

# Crises, protests and a glimpse of hope. The uncertain future of democracy in the Black Sea region in 2021



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# Introduction

The Black Sea region is situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Its geopolitical and geostrategic importance stems from its unique position as gateway to global trade, security, energy, and economic resources. The area is traditionally perceived by Russia as belonging to its sphere of influence and it has received increased attention as more and more countries began expressing their interest in a democratic path towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

During the last decades, the image of this region has undergone substantial changes. Revolutions and pro-democracy protests reshaped the political landscape, highlighting people's pro-European aspirations and their support for fresh and "uncorrupt" political figures. In contrast, regional confrontations, frozen conflicts, illegal annexations and militarized pro-Russian separatist territories are hampering the development of the region, making it even more unstable and unattractive for long-lasting partnerships.

The Black Sea region has long been a testing ground for the Russian Federation to exert its influence through state-owned media channels, local proxies and disinformation campaigns, all of which intensified in the aftermath of the illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass. The Kremlin is using a wide array of tools, including hybrid warfare, economic blackmail and military threats, tailored to the vulnerabilities of each country in the region, in order to undermine any process that may consolidate partnerships with the EU or NATO.

The region is of strategic importance to both the EU and the US, with China also seeking to play a more important role. The other significant actor in the region, Turkey, although a member of NATO and long-standing EU candidate country, is at odds with its Western allies.

While all countries in the region come with specific internal challenges, there are some joint patterns such as weakening of democratic institutions, attempts to undermine rule of law or fueling recurrent political crises. The COVID-19 pandemic is putting additional pressure at national and regional level and it provides an opportunity for third party actors to increase their influence in the region.

In 2020, we witnessed (1) large-scale protests in Bulgaria demanding the resignation of the government, (2) unprecedented protests and civil disobedience in Belarus, (3) local elections in Ukraine that revealed a weakening support for the current President's party, (4) parliamentary elections in Georgia that sparked a long-lasting political crisis, (5) clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh or (6) presidential elections in the Republic of Moldova won by the pro-European, pro-reform candidate that triggered yet another political crisis.

This paper attempts to summarize emerging trends, anticipate events, and also game-changers between countries in the region and global players for the period 2021-2022 in the Black Sea region. It presents events with a significant potential of influencing perception of the regional dynamics and with potential implications at both national and regional level. This paper analyzes and attempts to predict the potential impact of events in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Bulgaria. It portrays the authors' understanding of other key events and initiatives with prospective impact in the region.

## Ukraine



### Ukraine's first victory in its ECHR lawsuit against Russia

Ukraine has been long seeking to bring the Russian Federation to justice for its military actions and their consequences in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. In January 2021, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Ukrainian complaints concerning a pattern of human rights violations in Crimea by Russia were partly admissible<sup>1</sup>.

This preliminary decision was preceded by an important hearing before the International Court of Justice on the downing of the MH17 Malaysian flight. Evidence linking Russia to the shooting down of the civilian airplane, as well as proof of the Kremlin's direct control over the breakaway 'republics' of Eastern Ukraine were presented to the Court.

New decisions in a lawsuit filed against Russia at the European Court of Human Rights are expected in 2021, in reference to the events in Eastern Ukraine. After the beginning of the MH17 trial in the Netherlands, the ECHR decided to merge the lawsuit in question with Ukraine's lawsuit over Kremlin's military aggression in the Donbas region.

These decisions are important for Ukraine and the rest of the region, as they make the Russian Federation legally accountable for its aggressive military policies against some former Soviet republics. They also debunk the myths of Kremlin's "non interference" in the "civil war" in Eastern Ukraine or - in the case of Crimea - the "validity" of the referendum.

**Expert comment:** *"Developments in international courts in the Ukraine v. Russia case, especially the recognition of the Russian military occupation of Crimea, brought before ECHR, are important for several reasons. It is the first legal recognition of the occupation of Crimea, as previous decisions there were only political stances.*

<sup>1</sup> Grand Chamber decision Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea) - complaints concerning pattern of human-rights violations partly admissible, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22003-6904972-9271650%22%5D%7D>

*This decision is also a relief for Ukraine, which has been trying since 2014 to prove that the attempted annexation of Crimea is a result of a Russian military operation, and that the so-called referendum was used as a cover-up for the invasion. In the upcoming year, we hope that the ECHR will also de facto recognize that there is no civil war in Eastern Ukraine, but that the conflict was a result of the Russian invasion.”*

## **New sanctions imposed by Kyiv against Russian-linked oligarchs, politicians and media assets**

Ukraine enforced a series of sanctions on Russian-linked figures and their media assets. The sanctions, initiated in February 2021 by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, are aimed at national individuals, most notably the pro-Russian opposition MP Taras Kozak and oligarch Victor Medvedchuk<sup>2</sup>, the godfather of Putin’s daughter. Medvedchuk has been a target of US sanctions since 2014 and was unsuccessfully prosecuted for treason in 2019. Medvedchuk’s family and his businesses are now being sanctioned for funneling money towards separatist groups in the breakaway regions of Eastern Ukraine.

Ukrainian media, especially TV stations, is dominated by pro-Kremlin oligarchs and their associates. This made Ukraine especially vulnerable to Russian disinformation. In response, Ukraine expressed its interest in setting up an institution to monitor disinformation campaigns. The hardline approach against Russian disinformation comes in the context of faltering support for the President’s Zelensky pro-European *Servant of the People* party. Zelensky might wish to rejuvenate support for his party, but his actions may also further polarize Ukraine’s divided society.

The sanctions stirred mixed reactions. While the United States, the United Kingdom, and some members of the European Union, such as Estonia and Lithuania, expressed their approval, Ukrainian lawyers raised concerns about the sanctioning of media and domestic companies. The European Union also questioned the sanctioning of the three television stations nominally owned by Medvedchuk<sup>3</sup>.

It raises broader questions about the legitimate limits of sanctions when dealing with autocratic regimes, such as the Russian Federation, and how to limit the malign influence and counter the hybrid warfare set up by the Kremlin in Ukraine and in the rest of the region.

