

EaP Think Bridge

№16

January-March
2020

Eastern Partnership monthly analytical digest



EASTERN PARTNERSHIP VS. CORONAVIRUS: TEST FOR DEMOCRACY

For some EaP states, COVID-19 pandemic has become an impetus to mobilize resources and consolidate society. For others, it served as an excuse for the next round of repressions against the opposition.

Issue 16 (22)
January-March 2020

EaP Think Bridge is a platform uniting expert communities in the countries of Eastern Partnership region to fill the gap in distributing analytical products for stakeholders

The project benefits from support through the EaP Civil Society Forum Re-granting Scheme (FSTP) and is funded by the European Union as part of its support to civil society in the region. Within its Re-granting Scheme, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) supports projects of its members that contribute to achieving the mission and objectives of the Forum.

Grants are available for CSOs from the Eastern Partnership and EU countries. Key areas of support are democracy and human rights, economic integration, environment and energy, contacts between people, social and labour policies.

Contacts:

info@prismua.org
www.prismua.org/eap-think-bridge

The Eastern Partnership Digest is back!

After a short break, the EaP Think Bridge, the network uniting Eastern Partnership think tanks resumes its work.

Each month, experts from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine prepare reviews of the most important developments in the domestic and foreign policy, as well as the economy of the region. In addition, we will devote each issue to the analysis of significant events and processes.

Of course, the topic of this issue is the response of the Eastern Partnership states to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coronavirus has become a serious test not only for the healthcare systems of the countries of the region, but also for societies and economy. Epidemic also caused an irresistible temptation for politicians to use restrictive measures for their own benefit and the crackdown against the opposition. We analyzed the responses of the authorities and civil society. Which tactics are the most effective?

The project benefits from support through the EaP Civil Society Forum Re-granting Scheme (FSTP) and is funded by the European Union as part of its support to civil society in the region. Within its Re-granting Scheme, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) supports projects of its members that contribute to achieving the mission and objectives of the Forum.



Contents

Analytica

Eastern Partnership vs. Coronavirus: test for democracy	4
--	----------

March in review

Azerbaijan: Snap Elections and New Opposition Accusations	10
Zohrab Ismayil, Public Association for Assistance to Free Economy (Baku, Azerbaijan)	

Armenia: Constitutional Court as the key battleground	13
Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center (Yerevan, Armenia)	

Belarus: Perfect storm in Belarusian economy	15
Vadim Mojeiko, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) (Minsk, Belarus)	

Georgia: Clouds Gather over Georgian Dream	17
Lasha Tughushi, Liberal Academy Tbilisi Foundation (Tbilisi, Georgia)	

Moldova: Point of Return or Going Round in Circles	19
Natalia Stercul, Foreign Policy Association of the Republic of Moldova (Chisinau, Moldova)	

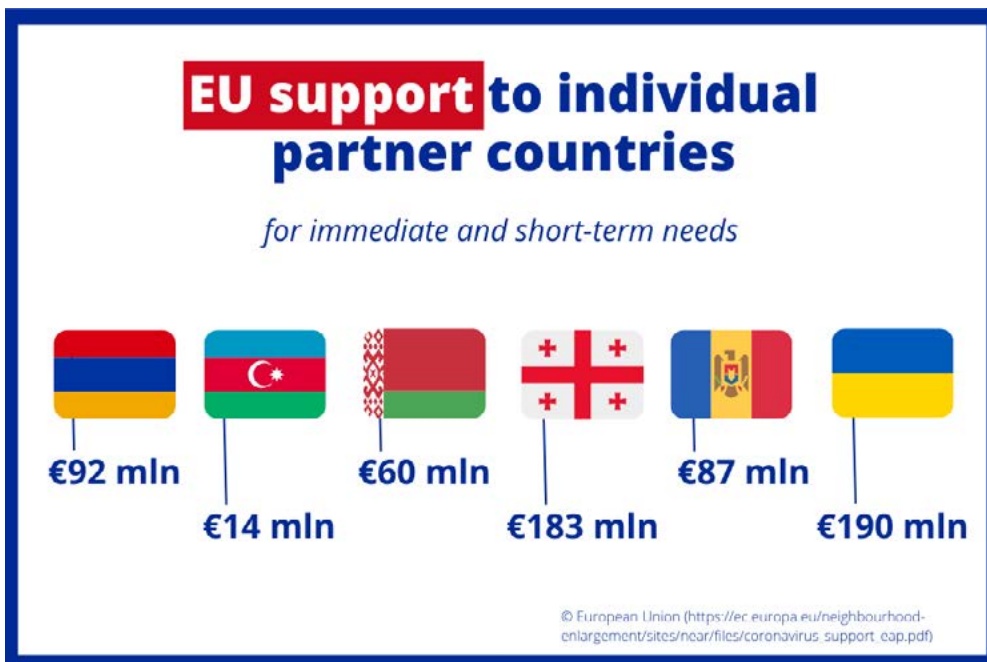
Ukraine: In the Shadow of Disasters and Dark Forecasts	21
Sergiy Gerasymchuk, Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"	

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum News

EaP CSF Re-granting Cycle 2020	24
---	-----------

Eastern Partnership vs. Coronavirus: test for democracy

Eastern Partnership countries responded to COVID-19 pandemic very differently. For some, the virus has become an impetus to mobilize resources and consolidate society. For others, it is served as an excuse for the next round of repressions against the opposition. Some have set restrictions earlier, and some still ignore the threat. But for all six states, for sure, this is a serious blow to the economy, which requires external assistance to recover from. What response strategies were applied the region and whose methods will be more effective?



As part of its global response to the coronavirus outbreak, the European Commission is mobilising an emergency support package for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine: €80 million for immediate needs and up to €83 million for the short and medium term to support the social and economic recovery of the region.

EsP CSF launched the campaign [#Prepare EaP4Health](#) – Civil Society’s COVID-19 Response to highlight the needs of six EaP countries to fight the outbreak of COVID-19,

which has major impact on both – political and economic developments of the EU and EaP countries.

ARMENIA: RAPID RESPONSE

Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center (Yerevan, Armenia)

For a small landlocked country, isolation is deadly. But in the face of the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis, the Armenian government was forced to impose a partial closure on its borders with Iran and Georgia, the only two of its four external borders that were open for trade and travel. And then with the closure of the country’s one international airport, Armenia is under self-imposed isolation to avert the threat of contagion.

Armenia’s response to the coronavirus crisis, as coordinated through the Foreign Ministry, began with the suspension of the visa-free regime for Chinese nationals on January 31, followed by preliminary planning for domestic response, including preparations for an extensive mobilization of domestic public health resources involving hospitals and clinics, and culminating in a decision from February 24 to impose strict limits on the Armenian bor-

der with Iran. Reflecting a surge in cases in Iran in January-February, this move involved a partial closure of the land border, allowing only trucks and other cargo through under close supervision and medical monitoring, and a suspension of an ordinarily active series of passenger flights. By February 29, the Armenian Foreign Ministry had evacuated some 65 Armenian citizens from Iran, with another 200 Armenians being ready for return to the country from China.

