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Think Bridge

Eastern Partnership monthly analytical digest

Bridging Divide: Forging Cooperation And Fostering Collaboration

For the Eastern Partnership, as the one entity that binds these six states, the outlook has improved.

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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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Closer to Europe?

However the different ways and motives the six Eastern Partnership countries may have, one way or another they are moving towards strengthening their cooperation with the European Union.

The systematic reforms and the ability to defend their national interests while resisting the outside pressure are the two essential components for the further successful development in this direction. It is not unexpected that the countries in the region are in the different stages of EU engagement, with prominent leaders being Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. That is why it is extremely important not only to establish the dialogue between the civil society and the reformers in each country of the region, but also to have the efficient communication between the countries sharing the best cases. It is exactly the subject matter of Armenian expert Richard Giragosyan's monthly analytics.

In May the relations of the countries in the region with their Western partners were not univocal. Georgia, on the one hand, became a political center, having hosted the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. However, on the other hand, it became involved in an international scandal due to the case of an Azeri opposition journalist kidnaped in Tbilisi.

The world leaders reassured Ukraine that the sanctions against Russia will not be lifted. Moreover, Kyiv itself imposed some new sanctions on the aggressor's business, and social networks "VKontakte" and "Odnoklassniki", as well as "Yandex" search engine were blocked.

In Yerevan the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe office, the last one in the Southern Caucasus, was closed at the behest of Baku. Yet Armenia and Azerbaijan faced new escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – missile attacks.

Moldova did not receive the financial aid promised by the EU, due to the issue of its democratic standards, in particular the deteriorating situation with media independence.

At the same time Belarus is still seeking balance to counter the Russian influence not only in the West, but also in the East. In the course of the "One Belt, One Road" Forum, taking place in Beijing in May, Minsk signed an agreement with China on the cooperation in economy, as well as in security and military spheres.

More details on these and other important events in the region are provided in our monthly reviews.

Olga Chyzhova,
Editor in Chief
EaP Think Bridge Digest

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Armenia weathers the storm

Richard Giragosyan, Regional Studies Center (Armenia, Yerevan)

Just six weeks after the parliamentary elections, a municipal election in the Armenian capital Yerevan on 14 May saw the return of the ruling Republican Party. With more than 71% of the vote, a mere 41% of voters actually turned out, largely due to the combination of the voter fatigue and a sense of resignation over the dominance of the incumbent party. But Armenia weathered the political storm as new signs of an improved economy, buoyed by a rebound in remittances, bolstered the government. Although foreign policy was again dominated by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict after an Azerbaijani missile strike.



Azerbaijani diplomatic pressure forced the closure of the OSCE office in Yerevan.

Photo by OSCE/Florian Gaertner

DOMESTIC POLICY

Political re-branding

After a heated parliamentary election early last month, the municipal elections in the capital Yerevan were largely seen by many Armenian voters as an afterthought. Especially as the incumbent Republican Party was intent on securing the re-election, once again relying on the traditional vote buying and interference practices. Despite their win, with only about 41% of the voters casting ballots, it was

neither particularly decisive, nor divisive. Beyond a degree of a political fatigue, many voters were also put off by the rather one-sided context, as the incumbent Republican Party assured a strong showing.

And a lack of competition only fostered a second reason for such a voter disinterest. More precisely, Yerevan voters were disappointed, if not disgusted, by the arrogance of the ruling authorities in the capital, which spurned offers to hold the public debates and skirted any serious discourse

over pressing issues facing the capital. This refusal to address real concerns, ranging from the traffic and transport problems to the garbage collection issues, only sparked the public anger not apathy.

Nevertheless, the return of the Republicans as the masters of Yerevan, the center of the political and economic power in the country, also solidifies the trend of the one-party dominance that was evident in their sweep in the recent parliamentary election. In fact, mounting concerns over the tendency of the one-party dominance, which first emerged in the last month's parliamentary election, only add to the mounting level of a voter distrust and a citizen mistrust. From a broader perspective of the back-to-back

elections, despite the seeming "victory" of the ruling authorities, the loss of the public trust and lack of the legitimacy will only exacerbate the coming challenges.

Beyond the local election, the national politics dominated this month with the inaugural session of the newly elected parliament, marked by the Republican Party government's re-appointment of nearly all of the outgoing cabinet. The few exceptions were the elevation of the female Justice Minister to the post of a deputy speaker of the Parliament and the replacement of the elderly Parliamentary Speaker with a more presentable former Minister of Health. Overall, these moves were the latest elements of the ruling party's attempt to re-brand the image of the government.

ECONOMY

Rare good news

For the Armenian government, the economic developments only bolstered its confidence, buoyed by a fresh assessment by the World Bank, forecasting long awaited and much improved growth for this year. After the anemic last year growth, the projected 2.7% GDP growth for 2017 and the estimated increases of 3.1% and 3.4% for 2018 and 2019 respectively, extended a new sense of confirmation of the optimistic state budget. But even with those more optimistic figures, it may not be enough for the government, whose state budget is predicted on an underlying base of 3.2% growth in GDP for 2017. That means that anything less will threaten the fiscal viability of the set spending plans and programs already underway this year.

Although the positive news was offset by the more cautious warnings of the country's vulnerability to "the negative impact external shocks"

inherent in its dependence on Russia and concerns over "the investor confidence" and "the pace of the reform", the World Bank embraced the Prime Minister Karen Karapetian's pledges and promises to improve the domestic business environment, combat tax evasion and attract some foreign investment. Also helping the government to weather the storm of the political uncertainty, a significant increase in the amount of remittances, which rose by almost 15% in the first quarter of this year to \$313 million, also ended a three-year decline.

The return of the Republicans as the masters of Yerevan solidifies the trend of the one-party dominance that was evident in their sweep in the recent parliamentary election

FOREIGN POLICY

"Apples of discord"

For the Armenian foreign policy, the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh issue has long served as the primary consideration, and this month was no exception. Most notably and especially given heightened tension after a brief but deadly clash with Azerbaijan in April 2016, the military situation continued to deteriorate, as an upward escalation in ceasefire violations mounted. But the scale and scope of such clashes expanded this month, with a precision missile attack by the Azerbaijani forces destroyed a Russian-supplies air defense unit. The mid-May operation, which consisted of a volley of the three Spike missiles that targeted an Osa air defense system, demonstrated the increasingly effective and improved operational capabilities of the Azerbaijani armed forces.

