

CENTRAL & EASTERN EUROPE MONTHLY BRIEFS

OCTOBER 2020

DEMOCRATISATION AMIDST PANDEMIC AND REGIONAL CONFLICTS



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The Central and Eastern Europe Monthly Briefs concisely summarise the latest phenomena and particular issues on a regional and international level. A group of young scholars and young researchers combine their desk-research skills with data analysis in order to provide a bigger picture on different regions and their potential developments.

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DEMOCRATISATION AMIDST PANDEMIC AND REGIONAL CONFLICTS



BELARUS. Lukashenko Clinging to Power

By Gilles de Valk

Demonstrations in Belarus have not ceased, despite attempts by the authorities to break them. Protestors are being arrested, opposition figures are being detained or have gone into exile, and authorities have cancelled accreditation for foreign media. In this way, Alexander Lukashenko is trying to stay in power, while foreign actors, such as Russia and the European Union, attempt to influence the situation as well.

Lukashenko's 'dialogue' with imprisoned opposition

On 10 October, Lukashenko visited jailed opposition activists to have a dialogue with them. A change in tactic or even a sign of hope, according to some. Nevertheless, opposition figures soon dismissed the meeting as a farce. Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Lukashenko's main opponent in August's presidential elections, stated that "you can't have dialogue in a prison cell". Indeed, it seems to be a mistake to interpret this move as an attempt at compromise by Lukashenko. Only a day later, authorities once again violently repressed the demonstrations. Other analysts added that Lukashenko's goal of the meeting was to drive a wedge between Tikhanovskaya and other members of the opposition.

Moscow's fear of pro-democracy movements

Meanwhile, Russia is exploiting Lukashenko's declining legitimacy and pushing for Belarus' deeper integration with Russia. Lukashenko resisted this for a long time, as it would likely reduce his powers. Publicly, however, Russia is supporting Lukashenko – for the time being. On

16 October, Russia put Tikhanovskaya on a wanted list (following Belarus) for alleged calls to overthrow the constitutional order. This served as a response to a statement Tikhanovskaya released on 13 October, calling for nationwide protests if Lukashenko fails to step down, to release political prisoners, and to end the violence against protestors by 25 October. Even though the opposition's demands have not purported anti-Russian sentiments, observers pointed out Moscow considers any pro-democracy movement in its neighbourhood a threat.

The West resorting to sanctions

On Monday 12 October, the Council of the EU underlined that Belarusian people have the right to elect their president through new, free and fair elections. Furthermore, it announced it will scale down bilateral cooperation with Belarus and stated its readiness to take further "restrictive measures" against high-ranking individuals, including Lukashenko. Besides, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States have imposed sanctions targeting Belarusian individuals. Although the EU seems to have become quicker and more determined in responding to crises at its Eastern border compared to previous years, experts doubt whether these sanctions can have the desired effect.

While Lukashenko is desperately attempting to repress opposition, Moscow is supporting him, or rather, breathing down his neck. If he can maintain his position, it will undoubtedly come at the cost of handing over significant powers to Russia. Despite the EU's relatively swift response, the impact of the current measures could turn out to be disappointing. The EU's response in Belarus is essential for defending principles of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, and hence for maintaining and restoring its credibility both at its eastern borders and within the EU.

VISEGRAD: The EU coronavirus strategy and how it effects the Visegrad group

by *Daniel Drury*

This month, the European Commission has set up an EU wide system to ensure that the contact and trace apps of each member state can communicate with each other. Czechia's contact trace app is expected to join the system next week, with more states joining in November. Czechia reported 8076 new cases and 46 deaths on Monday 19 th October. The country is now looking to tighten restrictions according to the Health Minister. Prime Minister, Andrej Babis, has also announced plans to purchase 1000 new hospital beds for severe cases of coronavirus. Czechia is the country with the fastest growing infection rate in Europe and is therefore a top priority for the EU in their wider strategy of integrating member states' efforts to fight the virus.