**Expert comment:** *Controversial reactions (to sanctions) prove how difficult it is to find a democratic response to abuse of democracy. This dilemma is being debated not only in Ukraine, but in the entire democratic liberal world. An effective, yet non-controversial and fully democratic way of tackling special information operations of aggressive states like the Russian Federation has not yet been invented.*

## **The “Crimean Platform” - a new tool for Ukrainian diplomacy**

For a long time, Ukraine has been trying to advocate for a strong international unitary response to the illegal annexation of Crimea. Since 2014, Russia has increased its ideological and military presence in the region, leading to political persecution, Russian propaganda in schools, forced conscription and human rights violations.

<sup>2</sup> Why Ukraine sanctioned Putin’s ally Medvedchuk, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-ukraine-sanctioned-putins-ally-medvedchuk/>

<sup>3</sup> EU Questions Ukrainian President’s Sanctions On TV Stations, <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-questions-ukrainian-sanctions-tv-stations-medvedchuk-zelenskiy/31084591.html>

In August 2021, Ukraine is set to launch the ‘Crimean Platform’ - a new multidimensional large-scale project, designed to unite the international response to the illegal actions and aggression of the Russian Federation on the territory of the Crimean peninsula. The initiative will be implemented at several levels of cooperation between partner countries, involving regional governments, heads of states, expert networks and various ministries of the participating countries, and is intended to become a focal point for creating an adequate international response and a common stance.

The Crimean Platform is perceived as an indispensable tool for the implementation of the Ukraine’s Crimean strategy, based on: (1) continuing the policy of non-recognition of the attempted annexation of Crimea, including the requirement to supplement each bilateral treaty between third parties and Russia with a special note related to non-recognition, (2) imposing additional sanctions in cases of further violations of human rights, (3) adopting common approaches aimed at preventing further militarization of Crimea, (4) ensuring security, including freedom of navigation in the Black and Azov Seas, and (5) respect for human rights of the people living in the occupied territories.

## Bulgaria



Source: Euronews

### **New figures challenging the mainstream parties in the upcoming Parliamentary elections**

Parliamentary elections are scheduled for 4 April 2021. The results of the elections are expected to reflect the impact of the widespread anti-government protests in the country, the (mis)management of the COVID-19 crisis and the country's vaccine distribution strategy, putting the support for the current governing coalition to the test.

The main contenders remain the mainstream parties of the Bulgarian political establishment: center-right ruling party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), currently the main opposition party, center-left, and the pro-Turkish Minority Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS). Protests were mainly targeting the GERB Party. An attempt by BSP to lead the manifestations was strongly dismissed by the protesters. Widespread feelings of disappointment with the mainstream parties, in particular GERB, may divert an important number of votes towards new figures and parties.

There are several new figures and political parties running for the very first time in the 2021 elections. The Poisonous Trio, the controversial figures considered to be the organizers of the anti-government protests, announced their participation together with the Stand-up.BG platform (led by Maia Manolova, a former MP of the Bulgarian Socialist Party). The surprise of the elections is predicted to be the populist party of the showman Slavi Trifonov "There is Such a People". According to the latest polls, it could gain more than 12% of the votes. Democratic Bulgaria, led by Hristo Ivanov and Atanas Atanasov, will also most likely pass the threshold.

The polls show that at least 5 parties will enter the Parliament, which indicates a potentially fractured legislative and prolonged negotiations to form a functional government, while some analysts even predict that new elections could take place after the regular ones as negotiations could end in deadlock.

## Rule of (un)law and democratic backsliding

Bulgaria, perceived as one of the most corrupt EU countries<sup>4</sup>, alongside Romania and Hungary, has failed to implement sustainable reforms in the judicial system after EU accession. The EU has yet to lift the Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification for Bulgaria. Bulgaria also has the lowest standards for press freedom in the EU, according to a recent report by Reporters without borders<sup>5</sup>. There are only a few independent media outlets, while most TV stations and newspapers are controlled by a small number of oligarchs.

Strengthening the rule of law is one of the key demands of the protests in Bulgaria and a key issue for the April 2021 elections. GERB's contestants and civil society demand a reform of the justice system, which is currently perceived as serving the interests of the ruling elites. This has topped the protesters' agenda and is one of the most debated topics of the electoral campaign.

The most critical issue is the lack of effective checks and balances on prosecutorial bodies, particularly the Chief Prosecutor. Ending the impunity of the Chief Prosecutor will be one of the focuses of the political process in 2021. In February 2021, the GERB-dominated Parliament voted to create a new special prosecutor who would be able to investigate the Chief Prosecutor and his deputies. However, the law has been criticized by all GERB opponents, as well as by the Supreme Judicial Council, while the EU and the Venice Commission have also expressed concern over the matter.

## Growing Russian influence

The Russian influence in the Black Sea region is not limited to the countries of the former Soviet Union, which share more obvious political, economical and social ties with Russia. Bulgaria is one of the countries in the region which still maintains strong ties with the Russian Federation, reflected in its political, energy and social sectors. Like Russia, Bulgaria is an Orthodox country, there is some linguistic resemblance, as well as a shared communist past, as the country was once labelled the "sixteenth republic" of the Soviet Union.



4 Corruption Perception Index 2020, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/bgr>

5 Bulgaria, Black sheep of the European Union <https://rsf.org/en/bulgaria>

Russia's influence over strategic decision-making in the energy sector is substantial, and is now increasing on account of Russia's success in locking governments in certain countries in costly infrastructure projects that undermine the common European energy security. In Bulgaria, for example, the gas pipeline TurkStream renamed Balkan Stream by the Bulgarian government is in fact a Russian Stream in all but name. It became operational on Bulgarian territory in 2020. Even though the management company is registered in the Middle East, it is only a façade for Russian stakeholders.