As usual, that incident only triggered a further military response as Karabakh forces retaliated by targeting several Azerbaijani military positions, including a communication command point and a military vehicle beyond "the contact line" between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan.

Beyond the frontline exchanges of fire, the conflict also took a new twist this month, when a discovering of the Azerbaijani apples in the Armenian markets sparked a heated, if not silly response. After the discovery of the Azerbaijan-labeled apples, a hurried official investigation was launched, officially justified not by the country of origin of the apples but rather, on the grounds of the illegal import, skirting safety and tax inspections. By the end of the rushed inquiry, several Armenian customs officers were arrested

for allegedly accepting bribes by the smugglers to allow the illegal tax-free import of the Azerbaijani apples. Despite the somewhat comic concern over "the enemy apples", the case did reveal the problem of the entrenched corruption within the Armenia's notorious customs and tax services.

In a serious setback for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Azerbaijani diplomatic pressure within the organization forced the closure of the OSCE office in Yerevan. The move by Azerbaijan to veto the routine extension of the office was prompted by their new concern over an OSCE humanitarian demining program implemented in Armenia. Although the program never raised any objection in the past, Azerbaijan successfully avoided any temptation to compromise and hailed the move as a diplomatic vindication.

The eviction of the OSCE from Armenia has wider implications, however, for two reasons. First, after Russia forced the closure of the office in Georgia in the wake of the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war, and the Azerbaijani government shut down its own OSCE office in Baku in 2015, the OSCE presence in Armenia was the organization's last remaining diplomatic outpost in the South Caucasus region. But a second, even more negative implication from the move, which was most likely not anticipated by Azerbaijan, was the fact that the OSCE office in Yerevan was always by practice headed by a Russian diplomat. Although this consideration did not trigger a public Russian reaction, it was bound to have prompted an unpleasant reaction in Moscow due to the loss of the one OSCE office under Russian diplomatic leadership.

Azerbaijan: New low in relations with Russia

Vugar Bayramov, Center for Economic and Social Development (Azerbaijan, Baku)

In May, Azerbaijan ends four-year-long negotiations on buying a share of the Greek national gas transmission system operator DESFA with no result. The country's partnership with Russia faces a new crisis, while the window might open up in relations with the USA.



Azerbaijan drops out of negotiations on buying a share of Greek national gas transmission system operator DESFA. Photo by pixabay.com

DOMESTIC POLICY

Social housing project takes on

On 30 May, the Government of Azerbaijan announced the beginning of the registration for the [social housing](#). The applications will be submitted by the “Electronic Government” portal, and reviewed by the State Housing Construction Agency (MIDA), created by the President earlier in 2017. As it was announced, the earlier subsidized housing system will not exceed 10% of the real estate market in Azerbaijan.

The need for the social housing has been on the table for a long time. The high prices in the real estate market created an unfavorable condition for

the families with low income to obtain an apartment of their own.

At the same time the dive in the oil prices decreased the demand for the high-priced new apartments, and created some financial problems for the construction sector in Azerbaijan, which employs most of the unqualified population from the regions.

In order to prevent the construction sector from collapsing, and help the low-income families, the social housing program was initiated. This step also aims to strengthen the competitiveness in the construction sector.

ECONOMY

SOCAR out of DESFA deal

The Azerbaijan's State Oil Company (SOCAR) and its European partners were unable to reach a deal on the future of the [signed contract on the purchase of the Greek national gas transmission system operator \(DESFA\) share](#). Hence, SOCAR ends the negotiations, which have been going for the last four years.

In 2013, SOCAR won a tender for purchasing a 66% stake in DESFA for 400 million euros. The deal was jammed by the antimonopoly regulations

of the European Union. Thus it was agreed to sell SOCAR's 17% share to Snam company from Italy, giving only 49% to Azerbaijan. However, in May 2017, it was announced that SOCAR and its European partners were unable to reach a common ground on the price of the deal.

For the last four years, SOCAR demonstrated a strong will to purchase the DESFA shares, and continued its efforts despite the hostile surrounding of the deal. Apparently, following the economic troubles in the country, the government-sponsored companies in Azerbaijan are less willing to invest abroad.

FOREIGN POLICY

US–Azerbaijan relations in progress

This May was marked by several [contacts of Azerbaijan with the new US President](#) after a long pause in the bilateral relations. First Donald Trump met President Aliyev in Saudi Arabia, during the Arab Islamic American Summit. Later on Trump sent several messages to Azerbaijan: congratulation on the 99th anniversary of Azerbaijan's Republic Day, as well as some welcome letters to the participants of the 24th International Caspian Oil and Gas Exhibition, and the 7th Caspian International Power and Alternative Energy Exhibition. The high-ranking members of the government and the parliament called the rise in the quantity of these interactions “a new page in the US–Azerbaijan relations”.

At the same time Azerbaijan faces new difficulties in relations with Russia. The media [reports problems](#) for the trucks carrying tomatoes from Azerbaijan to Russia, in the Russian border checkpoints. Russia has imposed strict weight norms for the trucks crossing the border, while the Azer-

bajani partners do not obey this rule.

Earlier this May, the Russian courts [terminated the license](#) of the Azerbaijani diaspora organization in Russia. During the last month, the Russian MFA spokesperson [Maria Zakharova's statements](#) on Azerbaijan caused frustration in the diplomatic circles in Baku.

Independent experts observe some political and diplomatic frictions in the relations between Azerbaijan and Russia

Despite the Russia's President Vladimir Putin's praises of the Azerbaijani–Russian relations with “the dynamic progress”, the independent experts observe some political and diplomatic frictions in the relations. Baku is not satisfied with the Russia's efforts in the post-Four-Day war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Meanwhile in May, Baku also announced [a purchase of the two Italian produced military fighter-trainers](#). Italy was the first NATO country to sell the weapon to Azerbaijan, which is in a conflict with neighboring Armenia.

