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**CORONAVIRUS
CRUSH TEST:**

**DISINFORMATION RESILIENCE
OF THE EAP STATES**

While Eastern Partnership countries are obviously focused on managing humanitarian and healthcare issues related to the coronavirus outbreak, the information sphere is also under strain.

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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

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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.

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Security and stability at stake

Full-scale hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, unfolded in late September, endangered the security and stability of the entire region. Perhaps, even further cooperation within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, which includes both warring countries, is questionable.

Meanwhile, for more than seven weeks now, street protests against unfair elections and the system in general have not subsided in Belarus. The violence of the security forces against the protesters has not stopped as well as.

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are preparing for elections - parliamentary, presidential and local, respectively. This means that the polarization in the societies is growing.

However, it is not only military clashes and political showdowns that endanger the region. While the countries are trying to cope with the crisis in the healthcare system, the economic and humanitarian consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, the information sphere is also under attack. The rampant stream of disinformation about the virus has become a test for strength - for the states, the media, and civil society, a real "combat" test of their readiness to defend their information security. After all, the goal of fakes in most cases is to sow panic and undermine confidence in the state.

All these topics and some more can be found in the latest issue of our digest.



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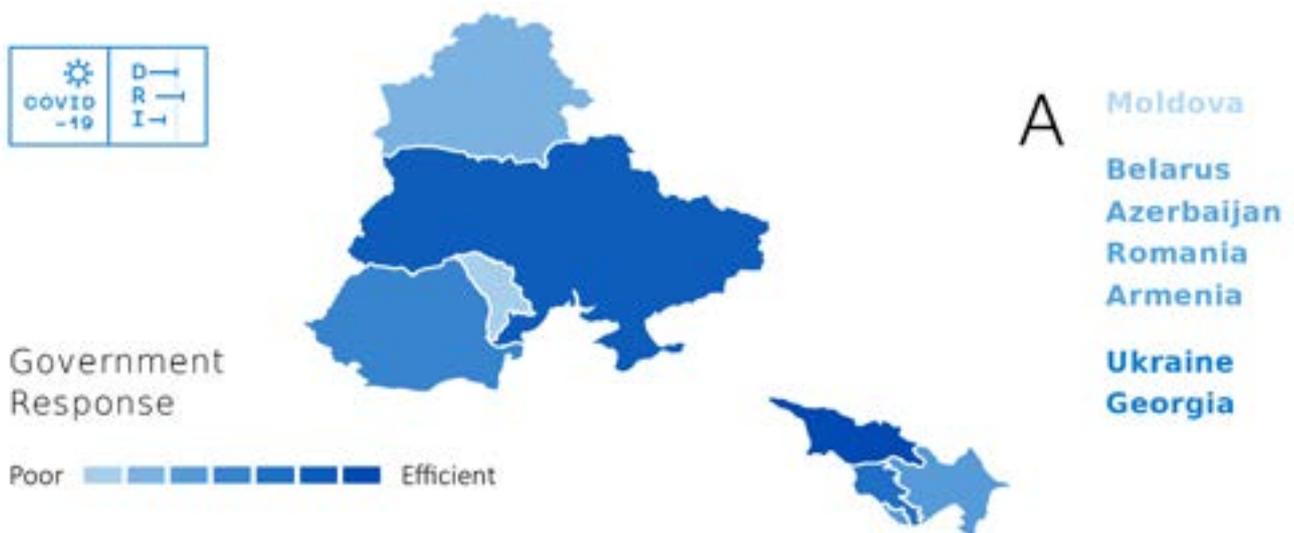
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Coronavirus Crush Test: Disinformation Resilience of the EaP States and Romania

Hanna Shelest, NGO Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation

The rampant flood of disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic turns out to be a test for state disinformation resilience. While Eastern Partnership countries are obviously focused on managing humanitarian and healthcare issues related to the coronavirus outbreak, the information sphere is also under strain. The sources of disinformation can be different (both domestic and foreign), their consequences are similar and could generate panic, distrust in governmental activities, and crisis mishandling.



COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index: Government

Which Eastern Partnership state had a more efficient response to pandemic-related disinformation? Who had more impact from measures taken in

the information sphere: governments, media or civil society? These were the issues studied by analysts from all six countries and Romania, led by the For-



COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index: Media

Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”. The research presents an overview of the COVID-19 related actions and communication strategies, as well as disinformation narratives in each of the studied countries for February-July 2020. The local experts in seven countries analyzed the actions, statements, and initiatives of both governmental and non-governmental institutions, including media and religious organizations, as well as narratives present in the public and media discourse.

The analysis showed that even if in the majority of countries the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in March, the disinformation and conspiracy theories had been spreading since January. They were part of the global tendency and had mainly a geopolitical nature linked with China-US discourse or fear of the unknown.

One of the main factors that influenced disinformation flow was timely and sufficient, as well as coordinated delivery of information by the appropriate governmental authorities. As soon as the media and public had open access to information, through regular briefings, official websites, etc., the information vacuum has been filling, leaving less space for gossips and manipulations.

Media had a serious role both in disinformation spread and debunking. Unfortunately, in some countries, the media became a hostage of the political preferences of their owners, or of the lack of the specific knowledge necessary for covering pandemic

While the Russian narratives are steadily occupying public discourse, during the pandemic Russia was not the only source of disinformation

stories.

All countries faced a problem of balancing between the necessity to prevent the spread of the disinformation, thus blocking some news or online resources circulating them, and a right for free speech and media activities. However, the level of governmental criticism was arguably correlated with a level of trust in governmental actions. For instance, in Azerbaijan and Belarus there have been numerous previous cases of blocking as a punishment against the opposition, so any new restrictions have been perceived through the lens of additional pressure. Whereas in Ukraine, the public accepted the necessity to block some Facebook pages by security services as a necessary step to prevent disinformation spread, as previously such actions have been predominantly connected with preventing Russian or separatist propaganda.

