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Eastern Partnership monthly analytical digest

VISA-FREE WHIP. **Prospects of preserving a visa-free regime for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia**



EU countries are closely monitoring migration trends, and in the event of a breach of several conditions the visa-free regime for Eastern Partnership countries may be suspended

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

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Visa-free regime under threat?

In the Ukrainian presidential race the possible abolition of the visa-free regime with the EU in case of the victory of a “wrong” candidate became a hot topic. The dividing line was no longer on the voters’ preferences of Russia or the West, as none of the openly pro-Russian candidates had any real chances of winning. However, visa-free issue is still used in the campaigns after the first round, despite the fact that both leaders declare a course towards the West.

Under what conditions can a visa free regime be, in fact, suspended not only for Ukraine, but also for the other Eastern Partnership countries? And who really walks on the edge - Kyiv, Tbilisi or Chisinau? Ekaterina Kulchitskaya analyzes.

In the meantime, Belarus is only preparing for elections. The president is carrying out personnel changes and strengthening the rears in the regions. Another important step in this process was the adoption of the Information Security Concept. Neither the rights of citizens nor union obligations to Russia, but the supremacy of the state in the information space is placed first in the document. What is so unusual about this Concept and why it is needed at all, Yuri Tsarik tells.

Moldova already shares out main posts after the elections. Although only three parties passed to the new parliament, they haven't been able to reach an agreement yet. The same is the situation with the judicial reform in Georgian parliament. Since the negotiations were at an impasse, the opposition appealed to the Venice Commission for help. And the Armenian not numerous but vocal opposition strives to reduce the powers of the prime minister with no luck so far. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan saw an unprecedented amnesty, when 51 political prisoners were released. Is this a sign of the regime liberalization or the result of pressure?

Find out about the main events in the Eastern Partnership in March in our short and capacious reviews.

Olga Chizhova

Editor-in-Chief of the EaP Think Bridge Digest



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Mistakes & missteps: Armenian government begins to falter

Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center (Yerevan, Armenia)

In March not numerous but vocal opposition tried to limit premier's power, while the government accented its victories and successes.



DOMESTIC POLICY

A parliamentary move to limit government power

Despite the obvious political power of popular support and an overwhelming majority in the parliament, the small but vocal Bright Armenia Party (LHK) introduced legislation on 27 March seeking to limit the power of the government led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian. The move was in response to the prime minister's insistence that three power-

ful state bodies: the police, National Security Service (NSS) and the combined tax and customs State Revenue Committee (SRC) – remain subordinate to premier's office, rather than account to the parliament. The bill also seeks to elevate the police and NSS to the level of full government ministries, thereby making them accountable to the parliament, while also calling for the merger of the SRC with the Finance Ministry. These three powerful agencies were traditionally under the control of the president, but with the country's

unprecedented transformation to a parliamentary form of government, the prime minister is eager to keep them under his direct jurisdiction. The government's defense of keeping the three state bodies under prime ministerial control, as articulated by Deputy Prime Minister Tigran Avinian, is based on the argument that the importance of these state agencies necessitates a safeguard against their "politicization."

The legislation has little chance for passage due to the dominant position of the 88-seat ruling pro-government "My Step" bloc. However, the attempt by the 18-seat Bright Armenia Party is a logical bid to counter what their party leader and former Pashinyan ally Edmon Marukian defines as a dangerous move toward creating a "super prime-ministerial" scenario that tends to only replicate Armenia's previous "pyramid" system of government. The bill is also a prudent attempt to bolster the authority and institutional power of the parliament as more of a "check and balance" branch of government in order to meet its own responsibilities of legislative initiative, accountability and oversight.

The small but vocal Bright Armenia Party (LHK) introduced legislation seeking to limit the power of the government led by Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian

Ethics watchdog found to violate his own standards

The state Ethics Committee for High-Ranking Officials determined on 21 March that Davit Sanasaryan, the head of a supervisory body subordinate to the Prime Minister, violated the very same rules governing ethics in public service that he is empowered to protect. The Committee determined that Sanasaryan failed to "contribute to the credibility of and respect towards his office and the body he represents". The rather embarrassing case consists of public statements by Sanasaryan that accused Yerevan State University Rector Aram Simonyan of misappropriating or embezzling over 800 million drams (about \$1.6 million) during his tenure as the head of the university. Although the charges tend to be in line with the public suspicion of Simonyan and the use of his position to support the former government, the legal presumption of innocence greatly contributed to a perception of bias and pressure by Sanasaryan.

ECONOMIC

Armenian Premier defends his "economic revolution"

In a robust defense of his demand for an "economic revolution," Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan argued on 27 March that official statistics confirmed that the Armenian economy continued to expand, tax revenues were increasing and that his government's efforts to forge a "level playing field for all businesses" were successful. In a report to the parliament, the prime minister added that "our model of economic development and economic revolution is working," hailing a nearly 22% increase in construction for the first two months of 2019 and noting that a dramatic expansion of mortgage-related bank lending stood out as the evidence of the public's "confidence in their own future". Nevertheless, for the same period, exports declined by 11% and industrial output increased by a meager 2%.

World Bank offers Armenia a new loan package

In an announcement on 28 March, the World Bank Group pledged some \$500 million in new loans and other funding for the Armenian government over the coming five years, noting that the World Bank will "capitalize on the momentum and political will for deeper reforms and renewed commitment to good governance, sparked by recent changes in Armenia, to support rebalancing the economy toward a new growth model". The new loan package will focus on the Armenian energy sector through modernization and reforms aimed at reducing dependence on energy imports, while also supporting measures to "increase competition and open the economy to foreign investment by providing direct financing to companies and supporting the development of export-oriented industries". The World Bank stands out as the country's leading foreign creditor and main donor, providing Armenia with loans and grants totaling over \$2 billion since 1992.