Belarus: China's most special partner

Arsen Sivitski, the Centre for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies (Belarus, Minsk)

In May the Belarusian authorities, on the one hand, continued reducing the pressure trying to get back to the policy of the national unity, and avoiding both Russophobia and any accusations towards to the West. On the other hand, they were obliged to incur the expenses, connected with the crisis in February-March, 2017.



Participants of “One Belt, One Road” Forum.
president.gov.by

DOMESTIC POLICY

Games on the “populist” left-of-centre pitch

The main “liberal” event of the period under review was the [registration of the campaign “Tell the truth”](#) as a non-governmental organization, after seven years of such efforts. This is the first in Belarus within the last decade registration of a significant political structure referring itself to the opposition. This event caused a storm of various comments. However, the idea is clear and transparent: being in need of carrying on the process of the relationships normalization with the Western countries, authorities move towards the liberalization of the political space, but in what is considered to be the safe way.

[The meeting of Aleksander Lukashenko](#) with the chairman

of the Belarus Federation of Trade Unions (BFTU) Mikhail Orda had important influence on the evolution of the midterm Belarus internal policy. During the conversation the president supported the BFTU's initiative to establish a “people's control” over the prices: every month members of the working group have to check the groceries prices in the shops. What is more, the president also confirmed the federation's “responsibilities” in assistance and protection of the population employment, as well as their fight for the salary increasing.

Thus, authorities, promoting economy reforms agenda at the same time create polittechnological tools for their active gaming on the “populist” left-of-centre pitch.

Noteworthy was the fact that the Belarus president used the meeting with the leader of the state trade unions in order to bring up the issue of party construction. In particular, the president stated that he doesn't oppose the parties devel-

opment in Belarus. In this context, Lukashenko mentioned two major structures for which the president to support: they are the BFTU and the Republic non-governmental association (RNGA) "Belaya Rus". Nevertheless, he did not show any signals of transforming one or both of these structures into the parties.

Partnership with China for Belarus opens the opportunity to hedge its foreign policy risks

ECONOMY

Government's optimism vs. international financial institutes' estimations

The period under review was marked with some positive economical dynamics and raise of the optimism among the Belarusian authorities. Such position was determined by the gas and oil conflict resolution, as well as the new credit agreements, made with Russia last month.

Despite this, in its [May review of the regional economy](#) the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development predicts 0.5% recession level in 2017 in Belarus. The International Monetary Fund also foresees keeping of recession of 0.8% in Belarus. World Bank predicts 1% tendency of the recession.

[The analysts of the international rating agency Fitch Ratings](#) suppose that the credit renewal from the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development (EFSD) and the regulation of the conflict on energy with Russia decrease

but don't eliminate uncertainty about the Belarus' ability to successfully implement the funding scheme in 2017. The Belarus government's financing plan means the enlargement of the non-debt-based incomes in a foreign currency to \$1.8 billion in 2017, to comparing to \$1.2 billion last year and EFSD's \$1 billion payoffs.

At the same time, several experts believe that reducing of the external liquidity risk prior to the payment deadline for the \$800 million Eurobonds in January, 2018 will also depend on some additional foreign currency sources involving, and as a result, on the other components of the financing plan. Among these components they name a return to emissions on the international capital market, which, as the state predicts, will provide \$800 million and the ability of the state to attract more borrowings in a foreign currency to the internal market

Belarus vulnerability in the external financing area determined by both low gold and foreign currency reserves and high net external debt is a long-term drawback for the creditability.

EXTERNAL POLICY

Influence of China factor

The main event of the month was [Lukashenko's visit to the People's Republic of China](#) to participate in Forum "One Belt, One Road" in Beijing on 14-16 May.

The relations with China at this stage appear to be very advantageous on all counts. As the forum revealed, due to the consistent participation in this Chinese initiative, Belarus gets the status of one among few close partners of the second most powerful state in the world. This symbolical capital is important not only for the country, but for the Belarus leader himself.

From objective point of view, partnership with China for Belarus opens the opportunity to hedge its foreign policy risks. Although it is unlikely to abuse the use of Beijing's political weight, nevertheless, but anyway in some critical situations any political and technical support from China may be not just necessary, but also essential for the Belarus government. Finally, from the practical point of view, the collaboration with China promises a great number of investments, credits, and last but not least technology.

During the [meeting between Lukashenko and Xi Jinping](#), the Belarus leader emphasized the importance of Belarus-China relations in the field of security, including military sphere and collaboration between the special services. Creation of the common permanent working group on combating "colour revolutions" and countering interna-

tional terrorism, internal separatism and religious extremism was announced.

In addition it was stated that the Belarus State Secretariat of Security Council and the China Ministry of Public Security are approaching the signing of new agreement, which will promote establishing tighter contacts in such important directions as the consecutive and expert work, coordinated migrant policy.

In other words, in security area the Chinese "balancing" influence on the Belorussian national security environment can get institutionalized. Both great resources and considered professional position of Chinese experts in this sphere can become a real factor in ensuring stability and security in Belarus.

Lukashenko also announced that Belarus and China will continue the collaboration in military-technical sphere. Particularly, it concerns modernizing multiple-launch rocket system "Polonaise" (extending shooting range up to 300 km), developing modern arming and military technology samples and other export-oriented military and dual-use products.

Oleksandr Lukashenko's statement that Belarus supports China in its determination to "assume the obligation to protect global peace" was politically important. Including this statement into public materials of press service obviously aimed at signaling Russian side about Minsk's intention to support "multipolarity" in the security sphere in Eurasia.

Georgia: Way to NATO

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

Georgia became the fifth non-member state to host the NATO Parliamentary Assembly session. The leaders of the country reaffirmed their course not towards the Membership Action Plan, but towards the very membership in the organization. On the last day of the session, an Azeri journalist was abducted in Tbilisi, that raised some questions regarding the role of the Georgian special forces in this situation.



Media protest in Tbilisi after the kidnapping of Azerbaijanian journalist.
Photo by facebook.com/nino.macharashvili.18

DOMESTIC POLICY

Azeri journalist kidnapped

At the end of May, an Azeri opposition journalist, 43-year old Afgan Mukhtarli, seeking shelter from the persecution in his homeland on the territory of Georgia, went missing. Later on the journalist was suddenly located in Baku. According to the State Border Service of Azerbaijan, Mukhtarli was detained during his attempt to cross the border avoiding cross-border control points and with no documents. He also tried to escape when he was being detained.

