

# WORLDWIDE MONTHLY BRIEFS

SEPTEMBER  
2020

DEALING WITH PANDEMIC AND PEOPLE'S DISCONTENT



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## DEALING WITH PANDEMIC AND PEOPLE'S DISCONTENT

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The Worldwide Monthly Briefs concisely summarise the latest phenomena and particular issues on a global level. A group of young scholars and 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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# EASTERN EUROPE



## BELARUS. Call for Democracy in the Last Dictatorship of Europe

by *Kateryna Halushka*

Protests in Belarus were triggered by government's mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic while Lukashenko went as far as to claim that it does not exist in Belarus. Pandemic is also one of the factors that made protests possible: previous history shows that government prosecutes anyone from the opposition forces and public protests are faced with police violence, but wearing masks as a precaution to the pandemic increased anonymity among protestors. The elections on 9<sup>th</sup> of August went as planned by the dictatorial government and Lukashenko is still in power. Soon after massive numbers of protestors gathered on the streets of Minsk. The protests were met with violence from the police and unwillingness of the central government to acknowledge the demands of the wider public. Use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and grenades followed by massive arrests by the police did not manage to stop the unfolding of the political crisis. However, Lukashenko's actions do not contribute to calming the public. Instead of direct communication, he reached for a call with Putin to discuss internal affairs. Many political experts are having debates on whether or not Putin and Russian forces will play a role in de-escalation of the protests, but so far there is no clear answer to that.

### What is Coordination Council?

Protestors managed to form a leadership group and an organization to represent the objectives of

the protest. Coordination Council was formed by the opposition presidential candidate after the elections and gathered like-minded activists in the presidium. Council states the goals of the protests to include: release of the political prisoners and bringing to justice those responsible for the unrest, as well as conducting new elections under international democratic standards. Soon, the establishment of criminal case was opened against the presidium of the organization for "aiming seizure of state power". Most of the main figures of the protests were forced to flee the country, such as Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Lukashenko's opponent in last elections, who was forced to move to Lithuania.

### Abduction of Maria Kalesnikava

Maria Kalesnikava, one of the members of presidium of the Coordination Council, was abducted by OMON on 7<sup>th</sup> of September. By 9<sup>th</sup> of September, it became public knowledge that Kalesnikava was imprisoned in Minsk for "aiming seizure of state power". On the same day, another leader of the Coordination Council, Maxim Znak, disappeared. International reaction to the abduction of protestors and leaders of Coordination Council showed that Lukashenko is losing legitimacy in the international

arena. European nations expressed concern towards detainees' welfare and urged the government to release political prisoners. Investigative Committee of Belarus claims that member of the Coordination Council destabilized state's internal affairs by particularly threatening national security. Both Maria Kalesnikava and Maxim Znak are considered suspects in the case. 12 human rights organizations in Belarus have already declared them political prisoners. The Council of Europe stated its support for

**Lukashenko is trying to return to order by using police force and violence against peaceful protesters, whose political campaigns might further destabilize his position as a leader.**

Belarusian people campaigning for human rights and dignity, while refusing to recognize the results of the elections. Together with other international organizations, the Council of Europe is going to organize an international investigative body to secure information about the human rights violations in Belarus.

### Outcome of the week

Events of the last months in Belarus showed the fragility of public support and legitimacy of the current government. Lukashenko is trying to return to order by using police force and violence against peaceful protesters, whose political campaigns might further destabilize his position as a leader. Abductions of the last week elevated concern for crimes against human rights on the international arena. While complete change of regime does not seem possible at this stage, crimes committed by Lukashenko's government against its people caused an international outrage and threatened status quo.

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## UKRAINE: Berlin 2020 Normandy Four. What's next after Paris?

by *Kateryna Halushka*

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, Ukrainian representative travelled to Berlin for the Normandy Advisors' Four meeting. This year, Ukraine is represented by Deputy Prime Minister for Reintegration of Temporarily Occupied Territories Oleksiy Reznikov, France by president's advisor Emmanuel Bonne, Germany by German Chancellor for foreign policy Jan Haecker, and Russia by Dmitry Kozak. Earlier, Zelensky had a call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel regarding the progress Ukraine

made in the Donbas settlements. During the call, the German Chancellor stressed the importance of implementing the Paris Agreement, affirming that Germany will put an effort for achieving peace at all costs.

### What is Normandy Format?

The Normandy format is a type of informal meetings of the representatives from Ukraine, Germany, Russia, and France to discuss and resolve conflict in Donbass and the Russian position within the region. Named after the first meeting on the D-Day in Normandy in 2014, the meeting itself was initially planned to the 28<sup>th</sup> of August. Yet, it was postponed to the 11<sup>th</sup> of September due to the French representative Emmanuelle Bonne who left for a working trip on the same date.

**The military confrontation in Donbas is affecting the legitimacy of the Ukrainian President and his party, who claimed to make settle down the war and deliver peace to the region**

### Perspectives

During the last meeting in Paris, Germany and France widely supported Ukraine in its the negotiation process with Russia. The Head of the Ukrainian President's Office, Andriy Yermak, opened the doors for implementing an agreement that has already been done. Therefore, he stated, it is time for a new N4 summit to form concrete steps. In turn, Lavrov commented on the meeting as being unnecessary since the objectives of the previous meeting have not been reached yet. However, Russia is still going to be present in negotiations represented by Dmitry Kozak, Deputy Head of Russia's presidential administration. Peskov claimed that the substance of Berlin meeting is decided in advance "not to water down" previous agreements. The Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Dmytro Kuleba, stated that the Ukrainian side is interested in preserving the position held for the Normandy-Minsk agreement. Previously, he had also commented on the Russian position,

expressing in the letter by Dmitry Kozak to withdraw from the negotiation process regarding Donbass. Mr. Kuleba insisted on treating it as part of diplomatic game without coming to conclusion that might impinge on the negotiations. Nevertheless, there were no further comments from Kremlin since then.

### What at take?

While the contents of the meeting are still unclear, the latter is beyond doubt a crucial event for the future of the Ukraine and its sovereignty since it will have a tremendous weight on where the progress in the region will be directed. It is important here to mention that the European reputation of the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, was damaged after the scandal regarding the US military assistance. Also the timing of the meeting plays an important role in Ukrainian internal affairs. Since local elections will be organized in the end of October, the electoral campaign that has already started, will not see the participation of the occupied territories in Southeast Ukraine. As a result of this, the ongoing military confrontation in Donbas is affecting the legitimacy of the current President of Ukraine and his party, who claimed to make end of the war their top priority and still did not deliver on that objective.

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## ROMANIA & MOLDOVA: Juggling Politically the Pandemic

by Nicoleta Mirza

The Covid-19 cases has sparked in the Republic of Moldova from 258 cases on 7<sup>th</sup> of September<sup>1</sup> to 560 cases on 10<sup>th</sup> of

September.<sup>2</sup> Considering the increasing number of virus cases, Italy has decided to prolong its imposed restrictions on Moldovan citizens. Therefore, Moldovans are denied access on the Italian land.<sup>3</sup> The Medicines Commission under the Agency for Medicines and Medical Devices approved on 9<sup>th</sup> of September, as a matter of urgency, two other international multicentre clinical trials, which are being conducted in parallel in more than 100 medical institutions around the world. Clinical trials will take place at the Republican Clinical Hospital "Timofei Moșneaga".<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the General Director of the Agency for Medicines and Medical Devices, Eremei Priseajniuc, signed for the first time, on 8<sup>th</sup> of September, the authorization for the import, of a batch of Remdesivir, which is the first medicine authorized in the USA and EU for the treatment of COVID-19. The batch of medicine Remdesivir (trade name Covifor), will be delivered in the Republic of Moldova within 10-20 days by the pharmaceutical distributor "Dita EstFarm" SRL, in a quantity of about 2,000 bottles.<sup>5</sup> The head of the National Public Health Agency, Nicolae Furtună, stated in a show on TVR MOLDOVA that people who died due to the new type of virus were a burden for themselves and those around them.<sup>6</sup> The statement has been criticized not only by the Moldovan citizens but also by the ex-Minister of Health Ala Nemerenco.<sup>7</sup> Nicolae Furtună has later apologised for his comment and announced his resignation.

