointing people from the security services and the military to powerful positions. As such, he has tried to gain their loyalty, while making them complicit in the regime's crimes. Since the people in power risk prosecution in case of a power transition, peaceful change becomes increasingly unlikely.

In December, the European Parliament awarded the Belarussian opposition the Sakharov Prize, an award for human rights defenders. Although Tikhanovskaya was "humbled" by the recognition of Belarus' resistance, she added: "We call on Europe to be braver in their decision and to support the people of Belarus now - not tomorrow and not in the future. Your solidarity is important, but actions matter." Arguably, the award itself illustrates the European Union's lack of decisive action,

as it is merely a symbolical gesture. So far, the EU imposed asset freezes and travel bans on about fifty Belarussian top officials, but this does not seem enough to enforce democratic change in Belarus. Besides, the opposition faced a setback on 20 December. In November, Tikhanovskaya had called for the “most massive march” on this day, but the turnout of a few thousand protestors was low compared to the tens and even hundreds of thousands that showed up in the weeks and months before. Although the Belarussian people have shown perseverance and creativity with their demonstrations for several months, the question is whether the protests will survive Lukashenko’s violent and nonviolent deterrence methods in a cold winter.

No End in Sight

The fact that the situation in Belarus remains undecided could partially be attributed to Russia’s involvement, which is limited if you would compare it to Russia’s involvement in neighbouring country Ukraine. Although Russian President Vladimir Putin immediately congratulated Lukashenko on his election ‘victory’, Russia has avoided making irreversible steps when it comes to supporting Lukashenko, such as a

Ukraine-like military intervention. Putin is acting cautiously in Belarus, because he is taking into account that Lukashenko could still lose his power. Lukashenko might be an important ally to Russia, but they have had their differences regarding Belarus’ business agreements and closer political integration with Russia.

However, Russia realises that a replacement for Lukashenko, installed by Moscow, could be regarded as an occupier by the people. At the same time, Moscow would like to see the demonstrations end sooner rather than later. Despite the opposition’s attempts to show Russia it has nothing to fear from them, Moscow considers any pro-democracy movement in its neighbourhood a threat. Hence, Russia supports Lukashenko for the time being. For example, Russia has provided financial support, has deployed teams of advisors, and has put Tikhanovskaya on a wanted list for alleged calls to overthrow the constitutional order, after Lukashenko’s regime had done this.

Risk of Further Escalation in 2021

Protests are likely to continue in 2021, although they will continue to grow smaller in number. The protests alone are unlikely to topple Lukashenko in the short term and

Lukashenko's response to the protests is likely to become increasingly violent, in order to deter the opposition's persisting efforts. European countries are likely to remain reluctant or unable to undertake more decisive steps. Yet, the question is at what cost Joe Biden's Presidential Administration would be willing to get involved in Belarus and if this could be coordinated with European action.

Although Lukashenko is still in power, he has lost legitimacy and power both domestically and internationally, which challenges his position in the long term. In 2021, Russia will try to benefit both economically and politically from his weakened position. Lukashenko, however, will keep resisting domestic and foreign attempts that challenge his position, clinging to power.

Endnote

¹ BBC News. 'Sakharov prize: Belarus opposition leader 'humbled' by award'. Published on 17 December 2020. Available at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55332452>.

UKRAINE

Pandemic and Democratization

Kate Haluska



2020 In a Nutshell

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a drastic impact worldwide. Ukraine has also been hit hard due to a high contagion rate and the national struggle to deal with the crisis in the healthcare system and relatedly emerging socio-economic crisis on a national level. In 2020, the most important issues that Ukraine has been dealing with are those regarding the promotion of the reforms, and the continuous conflict resolution process in the Donbas.

Impact of COVID-19

The epidemiological crisis has largely affected the economic development of Ukraine through the rapid decrease of its GDP: since the beginning of the year up until to May, GDP fell by 5.9 percent. Hence, projections for the end of the year came to estimate a fallout of the 8 percent. According to the local authorities, the Ukrainian economy suffers even more in practical terms due to a shrinking job market and a shadow economy contributing to the rampant unemployment. Moreover, Ukraine is obliged to pay an international debt of 5 billion dollars which contributes to the growing budget deficit. The current administration argues that fighting the Covid-19 pandemic is the first priority and that the economic crisis will be addressed in 2021.

Reform Implementation

Yet another important point for Ukraine in 2020 was the summit with the European Union in October concerning the progress of reform implementation and future prospects for a full-fledged EU integration. This event was preceded by a domestic incident where two last representatives of the reform implementation committee were removed from the National Bank of Ukraine (NBU). The formal reason for that was called to be a violation of ethical standards while in practice they were removed for their support of policies to reform NBU. This issue once again demonstrated the inability and unwillingness of the current administration to bring reforms further. During the first year of his presidency, Zelensky removed most people who were previously driving the reforms by replacing them with either pro-Russian candidates or with figures supporting his party.

