

EaP

№9

November 2020

Think Bridge

Eastern Partnership monthly analytical digest



PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN MOLDOVA: INTERIM SUCCESS OF MAIA SANDU

The election of Maia Sandu is a positive signal and opens up opportunities both for the resumption of high-level dialogue with the closest neighbors and for the implementation of the Eastern Partnership policy.

**Issue 3 (30)
November 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.

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Eastern Partnership: Far from Stabilization?

November did not bring the expected calm to the countries of the region, although several important steps were taken towards it.

In Moldova, the euphoria over Maia Sandu's sensational victory in the presidential race has been replaced by exaggerated demands from voters and an unreasonable expectation of quick results from her work. What changes are coming to the country and the region?

In Georgia, the opposition does not recognize the election results and refuses to enter the parliament. The country's legislature risks remaining one-party with only 90 out of 150 seats filled if the boycott of opposition parties continues.

The 44-day war ended in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the peace agreement, signed at the Kremlin's proposal, sparked protests in both Azerbaijan and Armenia. In Yerevan, the agreement is called treason and calls for the resignation of the prime minister are loud. Meanwhile, in Baku the opposition is concerned about the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to Karabakh.

Protests against the regime of Lukashenko continue in Belarus, as do the use of force by the authorities and arrests of protesters.

The most important developments of November in the Eastern Partnership analyzed in our digest.



Analytica

Presidential Elections in Moldova: Interim Success of Maia Sandu	4
Artem Fylypenko, Black Sea Center for Security Environment Research (BSCFSER)	

November 2020 in review

Azerbaijan: War Ended in a Victory	8
Turan Information Agency (Baku, Azerbaijan)	
Crisis in Post-War Armenia	11
Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center (Yerevan, Armenia)	
Belarus: Lukashenko Calls on “Taking No Prisoners” and Closes Borders with the EU	16
Vadim Mojeiko, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) (Minsk, Belarus)	
Georgian Parliament with No Opposition	18
Lasha Tughushi, Liberal Academy Tbilisi Foundation (Tbilisi, Georgia)	
Moldova: New President – New Hopes	21
Sorin Șclearuc, Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (Chișinău)	
Three November Challenges for Ukraine: “COVID”, Anti-Corruption and Financial Ones	24
Sergiy Gerasymchuk, Foreign Policy Council “Ukrainian Prism”	

Presidential Elections in Moldova: Interim Success of Maia Sandu

Artem Fylypenko, Black Sea Center for Security Environment Research (BSCFSER)

According to the results of the presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova, the former prime minister and leader of the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) Maia Sandu won with 57.72% of votes. The incumbent President Igor Dodon, who also made it to the second round, gained 42.28% of votes. The gap of more than 250 thousand votes made it impossible to dispute the voting results, and Igor Dodon admitted his defeat.



Maia Sandu speaks to reporters. Chisinau, November 15, 2020. azattyq.org

Sandu's victory became a kind of sensation, given the fact that her top rival had incomparable administrative, financial, and media resources. Also, Igor Dodon was openly supported by Moscow.

“Geopolitical”

Elections without Geopolitical Choices

This is the second political duel between Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu. The first one took place in the fall of 2016, when, after a long hiatus, direct presidential elections were held in Moldova (before that, the president was elected by the parliament). Maia Sandu then lost. An important role in Igor Dodon's victory was played not so much by the pro-Russian slogans as by the organizational support from the ruling Democratic Party (PDM) and its head, the oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc. For Plahotniuc, the pro-Russian Dodon was preferable to the pro-European Sandu. In a dialogue with Moldova's Western partners, Plahotniuc tried to offer a simple choice: either the power of the corrupt but pro-European PDM, or the possible victory of the openly pro-Russian Igor Dodon and the pro-presidential Party of Socialists (PSRM).

The 2020 presidential campaign (at least before the first round) differed from the 2016 campaign in a low level of “geopolitical” rhetoric. Recently, Igor Dodon nearly abandoned the anti-European slogans and did not raise the issue of breaking the Association Agreement between Moldova and the EU. On the other hand, in her campaign, Maia Sandu focused on reforms and the fight against corruption.

At the same time, the external players' position made these elections “geopolitical”. Russia made an obvious bet on Igor Dodon's victory. Thus, on October 22, the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin said at a meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club: “We hope very much that at the next elections in Moldova, the Moldovan people will appreciate the efforts that the current president of the republic is making to build relations with Russia.” And a month earlier, during a video meeting with the Moldovan President, Putin announced his readiness to provide Moldova with humanitarian aid in the amount of 500 million Russian rubles (about \$6.6 million) to support Moldovan agricultural producers affected by the drought.

The European Union emphasized the need to ensure democratic and transparent elections. The US Ambassador to Moldova Derek Hogan had a similar position, he especially emphasized the possibilities of attracting administrative resources and voters from Transnistria.

The 2020 presidential campaign differed from the 2016 campaign in a low level of “geopolitical” rhetoric

In response to this position, the Russian officials made statements about the US interference in the electoral process in Moldova and the “colour revolution” prepared there. In Moldova itself, the mass media supporting the Party of Socialists intensified anxiety, intimidating ordinary people

with chaos and unrest that should arise if the opposition starts protesting against the rigging of election results.

But the opposition was seriously preparing to resist falsifications. They took polling stations in Russia and special polling stations for the voting of the Moldovan citizens living in the uncontrolled territory of the Transnistrian region as the most vulnerable places.

Thus, according to the CEC decision, the number of polling stations in Russia increased from 11 to 17, compared with the previous year's parliamentary elections. This decision was preceded by a scandal with violations in the preliminary registration of the diaspora.

42 polling stations were opened on the right bank (territory controlled by Chisinau) for voting of the Moldovan citizens living in Transnistria. A strict quarantine and restrictions on movement across the administrative border with Moldova, introduced by the Tiraspol administration, could become an obstacle to voting. However, on October 1, the operational headquarters of the “Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic” decided to allow the Moldovan citizens to freely leave the region on election day.