The announcement of the EU's contact and trace system comes a week after there was an agreement for a coordinated approach to restrictions of free movement, with member states being classified as red, orange and green according to the level of risk of being infected in that country. This is based on the total number of new cases in the last 14 days as well as the test positivity rate. Countries will also be assigned the colour grey if there is not enough information or not enough testing. Based on this system, member states have agreed that there will be no restrictions on travellers from 'green' level countries, meaning that there will be no quarantine or testing requirements. Any countries that are categorised as red, orange or grey could then be subject to quarantine or test restrictions

when citizens are travelling to other states in the EU.

This colour coded scheme has had a significant impact on the Visegrad states whose economy relies on freedom of movement between each other. With all Visegrad countries currently being classified as 'red', it is down to each of the countries in the area to determine how stringent the restrictions will be on movement across borders. For example, Hungarian citizens have been given permission to travel to Austria (another 'red' country) with no restrictions. While cases in Hungary are rising, with 989 new cases and 38 deaths reported on Tuesday 20 th October, their numbers are at the EU average according to their chief medical officer and Austria has acknowledged that Hungary is a lower risk country than the others in the region. Significant hits to the hospitality industries of the other Visegrad countries have been reported this month and their new classification as 'red' countries will do nothing to help this situation. In Poland, 87% of hotels have not exceeded 40% of capacity in October. In Slovakia, 900 restaurants, pubs and fast-food outlets have gone bust this year, largely due to the coronavirus restrictions. Slovakia have responded to this adversity this month by launching a highly ambitious coronavirus testing strategy which aims to test the entire population. This strategy could see them break out of being categorised as a 'red' country by the European Commission and set them on the road to a more sustainable recovery as testing on such a large scale could see their positivity rate come down.

Education Minister, Branislav Groehling has said that 'the rest of Europe is already taking notice of this plan' and that 'it might inspire them'. Overall, the EU strategy of attempting to integrate the efforts of all member states in tackling the virus will look to provide a structure for the struggling nations such as Czechia who are in desperate need of support in their fight against

the virus. However, the categorisation of the other Visegrad countries as ‘red’, while a necessary step in protecting the health of travellers within the EU, is another blow to the hopes of economic recovery. Hungary and Austria have shown that agreements between neighbouring countries are possible, but the ambitious testing policy of Slovakia may yet signal the most sustainable way out of this crisis in the form of improved contact tracing and in restoring the confidence of the other member states of the EU to allow citizens to travel there without restrictions.

BALTIC STATES

By Maximilian Feske

Estonia – Increasing its Defence Budget

The government of Estonia has agreed to raise its defence spending to €645, 5 million for 2021, which constitutes an increase of €30,4 million from this year’s budget¹. Next year’s defence budget will be equivalent to 2,3% of Estonia’s GDP and therefore exceed the two-percent budget goal, which was agreed upon by the heads of state and government during the NATO Council summit in Wales in 2014². The Estonian government thus follows its State Budget Strategy of 2019, despite an estimated decline of its GDP for 2021 due to the COVID-19

¹ ERR News (2020): Defense spending to rise to €645.4 million in 2021, <https://news.err.ee/1141128/defense-spending-to-rise-to-645-4-million-in-2021>, rev. 2020-10-20.

² NATO (2014): Wales Summit Declaration, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm, rev.2020-10-20.

³ Hurt, Martin (2020): Estonia’s 2021 Defence Budget: The Result of a Heated Political Debate, <https://icds.ee/en/estonias-2021-defence-budget-the-result-of-a-heated-political-debate/>, rev. 2020-10-20.

pandemic³. The increased budget results from the country’s modernization efforts, which prioritize a fortification of its coastline. Estonia recently added anti-ship missiles and sea mines to its coastal defences and seeks synergies with Latvia and Lithuania⁴.

Latvia – New Concept of National Defence

The Latvian parliament has approved a new State Defence Concept, which is aimed at strengthening the country’s deterrence to a point where an aggressor would lose more than potentially gain. It consists of the four main lines National Armed Forces (NBS), comprehensive defence, NATO collective defence and international cooperation. According to the concept, the NBS are supposed to grow to 8.000, to 10.000 by 2024 and to 12.000 soldiers by 2027. Maintaining NATO’s two-percent goal despite any crisis is defined as essential⁵.