Russia exerts its influence not only through leveraging its economic presence, but also through its support of political parties with anti-Western or Eurosceptic agendas. In Bulgaria, these include some nationalist and Russophile parties, but there are influences also on the major parties, that are officially pro-EU, including the ruling GERB and – even more so – the main opposition party, BSP. The Russian diaspora in Bulgaria also plays a certain role, strengthened by the so-called golden passport regime allowing Russians to acquire Bulgarian residence based on property ownership or investment.

One of the vulnerabilities which Russia is trying to exploit in the region is the weak democratic culture, e.g., the fact that the political elite, as a whole, has a very poor understanding of the principle of international scrutiny over democracy and human rights. In Bulgaria, this weakness, combined with the traditional reluctance to criticize Russia, and the cultural affiliation based on Slavic language proximity, leads to frequent justification of Putin's policies.

**Expert comment:** *For example, the leader of the Bulgarian opposition, the chair of the BSP, Kornelia Ninova, when asked during a TV interview whether the arrest and imprisonment of Alexey Navalny is a matter of Russia's internal affairs not to be meddled in, or a matter of democracy and human rights, stated without hesitation that it was the former. The BSP is one of the two political actors in Bulgaria, along with GERB, who are likely to form the future Bulgarian government after the 4 April 2021 parliamentary election.*



## Georgia



Source: Eesc.europa.eu

### Political crisis in the aftermath of the 2020 parliamentary elections

Georgia entered 2021 in total political crisis. The party of billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvil, Georgian Dream, claimed a narrow victory in the parliamentary elections of October 2020. The results of the elections were contested by the opposition parties, which called for snap elections. Protests also erupted. Nika Melia, the leader of the largest opposition party, United National Movement, was charged with allegedly leading violent protests and had a tracking bracelet installed by the Georgian probation service. As a sign of protest, he publicly removed the monitoring device and was then ordered to pay bail.

An opposer of Mr. Nika's arrests, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned on February 18, citing his concern for growing polarization and internal party disagreements. Irakli Garibashvili, who was defense minister in Gakharia's Cabinet, was appointed as the new prime minister. Mr. Nika was then forcefully removed from his party's HQ and arrested for refusing to pay bail.

The decision to arrest Nika Melia was contested by civic organisations and Georgia's international partners, including the United States. The US Embassy to Georgia published a harsh statement: "Georgia has moved backward on its path toward becoming a stronger democracy in the Euro-Atlantic family of nations"<sup>6</sup>. EU Council President Charles Michel was involved in mediating the conflict. On March 15, the EU will further assess the state of the negotiations between government and opposition parties<sup>7</sup>. Growing tensions risk derailing the country from its European path. This makes the country highly vulnerable to the actions of the Russian Federation and local pro-Kremlin proxies that may use this period to intensify propaganda and disinformation campaigns, fuel anti-EU messages and further support the separatist movements.

<sup>6</sup> US Embassy: 'Georgia has moved backward on its path toward becoming stronger democracy in Euro-Atlantic family of nations', <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/487>

<sup>7</sup> EU to assess progress in Georgia mediation talks on 15 March, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eastern-europe/news/eu-to-assess-progress-in-georgia-mediation-talks-on-15-march/>

**Expert comment:** *Once a frontrunner in democracy in the region, Georgia has unfortunately missed the chance to end one-party rule and form a coalition government that would result in pluralistic decision-making.*

**Expert comment:** *Georgia's democracy and Euro-Atlantic future are at stake nowadays. The acknowledgement by former Prime Minister Gakharia of the politicization of law enforcement, and his resignation over it, shows an immense backslide in democracy of the country. It's only the Kremlin who will be pleased to see an unstable Georgia in the region. Georgian people have made their choice to be European and democratic and will stand firmly on it.*

## Worrying signs for democracy, human rights and the rule of law

The rule of law in Georgia is still deteriorating despite some judiciary reforms. According to a 2020 report by the Venice Commission, recent changes of the appointment of judges of the Supreme Court of Georgia have been consistent with previous suggestions with the body of the Council of Europe, but more changes need to be implemented in order to ensure the transparent appointment of more experienced, competent, diverse and independent judges. The recent arrest of opposition leader Nika Melia adds to previous concerns about judicial politicization, including the manipulation of the case distribution system and the alleged influence of the judges of the High Council of Justice on the independence of individual judges and the broader justice system.

Georgia's criminal justice system is also facing serious issues. An ongoing investigation on the excessive use of force of riot police in the protests of June 2019 has shown the difficulties in taking high ranking officials to account. Even though Georgia has ratified the Istanbul Convention, an antiquated criminal code has determined ineffective prosecution and prevention of violence against women and domestic violence. Given that Georgia may wish to apply for EU membership in 2024, fixing the justice system is a vital challenge to face.

**Expert comment:** *The recent tragic case of sexual violence against an underage girl and widespread public outcry related to the case has the potential to change the status quo however. The case also revealed the failure of the entire criminal justice and child support system for survivors of sexual violence in Georgia.*

Georgia is facing the potential risk of further democratic backsliding. The final report of OSCE observation mission on Georgia's 2020 parliamentary elections was finally released on the 5th of March 2021. The report concluded that while the elections "were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected", there were also significant issues to address "pervasive allegations of pressure on voters and blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state reduced public confidence in some aspects of the process". The report also noted the presence of spending rules that disadvantaged small parties, issues with the dominant presence of the ruling party in election commissions, and also the lack of policy-based discussion in the polarized media.

## Victories against the Kremlin. Georgia vs Russia case at the European Human Rights Court

A recent ruling by the European Court of Human Rights concluded that Russia was responsible for human rights violations in the five-day war with Georgia<sup>8</sup>. In 2008, Georgia's attempts to regain control of the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were countered by the Russian Federation with a full-scale military invasion. The court has shown that Russia has been 'exercising

<sup>8</sup> [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#\\_Toc61345613](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#_Toc61345613)

effective control’ over the breakaway regions where it has failed to investigate war crimes and has ‘violated several provisions of the European Convention of Human Rights’, including the arrest, detention and expulsion of civilians.