Opposition fears routed from the fact that a record number of the residents of the region with a Moldovan passport took part in the 2019 parliamentary elections, 37 thousand, massively brought to the polling stations. Given the pro-Russian sentiments of the residents of Transnistria, one could expect that if the situation repeated, Igor Dodon would receive the majority of votes.

After the unexpected victory of Maia Sandu in the first round, a kind of a “taboo” on the “geopolitical” rhetoric was lifted. Igor Dodon and his supporters accused the opponent of intending to spoil the relations with Russia, as well as striving for the closer relations with Romania. However, most likely, such a tough position worked against Dodon and helped to mobilize Sandu's supporters.

What did the Vote Show?

In both the first and second rounds diaspora demonstrated the high activity. Traditionally diaspora plays a significant role in the economy of Moldova (in

2019, remittances of labour migrants accounted for 15% of the country's GDP).

The second round was attended by almost 263 thousand Moldovan voters living abroad (120 thousand more than in the first round), which is 16% of those who took part in the voting. These are people of economically productive age ranging from 21 to 40 years old. In the diaspora, 92.8% of the votes were cast for Maia Sandu, 7.19% – for the incumbent president. In general, about 25% of the votes received by the ex-prime minister are the votes of the foreign Moldovans and labour migrants, mainly those who work in the European countries. Although the number of diaspora representatives in Russia also increased, their total number (9,800 people) could not significantly affect the results.

At the same time, Maia Sandu cannot be regarded as a "president of the diaspora," since she won in Moldova too. Geographically, central and partly southern regions' representatives voted for her, while the north and certain regions of the south of Moldova, where ethnic minorities live compactly, supported Igor Dodon. In particular, in the Autonomous Territorial Entity of Gagauzia, the incumbent president received 94.6% of the votes, and in the Taraclia region, where the Bulgarians live, he received 93% of the votes. Another important issue was the victory of Maia Sandu in Chisinau, where the representative of the Socialists won the local elections in autumn 2019.

The main intrigue of the second round was who would receive the votes cast in the first round for the leader of Our Party and pro-Russian populist Renato Usatii (228,000 votes or 16.9%). Usatii himself called on to support Maia Sandu. Besides, other candidates also expressed their support to her. However, in the end, the votes cast for the leader of Our Party were split between both candidates.

Finally, the threat from Transnistria turned out to be overestimated. About 32 thousand citizens of the Republic of Moldova, living in the uncontrolled territory, took part in the second round of the elections, so the turnout more than doubled compared to the first round.

During the voting, some right-wing parties' supporters and participants in the 1992 war made several attempts to block polling stations and prevent voters from Transnistria from the voting. Dodon was supported by 85.8% of the Transnistrian voters, Sandu – by 14.2%. Compared to the first round, at the expense of the Transnistrian region, the incumbent president managed to increase the number of votes

by more than 11 thousand, but, in the total number of votes cast for Igor Dodon, the proportion of voters from uncontrolled territories was only 4%, which had almost no effect on the final result.

Will Sandu Succeed in Changing the Situation in Moldova?

This is a question many people today are worried about, both in Moldova and abroad. People who voted for Maia Sandu pin their hopes on her, which are incomparable with the powers of the president in Moldova. The government, supported by a parliamentary majority, is responsible for the foreign and domestic policy in the country. To implement his program, the president should at least rely on such a loyal majority. In this context, the success of Maia Sandu looks not final, but rather interim.

Currently, the composition of the Moldovan parliament is highly fragmented as a result of the constant changes in the composition of factions and the formation of some new parliamentary associations. None of the parties has a majority. The ruling coalition of PSRM and PDM essentially collapsed. Shortly before the second round, I. Dodon, at the suggestion of Prime Minister Ion Chicu, signed the decree on the

resignation of the government members previously appointed according to the quota of the Democratic Party.

At the same time, a new platform "For Moldova" (Pentru Moldova) was formed in the parliament, consisting of the "Shor" party faction (its leader, businessman Ilan Shor, is currently in Israel, and the

Appeal Chamber is considering a case on charges of his involvement to large embezzlement from the banking system of Moldova) and a number of independent deputies. Within a year, these independent MPs already managed to move from the PDM faction to the opposition Pro Moldova faction, and then left that one too. In total, the "For Moldova" platform has 14 seats in the parliament.

As a result, today the situation may develop according to four scenarios.

The first one presupposes the formation of a new ruling coalition, the union of the Socialist faction and the For Moldova platform. In general, their union gives 51 mandates, which is a critical majority. Igor Dodon intends to return to the leadership of the Party of Socialists and lead the opposition to the new president. The key question in this scenario is whether other parties are ready to go for a coalition with Dodon. On the one hand, the losers are not

People who voted for Maia Sandu pin their hopes on her, which are incomparable with the powers of the president in Moldova

particularly favored, on the other hand, fears for their political fate and the fate of their business can push the representatives of the For Moldova group, based on the PSRM, to creation of a new coalition.

The second scenario is the creation of a “pro-presidential coalition” by uniting the factions of the pro-presidential Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), the Platform Dignity and Truth Party (led by Andrei Nastase), the Democratic Party and Pro Moldova. PDM leader Pavel Filip already appealed to Maia Sandu and all the parliamentary factions with a proposal to elect a new government and postpone early parliamentary elections until autumn 2021. But in this case, Sandu will have to compromise with representatives of the forces that personify the previous regime of Plahotniuc and who are accused of involvement in corruption. This will inevitably lead to reputation losses.

The third scenario is the creation of a transitional “technocratic” government based on consensus with the majority of MPs without creating a coalition, or, alternatively, preserving the current minority government of Ion Chicu, subject to early elections in the fall of 2021. This option suits Igor Dodon but not Maia Sandu, against whom the time factor works.