Lithuania – Scepticism Towards EU Strategic Autonomy

The Lithuanian president Nauseda described the US’ role in the Baltic security systems as a critical factor and stated that it would be impossible to imagine their security without the United States. The aspiration of a strategically autonomous European Union, often associated with French president Macron, must not compete with the role of the USA or NATO’s functioning would be affected negatively, according to Nauseda⁶.

⁴ Sprenger, Sebastian (2020): Estonia moves to fortify its coastline with missiles and sea mines, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/10/01/estonia-moves-to-fortify-its-coastline-with-missiles-and-sea-mines/>, rev. 2020-10-20.

⁵ LSM (2020): Latvian Saeima approves concept of national defense, <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/defense/latvian-saeima-approves-concept-of-nationaldefense.a375599/>, rev.2020-10-20.

⁶ The Baltic Times (2020): Baltics cannot image 100 percent security without US – Lithuania's

Fittingly, a new American military camp is being built in Pabrade. The new facilities will allow for an increase of 500 soldiers, raising the potential number of American troops in Lithuania to 2.000 soldiers⁷.

Summary – Steadfast Transatlanticists

The security policy developments in October 2020 prove the Baltic States' commitment to NATO and their transatlantic security partnerships. All three of them are among the ten NATO members who reach the two-percent goal in 2020⁸. They insist on the importance of the USA for security in Europe, especially in view to their Eastern neighbours, and strive to fulfil Washington's expectations by increasing their defence budgets and military capacities.

Georgia is facing a new wave of COVID 19; the coronavirus pandemic (that appeared to ease during the summer) is hitting the South Caucasian country vigorously. Georgia has witnessed the number of people tested positive steadily grow, the majority of whom live in Tbilisi. The country reached its peak on the 19th of October, recording 1,186 new cases of COVID 19; 469 of them are in the capital. ¹ In order to deal with the surge of cases, the government has limited the entertainment facilities' working hours, establishing the mandatory closure at 10 pm; however, to date, there is no official curfew in force. The coronavirus pandemic is having a negative backlash on Georgia's economy. The recent World Bank's report states that Georgia's economy will contract by 6% in 2020, which will lead to a 2.8% increase in poverty ⁴ . However, the World Bank's projections assert that, if the COVID-19's second wave is

prevented, Georgia's economy will slightly improve in the next two years (4% growth in 2021, and 6% in 2022).

UKRAINE'S revival of diplomacy towards European Integration?

by Kate Halushka

October was an eventful month for Ukraine on the international arena. Since the Covid-19 outbreak, the EU Ukraine Summit opened the doors to new agreements with the UK and ongoing negotiations for the final accession to NATO.

The 22nd Ukraine – EU summit took place on 6th October with president Zelensky heading to Brussels for meeting with the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, in order to discuss issues of cooperation. The previous summit had taken place in July 2019, where the European Union was represented by Donald Tusk and Jean-Claude Juncker, respectively. The importance of such meeting has been highlighted by the fact that it is the first bilateral meeting held by the EU in person since the beginning of the Coronavirus outbreak. During the meeting, issues of combating the Coronavirus pandemic, reform implementation, and further implementation of the Association Agreement were raised and discussed.

Nauseda, https://www.baltictimes.com/baltics_cannot_image_100_percent_security_without_us_lithuania_s_nauseda/, rev. 2020-10-20.

⁷ Jankaukas, Kasparas (2020): New American Military Camp in Lithuania, <https://www.opednews.com/articles/New-American-military-camp-by-Kasparas-Jankauska->

Infrastructure_Military-Coups_Military-Deployment_Military-Massacres-201015-555.html, rev. 2020-10-20.

⁸ AFP (2020): Zehn Staaten erreichen Nato-Ziel bei Verteidigungsausgaben, <https://bit.ly/3jmj0W6>, rev. 2020-10-21.