While one of the major goals of Ukraine was a timely implementation of reforms under the guidance of the European Union, the progress of such reforms is currently into question. The latter could be explained either by structural challenges in the sphere of judicial reform or by the failing campaign against the high level of corruption. Against this, the rule of the Constitutional Court was reinforced and

the National Anti-Corruption Bureau was allowed to make e-declarations private, yet undermining the progress of the rule of law that started after the Euro-Maidan revolution in 2014. Relatedly, the international scandal with the leaders of the European Union and the representative from the Venice Commission came to urge Ukraine to resolve the issue through the re-establishment of the e-declarations. This issue brought the country to fear the agreement on the visa-free regime with the EU since it could drastically undermine the progress Ukraine made in fighting corruption. Western partners also argue for the conservation of the independence of the judiciary in this decision-making process.

The Ceasefire in Donbass

On the 27th of July, the Ukrainian side managed to sign a ceasefire that is considered more favourable in comparison with the previous ones. To reach this outcome, the Ukrainian side changed the representatives in the Trilateral Contact Group on Donbas that is comprised of the Ukrainian, Russian, and OSCE sides. The ceasefire added the swap of prisoners of war. The ceasefire is criticized by ex-president Petro Poroshenko and Ukrainian civil society

because possible opening to “capitulation” to Russia.

However, the ceasefire signed has not reached its ultimate goal. In fact, violations are still happening daily and are often the result of losses from both sides. Russia’s interest in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and its support of the regime in Belarus as well as domestic instability with regard to the recent controversial national referendum has also influenced decreased action from the Russian side.

In conclusion, the new administration, the pandemic and the ongoing armed conflict in Donbas are still impinging on the political instability and poor performance in Ukraine. Undoubtedly, the 2020 has largely challenged the ability of the Ukrainian administration to sustain multiple priorities in various spheres of development.

CENTRAL EUROPE

The Visegrad Area and the EU

Daniel Drury



The year of 2020 has brought with it the coronavirus pandemic, an incredibly challenging and unexpected health crisis for governments around the world. The response, first and foremost, has been about saving lives and protecting the healthcare system. It has also been a battle to maintain the economy amid national lockdowns which have seen businesses struggle in massive numbers. Finally, it has brought decisions over whether to close national borders and restrict travel in an attempt from countries to protect their own citizens from a global threat. In the V4 these issues have been just as pressing and urgent as anywhere, with each of the four nations attempting to maintain cooperation between themselves and the EU in dealing with these three areas.

Firstly, in terms of overall numbers, the V4 had comparatively few cases and deaths compared to other areas in western Europe during the first wave. Slovakia particularly were able to keep the number of deaths well down, with just 28 deaths in total at the end of May. There were only 320 deaths in Czechia and 526 in Hungary over the same period and Poland had 1064. In contrast, the worst hit countries such as the UK and Italy already had over 30,000 deaths by the end of May. It was the second wave of the virus that came after the summer which saw the V4

countries hit much harder by the pandemic. A huge upward curve for all four at the beginning of October means that Poland now has the sixth most cases and deaths in Europe with total deaths going above 26,000 in recent days. Czechia now sees their total deaths at over 10,000, with Hungary's total over 8000. Slovakia have still managed to keep their case numbers comparatively low but have also seen a sharp increase in the last couple of months and their total deaths now stand at over 1600.

This far more serious situation has led to tough decisions and negotiations between the four about how best to tackle the rise in case numbers while maintaining the economy and free movement between the four. In September, Czechia and Slovakia agreed with Austria to keep the borders open between the three and maintain economic cooperation and tourism to take a long-term approach to the issue. The disparity in the seriousness of the outbreak in Czechia which saw an alarming rise in cases, compared to Slovakia meant that this became harder and harder to maintain, however a nationwide testing policy that was implemented in Slovakia whose smaller population is easier to mobilise, as well as random border checks has meant that the border crossing between Czechia and Slovakia has

remained operational as it has with the rest of the V4 and with Austria.

In terms of the wider EU effort to tackle the virus, the V4 have made efforts to bring out contact tracing apps, with Poland's interoperable with others in the EU and Czechia's having the potential to do so. They have also provided enough information and done enough testing of their own populations to comply with the EU's traffic light system which is designed to show the risk of contracting coronavirus in each country. However, the EU coronavirus recovery fund which was set to be handed out as part of the wider budget, was stalled due to the misgivings of Poland and Hungary who have taken issue with the 'rule of law' stipulation in the budget. The row between the two countries and the EU has since been resolved and a deal has been agreed, but the impasse was one of the most significant and serious for the EU in years and was a reminder of the strained relationship which has seen the EU criticise the democratic standards in the two countries.

While coronavirus has been the defining issue of the year, the V4 have also been focused on other political issues in the EU. Following the elections in Belarus, the V4 were instrumental in their solidarity and support for the pro-democracy movement, with Poland calling a European council

meeting which came to the decision that the elections were 'neither free nor fair'. The Brexit issue has also been extremely relevant as the V4 have a large migrant presence in the UK as well as huge economic cooperation. This month it has been revealed that more than 773,000 Poles have applied for permanent residency in the UK, revealing the scale of the possible impact on Poland that Brexit has. Some of the concern around Brexit was eased at the end of January with the British government making it clear that migrants who were already in the UK would retain their rights and were welcome to stay, but concern remained around a trade deal to maintain the economic relationship. Reports from both Hungary and Poland indicated that both countries are looking to boost their economic ties and trade links with the UK despite Brexit. This is due to the investment that Hungary has been enjoying from UK businesses and due to the export market for agri-foods that the UK represents for Poland. Therefore, despite the challenges that Brexit will bring about, it seems that the economic relationship can be expected to continue with extensive cooperation into 2021 and beyond.