On March 16 a bill was adopted declaring a 30-day state of emergency that closed all schools and universities. The bill also mentions the prohibition of disseminating information about the virus that has not been confirmed by the government on social media and news outlets. The government followed with a “lockdown” of all public gatherings or movement on March 24. Accordingly, the national lockdown imposed by the Armenian government introduced new restrictions, as people would only be allowed to leave their homes to buy food, receive medical care or exercise, although food stores, pharmacies and banks remain open and no restrictions were imposed on agricultural work. Interprovincial passenger transportations were banned. Enforced by the police and subject to fines for violators, the measure was widely seen as successful and has reportedly slowed the contagion of the virus. Fines of up to 500,000 drams (about \$1,000) can be imposed

Authorities can access personal data from people’s mobile phones for the purpose of tracking movements, phone calls and text messages of Armenians infected with the virus

on those who break the requirements of isolation or self-isolation and if that violations results in mass infection in can be punished by up to five years in prison.

In a related move, the Armenian parliament voted on March 31 to allow

the authorities to access personal data from people’s mobile phones for the purpose of tracking movements, phone calls and text messages of Armenians infected with the virus.

Moving to confront the looming downturn in the economy from the public health crisis, the Armenian government announced on March 30 another \$20.2 million to pay service sector workers and individual entrepreneurs in one-time cash payments to cushion the economic impact of the emergency. This financial package is to be used to assist private sector employees and individual entrepreneurs in the hotel and catering sector, retail food outlets, tourism, hairdressing and beauty salon services and retailers, with the exception of medicine, food, alcohol and tobacco, however.

The move follows an earlier decision on March 18 to extend \$300 million aimed at providing a stimulus package that will include over \$50 million to co-finance and subsidize the interest rates of loans for companies that borrow money from Armenian banks in the national currency to pay salaries, taxes, bills and purchase raw materials.

		COVID-19 Response in Eastern Partnership					EaP Think Bridge
Special regime		State of Emergency: March 15 - April 14	'quarantine regime' March 25th - April 20th	✗	State of Emergency: March 21- April 21	State of Emergency: March 17 - May 15th	Emergency situation March 12 April 24
Locked borders		✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
'Lockdown'		✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Additional restriction		Only confirmed by the government information about the virus can be distributed	Restrictions are used for crack down on opposition	Government spreads disinformation about COVID-19 causes & treatment methods	Curfew 9 pm - 6 am	President proposed a temporary 'moratorium on political debate'	Self-proclaimed authorities of temporary occupied territories closed checkpoints on the line of contact in Donbas
Penalties		up to \$1,000	\$60-3000	✗	\$935	\$1250-1450	\$700-1400

AZERBAIJAN: FIGHT AGAINST VIRUS AND OPPOSITION

Zohrab Ismayil, Public Association for Assistance to Free Economy (Baku, Azerbaijan)

Azerbaijan, as a neighbour of Iran, where the coronavirus is widespread, is at a high risk. Many observers note that Azerbaijan was late to close its borders with Iran only on February 29 2020, when there were already first hundreds of patients in the country.

At the end of February, an Operational Headquarters under the Cabinet of Ministers was established to prevent a pandemic and coordinate state institutions. Since March, Azerbaijan introduced quarantine on the southern borders and for the first time began to check the temperature of citizens returning from Iran. Since mid-March, all citizens who returned from abroad have been sent to quarantine for two weeks. The large shopping and entertainment centres closed on March 22, while the metro in Baku stopped working only on March 30.

So far, more than 45 thousand tests for coronavirus were taken and 641 of them turned out positive, 44 people recovered, and 7 died.

Recently, Azerbaijan tightened quarantine restrictions: one can go out onto the street only after sending an SMS to a special number and only to buy food and medicine (for 2 hours) and to visit medical institutions or the funerals of their loved ones (for 6 hours). The city and intercity transport was stopped, the purpose of travel by private car is checked by the traffic police. Fines for violation of quarantine are set at a level from 100 to 5000 manat

Human rights activists believe that the government uses restrictive measures for the crack down on opposition.

(\$60- \$3000). But many lawyers consider this contrary to the Constitution because a state of emergency has not yet been declared and there are no legal grounds for such restrictions. Instead, a special quarantine regime is in effect until April 20.

Human rights activists believe that the government uses restrictive measures for the crack down on opposition. The President Ilham Aliyev, while addressing the nation for the celebration of Navruz, unequivocally stated that “isolating the fifth column would be a historic decision.”

On March 19, 2020, the President Ilham Aliyev allocated 1 billion manat (\$588 million) from the state budget to combat the pandemic and its consequences. The president also created the Support Fund Against Coronavirus and announced that he would transfer his annual salary to this fund. It was a campaign that forced civil servants of large banks and companies to “donate” to the fund. Although many people in the country responded to the president’s promise to live for a year without salary, with just a smile.

Later on, the government increased the allocated funds to 2.5 billion manat (\$1.5 billion). The government is set to partially pay the salaries to employees of the companies that suffered from the pandemic, provides tax holidays for entrepreneurs, and two-time payments of 190 manat (\$100) for registered unemployed, the number of who will reportedly reach 200 thousand people.

NON-SCIENTIFIC TREATMENT METHODS FROM BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT

Vadim Mojeiko, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS), (Minsk, Belarus)

Every day sees not only the increase of people infected with coronavirus, but also higher growth rates: if earlier the number of registered cases grew daily by 10-20%, starting from April 7-8 it made up already 40%. According to the Ministry of Health, 49 thousand tests have been made. It was only on April 8 that the Ministry of Health started to regularly update coronavirus statistics on its Telegram channel.

The country’s authorities admit that the number of infected people is growing: as Vladimir Karanik, the head of the country’s Healthcare Ministry, stated in the parliament, the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic is predicted to be in late April – early May.

President Alexander Lukashenko offered to treat COVID-19 with inhaling smoke and char, eating butter, driving a tractor, going to sauna, playing ice hockey, “disinfecting from within” using vodka

President Alexander Lukashenko demonstrated a unique attitude to the issue mocking it and saying that “the world has gone mad because of coronavirus psychosis and infodemic”. He also accused “the world’s most powerful” of an attempt to “divide the world yet again” in such a way, and offered non-scientific treatment methods: inhaling smoke and char, eating butter, driving a tractor, going to sauna, playing ice hockey, “disinfecting from within” using vodka etc.

State TV channels are active supporters of the strategy accepted by the Belarusian authorities and downplay COVID-19 epidemic threat. Belarus is the only European

country that not only ignored putting on hold its football championship but is still holding matches with audience being present. The annual parade is planned for May 9, and its rehearsals are already taking place.

However, there has been a recent change and the authorities did introduce some measures: some mass gatherings are banned, social distancing in cafes and hotels (even though there are not very many of them) was introduced, higher educational institutions provide distance learning, while parents can keep their children at home and don't take them to schools and kindergartens. On April 9 the self-isolation regime was expanded, and now it is to be respected not only by those arriving from abroad,

GEORGIA AND ITS CURFEW

Lasha Tughushi, Liberal Academy Tbilisi Foundation (Tbilisi, Georgia)

According to periodic TV surveys, including on opposition TV channels, the citizens of Georgia give positive feedback regarding the government measures to tackle coronavirus crisis. As of April 1, the number of infected people in Georgia is the lowest in the region.

According to official statistics, the first infected person appeared in Georgia on February 25. Special measures were approved by the parliament and came into force on March 21. The opposition representatives that are now boycotting the government were also present at the parliament session. As for political rights, only a ban of mass gatherings was introduced. There are no limitations when it comes to mass media.

Healthcare system operates rather well. It is evident that the authorities pay attention to medics and their recommendations. Despite the fact that healthcare remains a largely private sector, it is open for cooperation.