The fourth scenario, which includes dissolution of the parliament in the near future and holding early elections in the spring, is the most optimal for the newly elected president. In this case, Maia Sandu gets the opportunity to bring a large faction to the parliament on the wave of victorious moods. She is supported by Renato Usatii, who hopes to convert the first round success into creation of the Our Party parliamentary faction if early elections take place. However, there are no clear legal grounds for the dissolution of the parliament yet, and among the deputies there are enough people not interested in early elections (factions of the Democratic Party, Pro Moldova, the mentioned independent deputies).

But even if the fourth scenario is realized, Sandu will have to seek a compromise with other political forces, for example, with Usatii, who is very far from European values.

At the same time, even in the current conditions of uncertainty, the election of Maia Sandu is a posi-

Maia Sandu’s victory opens up opportunities both for the resumption of high-level dialogue with the closest neighbors, Ukraine and Romania, and for the implementation of the Eastern Partnership initiative as well

tive signal and opens up opportunities both for the resumption of high-level dialogue with the closest neighbors, Ukraine and Romania, and for the implementation of the Eastern Partnership initiative as well. In particular, there is hope for the formation of a consolidated position and coordination of actions of Ukraine and Moldova in the reintegration of the occupied territories. Maia Sandu already received an invita-

tion from the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to pay a visit to Kyiv, and it is quite possible that this visit will allow returning to the controversial issues of the recently “frozen” bilateral relations.

Sandu’s victory also became a moral defeat for Russia, which made a rather open bet on Dodon. Despite the fact that Vladimir Putin was the third to congratulate the newly elected president on her victory, Moscow is unlikely to accept the defeat and will do everything to strengthen the pro-Russian forces in power in Moldova.

It is in an anti-Russian vein that the Kremlin is also considering Maia Sandu’s statement to seek the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Transnistria. However, in general, one should hardly count on significant progress in the Transnistrian settlement. Even Igor Dodon, despite the control over the government, the expressed readiness to grant “broad autonomy” to the region, and repeated meetings with the head of the Transnistrian administration Vadim Krasnoselsky, could not achieve significant progress in resolving the issue.

At the same time, the participation of the voters from Transnistria in the Moldovan elections showed that Tiraspol can and will try to influence the internal political situation. Despite the fact that the region is entirely dependent on economic support from Moscow, the local administration is trying to play its own game, the goal of which is to maintain the status quo, allowing it to profit from the unrecognized status and the illegal or semi-legal “schemes” tied to it. This is confirmed by the results of the November 29 “elections” to the “Supreme Soviet” of Transnistria, in which representatives of the “Obnovlenie” party, the political wing of the local “Sheriff” holding, won on almost uncontested.

Crisis in Post-War Armenia

Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center (Yerevan, Armenia)

After suffering an unexpectedly devastating military defeat in the war for Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia faced a serious political crisis, with opposition parties and protesters demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and calling for fresh elections. By the end of the 45-day war on November 10, Karabakh Armenian defenders lost control over sizable areas of Azerbaijan before losing the second-largest city in Karabakh to Azerbaijan. At the same time, a related renewed surge in COVID-19 cases and a continued economic downturn only added to the challenges facing the country.



Seizure of the parliament building in Yerevan by protesters.
Photo: 24 channel

DOMESTIC POLICY

Armenian Prime Minister Resists Calls to Resign, Promises Stability

In a heated televised address on November 27, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan angrily denounced his political opponents for seeking to

“spread chaos” and attempting to “bring the war into Armenia and, using assault rifles and criminal groups, leave the country in a state of freefall in order to ensure their return.” Noting that the opposition to his government was driven by elements of the former government, Pashinyan rejected calls for his resignation and for early elections. However,

An agreement effectively ended the six-week war for Karabakh and triggered the immediate deployment of some 2000 Russian peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh for an initial five-year mission

the pressure on Pashinyan escalated, as Armenian President Armen Sarkissian joined on November 25 in calling for a change of government. In a partial response, Pashinyan dismissed six cabinet ministers, including the Defense and Foreign Ministers, and announced a “plan of action” that he argued would “establish stability” and strengthen the economy within six months.

Health Minister Reports Reduction in Coronavirus Cases

In a report on the coronavirus pandemic on November 26, Armenian Health Minister Arsen Torosyan noted that a recent reduction in infections down to roughly 1500 new cases per day, has greatly reduced the burden on hospitals struggling to manage the public health crisis. The improvement led to a controversial decision by the Ministry of Education on November 30 ordering secondary and high schools to reopen on December 7, after their closure since mid-October. Primary schools were earlier reopened

ECONOMY

Businessman Appointed New Economy Minister

As part of a sweeping cabinet reshuffle that saw the removal of six key ministers, Vahan Kerobyan, the founder and chief executive of an online food delivery company, was appointed on November 27 as the new Economy Minister. The 44-year-old Kerobyan has little if any experience with economic policy, however, and is widely seen as ill-prepared for the coming challenge to manage the economic downturn and need for recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

The challenge of managing a lingering economic crisis follows a recent report from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projecting an economic contraction of at least 7% in GDP for 2020, ending three years of consecutive growth. The government’s latest budget submission, from earlier in November, is

on November 13. All schools must adhere to strict sanitary and hygienic rules, set by the Health Ministry. To date, Armenia has recorded 2,587 deaths from the coronavirus.

Parliament Rejects Opposition Move to Lift Martial Law

In a 56 to 36 vote the pro-government majority “My Step” bloc repelled a move by the parliamentary opposition that sought to end the martial law imposed in response to Azerbaijan’s attacks on September 27. Arguing that the martial law restrictions on the freedoms of speech and assembly were no longer necessary since the war ended on November 10, the opposition failed to garner sufficient support in the face of pro-government arguments that national security required the continuation of martial law.