Romania, Ukraine, and Georgia ranked the highest in terms of resilience, society and governmental response, although still did not reach the top marks. Concurrently, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Moldova scored the lowest. For government response, Georgia received the highest score (6 out of 9), followed by Ukraine (5 out of 9), while Moldova – the lowest (0). Media performance was the best in Romania (3 out of 4) and the worst in Belarus (1 out of 4). Civil societies’ response was the most active in Ukraine and Romania (7 out of 8 for both countries) and the least active in Azerbaijan



COVID-19 Disinformation Response Index: Society

and Belarus (1 out of 8 for both countries).

As the study indicated, while the Russian narratives are steadily occupying public discourse, during the pandemic, Russia was not the only source of disinformation, leaving enough space for global and domestic narratives generation. Most of the disinformation narratives, circulating during the pandemic and identified in all the studied countries, could be grouped as follows: health-related (e.g., symptoms, diagnosis, cures); geopolitically-oriented (e.g., actions or influence of the third states, those related to foreign policy, foreign assistance); government-related (e.g., threats to democracy and human rights, 'failed' governments, political cleavages, etc.); conspiracy theories (e.g., 5G network, virus as a purposefully created bioweapon, virus invented by Bill Gates, etc.).

Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan, disinformation campaigns had roots both at the global and national levels, while the authorities have largely mishandled the situation. Information from state-run media and research centers in Russia has remained the main source of COVID-19 disinformation with a Russian-speaking community as the most vulnerable group in the country. Independent media and civil society were immensely limited due to the general

political situation in the country. Strict restrictive measures imposed by the government have been highly criticized and did not have a positive effect on Azerbaijan society's resilience to disinformation. Despite the fact that high-level authorities were providing facts and basic information, they lacked openness for questions, transparency, thus creating an information vacuum. Religious communities, including their leaders, were active neither in information discourse, nor in spreading disinformation. The main narratives were changing with the development of pandemic, starting from the geopolitical ones (reports about the United States creating COVID-19 as a biological weapon and the European Union falling apart) to those, during a peak of the pandemic, appraising the so-called 'successes' of the government in handling the pandemic, claiming that 'Azerbaijani experience' of measures and fight against a coronavirus are studied by the world.

Armenia

Armenia witnessed a serious range of anti-governmental narratives connected with the general political competition in the country when political disinformation was mostly spread by political opponents to undermine trust in the Armenian government. The government's initial response started with the appointment of Deputy Prime Minis-

All countries faced a problem of balancing between the necessity to prevent the spread of the disinformation, thus blocking some news or online resources circulating them, and a right for free speech and media activities.

ter as a central figure or a “point person,” as well as with systematic updates provided by the Ministry of Health. Regular briefings had a positive effect for filling information vacuums. However, the issues of pandemic mishandling and data privacy shadowed an initial positive response. Given that the media landscape is highly politicized in Armenia, it had its negative effect. In terms of social media, what had a significant effect are (former) doctors – bloggers, who used to mix politics and medicine and spread disinformation about the virus. Civil society had both positive and negative responses and was involved in both spreading and debunking disinformation. The main narratives popular in Armenia have been those criticizing masks and quarantine measures, building distrust for the government, and addressing George Soros’ role in virus spread.

Belarus

Belarus case has its particularities since it is the only country where quarantine and emergency state have not been introduced. In addition, the pandemic has been happening along with a very tense election campaign. Thus, the government and top officials themselves became one of the main sources of disinformation, together with the Russian information sources. At the first stage of pandemic spread, Minsk’s information policy was largely focused on preventing panic among the population by publishing very limited data about the epidemiologic situation and downplaying the risk of infection. President Lukashenko became the main newsmaker of false information. This resulted in an information vacuum and spreading gossips about the real situation around COVID-19. Independent media and opposition politicians criticized the governmental actions and tried to present alternative sources of information. This was used as a reason for attacks against the opposition media. In the situation of no quarantine in Belarus, civil society organizations and groups have been more involved in advocating stricter measures of social distancing and supporting medical personnel than in debunking activities. The main narratives were about denying the COVID-19 danger, geopolitical competition between China and the US as a reason of the crisis, and gossips about high mortalities in different towns.

Georgia

The governmental response in Georgia was one of the most successful, resulting both in the best pandemic situation and in good communication strategies. However, the political crisis and expect-

ed parliamentary elections during the pandemic had a negative impact on the information environment. The biggest challenge for Georgia was communicating quarantine measures and other restrictions to the national minorities (Azerbaijan and Armenian communities) that led to a number of incidents. Establishing the Interagency Coordination Council by the Government of Georgia had its positive effect, given that important information was provided, daily briefings organized, special websites and a hotline created. In terms of media, the problem with Russian media and with the one at the occupied territories of Georgia that retranslated Russian disinformation could be observed. Most of this disinformation was connected with the fake news about US laboratories in Georgia that likely had created COVID-19. Anti-US, anti-liberal, anti-quarantine narratives have been the most popular.

Moldova

In Moldova, the pandemic response and its coverage in the media have been highly politicized. The general political competition in the country had its negative effect and led to an increased level of misinformation and manipulation with information. Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns and media influence have been noticed. Moldova’s Response Plan presented in March had a communication component that included media and social media, top officials briefings, hotlines, and websites. However, the generally low trust of the Moldovan population in their government and disconnection between the information provided and real facts on the ground led to the negative perception of the official information. In addition, the President and the Government provided contradicting information. A significant presence of the Russian media content and Russian TV channels had a serious negative effect, which included both false news and propaganda. The church was one of the sources of disinformation, including spreading fakes about 5G and virus origin (most of the narratives were identical to those spread by the Russian Orthodox Church). The main narratives in Moldova were about methods of treatment, fears about a possibility to recover, as well as conspiracy theories (population chipping, 5G, US laboratories).

In addition, a geopolitical discourse was present, mainly ‘the death came from the West, and help – from Russia and China’.