On a political level, the Dignity and Truth Platform Party submitted, on September 7<sup>th</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> See Gutu L. (2020). [Încă 258 de cazuri de COVID-19 au fost înregistrate în Moldova. Diez.](#)

<sup>2</sup> See Diez (2020). [Încă 560 de cazuri de COVID-19 au fost înregistrate în Moldova. Retrieved from](#)

<sup>3</sup> Diez (2020). [Italia a prelungit restricțiile de intrare în țară pentru cetățenii moldoveni.](#)

<sup>4</sup> See Diez (2020). [Comisia Medicamentului a aprobat, în regim de urgență, alte două studii clinice pentru tratarea COVID-19.](#)

<sup>5</sup> See Diez (2020). [În Moldova va fi importat primul medicament autorizat în SUA și UE pentru tratamentul COVID-19.](#)

<sup>6</sup> Read more, [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> See Diez. (2020). [Fosta ministă a sănătății Ala Nemerenco, despre declarațiile șefului de la ANSP: „Domnul Furtună este o povară pentru noi toți”.](#)

the complete lists with signatures for the registration of Andrei Năstase, the candidate of the DT Platform, for the November 1st Presidential elections. The signatures were collected in three days.<sup>8</sup> The Democratic Party of Moldova has announced on 9<sup>th</sup> of September that it is not running any candidates for the November 1st, 2020 Presidential election. DPM leader Pavel Filip announced that this year's Presidential elections are a spectacle, and the party he leads will not participate in it.<sup>9</sup> Igor Dodon, the current President of the Republic of Moldova and former head of the Socialist Party has announced that he will be running in this year's Presidential elections as an independent candidate.<sup>10</sup> On a similar note, the pro-European politician, Maia Sandu, has stated in a press briefing that her team will not allow President Igor Dodon to defraud the presidential elections this fall. The Party of Action and Solidarity leader came with an appeal to all Moldovan citizens to be responsible and to report all the violations that will be observed.<sup>11</sup> The statement comes after the 2016 identified Presidential elections frauds. From an economic viewpoint, the Republic of Moldova will contract a loan worth about 70 million euros to ensure an effective response in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The Economy, Budget and Finance Committee decided on 8<sup>th</sup> of

**The Republic of Moldova will contract a loan worth about 70 million euros to ensure an effective response in the fight against the COVID-19**

September meeting to propose to the plenary of the Parliament the ratification of the Loan Framework Agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the Council of Europe Development Bank for the project "Emergency Response to COVID-19 and Support for Micro, small, and medium Enterprises".<sup>12</sup>

### **The Romanian Scenario**

Romania is among the countries most disadvantaged by the Commission's proposal on the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism. This is the conclusion of the opinion of the European Court of Auditors, issued on Wednesday, September 9th, following the European Parliament's request that this EU institution analyse the future distribution of aid to overcome the crisis.<sup>13</sup>

The senators rejected on Tuesday the project of Save Romania Union senator Florina Presadă for the amendment and completion of Law 135/2020 on the election of local public administration authorities from 2020, by which for the September 27 election two days are proposed for the vote of the voters.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Marcel Ciolacu's idea (Social Democratic Party leader) of postponing the local election day was rejected this week by the Romanian prim-Minister Ludovic Orban.

<sup>8</sup> Topală C. (2020). (video) Andrei Năstase, primul candidat care a prezentat listele complete cu semnături pentru înregistrarea la alegerile prezidențiale. [Diez](#).

<sup>9</sup> Diez. (2020). PDM nu va participa la alegerile prezidențiale din acest an. „Noi recunoaștem că în aceste alegeri există doar doi candidați”.

<sup>10</sup> Priveșc.e. (2020). Grupul de inițiativă privind înregistrarea candidatului la alegerile Președintelui Republicii Moldova, condus de Vlad Batrîncea, depune actele la Comisia Electorală Centrală.

<sup>11</sup> Priveșc.eu. (2020). Briefing de presă susținut de Lidera Partidului Acțiune și Solidaritate, Maia Sandu, cu tema „Avertisment pentru Igor Dodon”.

<sup>12</sup> HOTĂRÎRE Nr. 550 din 20-07-2020.

<sup>13</sup> Digi24.ro. (2020). Repartizarea subvențiilor UE e incorectă. Guvernul doarme?

<sup>14</sup> Digi24.ro. (2020). Senatul respinge proiectul care prevede două zile de vot pentru alegerile locale.

The day was voted in the Parliament and agreed by all political leaders.<sup>15</sup>

The Minister of Finance, Florin Cîțu, announces "good news from the economy", in a message posted on Facebook. Cîțu says that the investments that contributed to the economic growth by 0.4% in the second quarter and the increase of the average salary are signs of the economic recovery. The Government Emergency Ordinance on budget rectification, an ordinance providing for an increase in pensions by only 14% from September 1 and postponing the increase of teachers' salaries until 2021, was amended in the specialized committees of the Parliament.<sup>16</sup> President Klaus Iohannis stated in a press conference on Wednesday that the increase in the pension point by only 14% was "as much as possible". Klaus Iohannis explained that Romania's economy will recover and that this will allow in the coming years increases in allowances and pensions, as well as money for investments.<sup>17</sup> The Ministry of Public Finance (MFP) borrowed 938 million lei (around 193 million euros) from banks on Monday through a benchmark government bond issue, with a residual maturity of 51 months, at an average yield of 3.22% per year.<sup>18</sup> The Romanian national currency (Leu) has registered on Monday the new minim ever recorded as it has been depreciated against the single European currency. The National Bank of Romania published an exchange rate of 4.85 lei for one euro. However, the representatives of the National Bank say that this evolution is normal, and the growth is not significant at all.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Marina G. (2020). *Orban: Școala începe la 14 septembrie, iar alegerile se vor tine la 27 septembrie. E ridicolă ideea PSD să amâni alegerile.* [Digi24.ro](#).

<sup>16</sup> Digi24.ro. (2020). *PSD a reintrodus în comisiile din Parlament creșterea pensiilor cu 40% și majorarea salariilor profesorilor.*

<sup>17</sup> Kiss R. (2020). *Iohannis exclude tăieri de pensii și de salarii: „Este o prostie pesedistă”. Președintele spune că „economia își va reveni”.* [Digi24.ro](#).

In dealing with the pandemic in light of the reopening of the school and upcoming academic year, three schools and a nursery in Bucharest were closed after employees were infected with coronavirus.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, the Romanian Health Minister, Nelu Tătaru, proposed on Thursday extension of the statute alert.

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## HUNGARY: Locking the Country

by *Geraldina Shkurta*

Autumn 2020 does not only mark the beginning of the new academic year all around Europe, but it also comes with the already-expected second wave of the coronavirus epidemic. As Europe is now expected to face it, Hungary will not be found unprepared. With schools and kindergartens reopening again, teachers' trade union PDSZ raised the first complaints against the government's "incidental and incomplete safety measures". The teachers' union has expressed its skepticism towards the measures taken so far by the government as they might lead to mass closure of the country's schools and kindergartens. Blaming the government for not taking the situation under control, PDSZ claimed that if the government would introduce mass testing and/or switched to digital learning for junior high and high schools the government could be monitoring the situation closely and prevent the spread of the disease. The major of Budapest, Gergely Karácsony, has asked to Viktor Orbán to expand free testing and

<sup>18</sup> Bănciulea G. (2020). *Ministerul Finanțelor a atras, luni, 938 de milioane de lei de la banci.* [Agentia Nationala de Presa Agerpres](#).

<sup>19</sup> Bonea M. (2020). *Nou minim istoric pentru leu. BNR: Intră în sfera normalului. Ce ar putea destabiliza cursul.* [Digi24.ro](#).

<sup>20</sup> G.M. (2020). *Trei școli și o creșă din București au fost închise. Mai mulți angajați sunt infectați cu coronavirus.* [Digi24.ro](#).

make it accessible for everyone. Karácsony prioritizes the health of the children and the teachers, requiring free testing for all the teachers. In addition, the municipality of Budapest has also introduced further preventive measures. The mayor of Budapest, Mr. Karácsony claimed that the municipality has implemented the necessary measures to have all the citizens using public transport wear masks. On September, 9, the municipal council decided that anyone who is not wearing a mask or not wearing it properly on Budapest public transport could be fined up to 8000 HUF (approximately 22 euros.) Putting on a mask is also obligatory when entering markets, cultural institutions maintained by the capital, museums, archives, libraries, cinemas, theatres, the Budapest Cultural Center, and the enclosed premises of the Budapest Zoo and Botanical Garden. The capital has decided to increase the testing capacities in the city's social institutions, homeless care, and elderly care. When it comes to traveling restrictions and protective measures, Hungarian citizens and foreign nationals with Hungarian residency are expected to self-quarantine for two weeks after entering the country. The country has closed its borders again to foreign nationals with the exception of those Czech, Slovak, and Polish nationals who have already booked accommodation in Hungary before September 1, 2020. Nevertheless, they will be expected to show a negative COVID-19 test within five days of their arrival. Seeing a spike in the number of cases, citizens who

travel from Hungary to England will be quarantined for 14 days from September 12, 4 am BST.