The Ukrainian President convinced the wider public that Ukrainians are still headed towards European direction: “Ukrainians want to live in European Ukraine”. Zelensky also articulated his position in the EU sphere with regard to the Ukraine’s relations, suggesting closer economic ties between Kiev and Brussels and continuing the imposition of sanctions against Moscow due to the occupation of Ukrainian territories.

During the meetings, Zelensky made sure to confirm that there is no threat to the visa-free regime between Ukraine and the EU in light of the fact that such information had become a common concern among Ukrainians due to Coronavirus restrictions. Moreover, he added that the EU side was satisfied with the progress in reform implementation made during the past year in areas of banking law, land market, anti-corruption, and decentralization.

Furthermore, a number of new agreements on matters of cooperation in various spheres were signed. Among them, an agreement on EU4Resilient Regions with 30 million EUR fund, Civil Society Facility for 20 million EUR, and a Climate Package for a Sustainable Economy increasing Ukrainian funds by 10 million EUR, was discussed. Together, these projects are aimed at targeting Ukraine’s increase on resiliency in destabilizing situations as pandemics and hybrid threats and to strengthen democracy with a clean energy supply moving Ukraine closer to Europe.

This summit proved that Ukraine remains a priority in the EU’s external policies. The main issue discussed in Brussels involved an industrial visa-free regime important in the process of renewal of the trade part of the Association Agreement. It was decided that Ukraine is successfully moving towards full implementation of the Association

Agreement and establishment of a functioning Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. Taken together with a substantial amount of financial assistance towards democratic reforms, this summit is considered a great success in Ukraine – EU bilateral relations. Soon after the summit, Josep Borrell urged Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to adhere to the Minsk Agreements, once again reaffirming support for Ukrainian territorial integrity.

In addition, new military deals with Turkey were signed regarding a cooperation in the construction of warships and turbine engines. Such a move is an extremely important sign of Turkey’s support of Ukraine’s accession to NATO. Both sides emphasized that Turkey will continue to support Ukraine in matters of meeting criteria for membership with joint military training due to the need of securing peace and stability in the Black Sea region. Poland’s President Andrzej Duda visited Ukraine on 12-13th October reaffirming a similar statement and declaring Poland’s support of Ukrainian side in the conflict with Russia emphasizing the need to end the illegal occupation of Crimea.

The UK signed an Agreement on Political Cooperation, Free Trade and Strategic Partnership with Ukraine to confront hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine after Zelensky visited British Prime Minister Boris Johnson in London. The need for a new agreement was explained by the UK leaving the EU but still advocating for Ukraine’s territorial integrity. According to that agreement, the UK will continue supporting security and peace in Ukraine and engage in closer trading relations that will be reinforced by the newly established Trading Committee.

In conclusion, it could be stated that the eventful month for Ukrainian diplomacy meant a closer move to Europe and EU,

which continues to assert its support for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity through mutually beneficial agreements and financial aid.

MOLDOVA's Covid-19 Response

by Nicoleta Mirza

The Moldovan President, Igor Dodon, has announced on 29th of September that the Russian anti-Covid-19 vaccine will be available in Moldova by the end of the year. According to the Moldovan leader, the vaccine will be available at a reasonable price of 100 MDL (around 5.01 euros). Despite the criticism towards the announced Russian vaccine, Igor Dodon has stated that “the Russian medicine, the one that was present during Soviet Union” is the best and he has total confidence in it.⁹

Fortunately, the Moldovan Minister of Health, Viorica Dumbrăveanu, had responded to the President's statement. According to Viorica Dumbrăveanu, “Moldova will benefit from the anti-Covid-19 vaccine offered by the World Health Organization. Our country will only receive the vaccine after it will pass all the necessary

trials and will be proven to be safe for the people”¹⁰

The Republic of Moldova could soon produce Remdesivir, the first drug authorized in the United States and the European Union for the treatment of patients with COVID-19. The Medicines Agency announces that it has launched discussions with the local producers, but also with the authorities from other states in order to identify a solution through which Moldova will have the possibility to produce the drug.¹¹