Described by Georgia’s justice minister as a ‘historic victory’, the decision reiterates the human rights violations committed by the Russian Federation. The case is the second launched against Russia by Georgia. The first case was also won by Georgia, the Court ruled that Russia had arrested, detained and expelled civilians in 2006. The third case regarding the death of a Georgian citizen is still pending. The cases may have important repercussions for the region by further reducing Russian legitimacy and countering its disinformation campaigns.

**Expert comment:** *The case concerned the violations in the context of the brief but devastating five-day war in August 2008 between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia, a separatist region of Georgia internationally recognized as part of Georgia. Georgia had submitted that, Russian forces and separatist forces under Russia’s control, conducted indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, as a result of which hundreds of civilians were injured, killed, detained or went missing, thousands of civilians had their property and homes destroyed, and over 300,000 people were forced to leave Abkhazia (also a Russian-backed de facto regime internationally recognized as Georgia’s territory) and South Ossetia.*



## Republic of Moldova



Source: Eesc.europa.eu

### Chisinau plunges into political crisis

The election of Maia Sandu, an opposition candidate, as president in November 2020 and the resignation of the cabinet headed by Ion Chicu after her inauguration in December marked a new phase of Moldova's political crisis.

The main stake in this confrontation is the fate of the current Parliament and of its PSRM-Șor Party informal majority, with the president and her former party making efforts to cause the dissolution of the Parliament and to organize snap elections this year. The reasoning behind this is the lack of legitimacy of the Parliament, suspicions of high corruption, including massive party-switching, illegal political financing, and approval of problematic pieces of legislation by the current majority, added to people's demand for political change.

Snap elections were a key promise in Maia Sandu's presidential campaign, and had been endorsed at that time by all political parties in the Parliament. However, it seems the informal majority coalition parties changed their mind after Sandu's convincing victory and their own fall in the polls as an aftermath of her win.

**Expert comment:** *Maia Sandu's victory in the 2020 elections was followed immediately by an attempt of the parliamentary majority to curtail the presidential powers. The law voted by the Parliament strips the President of the power to appoint and supervise the head of Moldova's secret service, a highly controversial agency in the last years. The law was challenged before the Constitutional Court.*

*At the same time, it seems the new president seeks to affirm the office's status and mandate in both external and internal affairs, by promoting a clear reform agenda in the justice system or the intelligence service and by establishing direct contact with international partners. Maia Sandu's approach is expected to continue in 2021, especially if she succeeds in pushing for snap parliamentary elections.*

## What's next? Early elections, referendum to suspend the president, protests or political limbo

If the president's bid to dissolve the Parliament succeeds (by overcoming constitutional challenges or finding appropriate legal solutions) early elections will be held within three months after this dissolution. If that happens, we are expecting aggressive campaigning on all sides given the major stakes. Judging by the latest opinion polls, elections may radically change the power balance towards the now-opposition PAS party, formerly headed by President Sandu, who may even muster a majority and form a government single-handedly.

The current majority in the Parliament may try to oppose this scenario by using their prerogative to suspend the President with a 2/3 majority for violating the Constitution. In this case, a referendum will be called to impeach the President. For the motion to pass, it would take more people voting in favour of impeachment than the number of votes she got in the elections, which is a very high bar, and unlikely to be met. Moreover, the popularity of the President may make the move risky politically for the current majority. In fact, the pro-Russian socialists have already stated they do not intend to suspend the President.

If the crisis persists or intensifies, street protests are expected on both sides of the political aisle to push for their respective solutions. In the meantime, the country will continue to be governed by a caretaker government with limited powers, which ties the hands of the executive in adopting and implementing any meaningful reform.

### A geopolitical change?

Another phenomenon to keep an eye on in 2021 in the Republic of Moldova is the likely change of geo-political preferences for the majority of the citizens. While support for the East and support for the West has varied over the past years, the latest polls show a strong fall in the support for the Kremlin. The latest Public Opinion Barometer shows that for the first time in 20 years of research, the number of Moldovans who trust Vladimir Putin has dropped below 50%. This figure stood strong at 60-65%, at times, reaching as much as 75%. Moreover, the percentage of those who say they do not trust the Russian president has reached 47%, compared to 45% who say they regard him positively. Putin's negative rating report is also an absolute first in Moldova.

These currents of opinion denote a potential tectonic change in the structure of the Moldovan electorate. If the upcoming data will confirm this trend, we can assume that these changes will have a strong impact on future political developments in the Republic of Moldova.