FOREIGN POLICY

First official meeting of Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders

In their first official meeting, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan met with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev on 29 March in Vienna. Hailed as a "positive and constructive" meeting, the two leaders agreed to strengthen the ceasefire

in place over the Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh) conflict zone and contribute to "an environment conducive to peace", while also expressing their commitment to continue diplomatic negotiations. A subsequent joint statement issued by the foreign ministers of each country added that this round of talks offered "an opportunity for the two leaders to clarify their respective positions" and exchange "views about

several key issues of the settlement process and ideas of substance”. The joint statement was also endorsed by the U.S., Russian, and French mediators co-chairing the OSCE Minsk Group, the sole diplomatic entity empowered to manage the Karabakh peace process. And in what was perhaps the most significant development, Prime Minister Pashinyan and President Aliyev further agreed to develop a number of unspecified but positive measures related to “the humanitarian field”. This meeting followed three earlier informal conversations between the two leaders over the past six months, which was also noteworthy for a marked decrease in the number of violations of the inherently fragile ceasefire in place.

Azerbaijan conducts major military exercises

In a move seemingly to bolster their diplomatic negotiation position prior to a summit with the Armenian leader, Azerbaijan launched a major five-day military exercise on 11

March consisting of roughly 10,000 troops, 500 tanks, 300 missile systems, aircraft and other military equipment. The exercise also coincided with the visit to Yerevan by James Appathurai, the NATO Secretary-General’s Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia. During his visit, the NATO envoy praised Armenia’s “new efforts” and commitment to the Karabakh peace process, and stressed that the conflict had no “successful military solution”. On the same day, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan arrived in Karabakh to prepare for a special meeting of the Armenian National Security Council set for 12 March. And in a warning to both Armenia and Azerbaijan, the OSCE Minsk Group mediators issued a statement on 9 March calling on all parties to “refrain from statements and actions suggesting significant changes to the situation on the ground, prejudging the outcome of future talks or setting conditions for them, demanding unilateral changes to the format without agreement of the other party, or indicating readiness to renew active hostilities”.

Azerbaijan: Political prisoners released in mass pardon

Sevinc Aliyeva, The Baku Academy of International Law and Human Rights (Baku, Azerbaijan)

In March, to the great surprise of Azerbaijani people and the international community, 400 people including 51 political prisoners were released. The economy agenda of the country was dominated by the meeting of Azerbaijan and Russian ministers over gas issues. Meanwhile, the foreign policy agenda of the country was stable except for the meeting scheduled for March 29 between Aliyev and Pashinyan.



DOMESTIC POLICY

International pressure or government reform?

On March 16, Azerbaijan released more than 400 people, the majority of which being political prisoners.

Pardoning prisoners on the eve of Novruz holiday has become a tradition in Azerbaijan. However, surprisingly this time 51 political prisoners were among the released individuals as

well. The decree, signed by Aliyev on March 16, included the release of human right activists, several journalists, and members of different youth groups. Among them, there was former Minister of Health Ali İnsanov, journalist Fikret Faramazoglu, opposition Musavat Party member Alikram Xurshidov, and the deputy chairpersons of the opposition [Popular Front Party](#), [Gozel Bayramli](#) and [Fuad Qahramanli](#).

In the following two weeks, different interpretations were

spread around about the mass pardon. Some people see the decree as a success of international pressure, while others as a sign of internal pressure. In contrast, some people are hopeful about Aliyev's intent to reform the government.

One of the main sources of this pressure is considered to be the EU-Azerbaijan Cooperation Council, which is scheduled for April 4. After the pardon, the EU published a report, which praises the economic and political progress in Azerbaijan. However the document also mentions the need for improvement in human right issues. Maja Kocijancic, the EU External Action Service's Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy called this pardon "a welcome step" and added that ["The European Union expects that further similar steps will follow in future in line with Azerbaijan's international commitments"](#).

Furthermore, Freedom House released a statement praising this step, though stating that "... it does not signal a fundamental change" because ["... close to 80 other political prisoners remain behind bars, including Fuad Ahmadli, Seymur Hazi, Afghan Mukhtarli, and many others; we continue receiving reports of ill-treatment of imprisoned activists, most recently of Abbas Huseynov and Taleh Bagirzade"](#). Another statement by the US embassy called on Azerbaijan ["... to take additional](#)

Close to 80 other political prisoners remain behind bars in Azerbaijan

[positive steps in the months ahead, consistent with Azerbaijan's international obligations and commitments to protect the fundamental freedoms of its citizens"](#).

It should be noted that, according to the Freedom in the World 2019 report, Azerbaijan has an aggregate freedom score of 11 out of 100 and is labelled as ["Not Free"](#).

Compensation on loans

On February 28, President Aliyev signed a decree on compensation for problematic loans. Vusal Gasimli, Director of the Center for Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communications, indicated that 700 million manats (about \$411 million) will be allocated to address the issue, which 800,000 people [are expected to benefit from](#).

Issues related to loans date back to the beginning of 2015 and result from the decline in oil prices and devaluation of Azerbaijani manat. People who took loans in dollars before the devaluation faced difficulties paying their loans back with the new exchange rate. According to the decree, the difference will be compensated from public funds. If the compensation is not enough to pay the debt, the rest of the loan will have

a lower interest rate.

ECONOMY

Russian oil in the STAR refinery

According to a local news agency, on March 18, Azerbaijan's Energy Minister Parviz Shahbazov and Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak had a meeting and discussed the supply of Russian oil to the STAR refinery in Izmir, Turkey. Moreover, the current situation on the oil market and the bilateral energy agreement were on the agenda. After the meeting, a memorandum of understanding [was signed by the ministers](#).

Later on, General Manager of STAR Refinery, Mesut Iler stated that all the experiments have been completed in the refinery and it is expected to export around \$500 million of petrochemical raw materials per year. Prime Minister of Azerbaijan, Novruz Mammadov said that the refinery ["...will bring \\$850 million of](#)

[annual profit to the country"](#).

TAP – almost completed

The construction of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline project, which started in 2016, is 85.7% completed at the end of February. According to the TAP AG consortium, the construction is ["in line with the project construction steps and schedule"](#).

Starting from the Caspian Sea, moving through Northern Greece, Albania, and the Adriatic Sea, and connecting to the Italian gas network, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline is one of the valuable energy projects for the European Union. Once completed fully, this important Southern Gas Corridor route will offer cost-effective transportation of Azerbaijani gas to Europe.