Concerning the upcoming presidential elections (1st of November) in Moldova and the pandemic: the Moldovan government will buy three million protective masks for voters.¹² It has to be noted that, according to the 2014 census, the total number of the Moldovan population is 2 804 801.¹³

Furthermore, the government has addressed the right to vote of people infected with COVID-19 and citizens that are currently under the isolation restrictions. Therefore, the government proposes a separate bin for people with coronavirus symptoms present at every election location. Additionally, people in self-isolation will be able to vote using the mobile ballot box. In order to be able to express their right, Moldovans will submit a written request to the electoral bureau of the

⁹ Gutu L. (2020). Igor Dodon: „Vaccinul rusesc va ajunge în Moldova până la sfârșitul anului. El va costa până la 100 de lei”. *Diez*. Retrieved at: <https://diez.md/2020/09/30/igor-dodon-vaccinul-rusesc-va-ajunge-in-moldova-pana-la-sfarsitul-anului-el-va-costa-pana-la-100-de-lei/>.

¹⁰ See Diez (2020). Viorica Dumbrăveanu: „Moldova a primit răspuns pozitiv și va fi asigurată cu vaccin anti-COVID-19”. Retrieved from <https://diez.md/2020/10/01/viorica-dumbraveanu-moldova-a-primit-raspuns-pozitiv-si-va-fi-asigurata-cu-vaccin-anti-covid-19/>.

¹¹ Diez (2020). Moldova ar putea produce Remdesivir, primul medicament autorizat în SUA și

UE pentru tratamentul COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://diez.md/2020/10/11/moldova-ar-putea-produce-remdesivir-primul-medicament-autorizat-in-sua-si-ue-pentru-tratamentul-covid-19/>.

¹² Diez (2020). Guvernul va procura trei milioane de măști de protecție pentru alegătorii care vor participa la scrutinul electoral din 1 noiembrie. Available at <https://diez.md/2020/10/09/guvernul-va-procura-3-000-000-de-masti-de-protectie-pentru-alegatorii-care-vor-participa-la-scrutinul-electoral-din-1-noiembrie/>.

¹³ Recensământul Populației și a Locuințelor 2014. Available at <https://recensamint.statistica.md/ro/profile>.

polling station where they have their residence registration.¹⁴

Transnistria

The president of the National Security, Defense and Public Order Commission, Alexandru Jizdan, declared on 8th of October that, four people were abducted in the Left Bank (Transnistria) in a well-organized operation by the so-called MGB officers in Tiraspol. The first citizen was abducted on the morning of October 7, and the others - on the night of October 7 to 8. All the kidnapped people in the city of Camenca are accused of espionage.¹⁵ According to the Moldovan authorities, the Moldovan government does not recognize the accusations of espionage as Transnistria and Moldova are a single state, therefore the term cannot be applied in this case.

President Igor Dodon announced in a post on his Facebook page that he had a discussion with the leader of Tiraspol, Vadim Krasnoselski, in which he asked him to intervene promptly in the release of our citizens and to take the necessary measures to hold those responsible accountable.¹⁶

¹⁴ Diez (2020). Toți alegătorii vor putea vota. Procedura pentru persoanele infectate cu COVID-19 sau care au simptome. Available at <https://diez.md/2020/10/10/toti-alegatorii-vor-putea-vota-procedura-pentru-persoanele-infectate-cu-covid-19-sau-care-au-simptome/>.

¹⁵ Privescu. (2020). Briefing de presă susținut de Președintele Comisiei securitate națională, apărare și ordine publică, Alexandru Jizdan. Available at: <https://www.privescu.eu/Arhiva/92201/Briefing-de-presa-sustinut-de-Preedintele-Comisiei-securitate-nationala--aparare-si-ordine-publica--Alexandru-Jizdan>.

¹⁶ See Igor Dodon (2020, October 8). Situația referitoare la cei doi cetățeni moldoveni răpiți zilele trecute. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/dodon.igor1>.