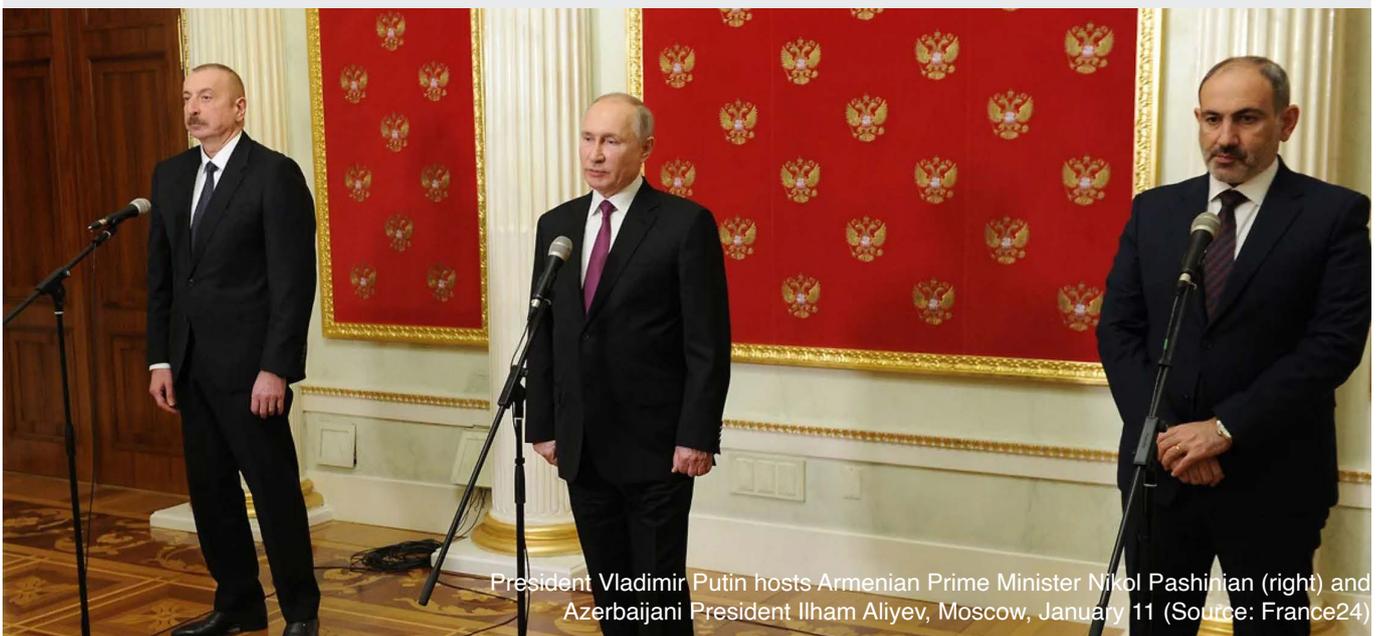
## Azerbaijan



Source: Caucasuswatch.de

### **The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. What will follow?**

The six-week violent escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the autumn of 2020 resulted in the victory of the latter. Azerbaijan returned the Azeri-inhabited districts surrounding the enclave that had been captured by the Armenian forces in early 1993 and entered the town of Shusha of equal strategic and cultural importance for both parties of the conflict. The subsequent ceasefire agreement signed under Russia's authority brought a new configuration in the region. It reconfirmed the status of Russian Federation as a key external player in the South Caucasus, but also brought Turkey as a counterweight to Russia in the format of the joint Turkish Russia Monitoring Center in Azerbaijan to monitor the ceasefire process with Armenia.



President Vladimir Putin hosts Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian (right) and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Moscow, January 11 (Source: France24)

Azerbaijan's prevailing in the conflict consolidated the authoritarian regime and the image of Ilham Aliev, the president of the country, gaining him major popular support and recognition even from some opponents<sup>9</sup>. The country has already started to direct investments for the development of the regained territories rich in natural resources. This process should be seen in the wider picture of economical and infrastructural reintegration of affected territories that is also going to earn the regime a better image at national level.

The subsequent relations with Armenia will be marked by how the countries perceive the outcome of the conflict. Azerbaijan tries to portray its stance as a country that now pleads for peace, with Armenia the less cooperation actor. Armenia is still affected by the territorial losses. As the ceasefire agreement has been perceived very painfully, protests sparked in its aftermath with the main demand that the prime minister Pashinyan resign. As some analysts note, the defeat of Armenia in this war is set to be promoted as a consequence of the “democratic experiment” of the prime-minister Pashinyan who came to power due to pro-democracy and social justice protests in 2018.

Disputes are also expected to emerge over the prisoners of war and leftover landmines that will periodically intoxicate the dialogue between the countries.

**Expert Comment:** *The parties should agree on the legal basis of the solution to the conflict. Not resolving the conflict would pose a challenge to sustaining long lasting peace. So far, there is no peace agreement, but a ceasefire agreement. The status of Nagorno-Karabakh is still unclear. Recently, Azerbaijan and Armenia have agreed on an economic pact to foster economic relations, with an expected positive impact.*

*One of the issues is the resettlement of IDPs. This resettlement in 7 districts will be carried out in consideration of their previous structure. Parties should however find an agreement on resettlement in Shusha and Hadrut. Before, Azeris were the majority in Shusha while Hadrut is mainly an Armenian populated district which is now controlled by the Azeri forces.*

*What is important is that the rhetoric of the Government and the media should change. Hate speech and fake news are widespread in both countries with a high negative impact in the two societies”.*

<sup>9</sup> Analysis: Nagorno-Karabakh War Transforms The Legacy Of Azerbaijani President Aliyev , <https://www.rferl.org/a/nagorno-karabakh-legacy-azerbaijani-president-aliyev/31006302.html>

## Belarus



### Will the protests in Belarus prevail?

Under the spotlight during 2020 and in the beginning of 2021, the Belarus protests challenged the international community's perception of Belarus. Long seen only as a country led by Europe's last dictator, Aleksandr Lukashenka, and as Russia's traditional ally and supporter with some limited *flirting* with the EU, Belarus is now known as a country actively protesting against its oppressive regime. In August 2020, the people of Belarus took to the streets to protest another rigged presidential election. According to protesters, the indisputable winner of the race is Svyatlana Tikhanovskaya, who is currently president-in-exile in Lithuania.

Belarus is becoming the new arena for a West-East *cold confrontation*. The European Union condemned the violent repression of the demonstrators and announced several rounds of sanctions against Lukashenka's close allies. Tikhanovskaya insisted on tougher sanctions and criticized the West for taking "ridiculously few" steps against the regime in Minsk. Russia eventually sided with Lukashenka, lending him the Kremlin arsenal of propaganda against the protesters and supporting the regime financially. This gave Lukashenka the much needed support for disregarding the protesters' demands and ignoring EU's sanctions.

On her part, Svyatlana Tikhanovskaya and her team are working to promote the Belarus protests and resistance movement through diplomacy and media. She also raises funds and donations to help political prisoners and victims of the protests. In early March 2021, Belarus asked Lithuania to extradite her "to face prosecution for crimes against order, public safety and the state." Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis responded: "We can tell the Belarusian regime that we would rather watch hell freeze over than think about their demands".

The protests sparked several local solidarity protests with Belarus throughout the world and also in the countries of the former communist bloc, including countries in the Black Sea region. All these are changing the traditional paradigm of an obedient Belarus and shaping the Belarus civic identity - different from the Russian one, as wrongly perceived by many. These are also challenging the strength of Russia in its perceived sphere of influence.

New waves of protests are expected to revive in the spring, as on March 25 demonstrations are announced to take place. In 2021, Tikhanovskaya reiterated her belief that Lukashenka's regime will fall. However, backed by Russia, the oppressive regime in Belarus is unlikely to fall, if no other critical events take place.