March 31 saw the introduction of a curfew. There are restrictions on movement from 9 pm to 6 am. Public transport including metro and buses does not operate. It is forbidden to gather for more than three people in a group. All enterprises that provide a wide range of services are closed, economic activity is allowed only in several sectors, while grocery stores, pharmacies, and financial institutions remain open.

The government also introduced social and economic assistance. According to the decision made by the government, the economy of the country will be aided by GEL 2 billion (over \$600 ml) that will mostly be used in order to support employment, as well as companies and their ongoing productions.

To help fight coronavirus crisis itself the relevant budget will comprise of GEL 351 ml (around \$100 ml) According to prime minister Giorgi Gakharia, it is extremely important that after overcoming the crisis peak Georgian economy is able to develop and restore its starting positions at the beginning of the year. Moreover, the budget also provides for social support. In particular, 1 million

but also by the contacts of the first and second levels. Full quarantine has not been introduced as of April 9, and masks are not obligatory to wear yet.

Already on March 16, Russia declared that it closed its border with Belarus, however, Belarus itself has not closed its other borders.

Against this backdrop active civil and social solidarity is especially clear. #ByCovid19 campaign was launched, and its activists help medical institutions to purchase or manufacture masks, medical equipment and protective gear. Business provides washing machines and washing powder to medical institutions, while cafes prepare and deliver food to doctors.

200 thousand households will be able to benefit from re-



There are restrictions on movement from 9 pm to 6 am

duced energy tariffs, while 671 thousand household – from reduced natural gas tariffs.

Georgia closed its borders while leaving a possibility of

transitting goods for neighboring countries. Armenia, for instance, does not have other reliable transit route. In relation to this, Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is busy assisting the return of thousands of its citizens to Georgia. There are not enough scheduled flights, with the relevant infrastructure also not being ready to provide a quarantine for those citizens, the number of who makes up over five thousand people now.

MOLDOVA: ELECTIONS IN THE TIMES OF PANDEMIC

Natalia Stercul, Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (Chisinau)

After declaring "red code" coronavirus alert special measures and restrictions were introduced, and the State of Emergency was declared to prevent the pandemic from spreading. However, despite significant efforts made by the authorities, control and continuous monitoring of patients, it was not possible to avoid failures and costly mistakes.

Starting March 11, restrictions related to the risk of coronavirus spreading were launched in Moldova: educational institutions, entertainment and sport facilities, shopping points except pharmacies, grocery stores and petrol stations were closed down, while mass gatherings were forbidden. Banks and state institutions operate under a special mode. Fines are introduced for violating the quarantine regime.

However, "red code" alert was not a good enough reason for Moldovan to postpone additional parliamentary elections in one-mandate constituency #38 in Hyncheshty. The threat of opposition winning overweighed common sense. The president signed a special decree by the Extraordinary National Commission of Public Health that states that elections are not a part of special measures and procedure remains unchanged. Over 23% of voters took part in elections on March, 15 and as a result, this area became the second epicenter of coronavirus spread after the capital.

On March 17 Moldovan authorities declared the state of emergency for 60 days, that is until May 15. Air travel is put on hold except for special flights, railway service is restricted, public transportation both in and between towns operates under a special emergency mode. Starting from March 25 new special measures and restrictions were introduced. Visiting public spaces, parks, recreational spaces and places of mass gathering is banned. People over 63 are banned from leaving their homes unless there is an extreme emergency. Pensions and social payments are delivered home. Military will be involved in supervising how these rules are respected on a daily basis.

Moldovan citizens keep coming back from abroad. Initially they were not tested for coronavirus as there were

Saakashvili, Georgia's ex-president, the leader of the main opposition force, has been offering Georgian government his support in assisting the return of Georgian citizens back to their homeland, namely tickets and some financial support. The government did not accept this help naming this a populist move. Right now, Saakashvili himself is abroad, as he is sentenced in Georgia, and as soon as he arrives in the country he will be imprisoned.

Over 23% of voters took part in elections on March 15 and as a result, this area became the second epicenter of coronavirus spread after the capital

simply not enough tests available in the country. There is still a clear deficit of tests as well as the most essential protective means such as gloves, masks, disinfectants etc. Moreover, lack of responsibility among those who returned to the country and violated the quarantine thus threatening

the lives of others, may cause the worsening of the situation in the near future as the number of sick people will significantly increase.

Churches also spawn additional risks. Despite the request of the prime minister Iona Kiku, on Sunday, March 29, services were held in 654 churches in Moldova.

The aftermath of coronavirus crisis may be a heavy blow to Moldovan economy that had been stagnating for a long time even before the epidemic outbreak. The only way it could carry on was largely thanks to regular aid from European partners and finances coming from Moldovans working abroad. The government provides MDL 36,28 ml (around \$2 mln) from its reserve fund to purchase medical equipment needed to fight coronavirus. This money is meant for providing 200 000 protective shields and 500 000 respirators. Moreover, the authorities developed special initiatives aimed at supporting social and economic stability in the country in crisis. Those enterprises whose work was put on hold according to the decision made by the Extraordinary National Commission of Public Health, will be supported by the government and state budget in order to keep jobs. The measures include paying wages by returning 100% of physical entity taxes, social payments for medical insurance funds, i.e. 44-45% of regular wages. Unemployed people who are not on the dole will get a sum equivalent to the amount of minimal wages in the country, that is MDL 2775 (\$150). Public servants who are on the first line of fighting coronavirus, and those infected with COVID-19 (doctors, nurses, police officers etc) will get a one-time governmental financial support of MDL 16000 (about \$900) that is equivalent to double average wages across the country. Other options of special measures to support the population of the country and its economic agents are being considered as well.

MPs are among the first infected

Sergiy Gerasymchuk, Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”

Quarantine in Ukraine started on March 12. At first, it was imposed until April 3, but the Cabinet of Ministers extended it until April 24. The government did not “invent a bicycle”, but used the experience of other countries, in particular China, Germany, Italy.

Passenger traffic between cities and regions was completely cancelled, including railway, bus and air traffic. In many cities, Kyiv in particular, all public transport, including the metro, was completely stopped. According to the latest changes, citizens are banned to be in public places without a face mask, they can only stay in parks while walking pets, and are banned from walking in a group of more than two people. All public places are closed, except for grocery stores, pharmacies, and banks.

Such steps, as conceived by the Cabinet of Ministers, should drastically reduce the population mobility and gain time to prepare the medical industry for a possible disease outbreak. At the same time, all mobile operators in Ukraine, in close cooperation with the Ministry of Health, sent SMS with brief instructions on what COVID-19 is and what people should do if they suspect a viral infection. Besides, every day, the deputy minister of health informs the population through the media about the current situation with COVID-19, the capital’s mayor and most of the region heads do the same.

An information campaign appealing to the population to stay at home and adhere to quarantine measures continues on the air of many radio stations and on television. President V. Zelensky, with enviable regularity, records video messages to the nation, talking about the work done and the measures taken in the fight against the disease.

The country borders are completely closed for the passenger traffic, both by air and land. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs received a joke nickname the “Ministry of Evacuation” because over the past 3-4 weeks diplomats helped tens of thousands of Ukrainians to return home. It looks like it is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that bears the palm in communications with society.

Several MPs were the first people in the country to be diagnosed with COVID-19. Despite this, the country’s parliament adopted several important laws aimed at overcoming the epidemic aftermaths. While adopting these laws, par-

liamentarians simplified tender procedures for the procurement and customs clearance of medications and equipment necessary to combat coronavirus infection. Parliament also allowed the use of drugs unregistered in Ukraine and recommended for treatment by the official bodies of the EU member states, the USA, Switzerland, Japan, Australia, Canada, China, Israel, and the UK. Besides the “anti-coronavirus”

laws, the MPs adopted some other equally important initiatives that should primarily support small and medium-sized businesses. Basically, these laws are aimed at exemption from certain types of taxes and penalties for the period of quarantine, as well as a moratorium on documentary and actual inspections of certain categories of business entities.