FOREIGN POLICY

Aliyev-Pashinyan meeting

After a year and a half, the first round of Nagorno-Karabakh settlement talks at the highest level happened on March 29. Being the initiative of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs, the

face-to-face meeting between Aliyev and Pashinyan was held [in Vienna, Austria](#). Until then, leaders had met several times in informal settings; however, this meeting was the first official meeting of the heads of states.

Belarus: In the grip of the negative and seeking the positive

Yuri Tsarik, Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies (Minsk, Belarus)

March saw a shift of accents in the work of the government and media in Belarus. Excessive attention to tensions in Belarus-Russia relations in January-February was replaced by an emphasis on domestic and economic policies. However, these accents turned out to be mostly negatively colored as well.



DOMESTIC POLICY

Government shake-up and contours of the election strategy

One of the major developments was the [adoption](#) of Belarus' new concept of information security, a regulatory

act with a questionable legal status even if passed with a resolution of the Security Council of Belarus. In practical terms, the Concept is all about declaring the right and the willingness of Belarus to format the information field in accordance with its own understanding of national interests without looking back at international commitments, including its commitments to the allies (i.e. to Russia).

In addition to the government justifying the legitimacy of any of its actions, testing a scheme to segment the target audience was an important step in the information field in March 2019. The government's messages for different audiences are now broadcasted through different channels with different accents. For example, the "anti-Russian" [statements](#) of the Belarusian leadership were covered mainly on the Internet, while TV channels [continued](#) their attempts to create a positive impression about bilateral relations.

Apparently, the adoption of Belarus' new concept of information security was the last regulatory innovation the authorities intended to implement before the presidential and parliamentary election campaigns to be held in 2019-2020. Since late March, the country's leadership has been focused on personnel issues and situation in the regions. Alexander Lukashenko [visited](#) Baranovichi in Brest Oblast and [Shklov district](#) in Mogilev Oblast at the border with Russia. The second trip resulted in the [resignation](#) of Deputy Prime Minister Mikhail Rusyi (he supervised agriculture in the government and [was transferred](#) to

Since late March, the country's leadership has been focused on personnel issues and situation in the regions

Assistant to the President in Mogilev Oblast), resignation of Gennadiy Lavrenkov, Assistant to the President in Mogilev Oblast (he was appointed Head of the Shklov district administration), resignation of Mogilev Oblast Governor Vladimir Domanevsky and a number of other officials. The lagging of the region in economic development and "poor local management" were the formal reason for resignation. At the same time, this is about moving a number of old political figures from the republican to regional level (and from regional to local level), which allows to reduce political risks prior to elections on the highest level and to strengthen work in Mogilev Oblast.

These shifts of staff are a sign of the special attention the government pays to the eastern regions which are strongly influenced by Russia and are the least well-off economically. Important [changes](#) took place in March in

other eastern regions, including Gomel and Vitebsk oblasts: Mikhail Grib from Minsk was appointed chief of the main law enforcement department of the Vitebsk Oblast Executive Committee. Alexander Kamko, a respected CEO of the industrial giant OAO Gomselmash, was replaced by Alexander Novikov, a technical figure. Meanwhile, Ivan Kubrakov known for his prompt actions on putting down the protests in February-March of 2017 in Minsk as Deputy Chief of the Main Directorate of Internal Affairs (GUVD), was appointed chief of the Minsk Police. However, Alexander Lukashenko did not rate the work of militsiya (police) high (barely 8 out of 10).

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ECONOMICS

Wage cuts, revenues rising

The economics statistics published in March shows that the February trends persist. These include low economic growth (less than 1%), average wage decrease and further active growth of revenues, including though the growing debt of Belarusians to banks.

An average wage in Belarus [decreased](#) for the second month in a row in February, if by 4 rubles only – to BYN 977.6 (US \$456). At the same time, labor productivity in Belarus [increased minimally](#) in January (by 0.9%). This means that the government returns to the policy of wage growth lagging behind the growth of productivity as a guarantee of sustainability for the real sector enterprises.

Despite the decrease in wages, total monetary income of the population [amounted to](#) BYN 6120 billion (US \$2.86

billion) in January 2019, delivering a nominal increase by 13.5% or by 7.5% adjusted to inflation compared to January 2018. Continued expanded lending to citizens by banks contributes to maintaining the income level. Household debts [hit](#) another record in March at BYN 11,827.1bn (about US \$5.520bn). This is BYN 98.5mn more than a month earlier.

Meanwhile, the real sector of the Belarusian economy is in a sensitive condition. According to the National Bank data [published](#) in March, the net profit of banks in 2018 amounted to BYN 5.2bn, a 38.9% decrease from 2017.

These statistics indicate that the Belarusian leadership has a small reserve of resilience for the upcoming election campaigns in 2019-2020. The authorities cannot ensure any dynamic growth of the economy and household income without delivering structural reforms in the real sector.

Looking for the positive elements

In the last week of March 2019, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz visited Belarus. The visit itself and the coverage of it were traditional for such events: the Austrian delegation attended WWII memorable places, [held talks with Alexander Lukashenko](#) and Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei. The narratives of both sides were mutually complementary although the Austrian side later [stated](#) that the “unpleasant” issues for Minsk such as freedom of speech and human rights in Belarus came up during the discussion.

Notably, the visit of the distinguished guest was the highlight of the summary [broadcasts](#) in the last week of March at Belarusian TV channels despite Lukashenko’s trip to Mogilev Oblast that week, which led to numerous dismissals. Obviously, such shift of emphasis was determined by the desire to present a positive picture of what has happened in Belarus and around it to the Belarusian audience. This turns the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs into a considerable provider of news triggers, enhancing its role in domestic policy despite the [lack of](#)

[progress](#) in the Belarus-EU negotiations on key issues on the agenda (agreements on facilitation of the visa regime and partnership priorities).