Two of the four detained people were shortly released and declared no sign of torture.¹⁷ On the other hand, Adrian Glijin, one of the abducted people by "force structures" in the Transnistrian region, is accused of "treason" by the so-called Transnistrian authorities and faces from 12 to 20 years in prison.

Environment

Based on research conducted by UNDP Moldova and images captured by the European Space Agency (ESA), it was found that air pollution in Moldova has been significantly reduced compared to other European countries.¹⁸

On October 17, the National Tree Planting Campaign "By planting forests we save Moldova" was officially launched, an eco-civic action aimed at increasing the forested areas of Moldova. According to the director of Moldsilva, Dumitru Cojocar, by starting these actions, they rely on increasing the afforestation of the country's territory from 11% to 15%, and in the next five years, about 50 million new trees will be planted.¹⁹

Domestic Politics

The candidate of the Dignity and Truth Platform in this year's presidential elections, Andrei Năstase, came up with a proposal to

¹⁷ Diez (2020). „Se simt bine și nu au fost torturați.” Detalii despre cei doi moldoveni eliberați de „forțele de ordine” din regiunea transnistreană. Retrieved from <https://diez.md/2020/10/09/se-simt-bine-si-nu-au-fost-torturati-detalii-despre-cei-doi-moldoveni-eliberati-de-forțele-de-ordine-din-regiunea-transnistreana/>.

¹⁸ Ministerul Agriculturii, Dezvoltării Regionale și Mediului (2020). În perioada pandemiei, în țara noastră, a fost redus nivelul de poluare a aerului. Retrieved from <http://www.madrm.gov.md/ro/content/2833>.

¹⁹ Diez (2020). Directorul Moldsilva: „În următorii cinci ani, în Moldova vor fi plantați peste 50 de milioane de copaci”. Available at <https://diez.md/2020/10/19/directorul-moldsilva-in-urmatorii-5-ani-in-moldova-vor-fi-plantati-peste-50-de-milioane-de-copaci/>.

the PAS (Party of Action and Solidarity) candidate, Maia Sandu, asking her to give up the electoral race and to continue supporting him in the fight for the position of president of the country.²⁰ It is important to note however, that according to the recent polls, 40.7% respondents mentioned that they will vote for Igor Dodon, 31.9% said that they will vote for Maia Sandu and only 1.1% consider voting for Andrei Nastase.²¹ Furthermore, a significant number of people who are part of the Chisinau intellectuals expressed their support for Maia Sandu in the presidential elections.²² Beyond that, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, president of the CDU (German Chancellery Party, led by Angela Merkel), sent a video clip in total support for Maia Sandu.²³

On a similar note, the ex-mayor of Chisinau Dorin Chirtoaca, has declared that he will withdraw from the Moldovan politics if he gets a smaller number of votes than in the 2019 elections for Chisinau City Hall.²⁴

SOUTH CAUCASUS: Armenia-Azerbaijan, the broad stakes of the South Caucasus conflict

by Alice Griffon

New hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke out on September 27 in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The devastating effects of this flare-up, still ongoing, have not been observed since the war in 1994. The conflict is causing a large number of civilian casualties and forcing people to flee their home. Besides the battle occurring on the ground, this conflict represents capital geopolitical stakes. Indeed, the South Caucasus is a corridor for oil and gas trading.

The war could expand regionally, paving the way to new leaderships. In addition to economic implications, deep ties exist between actors of this conflict, indeed. Turkey has been a long-term ally of Azerbaijan, hostile toward Armenia and directly supporting Baku on the ground. In turn, Armenia reported having shut down a Turkish military plane, and France accused Turkey to have sent Syrian mercenaries on the field. Azerbaijan can also count on its Iranian neighbor, which has however taken a neutral position so far. Armenia is therefore surrounded by rivals, relying only on its powerful Russian ally. Russia

²⁰ Diez (2020). Andrei Năstase îi cere Maiei Sandu să renunțe la cursa electorală: „Îi solicit să mă susțină”. Retrieved from <https://diez.md/2020/10/15/andrei-nastase-ii-cere-maiei-sandu-sa-renunte-la-cursa-electoral-a-ii-solicita-sa-ma-sustina/>.

