

EaP Think Bridge

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**NEIGHBORS,
PARTNERS,
PROBLEMS**
**- FIRST YEAR
OF ZELENSKYY'S POLICY
IN THE EAP REGION**

It is a definite necessity to differentiate President Zelenskyy policies towards the Eastern Partnership as a whole and bilateral tracks with the individual EaP states

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

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Grants are available for CSOs from the Eastern Partnership and EU countries. Key areas of support are democracy and human rights, economic integration, environment and energy, contacts between people, social and labour policies.

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Eastern Partnership: Regional Cooperation or Bilateral Tracks?

During the first year at the office, President of Ukraine Vladimir Zelenskyy hardly managed to set, or at least explain his team's foreign policy priorities. However, the Eastern Partnership did not go unnoticed on his agenda in multiple dimensions: as an instrument of cooperation with the European Union, as a region as a whole, and at the level of bilateral contacts with partner countries. Which of these tracks was more important and who did Ukraine manage to work with more efficiently while ignoring other capitals so far? The results of the first year of President Zelenskyy for the Eastern Partnership are analyzed by Hanna Shelest.

Meanwhile, in May, election campaigns launched in three countries of the region. In Belarus it started with the crackdown on the opposition, fines and arrests. In Moldova President Dodon started campaigning, in spite of all anti-epidemic measures. In the meantime, in Georgia it is still not clear which law will be applied to the parliamentary elections in October as the authorities and the opposition are still failing to find compromise.

Last month, Armenia was one of the first to lift quarantine restrictions and immediately faced a new wave of incidence of COVID-19. The prime minister and his entire family tested positively for coronavirus. In May, Azerbaijan faced a wave of arrests, with both the opposition and government officials behind bars. And Ukraine managed to get into two high-profile international scandals and new difficulties in relations with its partners, the United States and Georgia.

All these and other major developments of the month in the countries of the Eastern Partnership are analyzed in our traditional reviews.



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Neighbors, Partners, Problems - First year of Zelenskyy's Policy in the EaP Region

Hanna Shelest, NGO "Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation", Foreign Policy Council "UkrainianPrism"

The year of Zelenskyy's Presidency allows us to evaluate his foreign policy in different dimensions. Even though 2019 was a year of adjusting, finding the focus, and setting priorities, also accompanied by the Parliamentary elections and long overdue appointment of a new Cabinet of Ministers, there were still enough statements, legislation, and activities that allow a certain assessment of Zelenskyy's plans in the Eastern Partnership region.

It is a definite necessity to differentiate President Zelenskyy policies towards the Eastern Partnership as a whole and bilateral tracks with the individual EaP states. While the first one remained predominantly a business of executive power, foremost the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the bilateral relations had their ups and downs with sometimes controversial decisions.

To be objective, it is necessary to mention that a year of Zelenskyy's Presidency came amid two changes of the ministers of foreign affairs. Also, the changes both in the European Commission, European Parliament composition, and governments in some EaP states impacted Ukrainian relations with the region.

As neither President Zelenskyy nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs still have not presented any conceptual or strategic document in the sphere of Ukraine's foreign policy, the only document that allows us to evaluate his vision is the Presidential Decree #837/2019 "On urgent measures for reforming and strengthening the state" (November 2019). The document contains only one reference, "developing good neighbourly partner relations with neighbour-

For President Zelenskyy and his team, the Eastern Partnership is just a part of the general road towards country's European Integration

ing states" as one of the steps in the foreign policy domain. The necessity to solve existing problems in the humanitarian sphere is proposed only for the neighbors-members of the EU.

Eastern Partnership Approach of Ukraine

For President Zelenskyy and his team, the Eastern Partnership is just a part of the general road towards country's European Integration. This became especially visible in October, when Ukrainian officials demonstrated political interest in redirecting the EaP towards the key goal of Ukraine's European integration during an event in a framework of the EC's structured consultation that took place in Kyiv. Official documents, such as November Presidential Decree just confirmed this assumption. Moreover, in view of the 10th anniversary of the EaP, Ukraine has not provided any formal assessment of the policy and the country's participation in it.