Ukraine

A relatively long experience of information war with Russia, as well as existence of the number of

Even if in the majority of countries the first cases of COVID-19 were detected in March, the disinformation and conspiracy theories had been spreading since January.

debunking and information security NGOs, assured some sort of resilience towards disinformation and fake news. The government response was satisfactory with daily information provided and special websites created. Security services were also involved in preventing disinformation spread. Media appeared less resilient due to the politicization of the media landscape, lack of professional knowledge, Russian influence, and reference to unchecked sources. At the same time, there were positive examples of media outlets creating special coverage to fill the information gaps and debunk myths about COVID-19. Civil society in Ukraine became the most resilient and prepared, actively working in all directions. Disinformation spread in Ukraine differed depending on the situation. It has started with fake news and conspiracy theories due to the lack of knowledge, in addition to geopolitical narratives about foreign support in fighting a pandemic. The most popular disinformation was about virus origin (including US laboratories in Ukraine) and methods of treatment, as well as George Soros's role in causing pandemic.

Recommendations

The following **recommendations** have been developed by experts that can be applied not only in individual countries, but in the whole region.

Effective coordination between ministries and agencies in providing information to avoid misunderstanding and misleading news to increase trust.

Need to ensure at the state level that citizens receive complete, truthful, and timely information about the pandemic, with easy access to information both inside of the country and abroad, including the languages of national minorities.

Mutual trust is essential for ensuring cohesion and unity at the societal level. Conversely, lower levels of trust between state institutions and civil society affect the resilience of the state.

Professional fact-checking and debunking need to be encouraged in order to fight the disinformation, particularly in the online environment.

In addition to debunking the disinformation itself, the "name and shame" method should be used to address those who are spreading disinformation. The appropriate measures are needed to prevent future cases of disinformation.

Armenia at War

Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center (Yerevan, Armenia)

A dangerous new period of renewed hostilities in Nagorno Karabakh put larger regional security and stability at risk, with a rising number of combatant casualties and civilian deaths on both sides



Source: Armenia Ministry of Defense

DOMESTIC POLICY

Renewed hostilities escalate in fighting over Nagorno Karabakh

In the early morning of Sunday, September 27, Azerbaijani armed forces launched a coordinated offensive targeting military positions in Nagorno Karabakh and triggering a steep increase in open hostilities and outright warfare. In the opening days, the Azerbaijani offensive advances, leveraging Turkish military support and assistance, and seizes territory, inflicting considerable damage. As the fighting intensifies over the remainder of the month, Armenian efforts to defend Karabakh are challenged by the intense attacks involving tanks, artillery and

military-grade drones or UAVs, while Azerbaijan and Turkey coordinate their resistance to diplomatic demands for an immediate ceasefire.

Fighting over Nagorno Karabakh expands quickly on September 28-29, as artillery attacks the Armenian border city of Vardenis on the other side of the border with Karabakh. Armenian Ministry of Defense spokeswoman Shushan Stepanian also reports that Azerbaijan's Su-25 combat aircraft and Turkish Bayraktar attack drones were engaged by Armenia air-defense units, culminating in the downing of an Armenian Su-25 aircraft over Armenian airspace, reportedly shot down by a Turkish F-16 jet. The incident, which increases the risk of a wider escalation,

follows the Turkish deployment of several F-16s to Azerbaijan for a joint Azerbaijani-Turkish military exercise held in August. Those remained stationed at the Azerbaijani military airfield in Gyanja, Azerbaijan's second largest city located several dozen kilometers from the northern areas of Nagorno Karabakh.

Armenia mobilizes military reserves and declares martial law

In response to escalation, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan declares martial law late on September 27 and orders the mobilization of military reserves. In comments after convening an emergency meeting of his government and National Security Council, Prime Minister Pashinyan called on the international community to "prevent Turkey from any possible intervention which would further destabilize the situation in the region".

For his part, Armenian Defense Minister Davit Tonoyan stated that "as a guarantor of the security of Artsakh (Karabakh), the armed forces of the Republic of Armenia are prepared to provide any assistance to ensure the security of Artsakh's population".

Ruling pro-government party loses second parliamentarian

In a surprise move on September 25, Gayane Abrahamyan, a pro-government deputy resigned from the parliament, hinting at her disagreement with others in the "My Step" bloc. The 41-year-old Abrahamyan, a former journalist and civic activist, was first elected on the party list of Prime Minister Pashinyan's "My Step" bloc in the December 2018 election. The resignation is the second such setback for the ruling pro-government bloc, coming after the September 10th resignation of Arsen Julfalakyan, who noted his serious disagreement with Minister of Education, Culture

and Sports Arayik Harutiunian. Despite these cases of internal dissent, the pro-government bloc still retains control of some 88 seats in the 132-member parliament. The two vacancies are to be filled by other candidates from the "My Step" party list.

Court affirms pre-trial detention of opposition oligarch

In a ruling issued on September 25 by a Yerevan court, the arrest and pre-trial detention of one of Armenia's wealthiest men, oligarch Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the Prosperous Armenia party, was formally approved. The arrest of the 63-year-old Tsarukyan stems from a criminal investigation into his role in an alleged case of "vote buying" on behalf of his party's candidates in the parliamentary election of 2017. As a leader of the opposition Prosperous Armenia party, the second largest group in the parliament with 24 seats, Tsarukyan has become an outspoken critic of the government and has publicly called for the resignation of Prime Minister Pashinyan.

Tsarukyan's immunity from arrest or prosecution as a sitting member of parliament was lifted by that body in a vote three months earlier. This court ruling approving his arrest and detention overturns an earlier decision in June by a lower court that released him from custody. Despite an earlier political alliance with Prime Minister Pashinyan, that political relationship was short-lived and ended in October 2018 when Pashinyan dismissed all cabinet ministers affiliated with Tsarukyan's party. Since then, Tsarukyan, who was especially close to the former Armenian leadership deposed in the 2018 "Velvet Revolution," has renewed his criticism of the government for its handling of the COVID-19 crisis and attacked the government's education reforms, which he decried as undermining "Armenian traditional values."