Baku's court sentenced Mukhtarli to three months of the pre-trial detention. His lawyer told the reporters

his client was kidnapped by a group of some unknown men who forcibly took him to a car near his home, and put a sack over his head. Later on he was taken to Azerbaijan.

Tbilisi experienced a round of the small-scale but energetic protests. Several dozen journalists rallied in the streets of the capital. The mass media heaped strong criticism on the authorities that placed this case under investigation as a “kidnapping” case. There are doubts regarding the transport and the exact way of how the journalist crossed the border, as well as regarding the role of the Georgian special forces who might have “helped” him in this matter. The protesters

demand to punish those guilty.

The President of Georgia Giorgi Margvelashvili slammed it as a “childish trick” that may hurt the country’s image, while its Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili urged not to jump to any conclusions and [wait for the results of the investigation](#).

This story reminded the citizens of Tbilisi of the capital’s dark and harsh past, now long

forgotten and remaining only in plays and films. As for the authorities, they clearly stumbled over a stone, which, given failing response, may strike a hefty blow.

It is not MAP that Georgia needs, but a NATO membership. The country already has all the necessary instruments for this to happen.

ECONOMY

Trading land?

Heated discussions are still taking place concerning the agricultural land selling to foreigners issue, and the corresponding regulation of this process in the Constitution of Georgia. 20 Georgian MPs signed a draft (followed by its registration), which significantly complicates the process of the land buying, while minimum and maximum limits are also established with a minimum of 5 and the maximum of 100 hectares.

When buying, it will also be mandatory to explain to the authorities the reason and the resources that a buyer aims to tend to the land, as well as to provide his or her residence history in Georgia for the last couple of years.

More radical voices, both within the Parliament and outside of it, demand an absolute ban on the land selling to foreign private individuals and legal entities too. This idea relies not only on the law, but also on the Constitution in order to guarantee that no following Parliament will be able to easily dispose the land.

This approach is not shared by the liberal part of the society, where opinions are also divided. One part believes that everything can be sold but conscience (a famous phrase by the Georgia’s former Economy Minister Kakha Bendukidze), the other part allows certain regulations. Nevertheless, both flanks are united that this issue has nothing in common with the Constitution, and there is an odor of populism when it comes to this process.

FOREIGN POLICY

Georgia in strategic waiting

It was only the fifth time in the entire history of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization that the exception was made regarding hosting a NATO Parliamentary Assembly session in a non-member country. Tbilisi turned into a political center for several days. The first four states who were non-member states at the time of hosting a session are among the NATO member states today. In the framework of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly spring session, a declaration regarding supporting the Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia was adopted. The resolution contains recommendations on the exact steps to be taken in order for Georgia to become a NATO member through the Membership Action Plan (MAP), said Paolo Alli, the President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

[The government of Georgia positively reacted](#) to the text of the resolution, however, as was stated by the Georgian Foreign Minister Mikheil Janelidze, it is not MAP that Georgia needs, but a NATO membership. According to him, the country already has all the necessary instruments for this to happen.

The Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Andrii Parubii also took part in the summit. The Speaker visited Khurvaleti, a village split in two by the Russian barbed wire and thus a symbol of Putin’s Russia.

This was the first visit of the Head of the Ukrainian Parliament to Georgia within the last 10 years. Parubii met his Georgian counterpart Irakli Kobakhidze. The sides agreed to strengthen their format of Ukraine-Moldova-Georgia parliamentary cooperation.

It is also worth noting that the Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Kvirikashvili visited the USA meeting the US President Donald Trump, the vice president Mike Pence and the Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and had meetings in the Congress. As a result, the Senate adopted a resolution giving serious thought to those backing separatist regions in Georgia. According to this decision, the USA will not provide aid to the countries that cooperate with separatists. This and other encouraging decisions made in the defense and security spheres added an optimistic note to the country’s spirit.

Moldova: Authorities Forcing Mixed Electoral System

Lina Grau, Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (Moldova, Chisinau)

Reviewing the electoral system, forced by the Democratic Party, not only polarizes the society of the Republic of Moldova but also, judging by all symptoms, creates a risk for leaving the country without any financial aid promised by the European Union. The civil society warns about possible pressure from the authorities and anti-democratic tendencies, while foreign partners call on Chisinau to provide pluralism and mass media independence



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instagram.com/gurau/

DOMESTIC POLICY

Launching controversial electoral system reform

On May, 5 the Democratic Party included in the parliamentary agenda and voted for the merger of two drafts regarding reviewing the electoral system on the same day. The decision was supported by the MPs

of the European People's Party of Moldova led by the former Prime Minister Iurie Leanc and the socialistic opposition. The new draft suggests transferring to the [mixed electoral formula](#): some MPs will be elected from the parties' lists, and some—in single-seat majority constituencies.

Voting happened on the same day when the lead-

ers of two opposing parties—Maia Sandu (“Action and Solidarity Party”) and Andrei Nstase (“Dignity and Truth Platform Party”)—visited [Brussels](#).

These developments, far from being transparent according to its evaluation by [both the opposition](#) and [the civil society](#), caused some street protests. Those who initiated the draft on implementing the mixed electoral system reassured that during the second reading the document will only be passed provided there is a positive conclusion by the Venice Commission, which was expected to give its evaluation in early June.

While visiting Chisinau, the Secretary of the Venice Commission Thomas Markert stated that the best test case of this issue is Ukraine, which “burnt its fingers using a mixed electoral system”.

This situation was the center of attention, generating research and surveys both against mixed [electoral system](#) and [supporting it](#). The authorities stated

that civil society organizations acting against the new system are politically motivated and play to the opposition. [NGOs accused the authorities](#) of attempting to apply some pressure, while the Head of the EU Delegation in the Republic of Moldova [Pirkka Tapiola said](#) that non-governmental organizations play an important role and should participate in the affairs of the state.

Moldova is experiencing a deteriorating situation with media independence, which is reflected in the research [“Capturing mass media and other means of public communication of the Republic of Moldova”](#). The problems elicited deal with monopolizing both mass media and the market of advertising, propaganda and disputable legislation. These issues were also the subject of Pirkka Tapiola’s statement, [who called for the authorities](#) to bring into compliance the legislation and practice according to the Western norms.