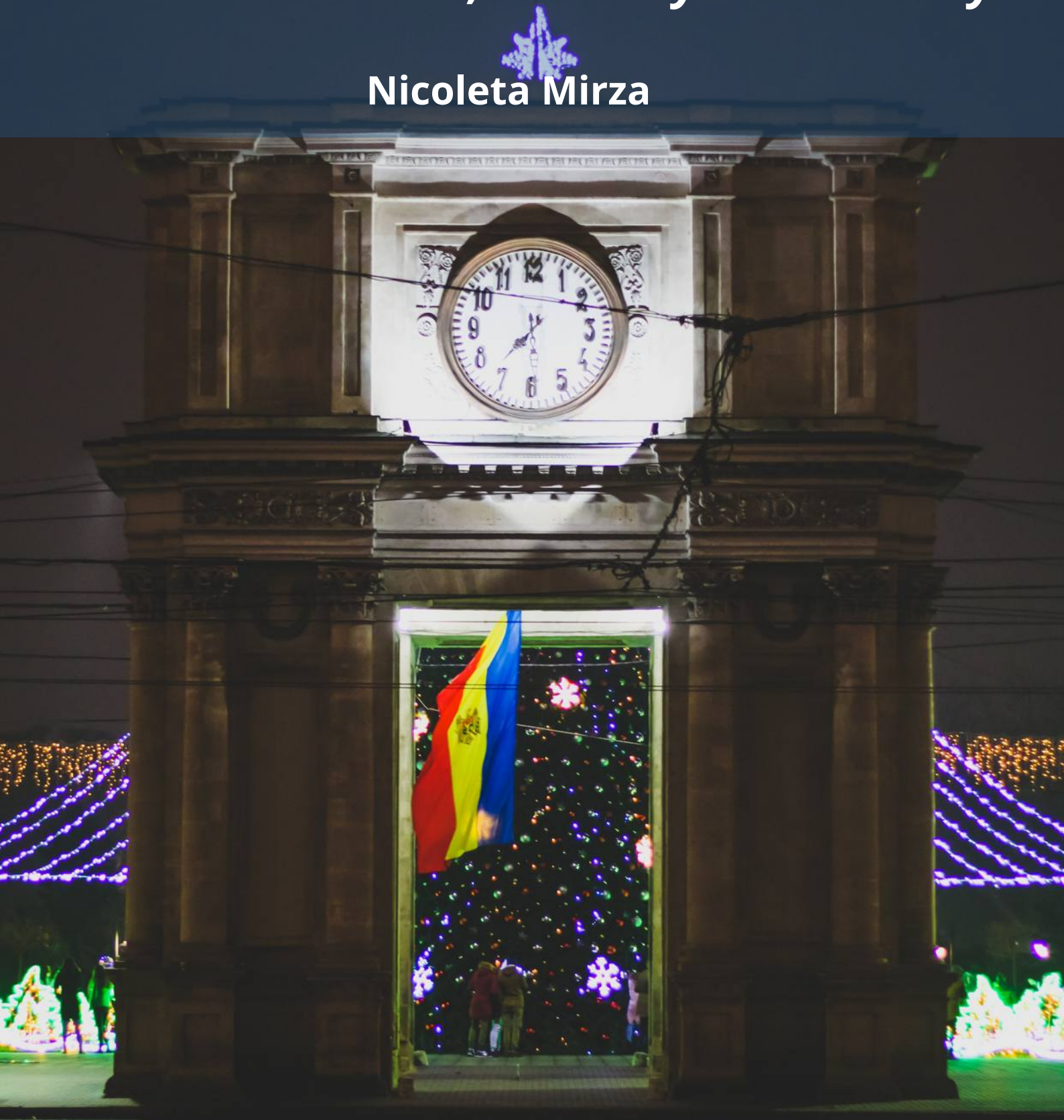
Overall, the main hope in 2021 for the V4 will be to maintain their economic and political cooperation in the face of the pandemic, with the recent arrival of a

vaccine springing new optimism around Europe that the end of this struggle is in sight and that the Visegrad group will be able to return to strong and mutually beneficial political and economic cooperation within the EU and recover from the strain that the pandemic has brought.

MOLDOVA

Between Covid-19, Economy and Security

Nicoleta Mirza



The year of 2020 has proved itself one of the most, if not the most, challenging years of the 21st century. This is also the case of Moldova that has been battling the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic instability, security issues in regard to Transnistria, and the emergence of new political events. Therefore, this section of the report aims to give an overview of the most important 2020 Moldovan developments. The chapter start with a description of the Covid-19 situation in the country, followed by an economic overview, a political assessment, and a detailed description of the armed security threats.