The other vector of Belarusian foreign policy did not deliver more positive news. March saw [harsh rhetoric](#) between the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Russia’s Ambassador Mikhail Babich. In addition to that, the Russian side did not take a step back but, quite on the contrary, [launched](#) direct defiant interaction with politicized figures in the Belarusian civil society who were not part of the pro-Russian pool earlier. Mikhail Babich met with Tatyana Korotkevich (candidate for presidency in 2015) and Andrey Dmitriev, both leaders of the Tell the Truth NGO, and economist Jaroslav Romanchuk. All attendees at the meeting [spoke out](#) positively both on the Russian diplomat and Russia’s position. In the meantime, Rosselkhozadzor (Russia’s Agriculture Supervisory Body) [continued](#) publishing materials on illegal sales of “sanctioned” products through the territory of Belarus. Babich reportedly made this one of his priorities.

Georgia: the Venice Commission is to get involved in the judicial reform

Lasha Tughushi, Liberal Academy Tbilisi Foundation (Georgia)

Georgia's judicial reform is still stirring the pot, and there is no compromise in the foreseeable future. Yet cooperation with NATO appeared on the country's foreign policy agenda in March.



DOMESTIC POLICY

How to put together the Supreme Court?

Last month saw heated debates on the issue of the Supreme Court. The ruling party in the Parliament adopted in its first reading a draft law on an alternative way to select judges for the Supreme Court. However, the situation is currently so tense that all the suggested options are out of the question for those MPs that are excluded from the

majority. The opposing parties concentrate on eliminating the influential group from the judicial system. Georgia's opposing parties and civil movements have called on the President of the Venice Commission Mr. Gianni Buquichio to help solve the issue of the country's judicial reform.

Their message is that in December 2018 the High Council of Justice of Georgia provided the Parliament with a list of 10 candidates to be selected as Supreme Court judges. The list included those judges whose reputation is

questionable and who have taken controversial decisions while having a low credit of trust in the society. Against the backdrop of the public protest “Georgian Dream” had to stop the nominating process and promise to change the law in order to secure a more meritocratic and transparent selection process.

It becomes obvious three months later that “Georgian Dream” has broken its promise and instead of fundamentally reforming the system provided a façade process to the public, with criteria and nominating procedures being just an illusion.

Those parties and civil organizations that signed this

document believe that such unsound actions are in fact a serious threat to Georgian democracy and create risk to the country’s development, which, in its turn, can lead to dramatic civil protests.

In order to avoid such a crisis, the authors of the document have yet again called on the authorities to stop discussing this law in the Parliament and start negotiations.

The Venice Commission representatives are already on their way to Tbilisi where meetings are planned. The authorities have promised to take into account the report of the Commission.

ECONOMY

The first water reservoir to be built in 50 years

Georgia is to start a large-scale construction of a water reservoir for the first time since 1950s. The water reservoir is to be built on the Tedzami river, providing water to approximately 10 000 locals and irrigating 7 000 hectares of land – the latter being almost abandoned as of today.

The Tedzami reservoir will supply water to 22 villages of Kaspi Municipality and 9700 citizens. GEL 71 ml (over \$

26 ml) will be invested into the project, with up to 500 locals employed. The reservoir project has been developed aiming at a minimal impact on the local environment. The construction is to start this year and to be completed in 47 months.

“It is a truly unique project that will breathe new life into Shida Kartli, namely the Kaspi region. Water and its resources are Georgia’s wealth. Accordingly, tapping into water resources is of vital importance for the success of our national economy,” the PM of Georgia Mamuka Bakhtadze noted.

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FOREIGN POLICY

Course towards NATO

“Georgia is to prepare for NATO membership, we recognize Georgia’s territorial integrity and the country’s sovereignty, we call on ending the recognition of the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and NATO fully supports Georgia’s territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders”, said Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary-General upon his arrival in Tbilisi.

NATO Secretary-General visited Georgia on March 2-5 and had meetings with the Prime Minister of the country Mamuka Bakhtadze, the president of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili, the minister of foreign affairs David Zalkaliani, the chairperson of the parliament Irakli Kobakhidze and other members of the government.

According to Stoltenberg, NATO’s attitude to Georgia remains the same, and Georgia will definitely become a member of the alliance in the future.

“The decision to become a NATO member is to be made by Georgia and other Alliance members, no other power can decide what (NATO) members can do”, Stoltenberg said.

According to him, further reforms, including judicial and defense reforms, are needed in order to become a NATO member.

Stoltenberg’s visit to Georgia coincided with NATO drills taking place in Georgia that included partner states and NATO members.

NATO Military Committee is also planning to visit Georgia. Military chiefs of staff of NATO member states will arrive in Georgia, while the minister of foreign affairs David Zalkaliani will visit Brussels within the frames of NATO-Georgia Commission. Such action-packed NATO agenda demonstrates Georgia’s importance when it comes to the Alliance’s political agenda.

Moldova: Where the three fight, the fourth wins

Sorin Sclearuc, Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (Chişinău)

The political situation in Moldova has been slowly getting back on track after the February elections. President Igor Dodon met with the leaders of the parliamentary parties to discuss the possibility of establishing parliamentary majority. The players have revealed their breakdown and main ideas. However, the impression is that the players of Moldova's political arena are engaged in nothing more than a tug of war.



DOMESTIC POLICY

Who will win?

In order to avoid early parliamentary elections, President Igor Dodon met with the leaders of the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and the ACUM electoral bloc to discuss the possibility of establishing a parliamentary majority.

ACUM declared that it was ready to lead the country. It noted that it would nominate Maia Sandu for Prime Minister and Andrei Năstase for Parliament Speaker.

PDM spokesman Vitalie Gamurari noted that ACUM's statement was unclear: "They should come for negotiations if they want to know our opinion, and we will discuss this. We have repeatedly invited them and all we have heard so far was that they did not

want to discuss anything and did not need any positions”.

Zinaida Greceanii, the leader of PSRM, noted that, first, negotiations between the parties should start, then the acceptance or rejection of certain positions should be discussed. She added that the party with the most seats in the Parliament should make proposals on certain appointments in accordance with European practices, a [source said](#).