²¹ Diez (2020). (sondaj) Maia Sandu, Igor Dodon sau Renato Usatîi. Pentru cine ar vota moldovenii dacă duminică viitoare ar avea loc alegeri. Retrieved from <https://diez.md/2020/10/19/sondaj-maia-sandu-igor-dodon-sau-renato-usatii-pentru-cine-ar-vota-moldovenii-daca-duminica-viitoare-ar-avea-loc-alegeri/>.

²² See Diez (2020). (video) Oameni buni. Mai multe persoane influente din intelectualitatea Moldovei și-au arătat susținerea pentru Maia Sandu. Retrieved from <https://diez.md/2020/10/15/video-oameni-buni/>.

[mai-multe-persoane-influente-din-intelectualitatea-moldovei-si-au-aratat-sustinerea-pentru-maia-sandu/](https://diez.md/2020/10/15/mai-multe-persoane-influente-din-intelectualitatea-moldovei-si-au-aratat-sustinerea-pentru-maia-sandu/).

²³ See CDU Deutschlands (2020, October 12). The CDU supports @sandumaiamd in the upcoming presidential election in the Republic of #Moldova. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/CDU/status/131569926677040742?s=20>.

²⁴ Diez (2020). Dorin Chirtoacă: „Mă retrag din politică dacă numărul de voturi obținut la prezidențiale va fi mai mic decât la Primăria Chișinău din 2019”. Retrieved from <https://diez.md/2020/10/13/dorin-chirtoaca-ma-retrag-din-politica-daca-numarul-de-voturi-obtinut-la-prezidentiale-va-fi-mai-mic-ca-la-primaria-chisinau-din-2019/>.

itself, indeed, has a military base in Armenia, making the country a strategic location.

Moreover, Russia sees Azerbaijan as a leading-threat country because of its oil and gas trade domination in the region and beyond. Indeed, Azerbaijan has built its growth and development on the oil trade with many regional and European partners. By gaining such power in the region, Azerbaijan is claiming its independence from other power states and is becoming a dangerous economic opponent. However, so far, Russia has only played its role of OSCE Minsk Group mediator and tried to implement peace in the region. All parts of this conflict are carefully observing the moves of Russia, that could determine the outcomes of this war.

The last stake in this conflict is the arm supplying. Turkey and Azerbaijan have maintained a trade alliance between oil and arms. In this instance, Turkey relies on Azerbaijan to receive oil, and, in exchange, it provides highly skilled military figures and armaments. Russia is supplying both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Serbia is suspected to play the same game as well. However, for Serbia, a military cooperation with Armenia might jeopardize its long-term relationship with Azerbaijan. The connection between Azerbaijan and Serbia relies on a strategic partnership, strengthened by Azerbaijan's support for Serbia in the case of Kosovo's independence. In return, Serbia supports Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh case. Nevertheless, economic aspects are also at stake in this alliance, as with the construction of a highway in Serbia in 2019. Azerbaijan was in alert after suspicioning that Serbia-made weaponry was used by Armenian forces in July. This was discovered and proven by international media outlets in light of the trade relations between Armenia and Slobodan Tesic, an armed dealer blacklisted by the United Nations

and United States of America. Despite the fact that the Serbian president, Aleksander Vucic, denies Serbia's implication in the armament of Armenia, diplomatic incidents with Baku seem to be avoided at present. Yet, while Serbia's position could be damaged in the eyes of top diplomats and politicians in Baku, a terrain for new cooperation with Armenia could be fertile for the near future. At this time, however, international attention is drawn to the ongoing war in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is far from being settled.

GEORGIA, South Ossetia and Abkhazia

by Luca Dilda

The COVID 19 pandemic did not spare the two de facto states, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. On the 17th of October, the President, Anatoly Bibilov, and the acting Prime Minister, Gennady Bekoev, of South Ossetia have been tested positive to coronavirus²⁵. The news report that they continue to perform their activities from home²⁶.