Covid-19 and Moldova

The first Covid-19 case was detected in Moldova on 7th of March 2020.¹ Since the first registered case to the present day 134,578 cases have been confirmed with 2,727 deaths (see fig.1). The Moldovan capital, Chisinau, has been hit the hardest by the pandemic, with 56,764 cases, followed by the cities of Tiraspol and Balti. This development is not surprising since the cities of Chisinau, Balti, and Tiraspol are the most densely populated cities in the country.²

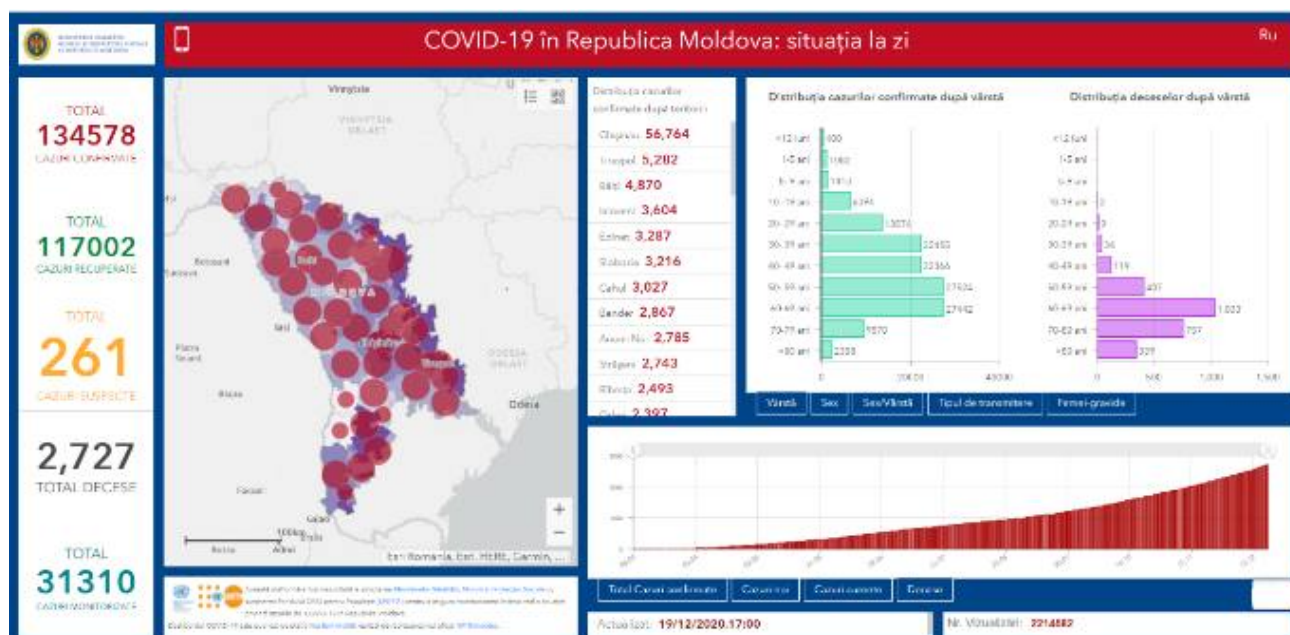


Fig.1. Ministerul Sanatatii Muncii si Protectiei Sociale. (2020). [COVID-19 în Republica Moldova: situația la zi](#).

The most cases have been reported for people aged 50-59 followed by the age range 60-69. Yet, people ranging from 60

¹ Ministerul Sănătății, Muncii și Protecției Sociale. (n.d). [În Republica Moldova a fost confirmat primul caz de coronavirus. Se iau măsuri pentru limitarea răspândirii virusului.](#)

² See Comisia Națională pentru elaborarea Raportului național al Republicii Moldova pentru Conferința Organizației Națiunilor

Unite HABITAT III cu privire la locuințe și dezvoltare urbană durabilă. (2016). [A TREIA CONFERINȚĂ A NAȚIUNILOR UNITE PENTRU LOCUINȚE ȘI DEZVOLTARE URBANĂ DURABILĂ \(HABITAT III\)](#). p. 10.

to 69 years old registered the highest death rate, 1,033 (see fig. 1). More women (58%) have been infected by the virus than men (40%). Nevertheless, the percentage of males (51%) who have died from the virus is higher than that of females (49%). More than 11,400 medical staff have been infected since the beginning of the outbreak.³

The first state of emergency was instituted on 17th of March,⁴ just 10 days after the first registered case, and was programmed to last until 15th of May. Shortly after the state of emergency decision, the national army has been mobilized on the streets to ensure the lockdown.⁵

The government's response to the pandemic has been criticized by the medical staff. The criticism mainly addresses the lack of qualitative protective equipment. Furthermore, there have been patient complains about the living conditions in the medical institutions.⁶ Despite the critique the government failed to address the issues accordingly.

On December 7th, The Republic of Moldova presented its request to the

COVAX Platform to safeguard the delivery of the Covid-19 vaccine in the country.⁷

Moldovan Economy 2020

Moldova is considered to be the poorest country in Europe. Therefore, the pandemic has a significant impact on the state's economy. The National Bureau of Statistics informs that in November 2020 the annual inflation (for the last 12 months) constituted 0.93%, including for food 2.72%, non-food goods (-0.22%) and services provided to the population (-0,18%).⁸ Average consumer prices in November 2020 compared to December 2019 increased by 0.07%.⁹ The increase in average consumer prices in eleven months of 2020 was mainly due to higher food prices (by 1.14 percent).¹⁰ Consumer prices in November 2020, compared to November 2019, registered a growth trend by 0.93%, while in November 2019 compared to November 2018 - by 7.14%.¹¹

The Executive Committee of the National Bank of Moldova decided, with a unanimous vote, to maintain at the current level the base rate and the permanent facilities. Thus, the base rate applied to the main short-term monetary policy

³ United Nations Moldova and Govt. Moldova. (2020). [Moldova: Coronavirus Disease - COVID 19 - Situation Report No. 42 \(14 December 2020\)](#). p. 2.