Central Election Commission chair Alina Russu [reminded](#) that the MPs must take into account the results of the consultative referendum which took place on the same day as the parliamentary elections. More than 39.78% of registered voters cast their ballots in the referendum. When asked “Do you support reducing the number of MPs from 101 to 61?” 744,529 voters responded “yes” while 266,188 said “no”. The second question “Do you support

The results of the consultative referendum show that 744,529 voters want to reduce the number of MPs from 101 to 61 while 266,188 said “no”

the option whereby people could recall MPs from their posts in case they do not fulfill their duties properly?” got 808,206 answers in support and 202,497 of the voters said “no”.

In this context, former speaker Andrian Candu [stated](#) that the Democratic Party of Moldova would prepare all necessary instruments for amending the Con-

stitution. He added that these procedures are quite complicated and should be discussed with the Venice Commission. “The referendum is a success of the PDM and the citizens of the country”, he said.

This suggests that people have swallowed the bait of the populists thus handing the PDM carte blanche for dismissing those MPs who “would not fulfill their duties” in case this idea comes into force.

ECONOMY

No reasons, some opportunities

The National Energy Regulatory Agency (ANRE) reports that [there are no reasons for](#) raising natural gas prices for end consumers at the moment.

Russia’s Gazprom has been selling natural gas to Moldova for \$237.46 per thousand cubic meters since January 1, 2019. This is

25% up from the price for the same period last year.

The last time natural gas prices changed in mid-March 2018: the price for end consumers shrank by the average of 20.3% to MDL 4,420 per thousand cubic meters (excluding VAT). The supplier of natural gas demanded a 11.4% reduction of the average rate for end consumers from MDL 5,545 to MDL 4,914.97 per thousand cubic meters.

FOREIGN POLICY

All quiet

On March 21, Leonid Manakov, the head of “the PMR official representative office in Russia” participated in the 40th session of the United Nation Human Rights Council in Geneva. However, he was presented as the representative of the International Council for Russian Compatriots at the event.

Leonid Manakov reported on “the statehood (!) of Transnistria as a guarantee of respect for human rights and freedoms”.

In [his report](#) he was brave enough to hint that the Republic of

Moldova allegedly violates human rights in the region, and that “Transnistrians have been living in constant stress for the last 30 years” because of the current situation.

This infuriated a number of Moldovan experts. More surprisingly, there were no slightest mentions of this incident in Moldova’s media when this article was written. There was no response from the Moldovan authorities, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration, or from the National Bureau of Reintegration. Why this was the case remains a mystery.

Ukraine elects, EU values progress, Russia persecutes Crimean Tatars

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

Just like in the past two months, the presidential election dominated domestic politics in Ukraine in March. The results of the election will define Ukraine’s domestic and foreign policy agenda for the years to come. The election turbulence (with the first round on March 31) has become quite threatening in this context. International media have described the campaign as the [“dirtiest race ever”](#). Amidst all the political turbulence, Ukraine’s economy has been surprisingly stable.



DOMESTIC POLICY

Corruption scandals and “Crimean arrests” – it’s getting hotter

The topic of corruption and the fight against it remained im-

portant in March. The major journalist investigations published in February and the notorious decision to abolish criminal responsibility for illegal enrichment by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine were met with a series of statements from international partners.

On March 4, G7 and the World Bank urged the incumbent government to take every effort in the anti-corruption field in [a joint statement](#). Transparency International believes that the IMF funding program and the visa-free regime with the EU will be frozen unless Ukraine finds solutions on the illegal enrichment clause in [the Criminal Code](#).

President Poroshenko responded to the corruption scandal by dismissing Oleh Hladkovskiy (one of the key figures in the journalist investigations) from [the office of First Deputy Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council](#).

Ukraine's anti-corruption agencies, including the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) and the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAP), rushed to close dozens of cases on illegal enrichment, qualifying as criminal until recently, in compliance with the Constitutional Court's verdict. According to NABU, 63 proceedings were closed fully or partially [by the end of March](#). On March 28, SAP published updated data on the closed criminal cases - these amounted to 65. The estimated sums of the alleged illegal enrichment cases investigated by NABU [were around shocking UAH 1,334,446bn, US \\$137,000 and EUR 531,000](#). These are only the 65 cases! In this context, the launch of the Higher Anti-Corruption Court of Ukraine remains an open question: the President received the list of 35 nominees for the Court judges but has not yet taken [his decision on them](#).

Clearly, this political context played into the hands of President Poroshenko's opponents. Most candidates for presidency built their campaigns on the criticism of his performance in office. In the first round, Poroshenko landed second with almost half the votes

Whoever wins the second round of the presidential election, it is the parliament that will play the ultimate role in defining the country's vector of development

for Volodymyr Zelenskiy, [a popular comedian](#).

Another favorite of the presidential race, Yulia Tymoshenko, surprisingly arrived third and did not make it into the second round. She is now most likely to focus on the parliamentary election and the fight for the prime-minister's portfolio. So will other candidates who used the presidential campaign as a rehearsal for the parliamentary race.

Whoever wins the second round of the presidential election, it is the parliament that will play the ultimate role in defining the country's vector of development. There are three major scenarios for this. The first and the less likely one is a pro-presidential majority in parliament. This would give the head of state unlimited power while also placing huge responsibility on him. In the second scenario, a majority in opposition to the president will bring Ukraine back into 2005-2010 with prime minister and president playing tug of war and seriously hampering Ukraine's development. The third scenario is an opposition majority that would curb the president's powers to a minimum. The last possible scenario is a group of factions that cannot agree with

each other and lead the country to chaos. Notably, the war with Russia provides fertile ground for the emergence of black swans. This means that Ukraine is facing a very difficult period.

The elections and the corruption scandals have unfairly overshadowed news about searches and [arrests of Crimean Tatars in the Russia-annexed Crimea](#). As of March 30, 23 arrested Crimean Tatars were taken to the Russian territory where they would be placed in five pre-trial detention centers [in Rostov Oblast](#).