Cabinet Reshuffle Continues

Resisting a combination of small but vocal protests and growing demands for his resignation, Prime Minister Pashinyan announced on November 23 the dismissal of Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Youth Affairs Arayik Harutiunyan. Although part of a larger cabinet reshuffle, with this dismissal following the earlier firings of the ministers of defense, emergency situations, foreign affairs, and labor, the 41-year-old Harutiunyan was a specific target of the opposition for his ambitious education reforms. Harutiunyan was replaced by Vahram Dumanian, the dean of the Computer Science and Applied Mathematics Department at Yerevan State University but was later appointed as a senior advisor to the prime minister.

more optimistic, with a baseline forecast of an economic recovery of some 4.8% for 2021, although the impact of the six-week war makes that estimate already outdated. In a rare display of good news, the All-Armenian Fund announced on November 27 that the charity had raised over \$26 million in donations from the global diaspora, earmarked to assist the roughly 100,000 Karabakh Armenians forced to seek refuge in Armenia from the war.

Prime Minister Unveils New “Action Plan”

Seeking to counter calls for his resignation Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan unveiled a new “action plan” on November 18 that he promised would “establish stability and security” and restore economic growth. The 15-point action plan, set to last for six months, includes state policies to stimulate business activ-

ity, extend tax incentives, spur infrastructural investment and address social needs as part of a broader

effort to overcome the coronavirus pandemic.

FOREIGN POLICY

Armenia Accepts Russian-Imposed Agreement to End the War for Karabakh

In a difficult decision, Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan accepted on November 10 a Russian-crafted and Russian-imposed agreement that effectively ended the six-week war for Karabakh and triggered the immediate deployment of some 2000 Russian peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh for an initial five-year mission. Although the agreement consolidated significant territorial gains by Azerbaijan and introduced a cessation of fighting, it only affirmed Armenia's stunning defeat. And while the ac-

ceptance of the agreement saved lives and salvaged the remaining territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, the conflict remained unresolved with several outstanding questions, ranging from the status of Karabakh to the terms of the withdrawal and possible demobilization of the Karabakh armed forces, making further diplomatic negotiations essential to ensuring lasting security and stability. Given the lack of preparation for Armenian society for the scale of the losses from the war, the Pashinyan government faced an immediate and emotional series of protests, leading for calls for the prime minister to resign and culminating in violent attacks on the parliament and the prime minister's office.

Azerbaijan: War Ended in a Victory

Turan Information Agency (Baku, Azerbaijan)

In November the war to liberate the occupied territories of Azerbaijan remained the main topic on the agenda of the country's domestic and foreign policies.



Azerbaijanis are celebrating the victory in the streets.
Photo: korespondent.net

DOMESTIC POLICY

Mutual Compliments and Reprimands by the President and the Opposition

The opposition expressed its full support of the army's actions on the frontline since the first day of the country's military operations and kept its promise to put domestic political fight on hold. After recapturing the town of Shusha, the head of the Azerbaijani Popu-

lar Front Party Ali Kerimli, who is the president's uncompromising opponent, expressed his greetings on the splendid victory.

Aliyev himself, addressing the nation on November 10, expressed his satisfaction with the actions of the opposition during the period of military operations.

On November 16 the Sabail court of Baku changed

the sentence for 21 people arrested on the charges of organizing disorders in Baku overnight from July 14 to July 15, with 12 activists of the Popular Front Party including three members of the party's board having their arrest changed to home detention.

However, in his second address to the nation on November 25, dedicated to the deployment of Azerbaijani military forces in Kalbajar District, Ilham Aliyev expressed severe criticism for the opposition and accused it of losing in the first Karabakh war in 1992-1994. He stated that the lands were lost due to the domestic political fight led at the time by the Azerbaijani Popular Front Party, which resulted in incompetent people coming to power.

Overnight, on November 9-10, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Russia Ilham Aliyev and Vladimir Putin, as well as Armenia's president Nikol Pashinyan signed the agreement on ending military operations on the terms of Azerbaijan

The opposition, in its turn, criticized the president's agreement to have Russian peacekeeping forces deployed in the conflict zone. On November 12 the National Council made a statement saying that "it limits the country's sovereignty, does not take into account the interests of Azerbaijani people and is itself the occupation of Azerbaijani lands in Upper Karabakh for an in-

definite period". The National Council also noted that the sudden return of Russian forces, which were withdrawn from Azerbaijan with great difficulties in 1992, means limiting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Azerbaijan in Karabakh.

ECONOMY

Azerbaijan Started Work on Recaptured Territories

In November the military agenda also happened to influence the country's economic processes. In fact, after recapturing the town of Shusha, Azerbaijan launched the construction of a new road to the town, with the president of the country Ilham Aliyev giving an order for the initial financing of the project with 50 million manats (\$30 million). The new Fizuli-Shusha highway will pass through the recaptured Fizuli, Khojavend and Khojaly districts. The motorway will include over 20 localities including Fizuli and Shusha.

Azerbaijan's Minister for Agriculture Inam Kerimov told journalists that the future development of agriculture on the liberated territories is already being planned.

"Recapturing hundreds of thousands of hectares of land as well as strategically important water reservoirs will positively impact on the development of agriculture. These fertile lands have a huge potential for the development of vine-growing, grain-growing, cotton growing, and livestock breeding. Agriculture's sustainable development will be implemented based

on the correct usage of this potential, as well as on the expanding recycling industry", he said.

Economists also started to analyze the prospects for the liberated territories. In fact, Rovsen Agayev, a well-known economist in Azerbaijan, referring to his information sources, stated that Kalbajar and Zangilan have a big potential for mining precious metals. According to him, there are high expectations regarding the tourism potential in Kalbajar and Lachin districts. "There are unique opportunities for medical tourism. The same concerns historical tourism and recreation. It can be said with full confidence that tourism income in this region may exceed tourism income of the entire country of Azerbaijan – a minimum of \$1,5 bn", Agayev believes.