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## WISEGRAD's Regional Perspective on Covid-19 and Belarus

*by Daniel Drury*

**Hungary has closed its borders, with the exception of Czechs, Slovaks, and Poles who have already booked accommodation before September 2020**

The main security concern of the Visegrad nations continues to be the question of how best to protect their countries from the worsening coronavirus crisis. An alarming rise in the number of cases, particularly in Czech Republic, has prompted a discussion between Visegrad heads of state about potential border closures although they remain open for now. Meanwhile, there continues to be a united position from all four Visegrad countries with respect to the situation in

Belarus, with the Polish Prime Minister leading the way in expressing solidarity and the promise of concrete policies to aid the protesters in Belarus. The Czech and Slovak governments made a statement of intent this week to keep the borders open between themselves and Austria following a meeting between the leaders of those three countries on Wednesday. Czech PM, Andrej Babis, Slovak PM, Igor Matovic and Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, agreed not to limit travel between the countries, in a meeting in Vienna. According to Babis, there were assurances that contact between the three would not be limited as it would not be good for 'economic relations and tourism' to do so. This comes as the Visegrad countries continue to try and strike a balance between health protection and protecting the economy, despite Czech

Republic registering a record number of covid-19 cases in one day on Tuesday, recorded at 1164 cases. The numbers that are ill, in hospital or in a serious condition are also at the highest since the end of April according to the Health Ministry. Hungary and Poland also announced a rise in cases of 411 and 421 respectively on Wednesday. However, Poland received good economic news with the Development Ministry revealing that Poland's economy has been the sixth best in Europe at coping since the lockdown, with a relatively small decline compared to most other EU countries. Meanwhile, Visegrad countries' international discourse has been largely focused on the events in Belarus over the last few days. They have been consistent in their support for the protesters and their agreement with the European Council decision that the elections were 'neither free nor fair'. On Wednesday, Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, met the Belarusian opposition leader, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, to promise solidarity with the movement and declare Poland 'an open home' for any Belarusians who needed help. 'The whole EU supports the Belarusian nation in its right to express its will, freedom and democracy' he said, in a clear expression of support for the protests and a desire to help those adversely affected by the consequences of the events in Belarus. Poland was instrumental in the immediate response to the Belarusian elections by calling a European Council meeting which resulted in EU wide agreement that the protests should be supported. Poland now continues to lead the way in this support by offering sanctuary for any Belarusians who cannot continue to live in their home country. In Hungary, the chairman of the parliament's Foreign Affairs committee, Zsolt Nemeth, echoed the call to stand by the

**Visegrad discourse has been focused on Belarus, in support of the protesters and in agreement with the European Council's decision to not recognize the results of the latest elections**

Belarusian people and said that he expected the big international organisations such as the EU and NATO to show full support for the protest movement in Belarus. The first of these issues, regarding the question of border closures as a way of better protecting the health of citizens, has shown this week a desire from Czech Republic and Slovakia to continue to work as a community of countries and help each other through this crisis. Despite the rise in cases, there is an obvious reluctance to go back into full lockdown and a belief that only through keeping the flow of tourism between the two can the countries expect to make a long-term economic recovery. This is a vote of confidence in the Visegrad group and demonstrates a belief that their multi-lateral cooperation could provide a better long-term route out of the crisis. In terms of the Belarus issue, there has simply been a reaffirmation this week of the statement of the European Council to which all four Visegrad countries agreed. However, there has also been a clear pro-activeness, particularly from Poland, to follow through with this statement and show complete support for the protest movement. It therefore seems that Poland particularly is keen to set an example on this issue and encourage the rest of Europe to follow.

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**SOUTH CAUCASUS: "The Past is always Head of Us"**

*by Alice Griffon*

**I**n Georgia, the Strength and Unity political movement nominated presented the former President Mikheil Saakashvili as the

candidate for the Prime Minister elections on October 31. Saakashvili ruled Georgia from 2004 to 2013 with the party United Nation Movement, today parts of Strength and Unity. He has been living in Ukraine since the end of his presidential mandate and was nominated head of the Ukrainian National Reforms Council in May. If he were to return to Georgian soil, he would face charges for abuse of power and his involvement in the murder of a Georgian banker. Despite the legal condemnation, Strength and Unity chose him to run against the ruling party Georgian Dream, which gained popularity with the handling of the Coronavirus pandemic. This choice might turn out to be detrimental to the opposition party.

### **Georgia and NATO**

Georgia is hosting the Noble Partner 2020 at Vaziani and Camp Nairo training centres. The military training started on September 7, and it will end on the 18 of the same month. In doing this, Georgia is welcoming troops from the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Poland. As described by the U.S. Ambassador to Georgia, the event is designed to enhance regional partnerships and increase U.S. force readiness and interoperability in a realistic, multinational training environment. Moreover, as underlined by Georgia Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, the Noble Partner 20 is an important component for Georgia to become part of NATO. Indeed, during the Bucharest Summit held in April 2008, the Alliance vowed Georgia would become a member. However, despite the great progress shown by Georgia to meet the frame set during the Summit, the integration process is stalling. One of the hampering factors is the Russian threat. Indeed, after condemning the statement held in April 2008 by NATO,

Russia invaded in August the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which can be perceived as an act of revenge. It will therefore be interesting to observe Russia's reaction to this military event and cooperation between Georgia and NATO members.

### **Azerbaijan**

On September 3, Tofiq Yaqublu, an opposition politician, was charged for hooliganism and sentenced to four years of prison. He was arrested after a car crash followed by an argument with the other driver in March 2020. On September 2, Yaqublu had started a hunger strike as a sign of protest against the conviction. Since then, the authorities have been trying to associate his action with signs of psychological disorder. Apparently, Yuqublu was forced to sign a statement that would have confirmed his psychological issue. Refusing to do so, Yaqublu continues to be one of the most important figures, deputy chairman of the opposition party Musavat and a senior politician in the National Council of Democratic Forces. He and his defenders currently claim that the charges were knowingly fabricated in accordance with President Aliyev's means of dealing with the opposition forces. The conviction led supporters of Yaqublu to protest in the streets of Baku the last week. The authorities reacted by arresting almost 50 demonstrators.

### **Serbia and Azerbaijan**

In July a flare-up occurred between Armenia and Azerbaijan, causing 16 casualties in total. The same month, the arms trade between Armenia and Serbia was disclosed, hindering

the latter's relation with its Azerbaijani ally. This week, Serbian President Vucic qualified the sell as the “wrong decision” in order to make amends. Serbia has been benefiting from Azerbaijan’s support, especially regarding Kosovo independence. It is therefore in the country's interest improve its relations with Azerbaijan.

# WESTERN BALKANS



## SERBIA suspends military activities and chooses neutrality

by Artta Haxhixhemajli

In September, Serbia suspended military participation activity because of the pressure from the EU. The government of Serbia decided for this action, although, the Minister of Defense of Serbia, Aleksandar Vulin claimed that Serbia must remain stabilized, whilst the stake is at Serbia's European future. Since 2009, Serbia has applied for membership into the EU and it must refrain from any inconvenient actions and needs to proceed with the process of integration. Therefore, Serbia perceived the action of suspension in the next six months as pressure for correct progress. The suspension includes all the activities and military partners. The roots of tension are caused due to the establishment of the Slavic Brotherhood in 2020. All three members of the Slavic Brotherhood, Russia, Belarus, and Serbia gathered together for one common aim. The Slavic Brotherhood remains important even that has planned support for Lukashenko in the second half of September, one country as Serbia must be cautious in taking action on endangering potential membership.

As a matter of fact, Serbia has close ties with Belarus, an example when the President of Belarus, Lukashenko, visited Serbia last December 2019. Moreover, the situation in Belarus was deeply affected by the following dispute election last month. If Serbia sets any action, then it would have perceived negatively in prospects within the region and beyond.

### Serbia suspends military activities and chooses neutrality

Serbia's decision is not a short-term causality, it can be described as a probability of nonaligned position of one country. Given the situation in Belarus, any influence coming from the region of Western

Balkans are not welcomed from EU or even NATO. Simple as that, you either stay with one bloc or the other. Here, the best solution for Serbia is to remain neutral due to many constraints, taking into consideration the latest political development in the Western Balkans. Hence, Serbia declared openly that they would depend on their forces since the participation of the country in peacekeeping must consider probable suspension too.

**Serbia has close ties with Belarus. Therefore, if Belgrade sets any action, it could be perceived negatively for the future of the region and beyond**

In the following matter, suspension for 6 months might be seen as profitable for Serbia in terms of foreign affairs and international position. Any presumed involvement in Belarus's affairs is not discern as positive rather than withdrawal from future membership in EU. Above all, Serbia's decision to opt out of military activities is a strategic point. To put in another way, neutrality remains the key in this scenario until the political turbulence in Belarus is under scrutiny.