ECONOMY

On pause

By contrast to the political front, the economic one remains calm and stable. Continued cooperation with international financial institutions has been the main topic in this field for months now. According to the Minister of Finance Oksana Markarova, Ukraine generally meets all the conditions and structural benchmarks of the

cooperation program with the [IMF](#). In one of her recent interviews, Minister Markarova stated that Ukraine needs to borrow nearly \$4bn in 2019 to service and repay its debt. The budget allocates UAH 418bn [for this purpose](#). According to Minister Markarova, the EU has given good assessments on the program necessary for the second tranche [of the macrofinancial assistance](#).

FOREIGN POLICY

International partners support Kyiv and condemn Moscow

Despite all the corruption scandals and the elections, Ukraine continues to receive support both from the EU and from the US. David Hale, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, visited Ukraine in early March. He noted, among other things, that the US supports Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. Under Secretary Hale urged the Russian authorities [to release Ukrainian sailors and political prisoners](#).

Petro Poroshenko's visit to Brussels on March 20 and the meeting with the presidents of the European Commission, the European Council

and the European Parliament - a Ukraine-EU mini-summit of sorts - signals high-level support of Ukraine [by the European officials](#). According to European Council President Donald Tusk, the parties have noted serious progress in bilateral relations in the past five years and set out the priorities [for the next five years of cooperation](#).

Canada did not stay aside: it joined the EU and American sanctions against Russia in mid-March, thus expressing [its support for Ukraine](#).

The EU's statement calling on Russia to stop its illegal actions against Crimean Tatars, human rights advocates and peaceful protesters against the illegal annexation of Crimea was extremely important in the context of the recent searches and [arrests of Crimean Tatars](#).

The concept of Belarus information security and its long-term consequences

Yuri Tsarik, Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies (Minsk, Belarus)

What Belarus' new Information Security Concept says and what consequences it will have for the evolution of its political regime



An unconventional document in many respects

The new Information Security Concept of Belarus (hereinafter, ISC) is an unconventional document in many respects. It was adopted on March 18, 2019 via a resolution of the Belarus Security Council, a document whose legal status leaves many Belarusian lawyers guessing. According to experts (the author would like to

thank [Yegor Lebedko](#) and Oleg Fedotov for the discussion on the topic), the few freely accessible acts by this authority focused on approving the texts of strategies and doctrines that were further submitted to the President for consideration. One document was special: it recorded the decision of the Belarus authorities to launch the construction of a nuclear power plant in Astravyets. It is because of this project that Lithuania is currently blocking the signing of agreements between Belarus and the EU.

The second interesting aspect of the ISC is the leak of the draft file several days before it was signed. On March 12, photographs of the draft ISC pages [popped up](#) in Telegram. The text on the photographs actually proved almost identical to the ISC clauses. Such a leak is surprising in the context of full mobilization of the state apparatus. The most likely scenario was that the Belarus government allowed the leak in order to test the response of society and the international community to a document of this sort. The adoption of it, barely amended, several days later might mean that the government interprets the response of society as normal.

What does the ISC say?

The Security Council [was actively drafting](#) the ISC text since late 2017. It included the analysis of some complex developments, such as the [protests](#) in February-March 2017 and [Zapad 2017 drills](#) on Belarus' territory, both accompanied by intense tensions in the information field. The main markers of the ISC became known in November 2018 when Minsk hosted an international security conference. Vladimir Archakov, Deputy State Secretary of the Security Council and formerly with the KGB, [spoke](#) at the conference. He offered the idea of "information sovereignty" in his report.

As a result, the concept of information sovereignty and information neutrality took the central place in the [approved ISC text](#). ISC qualifies information sovereignty as "the indispensable and exclusive right of the state to independently shape the rules of ownership, use and administration of national information resources; to conduct independent foreign and domestic information policy; to shape the national information infrastructure; to ensure information security." According to the ISC, Belarus' information sovereignty is "the most important target of ensuring information security". In other words, one of the main goals declared by the ISC is to ensure the rule of the Belarus state over its information field. This immediately sidelines other areas of consideration, such as the rights of the citizens and international commitments, including the commitments within integration entities (i.e. towards Russia).

Information sovereignty of Belarus should be ensured based on the principle of information neutrality, which is interpreted as peaceful foreign information policy, respect for generally recognized and accepted rights of any state in this sphere, exclusion of interference with the information fields of other states to discredit or undermine their political, economic, social and religious standards and priorities, and exclusion of causing damage to information infrastructure of other countries; non-participation in their information clashes. In other words, Belarus declares its neutrality in information conflicts of other states and blocs as it seeks to ensure its information sovereignty. This means that Minsk walks away from the Moscow-imposed obligation to support the "anti-Western" rhetoric of Russian state media and of the Kremlin itself. In addition, this position rules out the use of Belarus territory or infrastructure to harm third countries.

One of the main goals declared by the ISC is to ensure the rule of the Belarus state over its information field

The "sovereignty through neutrality" formula is essentially the cornerstone of the ISC. Clause 43 of the ISC says that "the main purpose of ensuring security of the information-psychological component of the information field is to maintain information sovereignty and the policy of information neutrality."

At the same time, the formulation of the direct goal of the ISC does not use these categories, defining it as accomplishment and support of the level of protection of the information field that ensures Belarus' national interests. However, the ISC does not specify these interests. It only mentions that "monitoring, analysis and evaluation of the state of information security are conducted, and indicators of its state assessment are applied" on the state level. It is difficult to further specify these indicators because information about them is classified.

The lack of formulation of the national interests in the conceptual document is thus the weak point of the ISC. The Concept of Belarus National Security, however, [formulates](#) these interests quite comprehensively. They include the following points:

Ensuring that the citizens can exercise their constitutional rights to receive, store and distribute full, accurate and timely information;

Shaping and gradually developing the information society;

Having the Republic of Belarus as an equal participant in the world information relations;

Transforming the information industry into an export-oriented sector of the economy;

Effective supply of information for the purpose of government policies;

Ensuring reliability and resilience of critical informatization objects.

The lack of direct correlation between the goals of information security formulated in the Concept of National Security and the ISC's accent on ensuring information security can be interpreted as a serious shift in understanding the essence of information security on part of the Belarusian government. Information sovereignty of Belarus is made into a priority. This includes both strengthening of information supply for government policymaking (including opportunities in the area of information resistance), and restricting freedom of information flows based on national interests.