Moreover, when talking about the potential of the agrarian sector, the economist noted that the total surface of agricultural lands in 7 districts makes up 535 000 ha. According to him, Agdam, Fizuli and Jabrayil in general are suitable for growing agricultural crops. The total area of farmlands in these three regions makes up 290 000 ha, with approximately two-thirds of these lands being croplands and the rest of lands being pasture areas and hayfields.

Trilateral Agreement Put an End to the War

In November Azerbaijan's main development was the end of the war for liberating the occupied territories. Overnight, on November 9-10, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Russia Ilham Aliyev and Vladimir Putin, as well as Armenia's president Nikol Pashinyan signed the agreement on ending military operations on the terms of Azerbaijan. The main condition of Ilham Aliyev was the timetable for withdrawal of Armenian troops from the occupied Azerbaijani territories. Ilham Aliyev and Vladimir Putin signed the agreement during a video conference, while Nikol Pashinyan chose to sign this document separately, without the presence of the above-mentioned country leaders and without video cameras.

According to the official information released by Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense the territories that had been occupied for 30 years, were liberated in 44 days. Following its military operations, Azerbaijan recaptured 286 villages, 4 colonies and 5 towns that are district centers (Gadzut, Fizuli, Jabrayil, Zangilan, Gubadli). Moreover, the recaptured territories included strategic positions in Aghdara (Martakert in Armenian), in Murovdag well as several strategic positions in Zangilan region. Azerbaijan completely restored its state borders with Iran along the Aras river. According to the trilateral agreement Armenian military forces were withdrawn from Aghdam district (on November 20), Kaljabar district (November 25) and Lachin district (December 1).

According to the statement, Russian peacekeepers (1960 people), 90 armoured vehicles and over 300 of other equipment were deployed in the region. The peacekeepers are going to be present in the region for 5 years. If there is no word against the presence of the peacekeepers up to 6 months before the deadline, the deadline will automatically be prolonged for another 5 years. Moreover, the parties agreed upon opening all communications in the region. One of the points of the agreement provides for the functioning of a monitoring center on cease-fire, with Russian and Turkish military forces involved.

France declared being unsatisfied with the trilateral statement (France is one of the three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk group along with the USA and Russia) and claimed that this agreement strengthens the role of Turkey in the region and affects Armenia. The position of France was followed by an immediate response of Azerbaijan. Hikmet Hajiyev, the assistant of the president of Azerbaijan, has accused France of attempting to start a new conflict in the region.

On November 25, the Senate of France adopted a recommending resolution for the government that suggested recognizing "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" and demanding Azerbaijan to withdraw its troops from the region. In response Milli Mejlis of Azerbaijan (the country's parliament) made a statement on November 26 that recommended the government to address the OSCE top management with a demand to remove France from the list of OSCE Minsk group co-heads and review its economic and political relations with France.

Belarus: Lukashenko Calls on “Taking No Prisoners” and Closes Borders with the EU

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

Lukashenko’s press secretary was involved in the incident leading to the death of a protester. The EU introduces new sanctions while social support is reduced.



The memorial to Roman Bondarenko in Minsk
Photo: [bbc.com/](https://www.bbc.com/)

DOMESTIC POLICY

Killing a Protester With Top Officials Involved

Alexander Lukashenko openly calls on violence against protesters: “Starting today...We will take no

prisoners. If someone touches a serviceman — he should leave without his hands at the very least”.

After such words top officials wearing their masks personally went to cut off red-and-white ribbons on the “Square of Changes” in one of Minsk yards. In the

course of the conflict a local resident, a 31-year-old Roman Bondarenko, was injured and then died. According to anonymous tap wires of telephone conversations, those personally involved in the incident included the chairman of the Belarusian Ice Hockey Federation and Lukashenko's press secretary.

Bondarenko's death intensified widespread protests even more, including those among medical staff. Over 200 thousand people took part in an online voting on choosing new tactics for protests, with local protests, gathering in their own districts, winning. This way, without one major gathering point, official law enforcement is inefficient when it comes to counteracting hundreds of protesters nationwide at the same time. The total number of detained since August 9 is over 30 thousand people.

Even though the nationwide strike following Tikhonovskaya's ultimatum did not happen, protests do

take place at some enterprises, and there are mass dismissals taking place in factories and universities. The infrastructure is failing: Astravets Nuclear Power Plant as well as the third Minsk metro line, both of which have just been launched, do not operate, with almost every day bringing news regarding accidents taking place on factories and water, power and heating cutoffs in residential buildings.

The authorities are afraid of students protesting and combine different repressive measures: arrests of student activists, mass expulsions of students, and closing state borders for those Belarusian citizens who study in other countries. The head of the Council of the Republic Natalia Kochanova had a meeting with Belarusian State University students. However, despite the measures, student protests are still ongoing.

ECONOMY

Reduced Social Support

The state lacks resources to provide social support: Lukashenko is planning to discuss the issue of decreasing maternity leave payments and stated his intentions on "increasing" pensions by 5,4% (which is lower than the annual inflation rate).

Seeking new resources the state additionally takes a share of profit from profitable state enterprises, while small and medium sized businesses have to deal with sudden inspections and large fines.

Moreover, Lukashenko granted his regional representations the authority to control the largest local employers.

FOREIGN POLICY

The EU Sanctions and Greetings from Putin

The European Union imposed sanctions against Lukashenko and 14 other top officials, while some EU countries, the USA, Great Britain and Canada adopted statements and resolutions including those calling on new elections in Belarus. Ukraine, Norway and other 5 countries joined the EU sanctions. The third package of the EU sanctions may be adopted already in December, and it will target those businesses supporting Lukashenko. In response to that Belarus suspended its dialogue with the European Union on human rights and the work of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group while downgrading its level of participating in the

Eastern Partnership to expert. Belarus also closed its borders with EU countries and expelled two British diplomats, with Britain's expulsion of two Belarusian diplomats following in tit-for-tat move adding that "the UK will not be cowed by the attempts of Lukashenko's regime to stop us speaking out about the rigged election and the despicable violence against the Belarusian people".