ECONOMY

Armenian government welcomes fresh EU aid

On September 24 the Armenian government welcomed the announcement by the European Union of a new aid package to Armenia of some 60 million euros (\$70 million) to finance and support state efforts to manage and respond to the COVID-19 crisis. The fresh EU aid will also provide half of the aid package to fund more specific measures aimed at legal reform and court modernization, while also including

important support for the planned establishment and operation of a new special anti-corruption court.

With 30 million euros set aside for dealing with the pandemic, the new aid will bolster ongoing measures to manage the public health crisis. As Armenian Economy Minister Tigran Khachatryan reported, since the onset of the crisis in March 2020, the government has distributed over \$300 million in a special financing and stimulus package, with over \$190 million in financing allocated in bank-provided preferential loans, subsidies and tax incentives and credits.

Armenia opens embassy in Israel

On September 18, Armenia formally opened its newly established embassy in Israel, selecting Tel Aviv as the site for the Armenian diplomatic presence. The move follows a coordinated strategy by the Armenian foreign ministry to refocus diplomatic engagement in the broader Middle East. Newly appointed Armenian Ambassador to Israel Armen Smbat presided over the formal ceremony and was joined by the Armenian Jerusalem-based Patriarch Nourhan Manougian. The Armenian government first decided to open the embassy in September 2019 and began with providing consular services as a first step toward reaching its full diplomatic presence.

Although Armenia and Israel first established diplomatic relations in 1992, the two countries never

Prime Minister Pashinyan called on the international community to “prevent Turkey from any possible intervention which would further destabilize the situation in the region”

established embassies in each other's capitals. Previously, former Armenian ambassadors to the Jewish State were based in Paris, Cairo and Yerevan, while Israeli diplomatic representation is traditionally through a “roving ambassador” based in Tel Aviv.

The timing of the move is delicate, however, as Israel has provided significant amounts of offensive weapons to Azerbaijan in recent years, including deadly military-grade drones and UAVs that have been deployed against Karabakh Armenian forces and were engaged in Azerbaijan's attacks on Armenia in July 2020. Such arms sales have surpassed billions of dollars (USD) worth of advanced weapons sold by largely state-supported Israeli defense companies.

Azerbaijan: State of War and Military Mobilization

Turan Information Agency (Baku, Azerbaijan)

A full-scale military operation of Azerbaijani forces started on September 27. However, the signs of future large-scale military operations have been obvious since the beginning of the month.



Artillery strikes on the frontline
Source: Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense

FOREIGN POLICY

Military operation on freeing the occupied territories

On September 27 Azerbaijani forces started a military operation on freeing the territories that had been occupied by Armenia, namely the Nagorno-Karabakh and several districts around it.

On the same day, President Ilham Aliyev in his address to the nation noted, that the operation was launched following another Armenian provocation on the front line. The president highlighted that the de-

structive policy of Armenia's prime minister Pashinyan made further conflict resolution through negotiations impossible. Now the Karabakh conflict can only be solved in a military way.

On the very day the president proposed, and the parliament approved introducing a state of war in the country. Curfews were launched in Baku and other large cities. A partial military mobilization started as well. On the second day of the military operation Baku officially reported on freeing some villages in Fusuli and Jabrayil districts (two out of seven districts in Nagorno-Karabakh occupied by Armenia) as well as

strategic positions in Murovdag that allow for a visual control and shellfire of one of the three main roads connecting Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh.

Since the beginning of September, the first signs of future large-scale military operations have started to appear. Azerbaijani officials started to mention Armenia's provocative actions more frequently. In fact, on September 12 Assistant to the President Hikmet Hajiyev stated that Armenia's illegal policy of populating the occupied Azerbaijani territories by Armenians from Lebanon and Syria is a serious violation of the international law. He warned that Armenia is planning to use such migrants as mercenaries against Azerbaijan. On September 14, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan called on the OSCE Minsk Group to take measures on stopping the illegal occupation of Azerbaijani territories by the government of Armenia.

On September 19 the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan issued a statement that Armenia is planning some large-scale provocations in order to aggravate the situation on the front line. Zakir Hasanov, the minister of defense of Azerbaijan, noted that the most recent media reports and rhetoric by Armenian military and political authorities as well as military mobilization activities and attracting foreign forces into the region clearly demonstrate that the rival plans large-scale provocations and the deterioration of the situation.

On September 19 the president Ilham Aliyev in his

interview to local TV stated the large-scale military operations can possibly be launched.

On September 20 the Minister of Defense reported that at 23:13 Azerbaijan's air defense units shot down a tactical unmanned aerial vehicle belonging to Armenia. According to information from social networks, the UAV was downed over the territory between Tovuz and Shamkir (Tovuz borders Armenia).

On September 21 the Ministry of Defense stated that the rival intends to heat up the situation on the contact line of Armenian and Azerbaijani forces as well as on the state border between the two countries.

That same day, a special call for reserve officers was announced in Azerbaijan.

On September 21 Ilham Aliyev in his video address at the top meeting within the frames of 75th UN General Assembly session expressed his concerns regarding Armenian military activities: "The aggressive rhetoric and provocations of Armenia demonstrate that Armenia is preparing for a new aggression against Azerbaijan. We call on the UN and international community to urge Armenia to refrain from another military aggression".

On September 22 the State Security Service stated that Armenian special forces via fake profiles in social networks are attempting to spread disinformation and sew panic among the population of the front line districts.

DOMESTIC POLICY

The case of Tofiq Yaqublu

In early September Azerbaijan's public as well as international organizations were closely following the court sentence in the case of a famous opposition activist, a member of "Musavat" party Tofiq Yaqublu. He was sentenced to 4 years and three months of imprisonment under hooliganism charges. Yaqublu stated that this is a "staged" case and all charges against him are false. A 59-year-old activist went on hunger strike to protest on September 1. International human rights organizations, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Freedom House as well as US and UK embassies in Azerbaijan, US Department of State, rapporteurs for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and others called on Azerbaijani authorities to reconsider the sentence. On September 12 a doctor Adil Qeybullu visited Tofiq Yaqublu in prison and reported on his critical condition. Yaqublu was

Since the beginning of September, the first signs of future large-scale military operations have started to appear.

transferred to a private clinic, while on September 18 Baku's appeal court supported a defense motion to change his sentence to home confinement.