But against this backdrop of fighting COVID-19, it was not without a big fly in the ointment. The Parliament failed the bill on sequestration of the state budget, and as a result on the creation of a special fund to combat coronavirus disease. All the Prime Minister D. Schmygal’s assurances that the Parliament will vote for the so-called “emergency budget” soon look like putting on a brave face in a bad game.

Ukrainian business does not stand aside and contributes to fighting against the disease. Many businessmen and companies, both large and small ones, are engaged as they are able in procurement (of face masks, respirators, protective suits, lung ventilators, test systems, etc.) for regional and central medical institutions and pharmacies.

The grass-roots sentiments in Ukraine about the quarantine measures vary. The conscious part of the population stays at home and does not go outside without urgent need. The other part takes quarantine as an unplanned vacation and goes on with a familiar lifestyle, arranges picnics in parks and green areas. The attempts to proceed with tourist trips overseas after the quarantine was announced were glaring and led the state to the need for intervention to ensure the return of such tourists. Such are the recent cases of citizens returned from faraway Vietnam, or evacuated from Bali through Qatar, who went on vacation after the President’s appeal for an urgent return to the homeland, and some of the returned people just hacked staying in observation places after their return. In the long term, such carelessness can lead to grave consequences, which we can see from the example of other countries.

With several MPs being among first diagnosed with COVID-19 in the country, parliament adopted several important laws aimed at overcoming the epidemic aftermaths

Armenia: Constitutional Court as the key battleground

Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center (Yerevan, Armenia)

Since Armenia's "Velvet Revolution" of 2018, the Pashinyan government has embarked on a largely successful campaign to deepen and drive economic and political reform. This was most visible in the first three months of 2020, evident in the government's initial flurry of activity across several reform areas and with the launch of a determined campaign against corruption. Yet despite the momentum in broader reform areas, the judicial system stood out as one of the more prominent institutional legacies from the old system of governance and emerged as the main priority in early 2020.



The obvious lack of an independent or even reform-minded judiciary should have been a much higher priority for the government. And the failure to address the lack of an independent judiciary sooner was a weakness for the government that presented an opportunity for government opponents to

regroup and regain momentum. Against that backdrop of demonstrable policy neglect, the legacy Constitutional Court has recently emerged as the key battleground between the current leadership and a disparate but determined group of "old guard" loyalists of the former government.

DOMESTIC POLICY

Constitutional Referendum on Hold

Several months of conflict between the Armenian government and the country's Constitutional Court devolved

into a personal confrontation between the Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Constitutional Court Chairman. Consequently, the Armenian parliament voted on February 6 to hold a national referendum on a set of constitutional

amendments that would remove seven justices on the nine-member constitutional court who were appointed by the previous government. With the introduction of a state of emergency on March 16, however, the planned constitutional referendum was postponed according to Armenian law, which requires any referendum to take place “no sooner than 50 and no later than 65 days after the end of the (30-day) state of emergency.”

Criminal Trial of Former President Opens & Then Postponed

Joining his predecessor to face criminal charges for offenses committed while in office, former President Serzh Sargsyan’s trial opened on February 25. The 65-year-old Sargsyan is accused of abusing his position by giving preferential treatment for the award of a state contract in 2013 to a friend, which prosecutors charge cost the state nearly \$1 million in losses. Unlike the more politically-related trial of former President Robert Kocharian, Sargsyan’s case is largely a result of unexpected evidence obtained from an interrogation of a former Agriculture Minister and two other former officials as part of a separate corruption investigation. The trial was postponed on March 26, after the imposition of a state of emergency related to the coro-

navirus crisis.

Political Polarization & Politics of Confrontation

After several months of mounting political tension, with a small but aggressively vocal group opposed to the Armenian government, two specific incidents in January marked the onset of outright political violence. The first such incident, on January 23, was a bizarre two-hour hostage situation at the Erebuni Plaza business center, where a lone gunman, 32-year-old Artur Torosyan, entered the office building before eventually surrendering peacefully. Strangely, the acting police chief, Arman Sargsyan, came to the scene to personally lead the negotiations, eventually convincing the gunman to surrender and hand over his weapon. But the suspect was taken from the scene in the private vehicle of the police chief, without handcuffs, and transported to a police station. The second incident, coming just days later, on the January 28 “Army Day” holiday in Armenia, involved a coordinated police crackdown and arrest of several “activists” notorious for their vehement and vindictive protests and social media campaigns targeting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, his government and even his family members.

ECONOMY

Expectations for Sustained Growth Dashed by Coronavirus

Although the rapid and robust response to the coronavirus crisis by the Armenian government has been exceptionally prudent, the projected economic impact from both the crisis and its response will clearly negatively impact

the economy, ending expectations for continued economic growth in 2020. The sudden downturn ends the optimism for sustaining Armenian GDP growth, which in recent statistics revealed a 7.6% growth rate for 2019, reaching \$13.6 billion in what is now the country’s fastest growth since 2008 and driven by significant increases in trade and services, including a 9% surge in industrial output.

FOREIGN POLICY

Nagorno Karabakh Peace Process Continues

In an unexpectedly intensive round of talks that lasted for two days, the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers met in Geneva on January 29-30 for what was described as the “most intensive” negotiations in years. With the French, Russian and U.S. mediators from the OSCE Minsk Group present, Foreign Ministers Zohrab Mnatsakanyan and Elmar Mammadyarov held “thorough discussions” and pledged to “support the “intensification of negotiations,” suggesting that confidence-building measures (CBMs) will continue over the coming months. The Geneva meeting was

the latest round of negotiations and followed a shorter, one-day session in Bratislava in early December 2019. And in an unprecedented moderated public discussion at the Munich Security Conference on February 15, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azeri President Ilham

Armenian parliament voted to hold a national referendum on a set of constitutional amendments that would remove seven justices on the nine-member constitutional court

Aliyev went head to head in a contentious 45-minute exchange that was more of a duel of historical diatribes than a debate over diplomatic discourse. Nevertheless, the exchange was important and offered a unique and unprecedented opportunity for the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders to present their views and visions of the conflict in a public setting. And despite a degree of disappointment with the devolution of discourse, it was a revelation of the conflict reality.

Armenia-EU Relations: A More Sophisticated Strategy

As seen in the February 13 meeting between Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, representing the third such meeting in 18 months, the Armenian government has demonstrated a more sophisticated policy of not only engaging the EU but also enhancing Armenia's strategic significance for Europe, beyond the foundation of the Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), expressed through a policy to pursue closer ties with Germany and

France in particular. The visit to Germany also highlighted the important role the country holds as Armenia's largest EU donor and trading partner, demonstrated by the \$451 million in bilateral trade for 2019 that although represents a rather marginal 4 percent increase, still offers consistent and considerable economic support to Armenia. And in terms of local presence and impact, the German metals group Cronimet is not only the largest enterprise operating in the Armenian mining sector, employing more than 4,000 workers, but is also the number one corporate taxpayer in the country.

Azerbaijan: Snap Elections and New Opposition Accusations

Zohrab Ismayil, Public Association for Assistance to Free Economy (Baku, Azerbaijan)

Early elections, new opposition arrests, drop in oil prices and threats to use the pandemic for a crackdown on opposition are scenes for the start of the year in Azerbaijan.