# CHINA & SOUTHEAST ASIA



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## **ASIA: Hong Kong and China Dispute: The Beginning of the End of “One Country, Two Systems”**

*by Jonathan St. Onge*

**T**he Chinese Communist Party, CCP, has systematically deteriorated Hong Kong’s domestic autonomy ever since the territory gained independence from British colonial rule in 1997. After gaining independence from British control in 1997, Hong Kong’s mini-constitution called the Basic Law guaranteed an interim arraignment of “one country, two systems” until 2047. The Basic Law decrees that Hong Kong would control its own internal affairs, while the CCP would have gain control of its external affairs. In this arrangement, Hong Kong would maintain a democratically elected legislative body and freedom of speech, press and assembly.

However, the CCP has violated the “one country, two systems” agreement by recently proposing a new slate of domestic laws within Hong Kong. In 2014 the CCP dictated that only pro-Beijing candidates would be allowed to run for office in Hong Kong’s legislative election, which then led to Hong Kong citizens to amass pro-democracy protests known as the “Umbrella Movement.” On April 2019, the CCP proposed an Extradition Bill that would allow the central government to extradite and prosecute Hong Kong citizens within mainland China. The Extradition Bill was later suspended, but it had the effect of reigniting the previous protests. On June 30th, 2020, the CCP passed the National Security law in Hong Kong by expanding unprecedented control of the territory. The National Security law criminalizes secession activity, acts of subversion toward the government, and colluding with foreign powers. The maximum penalty carries a life sentence, and the categorization of these violations are inherently vague.

It is widely believed by Hong Kong protesters that its legislative body has become a puppet government of Beijing. In response to the CCP’s actions the Hong Kong protesters have outlined five demands in order to retain its domestic autonomy. The five demands include a complete withdrawal of the Extradition Bill, a retraction of the ‘riot’ characterization that outlawed peaceful protesting, an immediate release and exoneration of arrested protesters, the establishment of an independent commission to investigate Hong Kong’s police, and the democratic right to free elections in Hong Kong’s legislation.

The current mass protests pose the most serious domestic challenge to the CCP since the 1989 pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, Beijing. Hong Kong remains the financial hub in China, and it would be politically and financially unwise to impose similar brutal crackdowns as it had done in Tiananmen Square. However, as the Chinese economy continues to grow dramatically as it has over the past two decades, the CCP is less willing to compromise in negotiations and is less restrained in use of police intimidation to contain the Hong Kong protesters. Although the US and Britain have condemned the CCP’s aggression in Hong Kong, they have not enforced meaningful foreign policies that would apply pressure on the CCP to cease its interference and abide by the Basic Law. Hong Kong’s future as an autonomous region is becoming increasingly perilous, and without foreign intervention Beijing will eventually dominate domestic control over Hong Kong before the interim agreement is set to expire.

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## **Southeast Asian populism in the face of COVID 19: from its rise to its fall**

*by Edmond Herrera*

In the last decade, Populism has experienced a renaissance. It increasingly proliferated to the point that it has gathered concern from the international community. Characterized by the rise of figures such as Donald Trump in the United States, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Narendra Modi in India as well as regional defining policies such as BREXIT. The Southeast-Asian regions also include states in which a populist figure was able to take power such as Rodrigo Duterte who secured power through his hard-fisted rhetoric promising change and a hard crackdown on drug addicts. The populist rise sparked concerns whether this trend will be short-lived or rather will deliberately define the political landscape of the coming years. However with the advent of the COVID-19 Pandemic this year, Populist leaderships globally have been observed to have the most shortcomings in terms of policies in the response to the pandemic (Leonhardt & Leatherby, 2020). Does this signify the inevitable fall of the populist regimes or is this just a temporary halt to the steady rise in southeast Asia?

COVID-19 proved to be a challenge globally. In Southeast Asia, COVID-19 is a diabolical policy challenge for every country but it has hit the hardest in countries where populists hold office. Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, and even Myanmar are SEA countries where populist leaders have come into power (Kenny, 2018). In Indonesia, the election was a choice between two popular populists with Joko Widodo winning the election. While Duterte garnered support with his hard-fisted appeal, Jokowi's appeal is derived from the humble beginnings that effectively portray him as a man of the people (Mietzner, 2015). Effectively winning the hearts of the masses against his more traditional populist counterpart. Whether by unsatisfactory economic conditions or by a strong disdain to what is deemed as the enemy class, populist figures utilized the previous socio-political conditions to charismatically mobilize the masses to gain power.

During a cabinet meeting, Jokowi lashed out at ministers over their response to the COVID-19 pandemic due to late handout shipments (Takahashi, 2020). Widodo's exasperation is warranted given that Indonesia is second to the Philippines in the number of cases with a 31.58 mortality rate and with over 220,000 COVID cases since September 5, lagging far behind from other ASEAN states with the country adding more than 1,000 new cases each day (CSIS, 2020). The president has also downplayed the threat while advocating for herbal remedies and has admitted to covering up the early spread of the virus for fear that it would harm the economy (The Star, 2020). Meanwhile, Duterte similarly delayed border closures against China in favor of preserving foreign ties while downplaying the threat of the pandemic in its early stages (Rappler, 2020). He refused to replace local incompetent local officials who have broken against established quarantine protocols and with surfacing corruption allegations over personnel with medical and scientific expertise (Aguilar, 2020). Over at the Cambodian parliament, it has passed a law granting Hun Sen, already an autocrat, problematic powers including the ability to conduct electronic eavesdropping and curtail freedom of assembly and speech (Rizvi, 2020). Additionally, Duterte intensified the crackdown on local media and passed the infamous anti-terror law. Populist regimes have used COVID-19 to accumulate power, under the pretense of safety as in the case of Cambodia and Philippines, to attack the media, and silence critics rather than opting for transparency to assure the people's confidence and safety. The lack of preparedness in the early stages in these states proved devastating, leading to a lack of a cohesive health response in the following months, favoring a more intuitive approach to policy rather than mirroring policy on medicine and science.

What was once considered the populist scare of the 21st century has shown what it's capable of in the scenario of a worldwide pandemic. The Populist reliance on crude charismatic strategy and intuitive thinking pales in comparison to

structured policy on health and other aspects. The tendency of populist countries in the SEA to secure people's safety through authoritarian means has rather done more harm than good. Such as in the case of the Philippines, public support of the president is only getting worse as the pandemic goes on (Tuquero, 2020). Perhaps this is an indicator of the decline of populism in southeast Asia or will the populist regimes simply regain power using the same textbook strategies?

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## ASIA: The EU-China Leader's meeting doesn't deliver the expected outcomes

by *Martina Furlan*

In the long-awaited EU-China Leader's meeting held on 14 September 2020, the parties were expected to achieve breakthrough in trade & investment, climate change, and human rights. No major leap was achieved. While Brussels evaluates the progress with cautious optimism, it looks like Beijing is carelessly dragging its feet from the outside.

Since the 2019 [EU-China Strategy](#), the EU decided to treat China with a flexible approach, as it marked the People's Republic both as a **cooperating partner and a systemic rival**. Looking through the prism of actorness, the EU wants to promote its values beyond its borders, based on **balance and reciprocity**. Yet the Asian counterparts see themselves as actors too, and they are willing to shape their external relations on their terms.

In this EU-China waltz, the fight to lead the dancing is challenging.

In August, the Chinese foreign Minister, Weng Xi visited Europe's capitals to **secure the Belt and Road Initiative development** after a summer signed by criticism from the EU regarding the erosion of human rights in China. The Minister signed trade deals with individual European

countries and achieved two things: to secure key EU capitals before the Leaders' meeting, and to show China's ability to deal with the EU in a divisive way; once with capitals alone, the other time with Brussels.

Against this background, it is no wonder that at the Leader's Meeting, **less progress was achieved than the EU expected**.

Regarding **trade and investments**, the EU aimed to conclude the Comprehensive Agreement on Investments (CAI) by the end of 2020. Brussels said progress was achieved regarding state-owned enterprises and intellectual property regimes, but more work was needed regarding market access in food trade and digital and financial services. Meaning that we are far from a conclusive deal regarding the CAI, the only comprehensive agreement the EU has with China, negotiated since 2013. Regarding **climate change**, the EU leaders pushed China to aim for climate neutrality by 2060 or face punitive carbon tariffs. One day later, China's Foreign Ministry said they were considering a mid-century vision for climate change, including peaking of carbon dioxide emissions and carbon neutrality. Goal scored for the EU, but it remains to see whether China will walk the talk. The topic of **human rights and the rule of law** was left at the bottom of the agenda, and China just took note of the EU's concern regarding Hong Kong and the treatment of minorities.

While climate change can be considered on paper, a step forward, the progress on issues where China needs to deviate considerably from its principles remains mild. Progress was achieved where the EU exerted substantial leverage, such as the threat of carbon tariffs. **If the EU wants to lead the dancing in the ballroom, it needs to find the right leverage** - in trade and investment relations, the threat of protectionism, and in case of human rights, the sanctions tool.