The court's decision was met with positive reactions from international organizations. PACE co-rapporteurs on monitoring Azerbaijan Roger Gale, Stefan Schennach and a rapporteur on reported cases of political prisoners Sunna AEvarsdottir stated that the court's recent sentence of home confinement is a welcome change and a first long awaited step by Azerbaijani authorities. **Economy**

"Taxis for well-off customers"

Moving on with changing the structure of management and regulating the country's economy, president Ilham Aliyev following the launch of Azerbaijan Investment Holding, on September 9 published a decree on creating the Economic Council of the State of Azerbaijan headed by the prime minister. The decree says that the new

institution is created with the aim of forming new basics for strategic management of economic policy reflecting the national priorities of the country's development in the post-pandemic period.

On September 3 the government published a state budget draft for 2021. According to this document, in 2021 the state budget expects an income of 24 billion 327 million manats (approximately \$14 billion 310 million). The state budget 2021 expenditures are expected at the level of 25 billion 847,5 million manats (\$15 billion 204 million). The 2021 state budget provides for a price of \$35 per oil barrel.

In September one of the hottest issues was an attempt made by the Baku Transport Agency to take over and control taxi services in the city. The agency

reported that a project on single operating center for all taxi companies with a single taxi tariff is being developed.

However, Hikmet Babayev, the head of the agency's legal department, suddenly dealt a heavy blow with his careless statements broadcast on one of the local TV channels saying that "it is not acceptable to have such low taxi prices; taxi services, as it used to be in the good old days, should only be used by well-off people. Everybody else can use buses."

Against the backdrop of public discontent, the Baku Transport Agency had to dismiss Babayev and make a swift statement that introducing a single tariff was only a suggestion which is no longer relevant.

Belarus: 50 Days of Protests, West Doesn't Recognize Lukashenko as Legitimate

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

The protests have been going on for 7 weeks, IT-business is losing \$100 thousand daily, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya is reinstating her foreign policy legitimacy.



Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya met with foreign ministers of EU member-states
Source: BBC

DOMESTIC POLICY

50 Days of Street Rallies

The protests including hundreds thousands of participants have been taking place every weekend following August 9. On Saturdays there are women's marches, on Sundays the

entire nation protests take place. The continued violence of special forces including using water jets and armored personal carriers, gas and diversionary garnets, as well as multiple firing in the air is not enough to stop the protests. The total number of arrests following

the elections is over 11 thousand people. On September 18, a man set himself on fire near a police station in Smolevichi as a sign of protest.

The repressions are on the rise and they are losing the cover of even alleged legitimacy. An agreement with a lawyer is now recognized as a criminal intention, while asking police officers to introduce themselves is a crime. Special forces officers testifying as witnesses provide testimony in court using aliases, wearing balaklavas while being broadcast in video messages. The ministry of internal affairs requests the Parliament to legalize this anonymity while the Telegram-channel NEX-TA is publishing personal data of thousands of

special forces officers.

Given the repressions, the protestors taking part in mass rallies have been very active on a local level. Throughout the entire country local communities are being formed in districts, areas and yards. There is a special map where one can find local Telegram-chats, in which neighbors come together for mutual help, having local meetings and forming columns for taking part in Sunday protests. Independent student structures are being formed in universities, with their demands reaching far beyond the system of education. Despite the fact that in several universities both security guards and police are watching the order, it is not possible to stop the solidarity actions.

ECONOMY

IT-business threatened

The country's political crisis has a significant negative impact on the most active sector of Belarusian economy, IT-industry. Many companies are forced to move their offices abroad or are planning a partial relocation for their employees. According to experts, IT-sector is experiencing a daily loss of \$100 thousand. Four top employees of one of the most famous companies, PandaDoc, were put under arrest and accused of fraud. Earlier the company's founder, Mikita Mikado, openly stated his opinion regarding the ongoing events in Bela-

rus and offered financial assistance to those special forces officers who choose to resign. Another criminal case has been initiated with charges against the staff of Beltyazhmash who provided premises for the headquarters of oppositioner Viktor Babaryka. The offers made by the country's business community have been ignored by the authorities, while average wages in Belarus are decreasing.

At the same time funds and projects that help those affected by the actions of the authorities (BY_help, BY_SOL, Honest people (Chestnie Lyudi), Media Solidarity Belarus and others) have raised over \$6 ml in donations.

FOREIGN POLICY

Tsikhanouskaya – to West, Lukashenko – to East

Svetlana Tikhanovskaya is strengthening her foreign policy legitimacy. The Lithuanian Seim recognized her as the "chosen leader in Belarus", while in Brussels she had a meeting with MFA heads of EU countries and her video address was broadcast at the urgent debates regarding Belarus in the frames of the 45th session of UN Human Rights Council.

The European countries and the USA have stated that they will not recognize Lukashenko as the country's legitimate president after his inauguration. On September 17, the European parliament adopted a resolution on Belarus

that does not recognize the elections and its results with Lukashenko having been elected as the president-elect. Moreover, financial assistance is to be frozen and EU policy on Belarus is to be reviewed with launching sanctions aimed at those responsible for false elections and repressions. The sanctions are yet to be launched due to the position of Cyprus (that does not mind the sanctions themselves, however, regards them with similar sanctions against Turkey).

The negotiations in Sochi, held on September 14 with Lukashenko and Putin present, did not result in memorandums or any signed documents, even though Russia did make a promise of providing a loan to Belarus equivalent to \$1.5 billion divided into three tranches.