Early parliamentary elections

POLITICS

Elections in a hurry

On February 9, 2020 early parliamentary elections, which had been originally set for the autumn, took place in Azerbaijan. The country's authoritarian regime decided to spring a surprise on the opposition and not grant it with the luxury of time thus minimizing its participation in the campaign for opposition and independent candidates.

As a result, some opposition parties including Azerbaijan Popular Front Party and National Council refused to take part in the elections at all, while those opposition powers that decided to go for it, namely the Republican Alternative, Musavat Party and Nida civic movement, were not able to unite into a single bloc.

As a result, 76 out of 121 MPs in the National Mejlis are

former MPs from previous parliamentary convocations. The opposition forces did manage to get at least one seat, won by a well-known lawyer Erkin Gadirli from ReAl (Republican Alternative).

In general, the election results were mostly falsified. Independent international observers as well as local observers documented hundreds of "carousel" voting cases, [mass ballot box stuffing](#), and [false protocols](#). Thousands of such videos were published on social networks. [OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and its International Election Observation Mission harshly criticized the organization of the elections.](#)

Following the elections, protests were organized by opposition forces and independent candidates in front of the

country's central election commission. [However, they were dispersed by the police.](#)

Journalist freed

On March 18, 2020 an opposition journalist Afghan Mukhtarly was released early by the Azerbaijani government. In May 2017 he was abducted in Tbilisi and taken to Azerbaijan, where he was sentenced to 6 years in prison on charges of allegedly violating the state border, resisting border guards and attempting to smuggle ten thousand euros out of the country. [When Afghan Mukhtarly was released, he went to Germany where his family had been residing since his abduction.](#) It is worth noting that Mukhtarly became the winner of 2017 Pavel Sheremet Journalism Award.

Another opposition leader behind the bars

[On March 22, 2020 one of well-known opposition leaders Tofiq Yagublu was detained following a controversial car accident; according to the order of the Nizami District Court of Baku he will be held for three months in pretrial custody on charges of hooliganism.](#) When the incident

6 out of 121 MPs in the National Mejlis are former MPs from previous parliamentary convocations, while only one member of opposition did manage a seat

took place, Yagublu published a post on his Facebook account saying he was dealing with a manufactured incident, a provocation. "I was sitting in my car parked near the *6 i jnk crcp* market when another vehicle approached from behind and side-swiped my car on purpose,

and now the driver is attacking and accusing me", Yagublu wrote. He also recorded everything that was happening on camera. However, the police took away his phone and his dash camera, and used neither as evidence during the trial. Later on, it was revealed that many of the recent posts written by the opposition leader were deleted from his social network account.

Yagublu has been an ardent critic of the Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev. More recent Yagublu's criticism was aimed at the address made by president Aliyev on occasion of a national holiday. In his speech, Aliyev called the opposition traitors and a fifth column, he strongly implied that he would use the fight against the virus to crack down on the country's political opposition and many opposition leaders may be locked down as well.

ECONOMICS

Lower oil price poses threats

Crude oil prices started to decrease already last December, and the ongoing process creates significant risks for economic growth and Azerbaijan's state budget performance. Azerbaijani government provided for crude oil price to make up \$55/barrel in its economic indicators and state budget. It is worth noting that approximately 60% of the state budget is financed from the oil sector. [It is also important that the export of crude oil, gas and oil products](#)

[made up around 90% of the total export of the country in 2019.](#)

In March 2020 banks clearly experienced foreign currency deficit. First the banks stopped selling American dollars and euros, then they set up a limit and as a result, there appeared long lines in banks. In March State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan sold over \$1.9 billion at the Interbank Currency Exchange. [This is 2.2 times more than in January and February combined, correspondingly.](#)

FOREIGN POLICY

"Mini-revolutions" in Nagorno Karabakh

On February 15, 2020 Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev and Armenian prime minister Nikol Pashinyan held an official meeting as a part of Munich security conference. It was for the first time that they had a public discussion on the issue of Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

[Ilham Aliyev stated that Nagorno Karabakh is historically a part of Azerbaijan and added that international law and UN Security Council resolutions support Azerbaijan in resolving this issue.](#)

Nikol Pashinyan attempted to use historical arguments

as well, however, he also said that "it is not possible to solve a 30-year conflict with one or two steps" but suggested applying "mini-revolutions" approach. The solution to the issue should be acceptable to all three parties: Armenia, Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan.

President Aliyev replied that he is not against a step by step solution, however, in his opinion, concessions are possible in case Armenia stops financing Nagorno Karabakh and withdraws its troops. Prime minister made an attempt to persuade his opponent that there are no Armenian troops in Nagorno Karabakh, only local self-defense forces and "volunteers" from Armenia, with his own son being one of them.

Perfect storm in Belarusian economy

Vadim MOJEIKO, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) (Minsk, Belarus)

The authorities combine rapprochement with the West and domestic repressions against their opponents, while the gale in the Belarusian economy is in its height



DOMESTIC POLICY

Repression with an eye on the West

Before the presidential elections, which are supposed to be held in the summer of 2020, the Belarusian authorities tighten control over socio-political processes. They take repressions against representatives of the groups whose activity is uncomfortable for the government: activists, politicians, non-state media representatives, human rights activists in particular. At the same time, the Belarusian authorities monitor the reaction to such reprisals from the West and try to avoid too noticeable pressure on their op-

ponents, which could ruin the warming of relations with the US and the EU.

Thus, the year began with trials of participants in the December protests against integration with Russia. Many of them were fined [large sums](#), and the political leaders and bloggers with a potential for mobilizing people were handed to administrative [arrest](#). The security forces also [searched](#) the apartment of Oleg Volchek, the head of Legal Assistance to the Population center. And two anarchists were sentenced to [seven years'](#) imprisonment in a colony

for their actions near the city court and the pre-trial detention center in Minsk.

At the end of March, Alexander Lukashenko [demanded](#) to tackle the problem of media spreading inappropriate information on the epidemiological situation in the country, which he called “rascals throwing these fakes”. However, after that, the security forces [searched](#) the editorial office of

The repressions are taken against representatives of the groups whose activity is uncomfortable for the government: activists, politicians, non-state media representatives, human rights activists in particular

Ejednevnik media portal and detained its editor-in-chief, Sergei Satsuk, who is known for his journalistic investigations, including those about corruption in organizing public procurement in the health-care sector. He was accused of bribery, but was later released from custody after a [statement](#) by the European Parliament.

ECONOMY

Perfect storm

The Belarusian economy comes through a [perfect storm](#) due to a combination of various factors, namely the coronavirus epidemic, a drop in exports, and devaluation.

Unable to find a compromise with Russia on oil price bonus which Belarus had to add to the Russian oil suppliers' price, it switched to other sources of oil, namely small Russian companies that agreed to supply oil without a bonus to price. First of all, these are [companies](#) of Mikhail Gutsieriev, who has some business interests in Belarus. Oil was

also purchased in [Norway](#) and [Azerbaijan](#). All this led to a drop in refining volumes, multiplied by the global drop in the price of oil products. Demand also fell for another important Belarusian export item, [potash fertilizers](#). As a result, the Belarusian exports [fell](#) drastically by 15%.

The devaluation of the Belarusian ruble since the beginning of the year reached over 20%. In March, the gold and foreign exchange reserves of Belarus [decreased](#) by \$1 billion, compared to February. This is the sharpest drop in the gold reserves of Belarus over the past 15 years.