# LATIN AMERICA



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## Colombia: Analysis on the increase of massacres in 2020

by *Maria Catalina Ospina*

The beginning of the year 2020 marked a new spike of violence in Colombia that was thought to be over for good. Since January, the Institute of Studies for Development and Peace (Indepaz in Spanish), has reported 55 massacres around the country, a much higher number than the 33 reported by the Colombian office of the High Commissioner of the United Nations for Human Rights, and even higher to the only 12 that the Ministry of Defense reported. It is worth noting that the definition of massacre may change depending on the entity recording them. Despite this difference, there is a consensus that the number of massacres has increased significantly in the last two years.

Although all of the responsables for said violence have not been identified, the UN reports that most of these massacres have occurred in places that have been impacted by illegal economies (mainly drugs), poverty, low State presence and illegal armed groups such as the ELN or FARC dissidences. Other causes could be rooted in the implementation of the peace treaty that was signed in 2016 and that has been highly criticized by the current president of Colombia, Ivan Duque. However, the connection between the spike in violence around the country and the current government has yet to be better analyzed. The influential online portal called Verdad Abierta, or Open Truth points out that many territories where massacres have occurred coincide with government projects of militarization, which may have pushed armed groups into action, and worsen the already difficult communication between the government and the local communities.

Currently, the government has condemned the situation through official channels, however this has not stopped many from the opposition from openly critiquing Duque's management of the crisis, deepening even more the unstable political situation in the country. On the other hand, Duque has tried to fortify military efforts in the most conflictive zones, like Cauca and Nariño, since the middle of 2019. Yet, despite the government's best efforts, the massacres have not ceased and in September alone, Indepaz reported 6 new cases. Accordingly, the UN has publicly called for more action to be taken. In summary, the situation is still being monitored but has not improved through the year, and has deepened a fragile political and social environment.

Due to a high level of unpopularity and outrage throughout many social groups towards the government, seen clearly in the recent manifestations in Bogota, I predict that the situation will only get worse. Even further, the Coronavirus pandemic and the economic crisis that have hit the country have highly restricted the governmental action, making the solution of the problem hard to finance or manage.

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## BRAZIL: The Intelligence Agency

by *Angel Adams*

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## **LATINA AMERICA: “The Presidential Election of the Inter-American Development Bank and its importance for the stability of the region”**

*by Robert Anglin*

The Board of Directors of the Inter-American Development Bank, held what can be labelled as the most controversial presidential election in recent history. In the mist of the economic contraction, bordering with a full-blown economic recession that Latin America faces due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, a new President for the Bank was elected on September 12, 2020.

To clarify a bit of the importance for the stability of the region, is essential to contextualize the relevance of the bank, and why this election raises more questions than it normally would. The IADB was founded on December 30, 1959 by the “*Agreement Establishing the Inter-American Development Bank*” as a contributor of the “*acceleration of the process of economic and social development of the regional developing member countries, individually and collectively.*” Needless to say the IADB, as a creation of the Organization of American States, is an important regional player as a lender of credit and investment for the Latin American States, who should use it to finance development projects in their countries. Traditionally the entity had been a presided by a Latin American citizen with an

American-Vice President, for this election the two main candidates were proposed, the former President of Costa Rica Miss Laura Chinchilla Miranda, and Gustavo Béliz from Argentina. Nonetheless for various reasons, mainly due to the economic challenges the regions faces, the Latin American candidacies were withdrawn, with even a push by some States to move the election further into next year, to no avails as the election was carried out even with an seeming attempt at boycott from Argentina.

The election result set a breach on the tradition as Mr. Mauricio Claver-Carone, an American candidate was elected al President of the IADB. Why is this worrying to some? Mr. Claver-Carone in tightly linked with the administration of President Donald J. Trump as a lobbyist<sup>21</sup>; a proclaimed hardliner in regards of Cuba and China, the later an important investor in Latin America, is unknown how this shift in leadership would affect the credit flowing from the IADB to the region.

The full extend of the effects of this designation are yet to be seen, as Mr. Claver-Carone's term will not start until after September 30. Its unclear if his tenure, given his personal convictions and proximity with the current US administration, would limit the access to credits and investment, in detriment of the political al economic stability of the Latin American region.

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## **VENEZUELA: Suspected US spy and the failure of Trump's maximum pressure strategy**

*by Galasso Gloria*

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On 11 September, the president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, announced a US citizen's capture accusing him of espionage and terrorist plot to sabotage oil refineries and the power grid. The suspected spy was captured in the state of Falcón, on the north-west coast of the country. According to the Venezuelan chief prosecutor, Tarek William Saab, the spy is a former US marine and CIA agent, identified with the name of Matthew John Heath. The US citizen was reportedly found with weapons, such as a grenade launcher, plastic explosives, a satellite phone, and a significant amount of US dollars. His targets were the Amuay and Cardón oil facilities, which are located in the Paraguaná Refining Center, in the state of Falcón. US authorities have not made any observations on the case. The Associated Press could not immediately contact Heath, a lawyer or relative, to represent him for comment on the allegations.

### **Trump's maximum pressure strategy is failing**

Venezuela had to close its refineries after difficulties due to US sanctions. However, the Cardón refinery was successfully restarted in April after Iran provided vital material to restart its catalytic cracking unit. The aid was followed shortly after by five oil tankers sent from Iran to compensate for the severe shortcomings created by the refineries' closure. The relationship between Iran and Venezuela started when Venezuela hosted the 2006 OPEC summit. The then-Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez formed a personal tie to his Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. However, Tehran's intervention infuriated Washington, which is trying to isolate Maduro politically and Tehran commercially, by alienating its trading partners with unilateral sanctions. Washington justified the unilateral measures, that also affect Caracas'

trading partners, by pointing the finger at Maduro's re-election's alleged illegality. Yet Washington's current approach to both seems to be strengthening their hold on power. Hence, the maximum pressure strategy is doing nothing to enable the aspirations of Iranians or Venezuelans; instead, it's just depriving them of resources. Meanwhile, Tehran and Caracas leaders show no signs of bending to external pressure or their populations' desires.

### **In preparation for the forthcoming American elections**

A possible Joe Biden's presidency will not revolutionize the American offensive against Nicolás Maduro's Venezuela, even if it may vary. At the most, Biden will look for more significant consultation with other international actors to be more closely involved in negotiations and sanctioning efforts. Finally, the obstacles to a solution to the Venezuelan crisis remain almost unchanged. To heal the socio-economic, ethnic, and political fractures, it will be necessary to offer concrete guarantees and incentives: such as targeted relaxation of sanctions, safe-conduct for state and military leaders, assurances on the future internal equilibrium, also on an economic level. A process that will have to consider the influence of actors such as Cuba (towards which Biden suggests a reopening), China, Russia, and Iran.

conscious acts by those who governed during this period". The referendum would be scheduled, if approved by the senate, 6 of June 2021 landing it around the time of the midterm elections. This comes during the rise of fraudulent crime throughout the country and the mass surge of 'pirate ambulances'. 'Pirate ambulances' are poorly equipped that drive throughout the city listening to emergency radio's and arrive at patients home's in record time where they charge family members. Charges range from \$175 - \$350 for rides to private clinics or for basic medical services needed but have been reported to come as high as \$1,400. These 'medical personal' openly hassle patients' family members, driving them to private clinics that payout to these ambulances for bringing patients in. These 'pirate ambulances' are just one of the many crime factions that are/have been happening throughout the country; cati smuggling in Ensenada being another one that is on the rise. This multimillion dollar business is rising as one of Mexico's leading smuggled goods being listed below drugs and guns. It is unclear how President Obrador will be able to handle this continual rise of crime throughout his country. With his 'campaign' centered around opening investigations against former presidents this allows for some pressure to be taken away from the decision making of his administration in regard to the handling of the pandemic and economic problems.

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## **MEXICO: Country's Crime in Brief**

*by Megan Pollenz*

**M**exican president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador called for a referendum in regard to opening investigations against his predecessors in a morning press conference Tuesday. The investigations will center around the corruption that has 'systemically' been in place since 1988. Obrador stated, "The social and humanitarian disasters we have suffered in this country over the last 30 years were the result of a series of

# NATO & THE WORLD

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## NATO: The Afghan Peace Negotiations

by *Ines Macieira*

19 years after the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York and the consequential war in Afghanistan it originated, Afghan peace negotiations initiated in Doha, Qatar. A mutual agreement between the Taliban and the United States is expected to be followed by a phased American and NATO military withdrawal from the area and intra-Afghan peace negotiations. In addition to the United States, regional powers like Pakistan, China, and Russia, as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), act as facilitators to the peace process.

NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg spoke at the inaugural ceremony of intra-Afghan talks. Stoltenberg highlighted how the negotiations between the Afghan authorities and the Taliban are a historic opportunity for peace. NATO's Secretary-General expressed his desire for Afghanistan to become a country where international terrorists are not accepted. "Afghans want peace and so does the international community, which has supported Afghanistan on this long, hard road. Much has been sacrificed along the way, by Afghans, and our own troops," he said. "These sacrifices were not made in vain."