On November 26 Sergei Lavrov, the head of Russian MFA, met with his Belarusian colleague Vladimir Makei and Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk. Sergei Lavrov conveyed greetings from Vladimir Putin to Lukashenko and reminded him of the earlier agreements. In particular, Sergei Lavrov drew attention to the much-needed constitutional reform in Belarus that would include limiting presidential powers.

Belarus suspended its dialogue with the European Union on human rights and the work of the EU-Belarus Coordination Group while downgrading its level of participating in the Eastern Partnership to expert

Georgian Parliament with No Opposition

Lasha Tugushi, the Liberal Academy of Tbilisi (Georgia)

The elections did not bring peace to Georgia: the opposition does not recognize their results and refuses to work in the parliament. The protracted political crisis also threatens the economy and relations with international partners.



Nika Melia speaks at opposition rally in Tbilisi
Photo: Vladimir Umikashvili / RIA Novosti

DOMESTIC POLICY

Opposition Boycott

All eight opposition parties, which entered the parliament according to the final verdict of the Central Election Commission (CEC), declared a boycott and refused to enter the country's legislative body. In their opinion, the elections were rigged.

A significant number of local organizations observing the elections believe that the electoral process was characterized by several problems. Their

position is much more critical than the opinion of the international organizations, including the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Although international observers acknowledge some problems, in the preliminary conclusions, they characterize the electoral process as competitive, with human rights protected in general. Formally, according to the Constitution, the president of Georgia must appoint a plenary session of the parliament within ten days after the final decision of

the CEC on the voting results.

To all seeming, only 90 out of 150 MPs will form a one-party parliament. In other words, the opposition will not only refuse to take part in the sessions but will also dismiss its mandates, resetting to zero its lists and leaving the Georgian Dream alone.

The embassies of the friendly countries, in particular their leaders, both individually and together, are holding consultations with the leaders of the parties to break the deadlock. However, neither the

The opposition will not only refuse to take part in the meetings but will also dismiss its mandates, resetting to zero its lists and leaving the Georgian Dream alone

government nor the opposition makes a real compromise. The opposition demands new, early elections, and the government is totally against this condition.

According to the opposition, the government is not able to “survive” in a one-party parliament and will collapse, which

will turn into an unprecedented situation in Georgia’s recent history. A protracted one-party crisis could be costly for the country given some challenges, including pandemic, economic and geopolitical pitfalls.

ECONOMY

2021 State Budget in Question

The Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia urged the political forces to take seriously the state budget draft, submitted to the parliament for discussion and approval. The budget is adjusted to reflect the new challenges connected with the COVID-19 spread. The opposition does not like the draft and is unlikely to support the document, considering a new loan set in it as inappropriate.

According to the final version of the draft budget for 2021, next year the Georgian government is going

to take 5.3 billion lari (\$1.3 billion) in external loans. 3.1 billion lari (almost \$1 billion) will be spent on servicing and paying off obligations to the foreign states. At the same time, 570 million lari (\$171 million) will be allocated for servicing and paying off domestic government obligations. As for the maximum amount of public debt, by the end of 2021, it is set to 33,680.1 million lari, including public external debt – 27,734.2 million lari, and internal debt – 5,945.8 million lari.

It seems that in the new parliament the budget will have to be passed by a one-party majority, with the current prime minister being the first on the list.

FOREIGN POLICY

Visit of the US Secretary of State

On November 17-18, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo paid a visit to Georgia. The visit came as a surprise to many people, but it was especially important against the backdrop of the war in the region. Pompeo flew from Turkey and then left for Israel. He stressed the importance of the US-Georgia relationship.

The US Secretary of State met with the Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili, the Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II and some representatives of the civil society.

The political elite of Georgia, occupied by the electoral battles, does not fully understand this visit’s importance. Meanwhile, the visit underscores Washington’s interest in Tbilisi.

Georgian experts sent a letter to Pompeo calling for an increase in the US military presence in Georgia. Many analysts, including those in Tbilisi, believe

that to meet new challenges there must be new security strategies.

In this context, the upcoming NATO ministerial, from which Georgia expects new impulses from the alliance, also gains traction.

The NATO general’s opinion that Georgia should be immediately invited to the North Atlantic bloc was also encouraging. This was stated by the former commander of the United States Army Europe, Lieutenant General Ben Hodges during an online discussion organized by the Georgian non-governmental organization Geokeys.

“We have a precedent for this: West Germany joined NATO when the Soviet troops were stationed in the eastern part of Germany. So, we have a precedent for accepting a country even when its part is occupied,” Ben Hodges said.

Georgia hopes the process of strategic patience will be replaced by some strategic decisions in favor of Georgia.

Moldova: New President – New Hopes

Sorin Șclearuc, Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (Chișinău)

November in the Republic of Moldova was marked by the end of the presidential elections saga. A candidate from the Action and Solidarity Party, Maia Sandu came as a winner. The post-electoral euphoria quickly subsided. Voters look forward to concrete steps to improve the situation in the country, especially during these difficult times of the pandemic, while the new president will take the office on December 24, 2020.



The turn out among Moldovans living abroad was record
Photo: tv8.md

DOMESTIC POLICY

Early Parliamentary Elections?

The first round of the presidential elections on November 1 became a wake-up call for the incumbent president Igor Dodon: he gained only 32.61% of the

votes against 36.16% given to his main rival, Maia Sandu. 16.9% of the candidate from “Our Party” Renato Usatii, the mayor of the Balti municipality, was a surprise of this plebiscite, as the other candidates failed to overcome the 7% threshold.

On November 15, in the [second round of the presidential elections](#) Igor Dodon won 42.28% of the votes, and Maia Sandu – 57.72% thus becoming the first female president in the Republic of Moldova.