⁴ See *HOTĂRÂRE privind declararea stării de urgență*. (2020). [HOTĂRÂRE Nr. 171 din 16-03-2020 cu privire la propunerea declarării stării de urgență](#).

⁵ Călugăreanu V. (2020, March 24). [Coronavirus: Guvernul scoate armata în stradă](#). DW.

⁶ Prijmireanu L. (2020, April 30). [ODF's monitoring of the COVID-19 outbreak in Moldova](#). *Open Dialogue*.

⁷ United Nations Moldova and Govt. Moldova. (2020). [Moldova: Coronavirus Disease - COVID 19 - Situation Report No. 42 \(14 December 2020\)](#). p. 4.

⁸ Biroul National de Statistica a Republicii Moldova. (2020, December 10). [Evoluția prețurilor de consum în Republica Moldova în luna noiembrie 2020](#).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

operations is still 2.65% annually. This decision was reached in the conditions in which the aggregate domestic demand decreased significantly against the background of the pandemic and the severe agro-meteorological conditions that affected the national economy.¹²

The National Bureau of Statistics informs that, according to the results of the research "Distribution of the number of employees according to the size of the salary calculated for September 2020", the average gross monthly earnings of an employee in September a.c. constituted 7991,3 lei MDL (380,56 EUR).¹³

Two thirds of the total employees (66.7%) had a salary below the national average (7991.3 lei/380,56 EUR), almost every second employee (47.3%) had a salary of less than 6,000 MDL/285.73; 31,5% of employees - had salaries between 6 and 10 thousand lei, and 21.2% of total employees had salaries of over 10 thousand lei/476,19 EUR.¹⁴

Progress has been made in the pension system. In terms of combating poverty, its rate has fallen from 21.9% to 9.6%, having already reached the final target set for 2020.¹⁵ Yet, these achievements are not

even remotely enough to combat poverty in Moldova and more progress must be made.

To battle the economic instability Moldova has received financial help from outside parties. For instance, EU approved €30 million disbursement in macro-financial assistance to the Republic of Moldova.¹⁶ Furthermore, the International Monetary Fund Executive Board has approved 235,000,000 USD in Emergency Assistance to Moldova to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic.¹⁷

Political Developments

Moldova's 2020 political activity has culminated by the victory of the reform-oriented Presidential candidate Maia Sandu. The candidate won with 57,72% of votes.¹⁸ Even if the President does not hold significant decision-making power, the victory has a symbolic significance, as Maia Sandu will become the first female President in the country's history. Consequently, the year of 2020 represents the last year in office for the soon to be former President Igor Dodon. The leader is a pro-Russian political figure with strong

¹² Banca Nationala a Moldovei. (2020, December 9). [Decizia de politică monetară: rata de bază și facilitățile permanente rămân la nivelul actual.](#)

¹³ Biroul National de Statistica a Republicii Moldova. (2020, December 11). [Repartizarea salariilor conform mărimii salariului calculat pentru luna septembrie 2020.](#)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Republica Moldova. (2020, November 11). [Raportul de evaluare intermediară a Strategiei Naționale de Dezvoltare „Moldova 2020”, prezentat la Guvern.](#)

¹⁶ European Commission. (2020, July 10). [EU approves €30 million disbursement in macro-financial assistance to the Republic of Moldova.](#)

¹⁷ International Monetary Fund. (2020, April 17). [IMF Executive Board Approves US\\$235 Million in Emergency Assistance to Moldova to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic.](#)

¹⁸ See Alegeri Prezidentiale in Republica Moldova. [Comisia Electorală Centrală a Republicii Moldova.](#)

ties to the Moldovan church¹⁹ and a hostile attitude against homosexuality.²⁰ Accordingly, Maia Sandu comes with an open-minded attitude encouraging the Pro-European Moldovan prospects. However, the upcoming presidency does not come easy for the newly elected President. In the last two months of office, Igor Dodon is desperately trying to restrict the Presidential power. His actions are done deliberately to limit the few remaining powers that the President already holds. For instance, Dodon promulgated the law that aims to transfer Information and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova from the leadership of the President to the leadership of the Parliament.²¹

Apart from Presidential elections, Moldova has also witnessed parliamentary elections for the district of Hincesti. Regardless of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the parliamentary elections for the constituency no. 38 Hincesti were held on March 15, 2020. The turnout was of 23%²² and resulted in the victory of the Socialist Party candidate Ștefan Gațcan.²³

Considering the legal “success” of Moldova in prosecuting national cases, the country was definitively convicted at the European Court of Human Rights in the case of the “Gemenii” S.A. House of Commerce, 14 years after the application was submitted. The final decision of the ECtHR was delivered on 18 February 2020. Thus, Moldova is to pay the applicants EUR 1.5 million in respect of pecuniary damage, EUR 5,000 in respect of non-pecuniary damage and EUR 10,000 in respect of costs and expenses.²⁴

Security

According to the Moldovan Government “between March 17 and June 1, 37 illegal checkpoints from Tiraspol were installed in the Security Zone. These posts represent facilities to restrict the passage around several districts under the jurisdiction of Moldova. The 37 stations were installed by Tiraspol without the agreement of the unified control commission.”²⁵ Concerning the situation the deputy Chiril Moțpan stated that “[t]he situation in the Security Zone of the Republic of Moldova is deeply

¹⁹ See [Interdicții, dar nu pentru toți: Igor Dodon, la biserică împreună cu familia sa // EXCLUSIVITATE](#). (2020, April 18). Jurnal TV. Also see Igor Dodon. (2018, June 18). [Astăzi Biserica Ortodoxă sărbătorește ziua Sfântului Cuvios Igor \[...\]](#).