In the meantime, Abkhazia has opened its borders with Georgia to allow pensioners from the Gali region (those with Georgian citizenship) to receive pensions and social benefits. The borders have been closed to every citizen since March 2020 due to the pandemic, instead; an exception was made for people needing emergency medical care, who are now allowed to return to their homes²⁷. On the political front, Abkhazia opened

²⁵ Agenda.ge (2020). Georgia reports 1,186 new cases of coronavirus, Tbilisi on top of list. Retrieved 20 October 2020, from <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/3230>

²⁶ Agenda.ge (2020). Restaurants, entertainment facilities to close at 10 pm in Tbilisi and Imereti.

Retrieved 20 October 2020, from <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/3197>

²⁷ World Bank Group. (2020). COVID-19 and Human Capital (p. 27). Washington, DC. Retrieved from https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34518/9781464816437.pdf?cid=eca_tt_eca_

its embassy in Syria, a decision that sparked criticism. The Georgian Foreign Minister immediately condemned the event, affirming that Syria's recognition is not legitimated by the international law since Abkhazia is not recognised as an independent state. For the Georgian top diplomat, the opening of the so-called embassy happened under Russian pressure and therefore did not have any legitimacy. He concluded stating that the international community has already condemned the 2018's recognition, and as soon as the Syrian regime will fall, also this decision will be reviewed²⁸.

Domestic and Foreign politics

The end of September determined the relighting of the dispute Armenia and Azerbaijan in the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As Georgia is neighbouring with both countries, President Salome Zurbishvili was questioned regarding Georgia's role in the feud. President Zurbishvili stressed Georgia's neutrality in the conflict because the country has a friendly relationship both with Armenia and Azerbaijan²⁹. Furthermore, the Georgian government stated its availability to act as an intermediary between Baku and Yerevan to reach a truce. The Georgian President also added how crucial is stability for the region, as it is an energy transitroute³⁰. Furthermore, she denounced the spreading of fake news coming from the Russian Federation,

which mentions Tbilisi favouritism over one or the other country (Armenia or Azerbaijan). On the domestic front, Georgia is preparing for the parliamentary election that will take place on the 31 st of October. This election will be the first with new the electoral system; Georgia is shifting from a majoritarian system to a proportional one³¹. During the 2020 election, voters will appoint 73 MPs in majoritarian, and the remaining 77 seats will be distributed proportionally. Starting from 2024, the Parliament will be elected through a fully proportional electoral system³².

The surveys suggest that the ruling party, Georgian Dream, is taking the lead³³; its agenda includes, among the other things, addressing poverty and the Russian occupation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and applying for EU membership by 2024³⁴.

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²⁸ Civil.ge (2020). World Bank Estimates Georgia's Economy to Contract by 6% in 2020. Retrieved 20 October 2020, from <https://civil.ge/archives/373986>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Civil.ge (2020). Tskhinvali Leader, Acting PM Test Positive for COVID-19. Retrieved 20 October 2020, from <https://civil.ge/archives/375903>

³¹ Mandalia, B. (2020). President and acting Prime Minister of South Ossetia got sick with coronavirus. Retrieved 20 October 2020, from <https://pledgetimes.com/president-and-acting-prime-minister-of-south-ossetia-got-sick-with-coronavirus/>

³² JAMnews, (2020). Abkhazia opens border for retirees to receive Georgian pensions. Retrieved 20 October 2020, from <https://jam-news.net/abkhazia-pensioners-georgia-border/>

³³ Agenda.ge (2020). Georgia condemns opening of so-called embassy of Russian-occupied Abkhazia region in Syria. Retrieved 20 October 2020, from <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/3108>

³⁴ Civil.ge (2020). Georgian President Talks Nagorno-Karabakh, Tbilisi's Neutrality. Retrieved 20 October 2020, from <https://civil.ge/archives/373210>