In order to honour the civilian and military sacrifices made during this 19-year long conflict, it is essential for NATO to assure that peace is not achieved without addressing women's rights. The 2004 Afghanistan Constitution protects women's freedom of expression and education, which has suppressed under Afghanistan's Taliban rule. Khalilzad, Ghani, his rival in the presidency Abdullah Abdullah, and several other Afghan officials affirmed that these rights must be protected and should not be sacrificed in a peace agreement.

Continued aggression between both parties is a hindrance to a definitive peace treaty. Although tentative negotiations were ongoing, the Taliban proceeded to conduct acts of terrorism in the nation's capital. According to figures published by the United States Air Force in February 2020, the United States dropped more bombs in Afghanistan in 2019 than every other year since 2013.

The United States Ambassador in Afghanistan cautioned that a peace accord could allow the rise of the Taliban to authority, equivalent to the result of the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, in which the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government was ousted in the defeat of Saigon. Pakistan advised that escalated instability in the Gulf region following the ordered execution of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani could affect the already stalled US – Afghanistan peace agreement.

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## NATO: The Serbian attitude. Trojan horse, Rogue Partner or Cautious Ally?

by *Shary Mitidieri*

In the past weeks, some observers are (rightfully) trying to bring back the focus to NATO's Southern flank, neglected by joint declarations at least since the London Summit (2019). But these observers also notice how security threats coming from the Southern and Eastern front are welding, progressively forming a continuous belt around the Euro-Atlantic quadrant. The main antagonists are the ever-present Russia and the newcomer China, whose action is mainly focused on the Western Balkans and, specifically, Serbia.

The Chinese interest in the area dates back at least to 2014, when the state-owned China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) started building the first section of the Bar-Belgrade highway.

More recently, China National Biotec Group (CNBG) and Sinovac Biotech Ltd declared that Serbia has agreed to run Phase-3 clinical tests of their coronavirus vaccine and, although Serbian Health Minister Zlatibor Lončar precised that security conditions are not yet met, he reassured that Serbia will be among the first to receive a vaccine.

Finally, in early July Serbia purchased six Chinese CH-92A attack/reconnaissance drones. This makes Serbia the first European country to

deploy Chinese unmanned aerial vehicles. Although the Chinese Global Times claims that NATO is being over-sensitive to the purchase, it is undeniable that it holds a high symbolic value. It does not help the cause of Serbian reliability, the fact that a giant cartel stands between the Parliament and the Presidential Palace, reciting “Serbs and Chinese brothers forever”.

These elements, taken together, suggest that Serbia can be defined, at best, as an ambiguous (and frustrated) partner for NATO and Europe. On the one hand, it remains committed to joining the EU. On the other, it still refuses to recognize Kosovo and it’s far behind in its democratization process, and these shortcomings are likely what prompts Vučić to keep a foot in both camps.

On the positive side, Serbia will not engage in the Slavic Brotherhood 2020 military exercise along with Russia and Belarus, allegedly due to EU pressure.

Thus, at the moment, three scenarios appear possible (from the least to the most desirable for NATO):

1) The “Trojan horse”: Serbia could favor Russia and China in virtue of the immediate benefits they boast about, effectively renouncing the development and integration offered by the Partnership for Peace (PFP) and the EU;

2) The “Rogue Partner”: Serbia could decide to “hedge its bets” and procrastinate the decision over its international position, with the risk of being unable to ever reach significant political wins (such as putting an end to the Kosovo issue) to avoid displease either camp;

3) The “Cautious Ally”: Serbia could take some significant steps to show reliability towards NATO and the EU, even though it means giving away some degree of autonomy in international politics.

The announcement that, for now, Serbia will not participate in *any* military exercise, seems to indicate that Vučić is still inclined to pursue the second option, and maintain an ambiguous posture.

# MIDDLE EAST & SAHEL



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## Lebanon and French Stratagems: Shaping Consent

by Arushi Singh

French President Emmanuel Macron has announced plans to visit Lebanon in December [of 2020](#). This will be his third visit to the country in a single year, made even more significant due to the ongoing global pandemic. Macron's mediations during his earlier visits have proved [essential](#) in facilitating acquiescence between the Lebanese political leaders' regarding [Mustapha Adib](#)'s appointment as prime minister. Moreover, during his prior visits, Macron had refocused attention on the need for [reforms](#) aimed at tackling the financial and corruption swamp overwhelming the country as well as threatening its stability.

Lebanon's stability is besieged by an economy ravaged by an economic catastrophe which has been plummeting the country's [currency](#), an untenable [refugee](#) influx, intensifying [sectarian](#) tensions, [mass protests](#) ignited due to electricity and water shortages aggravated by a [bloated public sector quelled](#) only by [surging](#) coronavirus cases. Moreover, the August 4<sup>th</sup> colossal port [blast](#) has led to concerns regarding [food security](#) exacerbated by unprecedented corruption under the entrenched governing elites as well as the creeping influence of [Hezbollah](#).

As such the French has had to reassure regional allies, European and American partners that they are there to act as "[honest brokers](#)" and to dispel fears regarding [neo-colonialism](#). Macron has even committed to organizing an [aid conference](#) for the economically wrecked country on [October](#) end on the initiation of reforms. This has awakened apprehensions that aid will be utilized to extract [concessions](#) as well as protecting French interests in the country including [natural](#)

[gas exploration](#). Nevertheless, Macron has been willing to utilize disciplinary mechanisms such as holding off on the release of [bailout money and sanctions](#) on the [ossified](#) governing class thus refusing Lebanese leaders [carte-blanche until the Lebanese leaders unify around change](#).

To rally the Lebanese leadership, Macron met with a top Hezbollah official directly. This was done despite demands from [Washington to punish](#) the Iran-backed Shiite faction which is considered by France to be a [key political actor](#) whose cooperation is needed to lift Lebanon out of calamity. However, considerable limitations pertaining to French abilities to implement change have come to the fore as well such as the complexity involved in overcoming [US-Iranian rivalry](#) affecting Lebanese politics, overstretch of French resources which are scattered across the [Sahel](#), [Libya](#) as well as against [Turkey](#) in the Eastern Mediterranean which is vying for [influence in Lebanon](#) as well.

Therefore, France has to exert influence through its financial expertise and to that end has been co-chairing the [International Support Group for Lebanon](#) (ISGL) which has secured 11 billion dollars in the aid package. However, that package is not to be released until financial reforms are implemented. Prime Minister-designate Mustapha Adib is anticipated to [present](#) a draft Cabinet line-up in matters pertaining to the appointment of the Finance Minister as well as other ministries which will be crucial in the implementation of such reforms. Appointment of ministers has become an emotive issue Adib has [not been consulting](#) Shia and Christian factions which also threatens the sustainability of the cabinet thus formed. Macron's [deadline](#) for cabinet formation was likewise not adhered to. Moreover, Adib is also expected to hold parliamentary elections while [constructing a concrete timetable](#) for the reforms.

Macron's detractors, however, believe that the [full breadth](#) of French power is not being utilized. Instead, the core of Macron's policy has been fiscal changes as well as public policy

formulation. The French embassy in Lebanon circulated a "draft program for the new government", for the heads of different political factions to get the warring entities focused on humanitarian aid, transparent governance, the appointment of members as well as resources to the [National Anti-Corruption Commission](#), reconstruction after the Beirut blast be based on international institutions assessments, strengthening oversight to ports, resumption of negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and time limits for sector-specific reforms for Lebanon to recover.

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## **SYRIA: Trump Wanted to Assassinate Assad**

*by El Mahdi Mouajib*

**S**yrria's current President Bashar Al Assad is without a doubt a war criminal and a dictator. His war crimes include bombing cities all over Syria and killing thousands of innocent people while fighting his opponents. For some reason, no western nation was able to take him down as they did to his former counterparts Libya's longtime dictator Gaddafi and Iraq's Saddam Hussein. In April 2017, the whole world was shocked when al-Assad used chemical weapons, illegal according to international law, against innocent Syrian civilians, many of whom were children. Horrific videos spread all over the internet and trended on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In a show of force, President Trump decided to retaliate by striking a Syrian airbase housing the same plane that was used by the oppressive regime to drop the toxic chemicals with multiple Tomahawk missiles.

However, according to renowned Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward, Trump wanted to assassinate Assad in the same way he assassinated Iran's military general Quassem Suleimani earlier this year. Trump of course denounced the book and called it fake news. Earlier this week, President Donald Trump

admitted in a Fox News interview that he wanted to assassinate Assad contradicting himself yet another time. Trump claimed that he had 1 everything set up for him to take the dictator out, but his then secretary of defense opposed the assassination attempt and so he decided to listen to his advice. Assassinating foreign leaders is not legal and the president of the United States does not have the power to order such an act.