## Regional events and trends to follow. Other actors' influence.

The impacts of vaccination campaigns and post-pandemic on regional dynamics. What is the role of key global players?



Vaccines are becoming the new soft power in the Black Sea region. In a region without the resources or ability to acquire the vaccine, disinformation campaigns are intensifying, mainly targeting EU approved vaccines. In Moldova, the disinformation campaign, carried by both external and internal actors, targeted the AstraZeneca vaccines donated by Romania through the COVAX initiative. Sputnik V got much better reviews.

In the case of the EaP countries, the EU, Russia and China are all competing for influence. Azerbaijan was the first country in the South Caucasus to start vaccinations using the Chinese CoronaVac. Armenia followed, with a donation of Sputnik V vaccines from Russia. Georgia, along with its neighbors, Armenia and Azerbaijan, is expected to soon receive its first vaccine doses from the WHO's COVAX. The fund, also sponsored by the EU, provides vaccines also for Moldova and Ukraine.

Ukraine, on the other hand, banned the use of the Sputnik V vaccine, but will still use the Chinese CoronaVac. On March 4, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) announced that it will start the process of approval for the Sputnik V Russian vaccine. Even though Russia is facing low vaccination rates caused by its own conspiracy theories, the move may be seen as a win for the Kremlin. In response, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated: "We still wonder why Russia is offering, theoretically, millions and millions of doses, while not sufficiently progressing in vaccinating its own people". A member of EMA's management board also warned EU countries against approving the Sputnik V vaccine without European authorization, but this did not stop the Russian Direct Investment Fund from striking a deal to produce the Sputnik V vaccine in Italy.

Lagging behind the US, the UK and Israel, the EU is facing pressure to up its vaccination rate and to be able to provide vaccines to neighbouring countries and to less developed countries. EU countries however had different stances concerning the use of vaccines unapproved by EMA. While Romania has ruled out using unauthorized vaccines, other EU countries have been less equivocal. Bulgaria has not excluded the possibility of using other vaccines. Hungary was the first to authorize the Russian Sputnik V and the Chinese Sinopharm, and other countries such as Slovakia and the Czech Republic soon followed.

## Will high expectations meet reality? The role of the Biden Administration in the Black Sea Region.



Source: AP Photo / Patrick Semansky

There are high expectations from the Biden administration regarding the US presence in the Black Sea region. It is, however, too early to tell if the US will significantly boost its presence in the region. The new administration follows a democracy-first foreign policy, meaning it will put more emphasis on defending against hybrid threats, invest in tools and policies that can limit the spread of disinformation and information wars (cyber-hacking, infodemics, use of local proxies to extend malign influences).

The principles are listed by the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance:<sup>10</sup> “We will work alongside fellow democracies across the globe to deter and defend against aggression from hostile adversaries. We will stand with our allies and partners to combat new threats aimed at our democracies, ranging from cross-border aggression, cyberattacks, disinformation, and digital authoritarianism to infrastructure and energy coercion. We will take special aim at confronting corruption, which rots democracy from the inside and is increasingly weaponized by authoritarian states to undermine democratic institutions.”

During his hearing, Lloyd Austin, the US Secretary of Defense, promised to evaluate the distribution of US troops and NATO troops in the Black Sea Region and Eastern Mediterranean, key regions for discouraging Russian aggression. The US administration seeks to promote a favorable distribution of power to deter and prevent adversaries from threatening the US and its allies. The retreat of US troops from Germany is also being questioned. The US posture in the Black Sea region depends on (1) the ongoing evaluation of the global distribution of US forces in the world, the so called global posture review, in addition to the budgetary adjustments process and (2) the overarching priorities of the US administration which are related to Indo Pacific area and China.

All these elements will depend on the size of US presence in Europe, the budget allocated to the European Deterrence Initiative (a similar initiative is expected to start this year for the Indo-Pacific area) and, most important, the footprint of the US in the Black Sea region.

<sup>10</sup> Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

## Chinese influence. Is China an imminent player in the region?



Security personnel outside the Wuhan Institute of Virology in Wuhan – Source: CNN

China's main goals in the Black Sea Region and the broader Central and Eastern European region are geopolitical and financial. In its quest to become a global power, China attempts to gain useful partners in international institutions that can veto unfavourable declarations, possibly leading to the weakening of the European Union through the creation of a Western/Eastern divide. China, the second biggest trading partner of the EU, also seeks to increase the magnitude of investments in the Central and Eastern European.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's global infrastructure investment project, is its main tool of influence<sup>11</sup>. The project, often criticized for creating debt-traps, seeks to offer financial incentives for connecting China to new and emerging global markets. In the recently established 17+1 summit that reunites China with Central and Eastern European Countries and Greece, China has promised large investments in infrastructure, new and green technologies. Vaccines have also been recently added to China's toolbox of geopolitical influence as the country has successfully sold COVID-19 vaccine doses to countries ranging from Hungary to Azerbaijan.

The Three Seas Initiative, established to increase investments in the region between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas, may be an important mechanism to counter Chinese influence. Unfortunately, European countries, including those of the 3 Seas region, lack a common approach. While Bulgaria is still happy to accept investment in its ports and nuclear plants, Romania opposes China's influence and potential investments. Hungary, a significant recipient of Chinese investments through the BRI, is possibly the biggest enthusiast of Sino-European relations. Along with Greece and Croatia, two other recipients of BRI funding, have previously refused to sign multiple declarations that would have incriminated China for human rights violations.