ECONOMY

EU postponing funding for Moldova

The European Parliament postponed providing financial aid of 100 mln euros to Moldova for a month. European MPs expressed their concerns regarding the condition of the Moldovan mass media, the situation with justice and

changes in the electoral system. They declared that funding will not be provided until Chisinau fulfils all provisions [previously discussed with the EU](#). In particular the requirements address the democratic standards, among which there is freedom of speech.

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FOREIGN POLICY

Parade in Moscow

The President of Moldova Igor Dodon is the only foreign head of the state who participated in the military parade in Moscow alongside the Russian leader Vladimir Putin. This was their third meeting since Dodon’s inauguration last December. The mass media and social networks [had a field day upon learning this news](#).

However, at the end of the month Moldova declared five employees of the Russian embassy as personas non grata, it was done based on the information provided by its special forces. The employees were to leave the country within 24 hours. The President of Moldova Igor Dodon registered his disapproval react-

ing to the decision made by the MFA and called their actions “unfriendly”.

At the same time Chisinau and Kyiv are ready to launch a joint control at the “Pervomaisk-Kuchurgan” checkpoint at the Transnistrian part of the Moldova-Ukrainian border. This issue caused [a stormy reaction of Tiraspol](#), which, supported by Moscow, declared this a blockade and an attempt to create cut-throat conditions for the situation in the region^{xiii}. Tiraspol called for discussion on this topic in the format 5+2 on Transnistrian settlement. However, both Chisinau and Kyiv reject this idea, referring to the fact that the Moldova-Ukrainian border is a subject to the conflict and can be negotiated only in the frames of a bilateral procedure.

Ukraine: “Away from Moscow” to Association with Europe

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

In May, the political and economical Ukrainian agenda remained closely connected to Russia. Russia and pro-Russian militants continue shootings of the government controlled areas in the east of Ukraine. Kyiv toughens its stand on the sanctions imposed on Russian businesses, and blocks the Russia’s information and propaganda influence channels, while the Western countries call on Kremlin to fulfill the Minsk agreements.



Solemn ceremony of signing the document on visa liberalisation with the EU for Ukrainians.
Photo by president.gov.ua

DOMESTIC POLICY

St. George ribbon ban and language quotas

On 16 May the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine approved the ban to manufacture and use for any propaganda issues in Ukraine the ribbon of St. George. 238 MPs gave their votes to support this decision. The docu-

ment also includes fines [for using, demonstrating or wearing St. George ribbon](#).

On 17 May Kyiv dealt another blow to Moscow: [the decree blocking](#) access to the “Yandex” services and the Russian social networks “VKontakte “ and “Odnoklassniki” in Ukraine (in the framework of imposing harsher sanctions against Russia) was signed by the President

Poroshenko, and published. Despite the fact that this decision is not completely univocal taking into account the European standards for the freedom of speech, the Head of Press and Information Section of the EU Delegation in Ukraine [Jurgis Vilchinskis said](#) that “the protection of the national security is the prerogative of the Ukrainian government”. However, he also stressed that “the authorities should ensure that the restrictive measures do not have a negative impact on the fundamental right to freedom of expression”.

Already on 23 May the Parliament voted for a 75% mandatory quota for the Ukrainian-language content on television. 269 MPs voted to support [this decision](#).

The decisions made by the Ukrainian President and MPs provoked a rather angry backlash from the Russian Federation. In particular, on 25 May the Russian Federation Foreign Ministry spokeswoman [Maria Zakharova said](#) that the St. George ribbon banning in Ukraine will postpone the Minsk agreements fulfillment. This way Moscow is trying to shift the blame for the breakdown in negotiations onto Kyiv.

Yet the Russian operation in the East of Ukraine does not stop. [According to the UN High Commission on Human Rights](#), within the period from March to 14 May the collateral damage in Donbas equalled to 178 victims, with 35 killed and 143 injured.

ECONOMY

Further sanctions and new strategies

This May brought on some harsher economic sanctions for Moscow, in particular the work of ERP-system “1C” LLC and other IT companies was blocked, following [the initiative of the President of Ukraine](#). The sanctions involve blocking assets, limiting trade operations and a ban for capital extraction outside the territory of Ukraine.

Moreover, the government of Ukraine stimulates the development of the small and medium-sized businesses. In particular, on 24 May the corresponding

development strategy till 2020 was approved. It is planned to provide the background for the supportive legal and regulatory, institutional and operational environment for the entrepreneurship, provide access to the small and medium-sized business representatives to financing sources under favorable conditions, and ease the tax administration. [The Cabinet of Ministers expects](#) Ukraine to enter the World Bank top 30 countries rated by the ease of doing business index, namely taxation and favorable conditions for entrepreneurship, before 2020.

From March to 14 May the collateral damage in Donbas equalled to 178 victims, with 35 killed and 143 injured

FOREIGN POLICY

Pressure on Russia remains

The Ukrainian foreign policy still considers keeping the Western pressure on Russia as a priority. In this regard May turned out to be quite a successful month for Ukraine. For instance, on 2 May [the Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel](#), while speaking at the press conference with the Russian President Vladimir Putin, stressed the importance of the Minsk agreements fulfillment as a mandatory condition for lifting sanctions on Russia. In its turn, on 3 May the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe called on Russia demanding [to restore the Crimean Tatar Mejlis in the Crimea](#). “The Ukrainian issue” was discussed [in the course of the negotiations between](#)

[Merkel and the President of the USA Donald Trump](#) during the G7 summit in Italy. [Following the results of the summit](#), the G7 leaders warned Russia of further sanctions, and demanded the Minsk agreements fulfillment. France’s newly elected President Emmanuel Macron calls on [resuming negotiations within the Normandy format](#).

The main achievement of the month was the EU decision to grant visa-free travel to the citizens of Ukraine, published on 22 May. This means that starting 11 June Ukrainians with biometric passports [will be able to visit the EU countries without a visa](#). And on 30 May the Dutch Senate [ratified the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement](#), thus eliminating the last barrier on the Ukraine’s way to Association.