The repressions are on the rise and they are losing the cover of even alleged legitimacy

Georgia under Risk to be Involved in South Caucasus Conflict

Lasha Tughushi, Liberal Academy Tbilisi (Georgia)

Georgia's political "debates" prior to the country's parliamentary elections heated up to the extent that some opponents attacked each other physically. The country's economy is under recession due to the current coronavirus situation. However, the main threat comes from the country's neighbors: Armenia and Azerbaijan, as two states started large-scale military operations.



Fights between ruling party and opposition supporters.
Source:kavkaz-uzel.eu

DOMESTIC POLICY

Political rhetoric ends up with fighting

Political parties have submitted their lists of candidates for parliament. The public is now familiar with the first dozens of parliamentary candidates. The ruling party "Georgian Dream" had been keeping the main intrigue till the very end: who would it be to head its list? Would the undisputed leader, a billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili be at the top? However, at the top of the list one can find the incumbent prime minister

Giorgi Gakharia, who will keep his position if the ruling party wins yet again.

The numbers in electoral ratings published by different organizations vary significantly. Nevertheless, the sequence is consistent, at least the first three places in all surveys are ranked identically. The second place belongs to the party of Mikhail Saakashvili called "United National Movement" (UNM), with the party's first number being a film and music legend, Vakhtang "Buba" Kikabidze.

The polarization of the society and rhetoric of political opponents is still quite high, while the public has witnessed some physical violence incidents in several regions. It is only one month before the elections and yet the groups from different parties can be seen wandering from one TV station to another. However, there is no ruling party among them as it would act differently from the others and go live only on those mass media that are under its influence. So far there have not been any high-quality program debates being broadcast. The discussions are quite personal

and come down to adversaries demonstrating a good knowledge of each other's biographies as well as mathematics when it comes to promises having some monetary value. Populist trends are quite clear, while pandering to religious issues has become a special feature of the campaign.

The situation prior to the elections is overshadowed by the growing numbers of COVID-19 infected people, especially when it comes to the region of Adjara, where domestic tourism rates set a record last summer. The aftermath of the growing domestic mobility is obvious.

ECONOMY

Lari is down with coronavirus

On October 2 lari celebrated its 25th birthday. "Lari is down with coronavirus" – such malevolent jokes are frequent in Tbilisi due to the fluctuations of Georgia's national currency shaking up the country's economy. Lari has been losing its value recently.

As of February 29, 2020 1 US dollar made up 2,79 lari. Officially 1 US dollar is equivalent to 3,32 lari as of September 29, at the close of the trade. The National Bank has sold reserves several times in order to stabilize Georgian lari rate. Overall, in 2020 the National Bank put on sale at the currency market reserves that

are equivalent to \$420 million.

Nevertheless, Georgian lari continues to fluctuate. According to the report published by National Statistics Office of Georgia, in January-August 2020 the economic activity in the country went down by 5,6%, while August saw a decrease of 5,3%, which, naturally, results in the devaluation of lari.

However, Georgian authorities are quite optimistic regarding the future, while growing prices on crucial goods do not result in any positive emotions experienced by customers. For instance, the price of food went up 8%, which creates a heavy burden on low-income households.

FOREIGN POLICY

Georgia "under crossfire"

It smells like war in the Caucasus. The war in Nagorno-Karabakh is intensifying, which naturally presents a serious threat to the security and stability of Georgia.

Georgia is quite neutral when it comes to this military conflict, with several factors acting as pre-conditions. Both ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis reside on the territory of Georgia.

Georgia is the main land transit route for both neighboring countries. Therefore, Tbilisi risks finding itself under pressure from its neighbors aiming to use its territory for arms transit. For instance, both a route from Russia to Armenia as well as from Turkey to Azerbaijan could have been a route for arms transit by land mostly via Georgia. This contradicts the national interests of Georgia as it would mean its involvement in military actions.

The Russian propaganda machine is already trying to involve Georgia into the conflict, with thousands of fake news being spread regarding

the transit of weapons and forces across the territory of Georgia. However, such information is not true. Several days following the beginning of the war Georgia's National Security Council meeting took place with its members announcing that Georgia bans military supplies transit to both countries. As for civil goods supplies, they have not been stopped and it will remain like this in the future.

The president of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili called on the Minsk Group and the European Union to be more active in the matters of deescalating and resolving the conflict.

Georgia once again made an offer of Tbilisi becoming a place for hosting the representatives of both countries for the fast conflict resolution.

The risks are also high when it comes to economy or humanitarian issues. Moreover, there are some issues regarding the Eastern Partnership policy since both Armenia and Azerbaijan are EaP members and now it is difficult to imagine them being the members of one club.

The polarization of the society and rhetoric of political opponents is still quite high, while the public was a witness of some physical violence incidents in several regions.

Turmoil in Moldova amid the electoral period, the pandemic and a contested governance process

Laura Zghibarta, Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (Chisinau, Moldova)

While Moldovan authorities seem to convey an ‘all is going well, despite the hard times’ message across policies, public statements and official activity, the country is not particularly stable or successful when it comes to the pandemic, political and governance processes. The upcoming presidential elections play a significant role in the situation. The electoral period has so far exacerbated issues with the functioning of state institutions, fueled clashes among politicians, redefined priorities on authorities’ agenda and shaped different narratives on governance quality, whilst too little has been done to address the public’s concerns, a public that will decide on the next president.



Campaigning in Moldova: in a solemn atmosphere and with a red ribbon, the socialists opened a toilet in village gymnasium.

Source: nokta.md

DOMESTIC POLICY

Justified priorities and concerns?

In September Moldova registered an all-time high of new COVID-19 cases, reaching a total of approximately [52.000 since March](#). Given the periodical relaxation of restrictions, new peaks are expected. Apart from warnings of a potential return to [tightened measures](#) if the situation worsens, a possible [increase in testing and an imported treatment medication](#) to become available in the country, there is no sign of an official hands-on strategy for virus containment.