FOREIGN POLICY

US Secretary of State Historic Visit

Belarus continues to establish relations with the USA and the EU countries, which are extremely important for its geopolitical balancing.

On February 1, Belarus was visited by the [US Secretary of State](#) Michael Pompeo. This is the first visit at this level in over 25 years. Following the visit, the US made several statements about its readiness to supply energy commodities to Belarus at competitive prices, as well as about approaching the lifting of sanctions, readiness to invest in the Belarusian economy and appoint the US ambassador in a short while.

After a five-year break, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of

[Lithuania](#), Linas Linkevičius, paid a working visit to Belarus. The two countries' relations were marred by the conflict over the Ostrovets NPP, which Belarus builds near the Lithuanian capital, but both Minsk and Vilnius are interested in developing the trade, in particular, of oil products through the port in Klaipėda.

At the same time, during the visit of the European parliamentarians to Minsk, their meeting with the deputies of the House of Representatives was [wrecked](#) due to the unwillingness of the European side to hold it in the parliament building. This demonstrates deep-rooted difficulties in the Belarus-EU relations: problems with democracy in Belarus, which are not always overcome by pragmatism.

Georgia: Clouds Gather over Georgian Dream

Lasha Tughushi, Liberal Academy Tbilisi Foundation (Tbilisi, Georgia)

For the ruling party of Georgia the year began with several strikes. The Georgian Dream had to compromise on electoral reform. Stumbling on the “project of the century” implementation is a threat not only to country’s economy and image but also to the relations with international partners.



Rally near the parliament supporting changes to electoral system. Photo by krymr.com

DOMESTIC POLICY

Parliamentary elections under new rules

Since the beginning of the year, there have already been tough debates about changes in the electoral system, with parliamentary elections planned for October. It looked like the Parliament was ready to proceed with the mixed electoral system, convenient for the ruling party. Currently, 77

parliamentary seats are formed by the proportional electoral system and 73 members of parliament are chosen by plurality voting system. Thus, the opposition has no chance to win a majority, because in Georgia the majority seats, as a rule, are almost entirely given to the ruling force (?won by the ruling force?).

Unexpectedly for the Georgian authorities, a number of influential American politicians sharply criticized the

current political processes in Georgia. In such a situation, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, the undisputed leader of the party in power Georgian Dream, faced a choice: either a compromise and support of the West or no compromise and loneliness.

And only thanks to the active mediation of several ambassadors, including the ones of the United States, the EU and Germany, the parties came to a compromise solution: 120 mandates will be won by the proportional system and 30 by the plurality voting system.

Who will finish the “port of the century” construction?

The construction of the strategically important deep sea port of Anaklia, the “project of the century”, as it was called by the country’s authorities, was frozen. In Febru-

Unexpectedly for the Georgian authorities, a number of influential American politicians sharply criticized the current political processes in Georgia

ary, the Georgian government cancelled the agreement with the Anaklia Development Consortium, which was responsible for the port construction. Before the dissolution of the agreement, representatives of the authorities and the consortium accused each other of failing to fulfill the obligations.

A major investor and curators left the project. The port was transferred to the Ministry of Economy balance. Meanwhile, the founder of the Consortium, the banker Mamuka Khazaradze, forms the opposition political party Lelo.

The port is an important infrastructure project for the Georgian economy and was supposed to make the country a logistical hub between Eurasia and Europe. It also has serious prospects in terms of the Black Sea security issues. Problems with the Construction may also hit Georgia’s international image as the partner in the Consortium was an American company.

ECONOMY

Lari hits anti-record

In the first quarter of the current year, the Georgian national currency, the lari, broke the anti-records. For example, on February 25, the exchange rate was 3.07 GEL for 1 euro; by March 25, the official rate increased to 3.74. On April 1, it is 4.05 GEL. Such a sharp depreciation of the lari caused harsh criticism of the National Bank and the government. The National Bank sold about \$100 million over the past month but could not keep the lari. At the moment, the National Bank and the government are facing a dilemma: how to keep the lari in free fall if the economy is practically in a pause mode? Moreover, it is extremely difficult to make any economic forecasts today. Besides,

the problem has a budgetary nature, since in the draft budget for 2020 the US dollar exchange rate was fixed at 2.98 lari per 1 US dollar.

At the beginning of each year, the National Tourism Administration publishes data for the previous year. In 2019, Georgia accepted a record number of tourists - 9,357,964 people, which is 7.8% more than in 2018. Significantly more tourists came from the EU countries: Germany +38.1%, Poland +32%, France +28.4%, Great Britain +27.5%, the Netherlands +25.8% etc. However, against the backdrop of the global pandemic, this is a thing of the past, and the tourism industry in Georgia is waiting for support.

FOREIGN POLICY

Under Russian cyber strike

In February, it was reported that Russian intelligence services stood behind the cyberattacks carried out on various Georgian servers in the previous year. The British National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) was the first to come to such a conclusion, stating that the cyberattacks were most likely initiated by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU).

“The GRU’s reckless and brazen campaign of cyberattacks against Georgia, a sovereign and independent nation, is totally unacceptable. The Russian government has

a clear choice whether to continue this aggressive pattern of behaviour against other countries, or to become a responsible partner which respects international law,” the UK Foreign Minister Dominic Raab said.

The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also condemned the Russian cyberattack against Georgia: “We stand with Georgia in condemning Russia’s cyberattack against its people and institutions. Russia must immediately cease this behavior in Georgia and elsewhere. The stability of cyberspace depends on the responsible behavior of all nations,” Mike Pompeo tweeted.

Moldova: Point of Return or Going Round in Circles

Natalia Stercul, Foreign Policy Association of the Republic of Moldova (Chisinau, Moldova)

The political situation in Moldova resembles going round in circles. Representatives of the Democratic Party returned to the new coalition government. The fight against corruption in the highest echelons of power is virtually nullified. Predicting a slowdown in economic growth in 2020, the incumbent government focused on obtaining another loan of trust from the European partners and IMF financial support.



The Democrats are back to the government of Moldova

DOMESTIC POLICY

Facing the presidential elections

Since the beginning of the year, the main attention has been focused on the upcoming presidential elections, possible candidates, and scenarios. The pro-Russian president's policy launched a discussion on whether Moldova could still remain pro-European while becoming closer to Russia. The European officials were in no hurry to establish cooperation with the new government, headed by I. Kiku. In response in his interview to Euronews, I. Dodon

said: "We must recognize that some European partners, European ambassadors do not want to cooperate with the new government." However, the point is most likely not in reluctance but in distrust and disappointment with the policies pursued by Moldova.

The opposition also repeatedly expressed its dissatisfaction and stated that the current government is working against the Moldovan citizens and is aimed solely at establishing one of the most corrupt regimes, the I. Dodon regime. Ex-Prime Minister M. Sandu repeatedly mentioned

possible early parliamentary elections.

However, the majority of the Moldovan population did not support the idea of snap elections: 70% are against such idea, and only 17% are in its favour, according to the Association of Sociologists and Demographers of Moldova survey. Polling carried on January 2-15 reveals that in the presidential elections 35% of respondents would vote for the current president Igor Dodon, 20% for Maya Sandu, leader of the Action and Solidarity Party, and 8% would support ex-Prime Minister Pavel Filip.