For the first time, the ISC outlines challenges and threats of information-psychological and technical nature, as well as countermeasures against them. The tasks under the information-psychology component of information security include the establishment, application and development of the information space to exclusively serve the interests of positive development of Belarus, and the preservation of traditional social norms and values, including the Belarusian language, in society; information supply and coverage of government policy, including improving the quality of public media; and preventing the distribution of banned and inaccurate information that damages national interests.

The technical section of the ISC includes measures ensuring

security of the information infrastructure and of the national segment of the Internet; countering cybercrimes; ensuring security of public information resources, including of state and public secrets; and protecting personal data from unauthorized access.

What's the purpose of all this?

The ISC is thus a fairly unconventional document, primarily political and ideological, often with abstract and raw formulations that poorly correlate with the clearer and more specific provisions of the laws and norms regulating national security.

Notably, the government intends to create an action plan to implement the ISC. This decision is somewhat surprising because conceptual documents normally require the adoption of more specific documents, including strategies, doctrines and programs outlining specific tasks and goals, and the procedures for accomplishing them. Neglecting this stage may signal that the ISC describes the work which the government is already doing in the information field, rather than outlining the vectors of work in the future.

From the political perspective, the purpose of adopting the ISC is to declare the right of the state to play the primary role in its information space and to implement the respective measures to ensure that primary role (to respond to the "distributors of fakes with their weapons", as A. Lukashenko [has put it](#)).

Therefore, any assessment of the ISC and its impact should take into account the complex of measures implemented by those in power, not just the clauses of the document. The analysis of statements and actions on the state level in 2018-2019 shows that Belarus is implementing at least the following measures:

Creation and improvement of the system to monitor the information field, including with software and hardware tools;

Creation of the system to monitor social media, including with software and hardware tools;

Creation of the covert potential to conduct information-psychological operations in the time of war or peace, including with the Defense Ministry (in 2018, the [creation](#) of an IT division, a special purpose unit in the Armed Force of Belarus, was announced);

Creation of open potential for information-psychological operations in the time of war or peace (involving civilian [volunteers](#));

Creation of a [system for objective measurement](#) of the TV audience preferences in Belarus -- most likely through cooperation with an internationally recognized media measurement companies;

As a result, creation of prerequisites for the development of the national television advertising market independent of Russia; Diminishing the dependence on Russian content as Belar-

Belarus declares its neutrality in information conflicts of other states and blocs as it seeks to ensure its information sovereignty

The ISC describes the work which the government is already doing in the information field, rather than outlining the vectors of work in the future

us organizes the work of its TV channels with the likely further decrease of Russian content in broadcasting and increase of national content;

Diversification of information flows via distribution of Ukrainian and foreign content in Belarus in addition to Russian (UA TV is [already broadcasting](#) through Belarusian cable operators);

Tighter control over independent and opposition media or restriction of access to them (transfer of the Belarusian Partisan outlet into the .by zone; restriction of access to Charter 97; [criminal prosecution](#) of TUT.by and BelaPAN news agency editorial teams);

Creation of the [system to monitor public security](#), including face recognition system;

Update (as a result of the 2019 [census](#)) and integration of databases in different government bodies and interlinking the updated data with the [biometric ID cards](#) Belarus citizens will receive starting from 2020.

These and other measures are implemented in the context of the growing hostility from Russia, the deteriorating economic situation for the majority of the population, and the nearing presidential and parliamentary elections expected to take place in August-September 2020 at the very latest. However, many of these measures -- for example, on media measurements, TV advertising and TV content -- will only deliver palpable results in several years. Others, such as the creation of the potential to monitor the information field and conduct information operations, will be enacted in 2019-2020 but will remain part of the Belarusian institutional landscape for years to come.

Despite the obvious flaws of the ISC and its instruments from the perspective of creating legiti-

mate grounds for the measures the government is already implementing, we are witnessing a strategic approach of the Belarusian authorities to the transformation of the information field. If these and other measures are successful, Belarus will become more independent and resilient against external information pressure. This will help it strengthen its stability and independence, from the Russian Federation first and foremost.

This evolution will hardly be accompanied by a similarly dynamic democratization of the political regime in Belarus. Quite on the contrary, it can make it harsher at some moment as external pressure intensifies and the economy deteriorates. In the mid to long-term prospect, however, the establishment of a hard framework for the domestic national consensus will create preconditions for political liberalization. This does not mean that these preconditions will be used for that purpose.

Visa-free whip. Prospects of preserving a visa-free regime for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia

Kateryna Kulchytska, Europe without barriers

EU countries are closely monitoring migration trends, and in the event of a breach of several conditions the visa-free regime for Eastern Partnership countries may be suspended.



Introduction

For already almost two years now, Ukrainians with biometric passports have been able to travel without a visa to the countries of the Schengen zone. Now, when more than 1.5 million Ukrainian citizens have tasted the benefits of visa liberalization, and the excitement around biometric passports is finally subsiding, citizens seem to be accustomed to a new routine.

However, the fact is that it is still too early to relax, because

the EU countries are closely monitoring migration trends, and in the event of a breach of several conditions (such as a significant increase in the number of citizens refused entry or rejection of reforms), the visa-free regime may be suspended. Of course, this method of control applies not only to Ukraine, but also to other states that have successfully met the criteria for visa liberalization, in particular, the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, with Progress on Visa Liberalisation Dialogues and Mobility Part-

nerships being one of “20 Eastern Partnership Deliverables by 2020”.

The first annual report of the European Commission (published in December 2017) was based on the migration trends of 2015–2016 and the first half of 2017, when visa-free travel for Ukraine has not yet begun. So the second verdict of the European Commission which essentially evaluated the results of the first year of visa liberalization in Ukraine is by far more interesting. We are additionally interested in the fate of Georgia and Moldova, since they are heading towards European integration together with Ukraine.

Ukraine: potential threats of irregular migration

Two indicators are the main weakness of Ukraine: refusal of entry and illegal stay within the territory of the EU member states. With both of these migration indicators, we have projected growth, which, however, can not be called critical for objective reasons.