**Expert comment:** *The most important regional development to watch in 2021 is the dynamics of Russian and Chinese influence on the economies, policies and societies of the Black Sea region countries. This region has long been in the geopolitical cross-currents of Russia and the West, but with the backsliding of democracy, the rise of China and the return of Russia onto the global scene, the stakes will remain very high in 2021. Authoritarian tendencies, including through utilizing new technologies in the direction of total surveillance and manipulation of public opinion will be a major threat.*

<sup>11</sup> Belt and Road Initiative, <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/belt-and-road/>

## Is the EaP instrument still relevant for the region? A roadmap for the 2021 Eastern Partnership Summit.



Source: Regtrends.com

The Summit of Eastern Partnership is a powerful instrument to shape EU policies in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Although the next EaP summit was supposed to take place in 2019, it was delayed due to various issues, which indicates that the EU is more focused on its domestic agenda, while its neighbourhood policy is of secondary priority. The next EaP summit is finally set to take place in 2021 – a much needed event in order to synchronize EU and EaP actions. The COVID-19 pandemic and the political crises in most EaP countries will likely shift the priorities of the next summit. Countries could focus more on post-pandemic recovery and on addressing immediate priorities. At the same time, there is growing divergence in the ambitions of the EaP states and the EU. On the one hand, there is Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, which prefer to keep their relations rather low-key with the EU. On the other hand, associated countries, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, are willing to shape an agenda that goes beyond the Association Agreements.

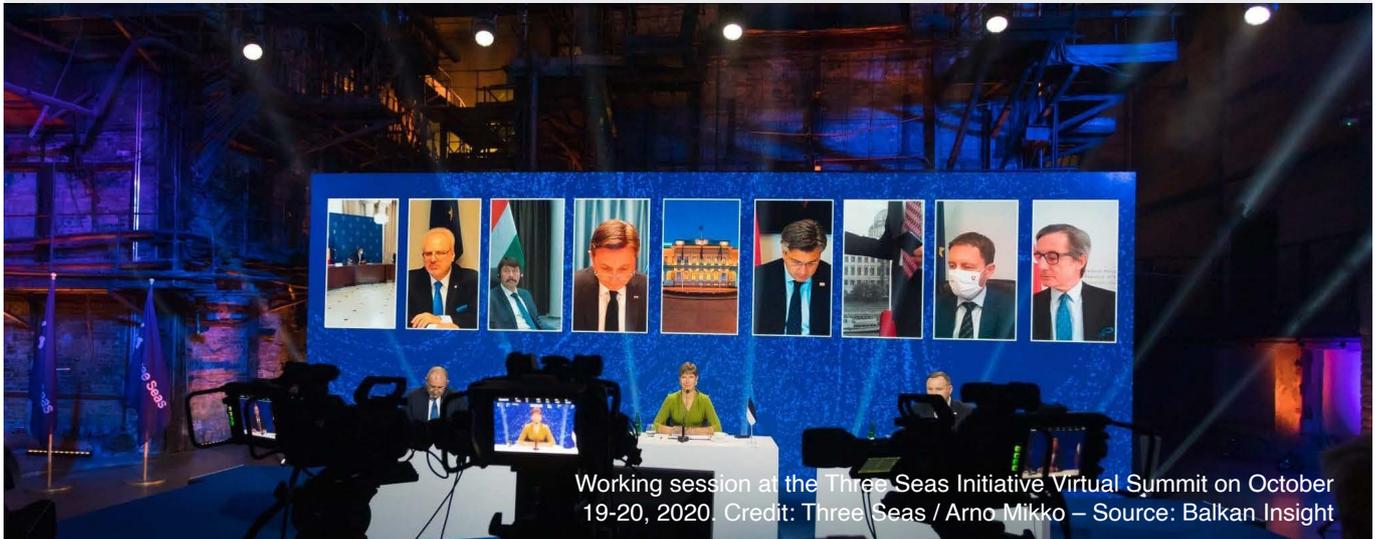
Monitoring progress in democratic and economic reforms will also remain important. Boosted by a successful vaccine diplomacy, Russian influence is growing in the region. In response, the EU should continue its collaboration with COVAX and provide more vaccines to EaP countries. It should also continue to offer conditional financial assistance and take into account possible Russian interference.

Developing a security dimension for the EaP countries, no matter what their stance on the EU, is one of the most important topics. The Russian military presence in almost all EaP countries is posing a serious threat not only to the reform process and democracy in these countries, but also challenges the EU value-based, rule of law and human rights approach in the region. This in turn could create additional pressure on the EU itself and the efficiency of its policy in the region. Economic development, which has been a cornerstone for the modernization of the associated EaP states is currently very vulnerable in light of Russian aggression and modest anti-corruption results.

In this regard, the EaP summit needs to address these questions and accommodate the priorities of the EaP states as well in order to keep the initiative relevant for the region.

**Expert comment:** *A reform of the Eastern Partnership is looming following the divisions between the participant countries. Moreover, the achievement of most attractive elements of the initiative such as visa-liberalization and the Association Agreement by Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine makes Eastern Partnership less attractive and unambitious. This is why EaP needs urgent rehabilitation that would include the extension of the possibilities to cooperate in the area of trade, energy, environment and security. Otherwise, its significance for the region will further decline.*

## The Three Seas Initiative. What to expect from this year's summit?



Working session at the Three Seas Initiative Virtual Summit on October 19-20, 2020. Credit: Three Seas / Arno Mikko – Source: Balkan Insight

The Three Seas initiative responds to the new trend for regional thematic formats for cooperation and development for 12 European countries between the Adriatic, Baltic and the Black Seas. Its scope is to perpetuate economic cohesion with Western Europe, to diversify energy resources and increase connectivity on the North-South line. The initiative is important for its “alternative” facility it provides, being backed by the EU, particularly Germany, and the US.

Scheduled to be hosted by Bulgaria in June 2021, this year's 3SI Summit focuses on the potential of the Black Sea region to contribute to the operationalization of infrastructure projects. According to the official Bulgarian vision<sup>12</sup>, the main objective of the summit is to further consolidate the 3SI as a cooperative platform aimed at strengthened cohesion and convergence within the EU, while developing its strategic transatlantic dimension. The summit will follow-up on the ambitious path of releasing the capacity of the Initiative as a genuine tool for regional cooperation and accelerated economic development by improving energy, transport and digital connectivity networks.