Bridging Divide: Forging Cooperation And Fostering Collaboration

Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center (Armenia, Yerevan)



Eastern Partnership countries all demonstrate the course of deepening ties to the EU.
Photo by Flickr/European Parliament

For the six countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union meant that the independence was as much an urgent crisis, and as an overnight opportunity. Burdened by the seven decades of the Soviet rule, the independence challenges were daunting as each of these states was unprepared for the statehood and under-equipped for the democratic governance. Although that starting point of the independent statehood was roughly equivalent, their shared Soviet legacy was quickly replaced by a diverging trajectory, with a pronounced variance in the political, economic and security reform. Of these six states, four were constrained by a conflict from the very start, as Armenia and Azerbaijan were consumed by Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia was collapsing under the weight of a civil war and separatism, while Moldova was confronting the Transnistrian conflict. For the other two countries, despite the absence of the outright conflict in the early period of the statehood, both Belarus and Ukraine were constrained by the corrupt and authoritarian regimes.

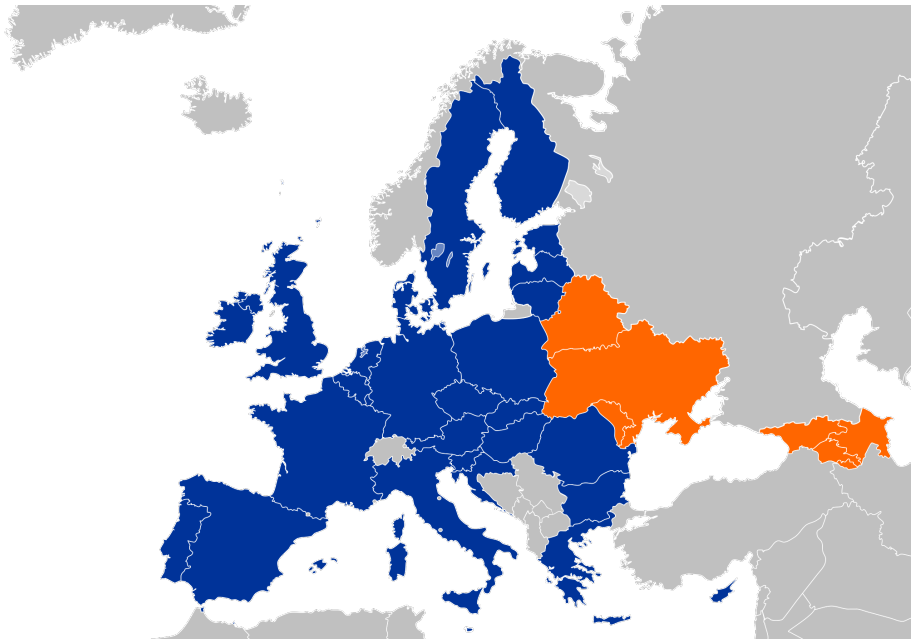
Introduction

For many in the West, the December 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union was an unexpected and sudden scenario. After the decades of rivalry and tension throughout the Cold War, despite some obvious structural failings and internal faults, the implosion of the Soviet system was neither predictable, nor necessarily pre-determined. But beyond the surprise in the West, the impact on the component republics of the Soviet Union was far more significant and immediate. Unlike the Eastern and Central European states within the Soviet orbit, where the Soviet collapse offered more of an opportunity than a risk, for the former Soviet republics this was an equally unprecedented and unexpected crisis.

The urgency of the challenge for these states was driven by three main factors. First, the legacy of seven decades under the Soviet rule left no preparation or even experience with the pluralistic political governance or the market-based economic management. This also meant that there was an absence of the traditions and institutions essential for the state-building. This was especially challenging for the states of Central Asia, given their absence of any native institutional foundation for the state-building.

Within this context there were exceptions, however. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, for example, were endowed with a more recent record of the independent statehood, that was proudly maintained despite their forced incorporation into the Soviet Union. And in the South Caucasus as well, both Armenia and Georgia preserved their own national identity beyond and even at times in conflict with their Sovietization.

A second driver of urgency stemmed from the acceleration of the conflicts that erupted in the waning period of the central Soviet system weakening. And with the abrupt fragmentation of the Soviet military and security apparatus into the new national and state-centric units, there was no effective response to the threats to stability posed by these escalating conflicts. This new threat environment was complex, as in the South Caucasus it ranged from the outright warfare over Nagorno-Karabakh, pitting Armenia against Azerbaijan, to the secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia amid a quickly unfolding internal civil war in Georgia. This was also matched by the deepening of an insurgency and a low-intensity conflict against Russia in the volatile North Caucasus republics, while in Moldova the eruption of the Transnistrian conflict



Despite their shared Soviet legacy each state has pursued diverging trajectories.

Photo by wikimedia.org

added to the wider scale of instability.

A third factor exacerbating the inherent vulnerability and daunting challenge to the independence was rooted in the rapid emergence of the corruption and the authoritarian regimes as the real barriers to further development. These related obstacles, which quickly consolidated to resist a real reform, were especially significant in the cases of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, as evident to this day.

The legacy of seven decades under the Soviet rule left no preparation or even experience with the pluralistic political governance or the market-based economic management

Diverging trajectories

Against that backdrop, each of these countries adopted different policy responses and sought to adapt to the onset of challenges. Despite their shared Soviet legacy, however, each state quickly pursued diverging trajectories in terms of both economic and political reform and strategic orientation. For the Eastern Partnership, as the one entity that binds these six states, the outlook has improved. Since the signing of the Association Agreements with the EU, Georgia and Moldova moved on to the implementation stage, while Ukraine sought to bolster its own implementation course through a more concerted effort to tackle the corruption despite the demands of an ongoing assault in the East from the Russian-backed forces.

And with the promise of visa liberalization extended to each of these countries, the EU delivered an important reward for reform. Although this tended to widen

the divide between a “top tier” of the members, comprising Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the “second class” group, composed of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, demonstrated a new sense of optimism and interest toward the EU in general and regarding the Eastern Partnership more specifically.