In particular, if in 2016 the European Commission reported a slight decrease in refusals of entry to Ukrainians compared to 2015, in 2017 the situation changed. According to the European Agency for the Protection of the Frontier and Coastal Guard (Frontex), Ukrainians were refused entry 34% more than in 2016 – 37 thousand times. The lion’s share of refusals occurred on the border with Poland.

In 2018, the situation became even more threatening: during the first nine months, Ukrainians were denied entry to Poland 38.7 thousand times, which is 57% more than during the same period in 2017, according to the Polish Border Guard Service. If such an increase had occurred within 2 months, then the EU could have criticized Ukraine for the breach of the criteria for the suspension mechanism. However, a point in our favor can be that other countries after the introduction of visa-free regime also had similar problems, as checks from consular offices for travelers with biometric passports ceased to exist. In addition, the number of refusals to enter the territory of Poland is negligible compared with the total number of entries. During 9 months of 2018 Ukrainians entered Poland 7.5 million times, which means the level of refusals was only less than one percent. Under such conditions, the growth rate is unlikely to be critical to our western neighbors, especially given the policy of engaging Ukrainians in the Polish labor market. Still, the European Commission obviously pays attention to this indicator in the second report and advises to intensify the informational campaigns for Ukrainians about the rules of using the visa-free travel.

Another indicator that has a slight increase is the number of Ukrainian citizens, who were illegally staying within the territory of the EU member states. In 2017, according to Frontex,

The ministers of internal affairs of Germany and Sweden have publicly complained about the unjustified growth of Georgian asylum seekers

there were 32.6 thousand such people, which is 12% more than in 2016. At the same time, in the year 2015–2016, the annual increase in the number of Ukrainian irregular migrants was even higher and amounted to 26%. As with refusals of entry, most cases of Ukrainians

with irregular status were recorded in Poland, but this figure is also rather low compared to the number of Ukrainians, who were in the country legally. For example, according to data from the Polish Office of Foreigners, by the end of 2017 Ukrainian citizens had 1.79 million valid residence permits in Poland, and by the end of the first half of 2018 this figure amounted to 1.87 million.

However, despite the relatively small number of unregulated migrants, the tendency of their numbers growth is alarming. Diplomatic circles say that the amount of Ukrainians who have exceeded their stay in the EU countries has increased, and this seriously disturbs individual EU member states.

In general, statistics shows that Ukrainians prefer to comply with migration laws of the EU countries. Some trends may alarm the EU partners. Therefore, the informational campaigns should continue in Ukraine, aiming at specific risk groups, first of all, at potential migrant workers, who may be illegally staying within the territory of the EU member states in the future.

Apart from migration, over the next seven years, our EU partners will continue to monitor the implementation of the criteria that were assessed during visa-free dialogue, such as the introduction of an integrated border management system, anti-corruption reform or anti-money laundering efforts. A year ago, in its first report, the European Commission focused on the need to strengthen anti-corruption measures, but all of the recommendations were never implemented. In particular, the NAPC failed to launch a truly effective system for verifying electronic declarations of civil servants, while Ukrainian MPs did not abolish electronic declaration for public activists, although this was directly recommended by the EU in 2017.

Moldova: departing from democratic standards

Moldova has serious reasons for concern. This is not even about the annual increase of 57% of refusals for entry for Moldovan citizens, recorded by Frontex, or an increase of 14% of those, who exceeded their stay in the EU countries. Four years after the introduction of a visa-free regime, the European Parliament said it was seriously concerned about the deviation from democratic

standards and the rule of law, lack of fair and transparent elections, as well as impartial judiciary, and insufficient efforts to fight corruption and combat money laundering in Moldova. In its resolution, the European Parliament recalls that the criteria for combating corruption

Thus, the EU gave a peculiar signal that it could apply a mechanism of suspending a visa-free travel to return Moldova to democratic standards

and money-laundering were linked to the provision of a visa-free regime to the country, which 1.5 million Moldovan citizens had used over the course of four years. Thus, the EU gave a peculiar signal that it could apply a mechanism of suspending a visa-free travel to return Moldova to democratic standards.

Consequences of the reforms rollback for Moldova can serve as a warning call for all other countries of the Eastern Partnership, in particular for Ukraine.

Georgia: threatening situation with asylum seekers

Among the countries of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia was the most frequent source of disturbing news about the visa-free regime. In 2017, the number of Georgian asylum seekers increased by 34% and reached 11.1 thousand. In Germany and Sweden, the number of applications for the first two months of 2018 increased significantly (by more than 50% compared with the same period in 2017), which could potentially launch a mechanism for suspending the visa-free regime. The ministers of internal affairs of Germany and Sweden have publicly complained about the unjustified growth of Georgian asylum seekers and demanded that the Georgian government take appropriate measures if they want to keep the visa free regime. Special concern for the EU was caused by representatives of organized crime, who abused the asylum system.

Ukraine is currently the only country of the Eastern Partnership, for which there was no political debate or signals about the possible launch of a mechanism for suspending visa-free regime

Has Georgia been able to cope with the difficulties? Official data on Georgian asylum seekers indicates that the situation has not been fully stabilized. Thus the political debate in support of launching the mechanism of suppressing a visa-free regime may intensify in the event of a worsening migration situation. In addition, the European Commission is likely to criticize the implementation of justice, freedom and security reforms, as did members of the European Parliament.

Conclusions

On the eve of the publication of the second report on the mechanism of the visa-free regime suspension, it should be noted that Ukraine is currently the only country of the Eastern Partnership, for which there was no political debate or signals about the possible launch of a mechanism for suspending visa-free regime. Even though Ukraine has seen an increase in refusals to enter and cases of illegal stay in the EU, such migration trends were relevant for other visa-free countries, in particular for Moldova.

Instead, Eastern Partnership neighbors of Ukraine should be more concerned, although in the process of reviewing the fate of a visa-free travel for Georgia, the EU has shown a greater willingness for dialogue rather than acting toughly. It is likely that Europeans will restrain from using a visa-free whip this time, but will once again demonstrate its presence.

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