Despite the precarious epidemiological situation, all attention and effort is redirected towards the upcoming presidential elections. The pool of announced candidates, some of whom have been officially registered, is indicative of the current political setup and dynamics. There is a divided right wing with party nominees Maia Sandu from Party of Action and Solidarity and Andrei Nastase from Platform DA Party, among others. There are candidates from Sor Party and Our Party, with their individual agendas, Andrian Candu from the Pro Moldova Party, who [was not registered](#) as a candidate in this election, and an [independently running](#) current president Igor Dodon (albeit with the Socialist Party's support). The [Democratic Party has withdrawn from the competition](#) and acknowledges only two candidates in the elections, presumably Sandu and Dodon.

Although to officially start in October, the elections campaign is in full swing and already controversial. [Visits to schools](#) paid by either PSRM representatives or Igor Dodon himself, including an 'inauguration' of a restroom facility in a village school, prompted heated discussions about the authorities' disregard for COVID-19 restrictions.

Despite the precarious epidemiological situation, all attention and effort is redirected towards the upcoming presidential elections

The Ministry of Education quickly [prohibited any such activities](#) in schools, much to President Dodon's discontent. The Head of the State will likely continue to meet and talk to Moldovans during the campaign.

In the right wing, Andrei Nastase's campaign focuses on current governance issues (e.g. in the [justice system](#)), while rephrasing his former ACUM partner. Meanwhile, the PAS candidate is leading a firm [campaign against corruption and injustice](#), personified in President Dodon. In the meantime, recent developments in Central Electoral Commission's (CEC) activity have raised suspicions

of fraudulent elections: several [fraudulent registrations](#) of citizens supposedly intending to vote in Russia and the [exaggerated number of polling stations](#) to open there as opposed to other jurisdictions are deemed to favor President Dodon. Ultimately, CEC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration [settled for 139 stations abroad](#). CEC's president was [called to resign](#) by PAS, after the institution also circulated a [note stating that political parties cannot finance](#) their candidate's campaign for presidential elections. Foreign officials in Moldova quickly [reacted and expressed their concern](#) about these issues or made [direct inquiries to Prime-minister Chicu and President Dodon](#) on the matter, while several candidates even made an [appeal to the international community](#) to closely monitor the election. Dodon, alongside PSRM, [denied the allegations](#), arguing that the opposition simply fears the defeat. It seems that President might have another ace in his sleeve, after the Prosecutor General's Office declared that it requested [the extradition of Vladimir Plahotniuc](#), the former leader of the Democratic Party, from Turkey.

ECONOMY

Success or unsuccess in action?

Moldova is under an economic toll, hence the government operated [changes into the Law on state budget](#) for 2020 for a third time already. As a prerequisite for accessing approximately [\\$558 million](#) of financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund, the authorities had to decrease state expenditures, while also finding means to cover the support for farmers and the education system, affected by drought and the pandemic, respectively. With many of their proposals dismissed in the first place, the [opposition MPs criticized](#) the adopted budget, as it included cuts for the healthcare system, amid an intensifying crisis, and a lower than proposed subsidy fund

available for farmers. Some of the initiatives were also seen as [elections-driven](#), including the unfair distribution of allocations to districts governed by representatives of the Parliamentary majority parties.

The authorities are fairly optimistic about other projects and accomplishments, too: the completed works in the '[Good roads for Moldova 2020](#)' program or the [sufficiency of grain](#) for both domestic consumption needs and export despite this year's drought. Moldovan farmers are also supposed to receive a [€5,5 million support from Russia](#), agreed in a recent talk between Igor Dodon and Vladimir Putin. Whether those are elections- or government performance-related assessments, political implications, the authorities' previous neglect of action and

other substantial arrangements to support the economic environment need to be accounted.

The newly ratified [Memorandum of agreement](#) on a €100 million macro-financial assistance from the EU is among those deals. With an added-value to Moldova's

FOREIGN POLICY

Unbalanced and insufficient commitments

The [Transdnistrian regime has been recently exploiting](#) Moldova's distraction with elections and internal frictions, and the authorities' limited engagement with the region. Tiraspol decided to [extend the region's self-isolation measures](#) until December 1st, on COVID-19 considerations. The decision adds to the recent issues with the illegal posts installed in the security zone and obstructed mobility of the Moldovan citizens settled on the left bank of the Dniester on the territory that falls under Moldova's jurisdiction. The move did not prompt the authorities to come up with an action plan. Instead, they urged Tiraspol to engage with Chisinau on health measures and called the international and local partners to monitor the situation.

It did not help that President Dodon seemed to confirm the Transdnistrian narrative that mobility restrictions are rooted in the pandemic, during his [speech at the 75th session of the UN General Assembly](#). His statements about the frozen conflict were not straightforward either with regards to the genuine issues at the core of the conflict or the measures undertaken by Moldovan authorities to address the problem. He did talk about an upcoming independent Moldovan proposal for conflict settlement, with

budgetary safety net, the program will also, hopefully, enable the country to improve its performance in terms of business climate, good governance, anti-corruption and public finance management, provisions that condition the disbursement of the loan.

yet unknown provisions or implications.

As if to reassure everyone of the current leadership's merits, president Dodon also took the opportunity to boast in front of the international community about the so-called progress in the justice sector reform, in advancing social and infrastructure projects or gender inclusion. The speech culminated with the reiteration of Moldova's balanced foreign policy, quite problematic with the West and fruitless with the East so far, and its neutrality. The latter enabled Igor Dodon to claim that Moldova will not partake in sanctions against its partners, a contentious statement, which most likely refers to the situation in Belarus.

Meanwhile, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Oleg Tulea paid a few working visits to EU and NATO officials in September. Those possibly aimed to either reinstate and strengthen Moldova's commitments with its Western partners under current political dynamics or help maintain the formal balanced foreign policy agenda. Moldova's continued interest in NATO's [security and defense programs](#), work on a new Individual Partnership Action Plan, cooperation with the EU on [free movement](#) and [energy security](#) aspects, among other discussed matters, have all been welcomed and reinforced by European officials. But these meetings also conveyed the Western partners' [expectations of Moldovan authorities to properly deliver](#) results, which is a matter of current debate.