The lack of a stable majority in the Parliament was resolved. On the verge of declaring a state of emergency due to the spread of coronavirus in Moldova, a new coalition government of socialists and democrats was created. On March 16, an agreement was signed. So, the Democrat-

The fight against the oligarchic regime and corruption in the highest echelons of power is a thing of the past

ic Party's protégés under the conditions of the growing epidemiological situation returned to power and received portfolios of ministers of foreign affairs, defence, economy, as well as education, culture and research. Besides, the Democrats secured the position of Deputy Prime Minister for the reintegration of Moldova.

Thus, the crisis was used for regular backstage political games ahead of the presidential elections. The fight against the oligarchic regime and corruption in the highest echelons of power is a thing of the past. Today, the representatives of the oligarchy are once again in ministerial

seats. Parliament Speaker Z. Grechanaya called the creation of this coalition "a truly historical moment", but this moment is the return to a circle of the once existing state of affairs.

ECONOMY

Looking for financial support

In the economic sphere, the main attention was paid to the results of 2019 and plans for the future. State budget revenues in 2019 exceeded 2018 revenues by 3.7 billion lei (\$202 million). According to forecasts for 2020, the economic growth rates will decline. If in the previous year the economy grew by 4.5-5%, in 2020 the growth will be at 3.5-4%, according to preliminary data. Most sectors will demonstrate slow growth.

The Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) completed the assessment of the economic results achieved by the Republic of Moldova in the framework of the program supported by the Extended Credit Facility (ECF) and the Extended Financing Facility (EFF). According to the conclusions drawn from the IMF mission's visit to the Republic of Moldova in January 2020, the IMF Council appreciated the actions taken to restore the banking sector and improve macroeconomic and financial stability. They

noted significant success in reforming the banking system by ensuring transparency of the joint-stock banks' shareholder's structure, verifying compliance with the criteria of integrity and professionalism of the banks' owners, improving supervisory and regulatory frameworks, and strengthening mechanisms to ensure financial stability. The completion of the IMF mission assessment allows it to pay a \$20 million tranche, with \$12 million addressed to support the budget, and the rest of the amount to be transferred to the National Bank of Moldova.

The EU has also put forth the conditions for subsequent payments. The most important of these are the fight against corruption and the reform of justice. Macrofinancial assistance involves the implementation of some specific technical conditions related to the justice reform, the regulatory framework, as well as the energy sector. Also, a new program for cooperation with the International Monetary Fund is on the table but they are to assess the political preconditions beforehand.

FOREIGN POLICY

Both with the EU and Russia

Trying to develop relations with the EU and Russia, while receiving help, support and benefits from both sides, the president increasingly emphasizes that Moldova cannot be exclusively pro-Russian or pro-European. That is why currently the main task is to smooth out the prevailing cold perception of the pro-Russian president's activities in the eyes of the European partners.

Authorities focus on fulfilling the requirements of the Moldova-EU Association Agreement. Among the priorities set for 2020, special attention is paid to progress in

the European integration and the development of relations with the external partners, the balanced and open nature of partnerships. The Prime Minister aims to increase the efficiency of trade and economic departments of the embassies of Moldova. Diplomats should focus on supporting the export of Moldovan products and attracting investments in the country's industrialization. At the same time, the government does not forget to emphasize the importance of bilateral economic relations with other states, which will increase mutual trade and expand export markets for Moldovan products.

Ukraine: In the Shadow of Disasters and Dark Forecasts

Sergey Gerasymchuk, Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”

For Ukraine, the first three months of 2020 were filled with extraordinary and sometimes tragic events, disasters, and the echo of past tragedies both on the domestic political front and in the international arena. The change of government, the new Prosecutor General, the risk of a diplomatic catastrophe at the Minsk talks are only a fraction of what shocked Ukraine in the first months of the year.



Appointment of a new Cabinet of Ministers headed by D. Shmygal. Photo by kmu.gov.ua

DOMESTIC POLICY

Does the change of governments make any difference?

The key event in Ukraine’s internal policy was the res-

ignation of A. Goncharuk government in early March and the appointment of a new Cabinet of Ministers headed by D. Shmygal. The Cabinet of Ministers headed by A. Goncharuk lasted six months, which is the shortest period in

the history of governments in Ukraine. The key explanation for such a staff turnover is a drop in the rating of public confidence in the president and the government. New authorities contrary to voters' expectations and despite the "turbo mode" could not fulfil V. Zelensky's election promises in a half-year: the era of poverty did not end, as well as the war with Russia. A. Goncharuk and his ministers in this situation became a kind of a "lightning rod". Moreover, the president's team went beyond replacing the Ukrainian government, and already on March 5, the Prosecutor General of Ukraine R. Ryaboshapka was dismissed. As the non-public reason for the resignation they name the lack of arrests of the corrupt top officials promised by V. Zelensky during his election campaign.

In just two weeks, the new government faced new personnel changes again. The parliament dismissed two ministers with key roles in the crisis, negotiations with the IMF and the pandemic response, namely the Ministers of Finance and Healthcare. But the vote for their successors demonstrated a historic turn when the president lost the unique "mono-majority" in the parliament, as his party

If the long-awaited changes do not come, more and more political players in the country will be inclined to "restart" the president himself.

"Servant of the People" failed to give enough votes. New appointments were supported only after V. Zelensky arrived at the Verkhovna Rada himself, and decision was only possible due to the voices of other factions. It was also a challenge to pass the laws necessary to conclude a new

agreement with the International Monetary Fund, namely the laws on launching the land market and the inability to return bankrupt banks to their previous owners. Both laws are disadvantageous to the oligarch I. Kolomoisky, so the president started an open conflict.

At large, the events showed that the beautiful tale of quick reforms and transformations crashed on the rocks of incompetence, the shortage of professional personnel and the realities of wartime. The president decided to play all-in and restart the government and the Prosecutor General's Office. Zelensky also has at hand an option of restarting the parliament (due to early elections). And if the long-awaited changes do not come, then more and more political players in the country will be inclined to "restart" the president himself.

ECONOMY

Is the miracle delayed?

As for the economy, the negative trends of the end of the previous year only worsened in 2020. [In general, back in December 2019, the IMF promised its support to Kyiv and agreed on a \\$5.5 billion financing program for Ukraine for three years.](#)

However, at the same time, the Fund set certain conditions: rule of the law in the country, reducing the influence of the certain individual interests, protection of the

achievements of cleaning the banking sector of Ukraine and returning taxpayers' funds spent as a result of the banks' bankruptcy, as well as reform of land legislation. [Parliament passed the relevant laws only on March 31.](#)

It is not surprising that taking into account such a delay and amid the coronavirus pandemic, forecasts for Ukraine's economic growth for 2020 deteriorated by [7.6% of GDP, decreasing from previously expected growth of 3.7% to a decline of 3.9%.](#)

FOREIGN POLICY

Downed Boeings and Minsk betrayal

The tragedy of the winter was the crash of a Ukrainian airline aircraft following the Tehran-Kyiv route in the sky above the Iranian capital on January 8. 176 people were killed. Later on January 11, the Iranian side admitted that the aircraft was shot down by their air defence system by mistake. [The Ukrainian plane was hit by two Russian-made Tor-M1 air-to-air missiles.](#)

Two months later, on March 9, in the Schiphol court complex in the Netherlands, the hearings began on another tragedy, the downed Boeing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 (on July 17, 2014, a plane heading from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was downed in the sky over the occupied Donbas from the Russian air defence system "Buk",

298 people killed). Three Russian citizens are accused in this case: I. Girkin, S. Dubinsky, and O. Pulatov, as well as a citizen of Ukraine L. Kharchenko. The international investigation team also found that flight MH17 was shot down by the "Buk" air defence system, which belongs to the 53rd Air Defence Brigade of the Russian Armed Forces, based in Kursk. [None of the four suspects appeared at the hearing. The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called this trial "the first step to restore justice".](#)