At the same time, Ukraine under President Zelenskyy continued looking at EaP beyond 2020, with a possibility to assume a role of promoter of the idea of Association+, or A3 format, where three countries-signatories of Association Agreements (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia),

should receive greater attention and greater opportunities.

As of now, it is fair to say that the civil society and expert community remain the main driving force for the Ukrainian participation in the Eastern Partnership.

Bilateral Relations with the EaP states

Developing bilateral relations or prioritizing other frameworks such as GUAM became a feature of President Zelenskyy within the Eastern Partnership area. Nevertheless, it is difficult to say that EaP states were among priority directions for President Zelenskyy and his team. However, there happened certain interesting developments.

Georgia

Relations with Georgia brought the biggest controversies during the first year of Zelenskyy's presidency. On one hand, strategic partnership has been confirmed on numerous occasions. On the other hand, the situation with former President Saakashvili being appointed to high post in Ukraine demonstrated the lack of understanding of the strategic sense of relations and sensitivity towards partner's position.

Strategic partnership of the two states, common agenda in relations with NATO and the EU, position towards Russian aggression created a fundament for continued high political attention for Georgia in 2019. Even if the Georgian President's second visit to Ukraine in 2019 was postponed (first one was just for the inauguration of President Zelenskyy in May), the December visit of the Georgian Prime Minister was an important milestone in the bilateral relations (especially considering increased role of the Prime Minister in Georgia after the Constitutional reform). On December 14, in Kyiv Ukraine's President Zelenskyy and Georgia's PM Gakharia signed the Provision on the Ukrainian-Georgian Top Level Strategic Council that should become the key mechanism for the bilateral dialogue.

Even more, finally after several years of discussions Ukraine and Georgia were ready to speak in a single voice in international organizations about the Russian aggression, which Ukraine had been hesitating with sometimes. On 22 December 2019, Ukraine and Georgia reported together on the Peaceful Settlement of Disputes item on the agenda at the Committee on the Charter of the UN at the UN Headquarters.

Unfortunately, already in 2020, the ruling team demonstrated the absence of the understanding of Ukraine-Georgia strategic partnership importance. First appeared the idea to appoint a controversial figure, Georgia's former President Saakashvili, convicted in his home country, as a vice prime minister. Even though this didn't happen, later he was appointed as a head of the Council of Reforms.

In 2020, the ruling team demonstrated the absence of the understanding of Ukraine-Georgia strategic partnership importance

Nevertheless, the situation led to the serious problems in bilateral relations, with Georgian ambassador being recalled for consultations to Tbilisi. The biggest issue is not even the fact of such an appointment, but accompanying comments by some ruling party members and presidential team, that were neglecting Georgian position, accusing it in interference in Ukrainian domestic affairs, and even allowing themselves some disrespectful statements considering small size of Georgia.

Such moves have a chance to negatively impact the level of trust between the states that were just regained two years ago.

Overall positive dynamics of Ukraine-Moldova bilateral relations slowed down significantly in 2019 due to both turbulences in Moldova (political crisis and several changes in governments) and elections in Ukraine.

Same as Georgia, Moldova was just briefly indicated as a country that should be followed closely in the official speeches of both President Zelenskyy and Minister of Foreign Affairs Prystaiko. In addition, Moldova was mentioned by President of Ukraine in the context of Russian aggression and policies in the region, and Moscow support of separatist regions. Zelenskyy stated that Ukraine and Moldova were united by a common desire not to have Russian troops in their territory and would not allow plans for so-called federalization to be imposed.

At the same time, one can note the higher interest of the Moldovan top officials in Ukraine than vice versa, confirmed by their numerous visits to Kyiv in 2019 with none in return.