The change in policy happened exactly a little over four decades ago when President Gerald Ford issued the first executive order prohibiting any government agency or employee from engaging an assassination attempt. 1 Assassinating Bashar al-Assad may seem like the right thing to do but there is little evidence that doing so would make the conflict in Syria less horrific. It is very difficult to predict who would take his place. Additionally, getting rid of Assad would trigger the extremists on the ground who would then attempt to take over Damascus and cities such as Aleppo again. General Mattis's decision to not only ignore Donald Trump but to convince not to go forward with the assassination was the right and moral thing to do. This incident is a perfect example of how Donald Trump has little respect for both US law and international law. Trump could easily change the law with another executive order nullifying the one that established the four-decade ban on assassinations. An executive order is not the law of the land and can be changed.

If Donald Trump wanted to kill Bashar al-Assad or any other foreign adversary, he would simply need to replace Ford's executive order with his directive. Unless Congress moves to codify the executive order, Trump can change the law and order the assassination of any leader he deems dangerous for national security. Donald Trump is a president that does not value tradition and long-held customs and policy standards, and so it is very possible that if re-elected, the American people would wake up one day to an America similar to that of the Cold War era. An America in which the CIA was engaged in secret assassinations and bizarre schemes to take down world leaders and install puppets leaders

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## SUDAN: Is the Peace Agreement with rebels going to last?

by *Giulia Messeri*

In late August, Sudan's transitional government and the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) - a coalition of five rebel groups and four political movements - signed a peace agreement to end the 17 years conflict in Darfur and the southern regions of South Kordofan and the Blue Nile. According to UN estimates, the conflict has counted 300,000 dead and 2.7 millions of people internally displaced. Expected to be signed formally on 3 October, the agreement has been described by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres as a "historic achievement" towards lasting peace, since it aims at delivering justice, building stability, and ensuring a democratic transition, cornerstones of the revolution that overthrew President Omar al-Bashir.

The peace deal is ambitious for its comprehensive nature; it tackles the roots of the Sudanese conflict by focusing on the historically marginalized groups and by dealing with issues of identity, religion and ethnicity, social justice, resource and land rights, discrimination, and marginalization at the local and national level.

The deal promotes a power-sharing system in which the armed groups will have three of the eleven seats of the Sovereign Council (the transitional government higher body), and 25% of seats in the Cabinet and the transitional parliament. Moreover, the fighters of the rebel groups will be included in the government security forces, prompting thus the government to broader reform of the security sector.

The peace agreement will address also the consequences of the conflict by granting access to humanitarian aid in conflict-affected areas, by

promoting a safe return home for IDPs voluntarily, by advancing development and reconstruction programs for the regions and communities most affected by the conflict. In terms of justice and accountability, the deal grants amnesty for political and military leaders of the rebel groups, while instead sets the stage for domestic trials for Bashir and other members of the former regime. Bashir will also appear before the International Criminal Court (ICC), from which is accused of crimes against humanity and genocide.

Despite being exhaustive in addressing the roots of the conflict, the deal is not inclusive given that it has not been signed by two important armed groups, specifically a wing of the Darfur-based Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and a faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N). Undoubtedly, this could endanger a long-lasting peace if the armed groups decide to spoil the process to advance their agendas.

When analyzing Sudan's peace process, it must be also considered the failures of the 2006 and 2011's peace agreements and the difficulties in implementing peace on the ground, especially during a fragile political transition, a pandemic, and an unprecedented flood.

The peace agreement with rebels represents surely an important step to end nearly two decades of deeply rooted violence, nonetheless for it to be successful, the transitional government will have to find a way to build trust among the signatory parties and the political movements in the country, mitigate the resistance from groups of the former regime and armed militias, ensure that ethnic violence won't reignite and more generally address the security issues in the region.

At the moment, the security situation in Darfur remains fragile. According to the Security Council Committee, parties in Sudan have continued to transfer weapons and other military materials in violation of the arms embargo, attacks against civilians have increased and

intercommunal clashes have been recorded especially as refugees try to return to their lands.

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## **ISRAEL: “Water for Peace” with Palestine**

*by Greyson Rowlands*

**I**srael is a water superpower in an arid region where water is a scarce resource. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has called the 1967 Six Day War – that brought the Gaza Strip and much of the West Bank under Israeli occupation – a war fought over water. Since Israel’s inception, Arab and Israeli governments have not cooperated well. Religious and nationalist violence, fractured governance in the Palestinian Authority, and settlements have led to a Palestinian society seemingly in a perpetual state of water crisis. Fewer than four percent of the water in the Gaza Strip is not suitable for consumption. Most of the population of the West Bank’s Area C, almost entirely under the authority of Israeli construction guidelines and law enforcement, suffers a disconnect from the water network and inconsistent water resupplies. Despite restricted movements in and out of Palestinian territories, especially the Gaza Strip, many Palestinians are dependent on trucks delivering water at high prices.

Polls reflect pragmatic realism among Palestinians that suggests most believe a one-state solution would never work, nor would an irredentist ambition be successful, and a two-state solution is losing popularity. In essence, there exists no broad consensus among Palestinians on what a viable solution is for Palestinian governance. Because of this disunity, the status quo is likely to continue for the foreseeable future but is fragile enough that Israeli provocation could easily be met with violence, as was foreshadowed by the intention to annex parts of

the West Bank. That annexation plan was ultimately suspended in return for the normalization of relations with the UAE in an accord that contains language discussing cooperative water management and sharing water technology.

With insufficient governance in Palestine, Israel has a possible strategic approach to provide clean, affordable drinking water to Palestinians. Israel should follow this duty in subsidizing costs of water deliveries in Palestine, repairing aquifers, and cleaning freshwater pollutants to create viable water sources. While fulfilling these duties, Israel will be taking a more humanitarian approach to the conflict and will gradually reduce support for violent resistance. In turn, taking proactive steps to address the water deficiencies in occupied territory opens avenues for future peace talks.

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## **MALI: Months of protests and security spur into a coup d’état**

*by Giovanna Giuriolo*

**I**n the past few weeks, the ongoing tensions in the West African country of Mali finally escalated, and the country experienced its fourth military coup since its independence. On August 18<sup>th</sup> a group of soldiers in a military base in Kati, a city 15 km from the capital Bamako, mutinied. The soldiers arrested the president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and Prime Minister Boubou Cisse. This comes after weeks of protests from the Malian people and the opposition party Mouvement du 5 Juin-Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques (M5-RFP), demanding Keita’s resignation and new elections. On August 19<sup>th</sup> president Keita resigned with a television statement handing over the power to the military junta, the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP).

The coup d'état is the result of years of general discontent with the Malian population. After a military coup in 2012 that overthrew the then-president Amadou Toumani Touré, Mali has experienced violence in the northern part of the country, where militia groups affiliated to the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have been carrying out attacks on both civilians and the military. In the past year, around 1000 soldiers have died due to confrontations with militia groups. Clashes between different ethnic groups have also exacerbated the situation in the northern region.

Adding to security issues is economic stagnation and alleged government corruption. Before the August 18<sup>th</sup> coup, the opposition party M5-RFP and part of the population have been challenging the result of parliamentary elections that took place in March, when after the kidnap of the prominent opposition candidate Soumaila Cisse, and polling complications due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the president was able to win seats in the parliament thanks to an overturn from the constitutional court after fraud allegations. This prompted one of the main opposition figures, Imam Mahmoud Dicko, to call for protests and demand Keita's resignation.

Since the CNSP took power, the junta released former president Keita, who fled to the UAE. Regional and international organizations like ECOWAS and the AU stepped in and tried to bring the different parties to the table to achieve a peaceful transition back to democracy. Transition talks began on August 22<sup>nd</sup>. ECOWAS rejected the CNSP's request for a three-year transition and is pressuring the junta and the M5-RFP opposition to reach an agreement as soon as possible, probably fearing civil unrest and a political vacuum that could result in a further escalation of violence by militia groups in Mali and neighbor countries.

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## Oil Crisis in Iraq in the pandemic era: Arab Spring 2.0

*by Ferrer, Marguerite Marie A.*

Following the Arab Spring event in 2011 marked another political and economic transformation among the Middle Eastern and African states. It started with political uprisings and protests which paved the way for the transformation of political regimes; thus, affecting the political, social, and economic status in the aftermath of this event. However, nearly after almost a decade collapsed, another wave of protests erupted across the Middle East and North Africa region. But this time it was due to the economic recession brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the world confronts a global economic crisis exacerbated by the current pandemic, its drastic consequences highlight the severity in fragile countries; of which economic stability would most likely suffer in fragile countries due to the following factors: (a) further debt to refinance broken health systems, (b) lose tax revenues, and (c) falling oil prices. Among the factors to consider in this article, oil will be the focus of the paper.