Already on November 25, the President-elect Maia Sandu [held](#) a briefing and presented her priorities for the next period, noting her intention to “bring the Republic of Moldova out of international isolation and pursue a positive foreign policy” immediately after taking her office.

It is worth noting that at a press conference on November 30, Maia Sandu [said](#) that she was in favor of early parliamentary elections, since the current convocation is unable to create a parliamentary majority that would support the implementation of the necessary reforms. “It is clear to us that this government must leave. Before leaving, this cabinet of ministers must fulfil its functions. Last week we came up with requests to ensure that the budget for 2021 has enough support for the most affected population due to the pandemic and the economic crisis,” Sandu added.

The National Commission for Emergency Situations (NCES) [declared](#) a public health state of emergency throughout the Republic of Moldova from No-

Maia Sandu is in favor of early parliamentary elections, since in the current convocation it is impossible to create a parliamentary majority that would support the implementation of the necessary reforms

vember 30, 2020, till January 15, 2021.

The Minister of Health, Labor, and Social Protection Viorica Dumbreveanu [reported](#) that a total of 102,894 coronavirus cases was confirmed so far, with 10,880 active, 3,499 people hospitalized, 253 people in intensive care, and 52 people connected to artificial respiration units. Chisinau hospitals are 90% full, while hospitals in regions of the country are 85% full.

To prevent the COVID-19 infection spread, the commission [decided](#) to ban the activities of nightclubs (discos, karaoke, disco bars) starting from November 28, 2020. Starting from November 30, restaurants, bars, and cafes are open until 22.00. Also, the commission prohibited organizing and conducting scientific conferences, sports competitions, Olympiads with the physical presence of people. Theatres, cinemas, concert halls, and houses of culture are closed for spectators. At the same time, public and private institutions are to establish a special mode of operation, employing only personnel strictly necessary to ensure the functionality of enterprises. For personnel whose activities do not require mandatory presence at work, they should provide the ability to work from home.

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ECONOMY

The Changes Were Not Long in Coming

Soon after the announcement of the presidential elections results, the Republic of Moldova [received the first tranche](#) of 51.6 million euros within the framework of the loan agreement between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union on macro-financial assistance, signed by the parties on July 21, 2020.

For the first time, [the Republic of Moldova and the United States will sign a Bilateral agreement on air transportation](#) of the “Open skies” type. The corresponding document between the governments of the Republic of Moldova and the United States of America was initialed on November 4.

FOREIGN POLICY

Will Russian troops be withdrawn from Transnistria?

The OSCE election observation mission for presi-

“The “Open skies” Agreement coming into force will create preconditions for the launch of direct flights from Chisinau to the US destinations, facilitate the opening of the air transportation market in the Republic of Moldova and diversify directions at Chisinau International Airport. On the other hand, this will have a positive impact on strengthening diplomatic and economic relations, facilitating investment cooperation between the Republic of Moldova and the United States of America. Besides, open airspace with the United States will bring impressive economic benefits to our country by increasing passenger traffic, as well as increasing competition in the domestic aviation market,” the Ministry of Economy and Infrastructure said.

dential elections in the Republic of Moldova [stated](#) that the second round was held in compliance with the democratic principles and passed without serious violations. The head of the mission, Corien Jonker, said that “in general, the electoral process was

held in accordance with democratic principles, without serious violations.”

The second round of the presidential elections [set a record for the turnout](#) among the Moldovan citizens living abroad, exceeding the number of 260 thousand. With their choice, the Moldovan diaspora made it clear what vector of development they want for their country: Maia Sandu received 92.93% of the votes of the Moldovans abroad, while Igor Dodon received only 7.07%.

At a large press conference on November 30, the president-elect Maia Sandu spoke [about the Transnistrian problem](#). Sandu noted that there are two forms of Russian military presence in Transnistria: the Operational Group of Russian Forces in Transnistria (OGRF), which guards military warehouses, and peacekeepers participating in the peacekeeping operation.

“There was no treaty or bilateral agreement on the location of the operational group of forces in Trans-

nistria. OGRF must be removed from the territory of Moldova. (...) I will work with Russia as long as necessary to resolve the issue of the weapons export and the withdrawal of troops,” Sandu said. As for the peacekeepers, Sandu added that “since there has been no danger of military actions for a long time, this mission should be made civilian under the auspices of the OSCE. This is the position of Moldova, which I confirm”.

However, the press secretary of the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin [Dmitry Peskov noted](#) that this topic was not discussed with the Kremlin yet. Also, Peskov [added](#) that “Russia performs very important functions and, of course, a change in some status quo based on the spirit and letter of international law, certainly, can lead to serious destabilization. Therefore, we expect that all this will be discussed and that no drastic movements will be made in this regard.”

Three November Challenges for Ukraine: “COVID”, Anti-Corruption and Financial Ones

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

November provided an abundance of alarming indicators for Ukraine. Against the backdrop of rising coronavirus cases there is also a threat of financial crisis, while the spread of corruption is adding oil to the flame of the crisis clearly seen on the horizon.



Protests under the Constitutional Court of Ukraine
Photo: UNIAN (Vyacheslav Ratynsky)

Fighting Coronavirus and the Virus of Corruption

November saw new anti-records of COVID-19 infected people – over 16 thousand in 24 hours. In mid-November the government of Ukraine, taking into account such large numbers, launched the so-called weekend lockdown. Every Saturday and Sunday, starting from November 13 to November 30, restrictions were introduced for many businesses. The lockdown, however, did not concern grocery shops, pharmacies and petrol stations. According to Maksym Stepanov, the minister of healthcare, the weekend lockdown was not as effective as expected, with the ministry not intending to recommend the prolongation of such a lockdown.