Moreover, the real progress for the Eastern Partnership program was driven less by that top tier of three countries, but rather stemmed from a new context of an opportunity for deeper engagement from the second class members. The clearest affirmation of this improved outlook, surprisingly, came from Armenia, which despite sacrificing its earlier Association Agreement with the EU back in 2013, was able to negotiate and “initiate” a new strategic partnership agreement with Brussels. And in part because of a reflection of the “peer pressure” and rivalry between Armenia and Azerbaijan, this move only encouraged the Azerbaijani government to abruptly return to talks with the EU, displaying a renewed interest in reaching its own “strategic partnership” with Brussels.

That new Armenia–EU agreement, formally known as the “EU–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement” was initiated in March 2017, and was hailed by both sides as an “important step to broaden the scope of the bilateral relations”. More specifically, this “second chance” for both sides to repair and restore their relations also includes a framework to “strengthen the political dialogue and set a solid basis for the continuation of the economic and social reforms” with the “strong commitments to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law”, as well as forging a “stronger cooperation in sectors, such as energy, transport and the environment, for the new opportunities in trade and investments, and for the increased mobility for the benefit of the citizens”.

This Armenian return to Europe was also more than simply a renewed commitment. Rather it was also rooted in a clear cost-benefit analysis, whereby, in the face of the marginal economic gains and mounting costs, Armenia was increasingly aware of the “opportunity costs” of both joining the Eurasian Economic Union and being dangerously over-dependent on Russia. The new trend, therefore, is one of worry and wariness, providing the limits of its alignment with Russia and seizing a second chance to forge a relationship with the EU. This is bolstered by two factors: a new challenge to the asymmetry of the Armenian-Russian relationship, and a need for a greater external legitimacy, driven by the weakness of the Armenian government’s domestic position as a political transition begins.

The success on the EU side was also due to a more flexible set of the alternative measures to engage Armenia, evident in the policy of the “differentiation” and based on a more realistic recognition of the limits

and liabilities of Armenia as a partner. And although the Russian pressure on Armenia was apparently overwhelming back in 2013, in reality Moscow’s goal at that time was more to compel Armenia to “say no” to the EU than to “say yes” to the Customs Union. And now the victory stands out as a success in salvaging and redefining a relationship between the EU and Armenia, that only enhances Armenia’s position within the Eastern Partnership.

The real progress for the Eastern Partnership program was driven less by that top tier of three countries, but rather stemmed from a new context of an opportunity for deeper engagement from the second class members

But in terms of an Armenia’s surprising second chance at reaching a new partnership agreement with the EU, there is also an important lesson from the 2013 Armenian decision to reject its Association Agreement and to turn instead to the Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). That lesson, most significantly for the other Eastern Partnership states, reveals more about Moscow than Yerevan. For example, it is now clear that the “U-turn” or sudden shift in the policy actually occurred in Moscow before Yerevan.

And the absence of the Russian pressure on Armenia through the nearly four years of the negotiations over the Association Agreement suggests two conclusions. First, for the past several years, Moscow clearly failed to see the EU engagement as a real threat. Such a view may have been rooted in the Moscow’s perception of the EU as neither a significant geopolitical actor, nor as a serious rival. Second, the rather last-minute shift in the Russian policy, as demonstrated by the imposition of the coercive measures on the other states, such as Moldova and Ukraine, viewed Armenia as more of a “sacrificial pawn”, designed to send a more important message of strength to deter any similar European aspirations by Chisinau and Kyiv.

On a broader level, therefore, this shift in the Russia’s policy toward the EU engagement stems from a much larger and more assertive Russian stance, driven by an attempt to consolidate the Russian power and position within the former Soviet space, and to deter the Western “interlopers” in what Moscow views as its natural “sphere of influence” or the “near abroad” referred to as *blizhneye zarubezhye* (ближнее зарубежье), which was elevated and expanded into a wider “post-Soviet space”. Moreover, this trend of a boldly assertive Russia only deepened in recent years, and now it is evident in the larger context of the Moscow’s more aggressive and confrontational policies toward the West.

Another demonstration of this trend was the Russia’s heavy-handed use of the coercive measures tar-

getting some of its neighbors. But the utility of such a combative and assertive posture for the Russian President Vladimir Putin, both politically and personally, is also important. As seen in the Putin's own personal imagery as a firm and decisive leader, the projection of a strong Russia endows a degree of the power-based legitimacy for Putin too, a significant asset given his own decline in the personal popularity. In this context, Putin exercised a much more combative and assertive "power posture", allowing him to display a strong leadership as a defender of the Russian interests.

Clearly, Ukraine remains the primary theatre of the operations for the Russia's strategy of the retrenchment within its "near abroad" or the former Soviet space. As Russia seeks to define and defend its own sphere of influence among the former Soviet states, the European engagement is now seen as an unacceptable challenge, equivalent to the perception of the NATO expansion as a direct threat to the Russian interests.

Within this context, the Russian policy consists of three primary objectives: (1) to undermine the implementation of the EU's Association Agreements with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine; (2) to divide and destabilize the EaP by weakening the top-tier states (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), and restraining the remaining states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus); and (3) to consolidate the Russian power and influence throughout its "near abroad" by leveraging a combination of a hard power, or the "hybrid war" in Ukraine, and a soft power targeting the internal vulnerability of the other EaP member states.

"Eurasian Union"

One key component of this more assertive Russian policy of consolidating its "sphere of influence" in the near abroad is the launch of a revamped "Eurasian Union" project of a broader reintegration within the former Soviet space. Against a backdrop of the Russian power and coercion, the Eurasian Union concept represents an attempt to integrate the states within the near abroad. The move is a natural expansion of

the existing Russian-led projects of the reintegration, based on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but with further building on both the Russian-dominated Customs Union.

Yet in many ways, the concept of the Eurasian Union is both incoherent and undefined, marked more by its lack of the practical benefits and the absence of any substance. And even the potential economic incentive for the states to enter the Eurasian Union is fairly weak, with a membership offering rather meager and marginal economic benefits, while gains would mostly accrue to Russia.

As Russia seeks to define and defend its own sphere of influence among the former Soviet states, the European engagement is now seen as an unacceptable challenge

While the Russian attempts to institutionalize the "reintegration" of the near abroad is not new, the timing suggests a belated Russian response to the recent trend of a greater EU engagement along the Russia's periphery, and a reaction to the Eastern Partnership. But the viability of the Eurasian Economic Union project was undermined by two developments, the obvious Russian loss of Ukraine and a rather unexpected resistance to the Russian dominance by Belarus and Kazakhstan, each of them strongly defended their own economic interests and political independence within the Eurasian Economic Union.