The 3SI's role is growing in the region with prospects to engage third parties investments in the field of infrastructure, energy and digitalization. Aside from the EU, which is partially financing infrastructure initiatives, the US is also interested in the energy and security dimensions, as well as the members of the Initiative who already contributed to the creation of the 3SI Investment Fund. The total budget of the Fund does not exceed one billion USD, but it is a very promising start. Eventually, the support from the EU and the US could increase the interest of private investors. Google's participation in the 3SI summit in Tallinn last year and in this year's summit proves that there is room for growth.

Digitalization as one of the pillars of 3SI inevitably raises the issue of cybersecurity. Bearing in mind the mutual interests of the countries of the region, the shared security concerns of the 3SI countries and the readiness of the third parties to invest there is a high likelihood that the Initiative will have a significant impact on developments in the region.

The Three Seas Initiative may also be regarded as an opportunity for Ukraine and Moldova to join the format in a more consistent way. A joint statement of the countries' leaders reads that they reaffirm the interest in taking part in it. Ukraine has the capacity to contribute by sharing its experience of counteracting cyber attacks of Russia.

<sup>12</sup> <https://3seas.eu/about/bulgaria-s-vision>

However, the initiative is criticised by some who are pointing out that the 3SI entails the risk of new divisions inside Europe. On the one hand, they fear that the participating states are building an energy alliance with the remote US, without the blessing, or participation, of Westerns EU partners. On the other hand, they fear that the participating 3SI states will not be treated fairly in the distribution of infrastructure capital and that most of the investment projects would benefit the Northern part of the new alliance.

**Expert comment:** *The 3SI has strong potential to become a highly politicized, contentious issue in Bulgarian domestic politics. Specific to Bulgarian politics of the last few years is a strong and lasting standoff between President Rumen Radev (who was elected in a direct vote with support from BSP, the main opposition party) and GERB leader, the Prime Minister Boyko Borisov.*

*As 3SI summits are organized at presidential level, while the coordination of the summit is entrusted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the parallel Business Forum is in the hands of the Ministry of the Economy, they will be forced to work together, which may be very challenging. This is not made easier by the fact that the June summit is scheduled to take place too soon after the 4<sup>th</sup> April parliamentary election, which is expected to lead to a very fragmented parliament and to result in difficulties in forming a government.*

## Angela Merkel's legacy. What is Germany's role in the region with a new leadership?



Source: Deutsche Welle

The German federal elections are scheduled for September 2021 and will mark the beginning of new leadership in Germany. After four mandates as Chancellor, Angela Merkel leaves behind a legacy of reform and leadership in Europe and worldwide. Her legacy covers the Black Sea region as well, as she has been one of the most consistent supporters of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia and other countries which sought reforms and a clear democratic track-record.

One of her special achievements was deterring Russia's aggressive policy and supporting countries in the region. She also has a long history of interactions with Vladimir Putin. At the same time, Merkel had Russia in mind when making some crucial decisions – such as blocking the NATO Membership Action Plan for Ukraine in 2008.

The elections are expected to bring some shifts in the German politics. The ruling coalition lost support since the 2017 elections. A potential coalition created between Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the Greens is credited with the highest chances. If that coalition becomes a reality, it is likely that Germany will lead an active foreign policy in the Black Sea region and that it will take an active stance in deterring Russia. Nevertheless, the personality factor is very important and it might take years until another German leader will be able to efficiently temper Russia's aggressive behavior in the region.

**Expert comment:** *Merkel's departure from politics might weaken Germany's role in the wider Black Sea region which in consequence could lead to a more assertive Kremlin. This is important especially in the light of the Normandy format talks for the settlement of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict of which Merkel was part of from the very beginning and invested a great deal of time and efforts to create a diplomatic affront in order to roll back Russian attack in Ukraine.*

## The arrest of Alexey Navalny: Questioning Putin's regime



Source: Ilya Varlamov, varlamov.ru

The arrest of Putin's main opponent, Alexey Navalny, upon his return to Russia after surviving a poisoning attempt sparked a protest wave throughout Russia. Navalny is considered the main threat to the survival of Putin's regime in the long run and has the potential to ruin the agreed scenarios for the upcoming legislative elections during the fall of 2021. However, his return to Russia and his do not guarantee an increase in the opposition's electoral score, but it does show that the current regime is shaken by an increased unapproval rate.

The demonstrations against Navalny's arrest were preceded by a wave of discontent against the regime. The long-standing Khabarovsk protests are questioning the legitimacy of the regime. Nonetheless, the protests do not have the potential to change the root characteristics of the regime, but only to reveal fractures and incoherences in its actions. The violent crackdown on the protesters revealed a weakened and distrusted regime.

Navalny's arrest took place in the light of the upcoming legislative elections in Russia therefore an operative crackdown of manifestations was essential to stop the spread of the protests, to prevent

voters from participating in those, to maintain an artificial approval of the regime and marginalization of protesters. Amnesty International withdrawal of Navalny's title as prisoner of conscience due to his past nationalist statements only helps Russian propaganda in pursuing its scope to internationally discredit Navalny and reduce support for him.

The regime aims to alter Navalny's public image and to fabricate evidence against him in order to discourage any form of opposition ahead of the elections. This is an ongoing process which will continue during 2021.

The response of the West is predictably formal and it lacks sufficient instruments to pressure the regime. The EU and the US announced a new round of sanctions against Putin's circle, and diplomats and international organizations were also monitoring the case while demanding Navalny's release. In response, the regime criticized the alleged meddling of the West in Russia's internal affairs, with relations between Russia and the West at an all-time low. This may extrapolate to EU and NATO projects in Russia's Near Neighborhood, coupled with an aggressive pro-Kremlin rhetoric by pro-Russian parties in the region and marked anti-Western propaganda to block or hamper reforms.

**Note:** The selection of countries in the first chapter is based on the limitations of our current research. The implementing team and the experts are assessing national dynamics in Romania, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. The second chapter includes key regional events and trends that require substantial attention on the short to medium term. This report does not intend to be a comprehensive analysis of the entire region, but to offer insights in some of the most important national and regional events and trends that can happen in 2021 and with a significant impact for regional dynamics.

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