While the MH17 disaster was being considered in the Netherlands, another catastrophe nearly happened in Belarusian capital on March 11 as part of the TCG (Trilateral Contact Group – Ukraine, OSCE, Russia, to resolve the military conflict in the Donbas region). This time a diplomatic one. The Group signed a "document", which implies the

creation of an “advisory council” with the participation of “representatives from certain regions of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine” (ORDLO). Among the participants in the negotiations and the signatories of the “draft document” were the head of the Office of the President of Ukraine A. [Yermak and the deputy head of the Presidential Administration of Russia](#) D. Kozak. According to the “document” logic, if the so-called “advisory council” is formed, Russia changes its status from a participant in an armed conflict for an observer status, like France and Germany, and the representatives of the ORDLO officially become the negotiators, which has not happened in the 6 years of the war. Such a somersault with the participation of the

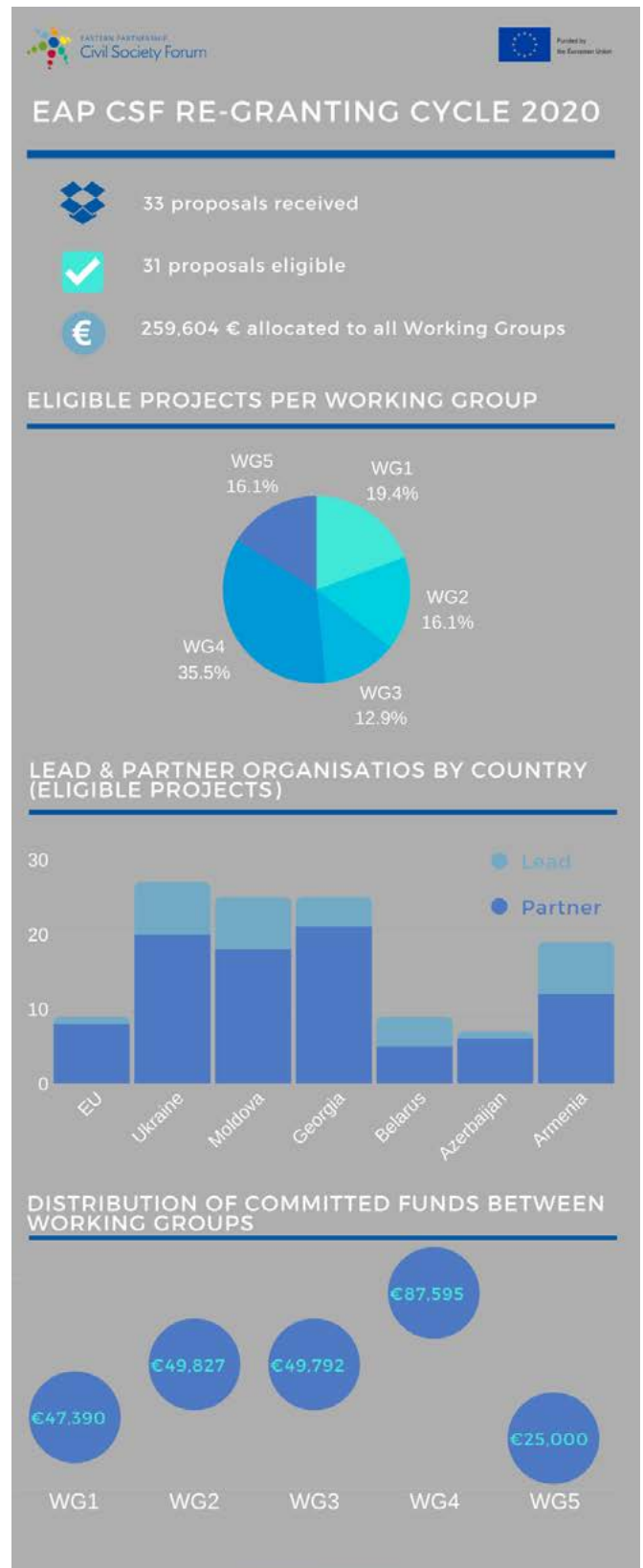
Ukrainian officials and “representatives” of the pseudo-republics caused a storm of indignation in the Ukrainian society and the political establishment.

Not only members of parliament of the opposition parties, but also a significant part of the pro-government faction of the majority “Servant of the People”, [demanded that the president oblige the negotiators from Ukraine to return to the framework of the law and prevent the creation of an “advisory council” in the proposed form](#). In addition to the appeal, a group of deputies registered a resolution to declare such [“advisory council” as unlawful](#). An ambiguous decision remains at the level of the “draft”, with a signature not revoked.

EaP CSF Re-granting Cycle 2020

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum Re-granting scheme (Financial Support to Third Parties – FSTP) supports the projects of civil society organisations from EaP countries and EU member states. These projects all have a regional dimension, and facilitate the work of one of the five thematic [Working Groups of the Forum](#). In the course of 2020 the Secretariat received 33 project proposals in total, out of which 31 passed the eligibility screening. In the next step, Working Group Selection Committees evaluated all received proposals and the European Commission validated the results. In the end, 11 projects have been selected to receive funding for their activities with the total of 259,604 Euro allocated. View the list of projects selected for the current call [here](#).

If you are interested to know more about the Re-granting scheme, please visit EaP CSF's Web-page [here](#).



EaP Think Bridge

**Project
is implemented by**



NGO Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation (PIC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization aiming to promote international cooperation and intercultural dialogue. The goal of PIC is to raise awareness in different groups (youth, students, business, journalists, state and local authorities, academics, etc.) on the issues of international, intercultural relations, global and local socio-political problems.
<http://ngopic.org.ua/>

Supported by:



The project benefits from support through the EaP Civil Society Forum Re-granting Scheme (FSTP) and is funded by the European Union as part of its support to civil society in the region. Within its Re-granting Scheme, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) supports projects of its members that contribute to achieving the mission and objectives of the Forum.
<https://eap-csf.eu/>

Network founded by:



Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" (Ukraine) is a network-based non-governmental analytical center, the goal of which is to participate in providing democratic ground for developing and implementation of foreign and security policies by government authorities of Ukraine, implementation of international and nation-wide projects and programs, directed at improvement of foreign policy analysis and expertise, enhancement of expert community participation in a decision-making process in the spheres of foreign policy, international relations, public diplomacy.
www.prismua.org



Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) is an independent think-tank, founded in 2007 by a group of leading scientists and civil activists. BISS's mission is to provide a holistic picture of socio-political processes in Belarus based on empiric studies.
<https://belinstitute.com/>



The Regional Studies Center (Armenia) is an independent think tank based in Armenia. The RSC conducts a wide range of strategic analysis and objective research, implements a number of educational and policy-related projects, and develops policy initiatives aimed at bolstering political and economic reform and conflict resolution in the broader South Caucasus region.
www.regional-studies.org



The foundation Liberal Academy Tbilisi (Georgia) is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization, committed to promoting core democratic values, supporting peace-building and European and Euro-Atlantic integration and with that fostering the democratic development of Georgia and the whole Southern Caucasus region.
www.ei-lat.ge

foreign policy association



Foreign Policy Association (Moldova) is Moldova's leading foreign policy think-tank, committed to supporting Moldova's Europeanization, integration into the European Union and a viable settlement of the Transnistrian conflict.
www.ape.md