Hence, this article aims to analyze how the COVID-19 pandemic and dwindling oil revenues affect Iran's fragility. In fragile contexts, such as Iraq, high levels of conflict, pandemic crisis, and drop in oil revenues will develop a sense of insecurity among the people. Furthermore, the aforementioned problems will result in extreme poverty resulting in social inequality. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2020), Iraq's economy is dominated by oil. Based on the World Top Exports (2020), Iraq is hailed as the world's third largest oil exporter<sup>9</sup>with an 8.3 percent market share worth US\$83.3 billion in 2019. Consequently, it is

considered as the world's fifth largest proven reserves of petroleum at 144.2 billion barrels.

Since Iraq is an oil-producing state; thus, its wealth and resources are highly dependent on oil. With the COVID-19 pandemic, health and economic sectors need to be balanced. However, since the focus should be more on healthcare systems, employment and education as Iraq also battles in this pandemic crisis, the government is very critical also to nudge the balance yet with the fall of the oil revenue, there are sectors which will be sacrificed resulting in further economic vulnerabilities. Oil is the lifeblood of the economy of Iraq. In order to generate revenue and fund public services, Iraq should improve its security situation and recovery in oil prices for the reformation of its economic vulnerability. Such a reform is vitally essential to fully sheathe Iraq from the repercussions of oil price fluctuations. If Iraq will not be able to overcome the oil crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this economic fragility will definitely go for a long period of time resulting in perhaps, another revolution or worse, another Arab Spring 2.0; in which the people and the state will suffer severely.

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## **CHINA & MIDDLE EAST: From economic interests to security cooperation?**

*by Kristína Lehutová*

**S**ince the end of the Cold War and then after the Arab spring in 2011, the Middle East (ME) has become a priority geostrategic region for China. First and foremost, China is the number one importer of crude oil from countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, or Oman. Secondly, since 2013 the ME has been prioritized within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Therefore, numerous MENA countries are now in strategic partnership

with China concerning mainly trade deals. On the other hand, while economic cooperation with MENA countries is deepening security involvement in the region becomes inevitable. China has been involved in anti-piracy and maritime security missions and mediation efforts concerning Syria. It has also stood behind the persuasion of Tehran to sign the Iran nuclear deal and it established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017.

Furthermore, maritime chokepoints in the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb contribute to the strategic importance of the region due to China's economic interests and the construction of the BRI. While the presence of the United States (US) in the ME is decreasing China declares it does not aim to fill the emerging gap. Relations between the two are guided by China's non-interference principle and its vision of a multipolar order. More formally, China's relations towards the ME are written down in the Arab Policy Paper from 2016 and in the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk and Road Economic Belt and 21-st Century Maritime Silk Road from 2015. Both deal mostly with economic aspects of the relationship. However, the Arab policy Paper refers to some security aspects of the cooperation as well. China bases it on the military cooperation within anti-terrorism initiatives, weapons, and intelligence and long-term security mechanisms and policy dialogue.

These are all declaration but what is the actual standpoint of China in the ME when concerning security in the region? Could the relationship be still characterized by non-interference or does China become more involved in the security aspects of the ME politics? In order to define the security standpoint of China in the ME, I would consider the following aspects of security cooperation between China and the ME:

1. The military presence of China in the ME and joint exercises in comparison to financial support for regional militaries and the supply of weapons made by China to the ME;

2. Chinese anti-terrorism initiatives in the ME vs. cooperation including technical and intelligence sharing, policy dialogue, and long-term security mechanisms. In other words, does China aim for deeper cooperation or does it want to build its security guarantees within the region?

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## SOMALIA: The brutality of Al-Shabaab and COVID-19

by Meghna Muralidharan

On [7<sup>th</sup> September 2020](#), three Somalian military personnel were killed and two others were injured along with an American service member. The latest example of insurgency has been existing in the Horn of Africa for a long period of time. According to the official reports, a truck laden with explosives detonated at a military outpost in the Jana Abdalle area in the Lower Juba region of southern Somalia. The attack was a retaliation by the terrorist group, as the area was reclaimed by the Somalian army with the support of American military personnel. The number of attacks initiated by Al-Shabab has increased over the period of time. The violent attacks claim to have taken the lives of thousands of people including politicians, eminent journalists, religious and innocent citizens. As the world tries to counter the pandemic, countries in the Horn of Africa are battling against insurgent groups threatening the stability and political integrity.

Al Shabaab or “Youth”, is a popular Islamist insurgent group based in Somalia. The militant group created havoc in Mogadishu and large portions of the Somali countryside. The insurgency remains a major security challenge for war-torn Somalia and continues to witness brutal attacks on the civilians and western forces in the region. The Islamist insurgent group Al-Shabaab with links to al-Qaeda has been active since [2006](#) and the group waged a war against the

Transitional Federal Government of Somalia. The group originated as a militia affiliated with the Islamic Courts Union and the group has been targeting youths. The main objective of this group is to establish an “Islamic state” in Somalia and to oppose the “western-backed government”. Its war is hugely asymmetrical where it depends on hit and run attacks, assassination, and murders.

### Al Shabaab and COVID 19

Like the rest of the world, cases of Covid-19 have witnessed an upward trajectory in Somalia and the poor health care system continues to be a challenge for the country. Somalia ranks 194<sup>th</sup> out of 195 on the Global Health Security Index and the civil wars have hampered the health-care system. Somalia has only [2 healthcare workers per 100,000 people](#) and 15 ICU beds for a population of more than 15 million. Furthermore, the country is considered to be the least prepared nation in the world to detect and control the spread of the pandemic. The increasing cases of Covid-19 have however not impacted the activities of Al-Shabab and despite the various measures like that of social-distancing implemented by the government officials, the insurgent groups have carried out attacks. To add to this, they have also been targeting health care workers and destroying camps.

Top leaders of Al-Shabaab had initially rejected the spread of the virus and claimed that the virus was a punishment by Allah. The group used various means of communication such as [Radio al Furqan and Radio al Andalus](#) and social media sites such as Calamada and Somali Memo and suggested that the diseases were a western problem and had no impact on their region. Months after resorting to this belief, the group has started a treatment camp and have been urging people to come and treat themselves.

### Way Forward

The unchallenged activities of Al-Shabaab may have an adverse effect on the people of the region much more than before. Security experts need to focus more on the current situation so that Al-

Shabab does not take advantage of the pandemic to fulfill its objectives. Knowing the brutality carried out by Al-Shabaab stringent measures must be taken to counter this challenge.

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## **ISRAEL-UAE: The Peace Agreement as the first step towards peace in the Middle East**

*by Stefania Rinaldi*

**O**n August 13, 2020, a peace agreement, the “Abraham Accords”, between Israel and the United Arab Emirates was announced and was officially signed on September 15. This event is the first one between a Gulf Arab state and Israel and follows the peace treaty with Egypt in 1979 and with Jordan in 1994.

This treaty serves to normalize the relation between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Both countries will have diplomatic ties, including the exchanging of ambassadors and embassies, as well as the establishment of telephone lines between the two countries. Furthermore, Israel will suspend its annexation plan of several areas in the West Bank, while the UAE will trade with Israel and cooperate in different sectors. Finally, the treaty plays an influential role in the current political situation in the Middle East, as it serves to “enhance security cooperation against regional threats, especially from Iran and its proxies”. After the announcement of the terms of the treaty, Bahrain agreed on September 11 to sign a peace treaty with Israel.

Although the proclamation of Abraham Accords came unexpected, they were at the same time predictable. This new cooperation between Israel and the UAE has a strategic value and brings deterrence against Iran, which has been becoming powerful in the Middle East. The JCPOA “did not prohibit Iran from developing more advanced

centrifuges, capable of swiftly enriching uranium and significantly reducing the time Iran would need to create a nuclear arsenal”, which is also used to expand Iran’s influence in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. As such, Iran has become dangerous to other countries, thus indirectly inciting the UAE and Bahrain to make allies.

After the announcement, Iran declared that Abraham Accords were a threat to the country, as they were seen as a form of betrayal from the UAE towards the Arab nations. This animosity towards the agreement is because Iran has been using the situation of the Palestinian people, projecting Israel as the enemy, as part of its propaganda to fuel the resentment of Arab countries towards Israel. Nevertheless, it appears that other Arab countries have not condemned this agreement as they also fear Iran: this can be seen with Saudi Arabia, as it did not condemn the agreement, even though the country is pro-Palestine. This action gave thus indirectly permission to Bahrain to join the agreement.

As such, the UAE and Bahrain are expected to have close relations with Israel in all sectors, creating a “shield” against Iran. Given the status quo, more Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, are expected to build new ties with Israel. On the other side, Iran will continue to condemn any treaty with Israel, fuelling its anti-Israel propaganda, but is not expected to retaliate against the UAE and Bahrain, as well as other Arab countries that might sign a deal with Israel. All in all, this treaty will play a powerful deterrence role against Iran and will begin to stabilize the situation in the Middle East.