Imperative to "bridge the divide"

Thus, for each of the Eastern Partnership states, the current course of deepening ties to the EU future will depend as much on their own capacity for reform as on their capability to defend their own national interests and withstand the Russian pressure. And the most instructive effort to accomplish these objectives and to effectively "bridge the divide" is to implement the imperative to forge the cooperation and foster the collaboration between the civil society and reformers within each of the Eastern Partnership states.

Eastern Europe And South Caucasus Facing New Security Environment

Olga Chyzhova, Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" (Kyiv, Ukraine)



Successful internal reforms and a strong dialogue within the region, as well as with other partners are the key factors of the Eastern Partnership security that were discussed during the EaP Think Bridge round table in Chisinau, Moldova in May. The new possibilities for the cooperation with the EU, on the one hand, and the Russian influence that is always present in this part of the world, on the other hand, were the main issues of the round table.

Opening the discussion **Marcel Rothig, the Director of the Regional Office «Dialogue Eastern Europe» at Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung**, hightailed that event, as well as Think Bridge initiative itself, are aimed at filling the information gap between the Eastern Partnership countries, as well as we are supporting information flow from this region to the European Union.

Defining security options for Moldova in new regional security environment

Moldovan security was the topic of the first panel. Participants agreed that it is one of the key challenges for the state that was never properly addressed by its leaders.

– No reform in the security sector in Moldova had clear fatality, as the objectives were never set clearly. We had three options: neutrality, joining NATO or counting on our

own capabilities. But neither option was never selected, – outlined **Viorel Cibotaru, European Institute for political Development in Moldova**.

Dr. Alla Rosca, however, implied that military sphere should not be considered as the only component of the security. The democratic reforms are as important for Moldova and other countries of the region to be safe. This idea was supported



by **Andrei Popov, Foreign Policy Association of Moldova**:

– The major threat to the Moldovan security, as well as the security of other five countries of the Eastern Partnership, does not



come that much from the outside, it comes from within. The corruption, huge problems with the rule of law, independence of justice, freedom of media are phenomena that bring us further from the political association with the European Union, and most importantly weaken the capacity of our countries to face and efficiently resist the foreign threats.



Although **Ion Tabirta, Institute for Development and Social Initiative (Moldova)**, argued that the biggest danger for Moldova comes from the outside:

– The understanding of the regional security is impossible without the Russia's ambitions and policy understanding. If talking about Moldova, the Russian pressure is

always present there. Moscow wishes for Tiraspol to play a very important role in the Moldovan politics.

Building up common security approach in the EaP area

The importance of the Russian factor for the regional security was also highlighted as a common threat at the second panel devoted to the cooperation opportunities. **Arseni Sivitski, Center for Strategic and Geopolitical Studies (Belarus)**, pointed out the nearest plans of Moscow.



– The large scale Russian-Belarusian «West» military drills provoke a lot of concerns in the neighboring countries, as well as in the West. There is no doubt that Russia will try to play its usual role and apply a so called «heavy metal» diplomacy with the help of these military exercises. The open intelligence data indicates there is all evidence that Russia is preparing or is trying to demonstrate that it prepares for a military conflict. This way Moscow wants to persuade the West to sit down and renegotiate the new Grand Deal, which is barely possible in the current geopolitical situation.

That is why countries of the region should learn from each other, stated **Sergiy Gerasymchuk, Foreign Policy Council «Ukrainian Prism» (Ukraine)**:



– Russian Federation tries to implement some new methods to melt the frozen conflicts. In this context, the Ukrainian case is very important one to be learnt not only by the interested parties within the region, but by the wider Europe, as Ukraine is in face to face contact with the Russian army in the East and is also a subject to the hybrid attacks.



And military sector should certainly not be the only one to cooperate in, added **Lasha Tughushi, Fund «Liberal Academy Tbilisi» (Georgia)**:

– Although it is very hard to talk about the Eastern Partnership as an

The corruption, huge problems with the rule of law, independence of justice, freedom of media are phenomena that bring us further from the political association with the European Union

unanimous region due to all differences in the development of the countries, we should look for the pragmatic interests to develop the bilateral relations in all spheres, including security. Among such rational interests can be energy security and oil and gas transit issues.

At the same time the prospects of EU engagement are more realistic now, mentioned **Robertas Sapronas, EU High-Level Advisor on Security Sector Reform (Moldova)**:



– A number of some new non-military challenges in Europe – cyber and energy security, migration – require a common response. And the EU is the organization that can best address those challenges. Some recent developments in the European Union itself provide the Eastern Partnership countries with the new opportunities to engage and cooperate. There is certainly some interest and readiness in Brussels to see how they could best contribute to the stability in the region.

Ukrainian case is very important one to be learnt not only by the interested parties within the region, but by the wider Europe

Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center (Armenia), concluded the discussion:

– In terms of building up a common security approach for the Eastern Partnership, the emphasis is on building as we do not have it yet. And we never fail to miss the opportunity to establish it. We need to remind ourselves yet again: we share a very difficult past and a very difficult present. What we often forget is that we also share a common future, but only if we are smart enough to use these opportunities.



We share a common future, but only if we are smart enough to use these opportunities

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www.prismua.org

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www.fes-dee.org

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www.regional-studies.org



The Center for Economic and Social Development (Azerbaijan) is a leading Azerbaijani think tank specialized in economic and social policy issues working with and establishing bridge between the government and the various representatives of civil society. The Center was set up in 2005 to promote research and analysis into domestic economic and social issues for the purpose to positively influence the public policy decision-making processes.

www.cesd.az



Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies (Belarus) is a non-governmental non-profit independent think tank, the mission of which is to promote the opportunities for the Republic of Belarus in the international arena

by analyzing international processes, and developing programs and projects.

www.csfps.by



The foundation Liberal Academy Tbilisi (Georgia) is a non-governmental, nonprofit organization, committed to promoting core democratic values, supporting peace-building and European and Euro-Atlantic integration and with that fostering the democratic development of Georgia and the

whole Southern Caucasus region.

www.ei-lat.ge



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

www.ape.md