²⁰ See Igor Dodon (2020, November 4). [Tradițiile, valorile familiale, credința sunt lucruri sfinte pentru mine. Eu nu voi permite legalizarea căsătoriilor între persoane de același sex și organizarea paradelor gay, iar Maia Sandu nu doar că declară deschis că va permite acest lucru, dar și a participat personal la astfel de marșuri](#).

²¹ See [Igor Dodon a promulgat legea privind trecerea SIS-ului în subordinea parlamentului, chiar dacă Curtea Constituțională a suspendat-o](#). (2020, December 8). *Diez*.

²² See [Stop vot! Alegerile din Hâncești s-au încheiat cu o prezentă de 23 % dintre alegători](#). (2020, March 15). *Diez*.

²³ Volontir N. (2020, March 15). [Ultima oră! Rezultatele finale ale alegerilor de la Hîncești](#). TV8.

²⁴ See [Moldova a pierdut 1,5 milioane de euro la CtEDO. Chicu cere inițierea unei urmăriri penale pe numele judecătorilor vinovați](#). (2020, February 18). *Diez*.

²⁵ See (video) Autoritățile de la Chișinău cer Tiraspolului să retragă toate posturile de control ilegale instalate în perioada pandemiei. (2020, July 2020). *Diez*.

worrying, a fact on which we have repeatedly drawn attention. [...] Moreover, the separatist administration delimited its territory by drawing an alleged “state border” and established control over the flows of people, transport and goods moving in and out of the region.”²⁶

After Igor Dodon’s meeting with the Vadim Krasnoselski, the situation has seen some improvements and at least five stations were uninstalled.²⁷ However, the Moldovan leader Igor Dodon is accused of making an enormous mistake by naming Vadim Krasnoselski- “the President of Transnistria”.²⁸ Accordingly, such an action would attest the recognition of Vadim Krasnosleski as a legitimate President of Transnistria by the Moldovan authorities. Such an action would deter the Moldovan government from the taken position towards Transnistrian since the Transnistrian 1992 war.

Unfortunately, the tensions between Moldova and Transnistria did not end there. On October 8th, 2020, four people were abducted in Transnistria by the “by

the so-called MGB officers in Tiraspol” and accused of espionage.²⁹ Again, the Moldovan leader, Igor Dodon, has been discussing with the Transnistrian authorities the release of the abducted people.³⁰ Two people have been released³¹ and one has been accused of treason and faces up to 20 years of imprisonment.³²

²⁶ [PPDA cere convocarea de urgență a Comisiei securitate națională, apărare și ordine publică pentru examinarea situației din Zona de Securitate.](#) (2020, July 24). *Diez*.

²⁷ See [Tiraspolul a eliminat încă cinci posturi mobile dintre cele 37 instalate ilegal în Zona de Securitate.](#) (2020, July 29). *Diez*.

²⁸ See [\(video\) PPDA va depune un denunț la procuratură pe numele lui Dodon, pentru că l-a numit pe Krasnoselski „președintele Transnistriei”.](#) (2020, July 29). *Diez*.

²⁹ Privesceu. (2020). [Briefing de presă susținut de Președintele Comisiei securitate națională, apărare și ordine publică, Alexandru Jizdan.](#)

³⁰ See 6 See Igor Dodon (2020, October 8). [Situația referitoare la cei doi cetățeni moldoveni răpiți zilele trecute.](#)

³¹ Diez (2020). [„Se simt bine și nu au fost torturați.” Detalii despre cei doi moldoveni eliberați de „forțele de ordine” din regiunea transnistreană.](#)

³² See [Una dintre persoanele răpite de către „forțele de ordine” din Stânga Nistrului este acuzată de „trădare de patrie” și riscă până la 20 de ani de închisoare.](#) (2020, October 12).

ARMENIA & AZERBAIJAN

From War to Peace?

Aurélia Bessède & Alice Griffon



The pandemic outbreak and the oil price fallout might have largely explained the rationale behind the 2020 Karabakh War. Before the conflict erupted in September 2020, the de facto authorities of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh organised general elections on March 31 and April 14. Karabakh-Armenians voted for both the President and the members of the National Assembly, electing Arayik Harutyunyan, the candidate of the Free Motherland party, as a President of the Armenian republic. Yet, the elections were criticised because organised during the first peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the international community did not recognise the elections, the Armenian President and Prime Minister welcomed their outcome regardless. After that, the July flare-up along the Armenian-Azeri border in the region of Tavush might have also provide another opportunity to Azerbaijan to resolve the issue in Nagorno-Karabakh. On September 14th, after 30,000 protesters took the streets in Baku demanding the deployment of the army against Armenia, the Azerbaijani President, Ilham Aliyev, drew people's attention away from domestic issues by initiating what citizens were asking for: a mass-scale military operation aimed at resolving at once the issue over the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The so-called "Second Karabakh War" erupted on September 27. Since then, in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, the introduction of the martial law and a total mobilisation came to shape wider public's opinion about the newly unfolded military confrontation. The conflict lasted 44 days and left around 5000 dead from both sides. Ending with a Russia-brokered peace deal on November 10th, the result provided to Azerbaijan a long-awaited military victory and territorial gains. As a result of the trilateral agreement signed up under the auspices of Russia, Armenia agreed to withdraw its military forces from the districts of Kaldjabar, Aghdam and Lachin districts, while Azerbaijan allowed almost 2000 Russian peacekeepers to enter the territory and secure peace.