Ukraine: New Trend of “Economisation” for Domestic and Foreign Policies

Sergiy Gerasymchuk, Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism” (Kyiv, Ukraine)

Money, budget and economic cooperation are the main focus points of September. It would seem that the budgeting process is neglected, while EBRD forecasts regarding Ukraine are not hopeless. However, there is a risk of reforms rolling back, and, as a result, a risk of disrupting programs of Ukraine’s international financial partners. Under such conditions both economic and foreign policy sectors of the government will need to make their best efforts to help the country escape the risk zone.



State Budget for 2021 introduced in the parliament.
Source: ictv.ua

DOMESTIC POLICY

Local Elections According to New Rules

The new political season in Ukraine launched with an official start of electoral campaigns for local councils. This year the process itself will be held according to the new Electoral Code that takes into account both the new territorial basis and the number of voters in territorial communities. The novelties include a mandatory gender quota (when forming the list of candidates, a political party should have at least 2 female candidates per every 5 positions in the list). Local elections are to take place on October 25.

Another important political development of early fall is the following. On September 14 the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved the draft for State Budget 2021 at an extraordinary meeting and submitted it to the Verkhovna Rada. On the same day it was registered in the Parliament. The MPs harshly criticized the draft dubbing it as “catastrophic” and “being a utopia” and suggested revis-

ing the document.

Along budget battles on September 16 the Constitutional Court of Ukraine ruled another decision regarding National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU). The Court in fact deprived the President of Ukraine of any influence on the institution. On one hand, such a decision of the Constitutional Court means more independence for NABU, especially when it comes to political influence. On the other hand, if the Ukrainian Parliament does not write a new procedure (amendments to the Law on NABU) within three months, a legal vacuum will appear and NABU activities, in particular regarding appointing its head, will be paralyzed. Such a development will work well for many power holders in Ukraine, however, it may create difficulties in the relations with international partners. The immediate reaction from G7 ambassadors followed. In their statement they called on current authorities to respect and support the independence of anti-corruption institutions in order to stop corruption from undermining the reforms already achieved.

ECONOMY

Don't Count Your Budget Until...

Submitting Budget 2021 to the country's Parliament has without a doubt become the main economic issue of the month. Among other things, the budget provides for the annual average exchange rate making up UAH29,1 to 1 US dollar, with the budget deficit being approximately UAH270,354 bn. In order to cover such a deficit, the state plans to use IMF assistance and the support from other creditors, as well as eurobonds.

It is expected that prior to December 1 the state budget has to be approved by the Parliament. However, there may appear certain difficulties, as, according to Danil Getmantsev, the Chairperson of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Committee on Finance, Taxation and Customs Policy, the Ministry of Finance of Ukraine did not hold consultations

with the Verkhovna Rada when preparing the budget draft. Other difficulties may appear when it comes to IMF assistance and the part it plays in forming the country's budget. The latter reminds that supporting the independence of the National Bank, Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office and High Anti-Corruption Court of Ukraine are preliminary conditions for the current program of IMF assistance.

Apart from the anti-corruption component, Kyiv has to concentrate on other directions of reforming the country's economy, as according to 2020 Index of Economic Freedom, Ukraine ranked 138 out of 162 countries as mostly unfree.

The only solace is that according to EBRD assessment, the decrease of economy in Ukraine is not critical and makes up 4,5%.

FOREIGN POLICY

In spite of Lockdown, International Contacts Are Being Revived

The first month of fall 2020 saw an abundance of foreign policy developments. Series of official visits were paid by

The new Electoral Code includes a mandatory gender quota (when forming the list of candidates, a political party should have at least 2 female candidates per every 5 positions in the list)

Ukrainian top officials to friendly countries. At the same time the partners of Ukrainian state had several visits to Kyiv.

Earlier this month the head of Ukraine's MFA Dmytro Kuleba had a working visit to Romania, where he held several meetings, in particular, with Ludovic Orban, Romania's prime minister,

and his Romanian vis-à-vis Bogdan Aurescu. The results of this visit included a decision to create a working group for developing energy cooperation.

Immediately after his visit to Romania, Ukrainian minister of foreign affairs had a working visit to Portugal. In the course of his stay Dmytro Kuleba had a meeting with Augusto Santos Silva, the head of Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During the press conference both sides stated that the two countries are planning to develop trade and military cooperation. Moreover, the Ukrainian minister had a meeting with Sergio Pinto, the chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs and Portuguese Communities. Both officials discussed the situation regarding security in Donbas region.

The President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky had official visits to Slovakia and Austria in the middle of September. There he had several meetings with top officials. The main issue discussed concerned joint economic projects, which is in line with a new trend – “economisation” of Ukrainian policies. The agenda also included energy security issues. An attempt to find common language with Slovakia was successful, while disagreements with Aus-

tria, the supporter of the “Nord Stream 2” project, remain.

In September some European officials visited Ukraine as well, including Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission. In Kyiv he had a series of meetings with anti-corruption activists and the President Volodymyr Zelensky. In the course of his visit the head of EU diplomatic mission highlighted the importance of independent and efficient anti-corruption institutions and the judicial system reform and stated that they are crucial to Ukrainian society. As for the issue of visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens, Josep Borrell noted that the country meets all the requirements.

On September 18 Ekaterina Zakhariyeva, Deputy Prime Minister and the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria visited Ukraine. In the course of her visit Ekaterina Zakhariyeva highlighted that Bulgaria prioritizes Ukraine among the Eastern Partnership countries. During the meeting with the Prime Minister of Ukraine an agreement was achieved on renewing the work of the intergovernmental commission on the issues of economic cooperation.

EaP Think Bridge

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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/>

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Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" (Ukraine) is a network-based nongovernmental 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



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.



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 (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.

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