However, if changing the course of the epidemic is quite difficult for the government due to some natural reasons, it is still possible to contribute a fair share when it comes to fighting the corruption. The vacuum of the anti-corruption legislation after the notorious decision by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine on October 27 still remains (following the October decision of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine, criminal liabilities for providing false information in asset declarations for state employees were lifted). It was only after a month that president V. Zelensky submitted to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine his version of the bill on liability for lies in asset declarations. In particular, the bill foresees milder punishments, with a sep-

The only thing that keeps those in power from dramatically eradicating anti-corruption reforms is dependence on financial and political international assistance

arate article suggesting introducing liability for the absence of declaration. At the same time the President of Ukraine appealed to the Venice Commission asking them to provide an assessment on the state of anti-corruption legislation after the decision made by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine. Among other things the head of the country asks for an assessment on the decision made by the CCU judges given the possible conflict of interests.

However, anti-corruption battles did not stop. On November 30, the working group of D. Razumkov, the speaker of the Parliament, registered a bill on the return of liability for lying in asset declarations without imprisonment. The bill suggests a fine, with the worst sentence limited to public work. With such an approach this fight with “cancer tumors” of corruption may turn into profanation. The only thing that keeps those in power from dramatically eradicating anti-corruption reforms is dependence on financial and political international assistance and, therefore, the opinions of international partners.

The notorious October decision of CCU led to the High Anti-Corruption Court of Ukraine being forced to shut down some ongoing cases on false declarations. Among other things a case against the MP of the 8th convocation in case of declaring false information was closed. Such a tendency may continue, and, most probably, will become an avalanche until this juridical vacuum is filled.

ECONOMY

Budget Deficit and Attempts to Dave the Day

The Ukrainian public found out from the interview of Sergei Marchenko, the country’s minister of finance, that there is a “hole” in the budget of the country equivalent to \$3 billion, and in the near future this money is nowhere to be found. The minister said that while this situation is complicated, it can still be controlled. It is also worth mentioning that such budget deficit is a result of Ukraine not getting IMF tranches since not all 10 structural reforms were implemented, and they are es-

sential to opening a window of opportunity for international financial assistance. The visit of Kyrilo Shevchenko, the chairperson of the National Bank of Ukraine, to Washington D.C., did not help the situation either. Except declarative statements and common phrases, the result was next to zero. The parties “agreed to come to an agreement”.

Since cheap Western loans are almost a single tool for Ukraine to partially cover budget deficit and restock its gold and foreign currency reserves, it was already in mid-November that the president of Ukraine V. Zelensky had a telephone conversation with Kristalina Georgieva, the Managing Di-

rector of the IMF. In the course of the conversation the Ukrainian leader noted that all structural reforms necessary for reviewing the IMF program, had been fulfilled. The statement of the president is somewhat different from the statements made by the minister of finance. According to the latter, Ukraine fulfilled 4 out of 10 structural reforms. The IMF mission, which was supposed to come to Ukraine already in September in order to evaluate stand-by arrangement program, did not come and is not expected until next year. Therefore, financial injections from the biggest donor are not to be expected. It is also worth mentioning that

other programs of international financial assistance are directly connected to the IMF program. Ukraine desperately needs international financial assistance – this can be demonstrated by the fact that already on November 20, Denys Shmyhal, the prime minister of the country, had a video conference with the director of the European Department of the IMF Alfred Kammer. Among other things the head of the government expressed his hopes that the Fund will give a positive signal on the support of agreements between Ukraine and the European Commission regarding yet another tranche of macro-financial assistance in the short term.

FOREIGN POLICY

Constitutional Crisis and International Response

The last month of autumn 2020 did not see the abundance of foreign policy developments. However, to be completely fair it is worth noting that the issue of the notorious decision made by the CCU regarding the fight with corruption and milder sentences for committing such crimes prevailed on the international arena as well.

In early November the EU called on Ukraine to restore its anti-corruption legislation, which is one of the conditions for financial assistance and visa-free regime. Several days later G7 ambassadors discussed with Dmitry Razumkov, the Rada's

speaker, "quick solutions" to resolve the constitutional crisis started by the decision made by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine. In her turn the German ambassador expressed her doubts regarding the ability of CCU to fulfil its constitutional obligations. At the same time US embassy made more reserved comments and called on a dialogue to resolve the constitutional crisis. The president of Ukraine contributed a fair share when it came to overcoming the constitutional crisis in the country and supporting such aspirations, in particular on the international arena. In the course of a video meeting with G7 ambassadors V. Zelensky expressed his visceral response to the decision by CCU, mentioned above.

Annual Assembly of the EaP CSF

The 12th Annual Assembly – “EaP beyond 2020: renewing commitments to rights, security, and the green agenda”, will be held online on December 7-10, 2020, bringing together more than 300 CSOs and EaP and EU decision-makers to explore the contours of the EaP policy beyond 2020. Against the backdrop of the recently finished war in Nagorno-Karabakh, a

severe political crisis in Belarus, and a number of important elections that have taken place in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine this event will focus on our shared aspiration for a truly multi-stakeholder engagement with empowered civil society at the core of the EaP policy to deliver meaningful results for people. Read more [here](#) and follow the live-stream [here](#).

EaP CSF COVID-19 Re-granting

The EaP CSF’s COVID-19 re-granting will support [23 member organisations](#) from the Eastern Partnership region to help realise projects aimed at mitigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of 81 submitted proposals, 23 were selected. 13 proposals were selected for the emergency fund, and 10 for the adjustment fund. The highest number of projects

was selected from Armenia with 5, followed by Belarus, Georgia and Moldova with 4, and Azerbaijan and Ukraine with 3. The projects will be directed towards addressing the needs of vulnerable populations, or towards helping EaP CSF members to adapt their activities to the challenging situation.

EaP CSF contribution to shaping the EaP policy

EaP CSF representatives channelled the input of the Forum on the new post-2020 deliverables and civil society’s priorities in the fields of good governance, security, economy, environment, and mobility

and people-to-people contacts during the EaP Platform meetings. Read the EaP CSF written input for Platform [1](#), [2](#), [3](#) and [4](#)

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 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.
www.ape.md