The Aftermath: A Timeline

02/10: During the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) meeting, Nikol Pashinyan said that Russian peacekeepers remain the main guarantee of peace and security in NK . Indeed, a force of nearly 2.000 Russian peacekeepers has been deployed in the region for a renewable five-year period.

09/12: The Turkish President Erdogan visited his Azerbaijani counterpart for a 2 days tour in Baku. Turkey also embodies

the “One Nation, two States” slogan and the flags of the two countries glittering on top of Istanbul's 369 meters television tower over the past November.

10/12: A massive military victory parade to celebrate Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia was held in Baku in the presence of Turkish President Recep T. Erdogan. Over 3 000 military servicemen and 150 military vehicles took part in the parade . It is described as the most important day of Alyev's presidency. The latter recalled that he had made it possible to achieve what he had promised at the time of his election 17 years ago, on October 15, 2003. The Turkish President said his ally's ‘struggle’ against Armenia should continue.

11/12: The Russian army and Russian Ministry of Defence reported a breach of ceasefire on Wednesday 11 in the Hadrut district.

13/12 : Azerbaijan authorities announced the death of four of their soldiers in recent incidents with Armenian troops in the disputed region. On the other hand, Armenia accused Baku of launching attacks.

14/12 : 44 Armenian prisoners were able to return home against 14 Azerbaijanis. Russian peacekeepers mediated this

exchange. A large number of soldiers are still missing, especially on the Armenian side, as many soldiers disappeared when Yerevan's troops retreated.

15/12: Officials from Azerbaijan and Turkey have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to build a new gas pipeline, a 85 km long route from Igdir province of Turkey to the Nakhchivan in order to enhance Nakhchivan's energy security.

18/12: During a virtual meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) led by Russia, Ilham Aliyev explained that ‘more than 80% of the potential of the Armenian armed forces had been destroyed’. He also stressed on the work being done to set up a Russian-Turkish monitoring centre in the Agdam region to monitor the situation. At the same time, the Armenian Government approved two temporary employment programs for residents of Nagorno-Karabakh who fled to Armenia due to the war. Hundreds of inhabitants of the Syunik region, now bordering Azerbaijan have blocked the main highway to protest against the deployment of Armenian troops due to the new borders.

21/12: Azerbaijan intends to allocate \$ 1.3 billion for the reconstruction of Karabakh

territories which came under the control of Baku. It is based on the draft law on the state budget for 2021 submitted to the Milli Mejlis (Parliament) .

The Peace Deal in Armenia

After the trilateral agreement was announced on November 10, thousands of Armenians immediately protested in the streets of Yerevan as an immediate response. The protests were considered illegal in light of the martial law and the state of emergency linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the protesters rejected the deal signed up with Azerbaijan and Russia, asking for the resignation of the Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan. The bloc of the opposition parties began to organise protests and a public campaign against Pashinyan. The resignation request was also supported by President Sarkissian during his allocution on December 11. Sarkissian himself asked for snap elections to be held. While the protests continued and some of his supporters resigned, the Prime Minister refused to step down. His coalition, My Step, holds a majority of seats in the Parliament, making it difficult to pass any no-confidence vote.

On December 3, the opposition movement named Vazgen Manukian as their candidate for a transitional government.

Manukian is a former Prime Minister and Defence Minister. He declared that he would not break the peace agreement, but he would resolve some issues such as the status of the region.

On December 5, an organised rally gathered 20,000 protesters. An ultimatum was announced by the opposition. If, by December 8, the Prime Minister would not resign, there will be civil disobedience. By that date, Pashinyan did not satisfy the protesters. The citizens responded by blocking the streets and organising rallies in different cities of the Armenian Republic. Those events also raised the attention of the Orthodox Church, which asked for the Prime Minister's resignation on the same day. Therefore, the press reported that family members statements of dead soldiers called Pashinyan a "traitor" for agreeing to what they say is a humiliating deal with Azerbaijan. Moreover, the opposition have planned to hold a separate mourning march to the Yerablur Military Pantheon on December 19 .

This political crisis brought up many suppositions. For instance, a part of the population shares the Prime Minister's opinion that this crisis is orchestrated by the former powers, who wish to regain some political control over the Republic. Some journalists also underlined President Sarkissian's wish to receive more power and meaningful duties. This

wish might bring the President to covet Pashinyan's position. This latter does not appear to cede under the running protests and calls for his resignation.

Tutelary Powers in South Caucasus

The 2020 has also brought Russia back to the South Caucasus. Three decades after the collapse of the Soviet administration, Moscow's commitment to the South Caucasus remains firmer than in the past. In this, Moscow will have not only access to the South Caucasus, but also control better Dagestan, Stavropol, Krasnodar, and other neighbouring Republics and territories of its Federation. On the other hand, Turkey's growing role and its ambition to gain influence over Azerbaijan is also worthy of note. Assisting Azerbaijan in gaining control of almost the entire Nagorno-Karabakh region, Turkey is not a surprise for the Kremlin. On the contrary, Russia is keen to cooperate with Turkey through a situational partnership. The joint monitoring centre to be probably built in Agdam, is just instructive. Given this token, Ankara, which is a NATO member, will definitely compete with the Moscow's position not only in the South Caucasus. In fact, Turkey and Russia's interests still parallel in the Black Sea as well. The 2020 Karabakh War is more likely to impact the European energy market as the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TAP) is already carrying oil and gas from Azerbaijan to

Europe. All of these will place the Caucasian region at the centre of West/East cooperation in the near future.

COVID-19 and State of Emergency

ARMENIA

On March 16th, Armenia declared the state of emergency, introducing a lock-down on March 24th and lasting up until to April 12, 2020. In May, the restriction of movement was lifted. Nationwide quarantine regime lasted four months, however, allowing the government to announce further lockdowns by either restricting or banning public gatherings and closing national borders. The constitutional referendum was postponed as a 25 anti-crisis set of measures was introduced to support households and businesses. In total, there are around 110,548 cases and 1636 deaths.

AZERBAIJAN

On February 28th, Azerbaijan confirmed the first Covid-19 case in the country. “Special quarantine” was put in place until November 2nd. The criminal code was modified in order to punish people who would break the restrictions. Ad hoc measures were lifted only in May, but they were reintroduced in June with stricter restrictions. After being gradually lifted in August, with exception for Baku, Sumgait and Absheron, on August 28th, two hospitals were closed after officials declared that both were the source of a new epidemic. In September, Azerbaijan confirmed that at least 30 doctors died from COVID-19 in Azerbaijan. Quarantine is extended until next January 2021, including full lockdown for Baku and other cities. Azeri authorities have so far confirmed a total of 154,152 infected patients and 1713 deaths.



GEORGIA

The Year of National Election

Aurélia Bessède & Alice Griffon

2020 was an important electoral year for Georgia and its capital Tbilisi in particular. Indeed, the Parliamentary elections took place as a follow-up event of the significant reform of the electoral system. In March, the United States and the European Union facilitated a deal between the ruling *Georgian Dream* party and the opposition parties in order to end the consolidation of power by a single party and its political élite. The agreement stated that 120 members of the Parliament should be elected through a proportional system, while 30 members should be elected by the majority. The deal also mentioned a capping mechanism, by which no party with less than 40% of national support will be able to claim the parliamentary majority.

The measures were adopted in Parliament on June 29. Since then, the opposition forces, namely *the National Movement* and *European Georgia*, boycotted the vote, however. A crucial issue was the liberation of Giorgi Rurua, an opposition leader who was charged for illegal possession and carrying of firearms, remained at stake. Despite this, 117 members approved the reform, paving the way toward the Parliamentary elections. The latter were held on October 31 and won by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the candidate from *Georgian Dream*, securing a third mandate for the party. The

controversial leader of the *United National Movement*, Mikheil Saakashvili, won the second position.

The opposition challenged those results and encouraged the population to protest on the following day. However, on that same day, the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) stated that, despite some irregularities, the elections respected the fundamental freedoms. Yet, protests continued in the street of Tbilisi. On November 8, a rally was organised in front of the Electoral Commission, which led to the use of water cannons by the authorities. This act raised concerns and was considered too violent by Human Rights defenders.

In response to these events, the United States and the European Union organised talks between the opposition parties and the *Georgian Dream* in the attempt to find a consensus and bring back peace to the streets. A runoff election was decided and held in 17 districts on December 21. In the new polls, *Georgian Dream* still won the majority of seats in the Parliament. Of 150 seats, the party won 90. The opposition parties, that had urged their supporters not to go vote in the second round, declared they would boycott the Parliament sessions.

On December 9, the last talks failed to reach a deal, and the opposition parties reiterated their intention to boycott the first

parliamentary session, which was held on December 11. Despite the reforms voted at the beginning of the year, the new electoral system did not stop the long-ruling party Georgian Dream to stay in a politically dominant position. Moreover, if the boycott of the opposition parties were to continue, the parliamentary balance could as well be challenged in the years to come.

In Abkhazia, the Russia-backed de facto state played also an important role in such an electoral year. However, this one was more of a reaction to the political events in the region. Indeed, in January, President Raul Khadzhimba resigned after the Supreme Court declared his election as unlawful. Prime Minister Valeri Bganda replaced him until the new election, which was to be held on March 23. The opposition leader Aslan Bzhania won the election with 56% of the votes. He was inaugurated a month later. During the ceremony, he pledged to work with 'brother' Russia, which has recognised the region as independent. The self-proclaimed Republic is still not recognised as a state by the international community.

The first Covid-19 case was registered on 26 February. The State of Emergency was introduced on 21 March and a curfew was decided on 31 March. Since 27 April,

Georgia decided to lift restrictions in 6 steps until late summer. At present, a total number of 191,900 cases are registered and 1883 deaths counted.