Among the primary topics for cooperation are border demarcation, joint customs control, legislative initiatives in the framework of Association Agreements and cooperation with the European Union. Still, it should be noted that cooperation at the level of the Georgia-Moldova-Ukraine Interparliamentary Assembly did not draw attention of the new Ukrainian Parliament.

In 2019, the sides failed to increase mutual trade to \$1 billion, as expected in previous years, it reached only \$896.2 million, showing a decline from 2018 (trade in goods and services reached \$953.6 million).

In general, the current state of affairs demonstrates that due to the absence of the initiative and a political turbulence, the level of relations between the two states currently is below the level of their potential.

Belarus

Belarus also remains among the controversial partners of Ukraine, and Zelenskyy's presidency did not bring any

clarity to this foreign policy direction. On one hand, Minsk and Kyiv are big trade partners. In 2019, at the expense of Ukrainian exports, trade turnover increased and amounted to \$5.3 billion, even if a significant negative balance remained. On the other hand, increase in trade and economic ties does not advance political relations, which are still lacking trust due to the strategic partnership between Belarus and Russia and thus Kremlin's influence. During his speech to the Verkhovna Rada before his appointment as a Foreign Minister (August 29, 2019), Vadym Prystaiko called Belarus one of the countries Ukraine should watchfully monitor.

Such distrust and lack of political interest can also be confirmed by the fact that no inter-parliamentary Ukraine-Belarus friendship group has still been established after 7 months in power of new Verkhovna Rada.

At the same time, this year experienced the Second Forum of the Regions of Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus (held in Zhytomyr in October), the biggest event in bilateral relations that brought together over 900 governmental representatives and entrepreneurs from both sides, including both heads of the states – Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Aleksandr Lukashenko. During the Forum, President Zelenskyy named fuel and energy, infrastructure and transport projects, agro-industrial complex among the main areas of cooperation. The results of the Second Forum of the Regions include signing of 15 agreements (2 interagency and 13 interregional ones). About 40 contracts worth up to \$500 million were signed there as well.

Armenia and Azerbaijan

As for the last 6 years, Armenia was out of the Ukrainian foreign policy attention, among others due to its alliance with the Russian Federation. Change of the political elites in Yerevan did not influence such an attitude of official Kyiv. Moreover, in late 2019 – 2020 the more pro-Azerbai-

The ability to balance between certain domestic interests and foreign strategic partnerships will be the main challenge for presidential team

jan position started to be presented, even if before Azerbaijan also lacked Ukrainian attention.

In December 2019, President Zelenskyy visited Baku, which was an important sign as he was not very active in his international activities during the year, except of “classical” trips to Berlin, Paris and Brussels. During this visit a number of bilateral agreements on regional and economic cooperation were signed though mostly of operational level. It became obvious that Ukrainian President considers Azerbaijan predominantly through the prism of investments attraction, infrastructure projects and energy.

Conclusion

As any foreign policy direction of Ukraine, Eastern Partnership is still lacking clear and articulated vision of President Zelenskyy and his team. However, the interest towards the participating countries, as well as using this format as part of the general road to the European integration can already be observed. For the next year, there are more chances that this program and countries involved will be in the focus of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Vice Prime Minister on European and Euroatlantic Integration rather than Office of the President of Ukraine. The ability to balance between certain domestic interests and foreign strategic partnerships will be the main challenge for presidential team.

Armenia Staggers & Stumbles

Richard Giragosian, Regional Studies Center (Yerevan, Armenia)

Despite a rapid and robust response to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, Armenia has staggered and stumbled over a surge in cases after an overly ambitious decision to ease restrictions and reopen the economy. Attempting to preempt the surge in cases that would overwhelm the country's health care system, the government moved to limit the number of hospitalized cases but has been unable to both ensure proper care at home and maintain significant testing.



Photo: Roadblocks were introduced as part of the new quarantine system.
Photo credits: www.kavkaz-uzel.eu

DOMESTIC POLICY

Armenia Struggles to Contain COVID-19

Late on 31 May, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan announced that he has been infected with COVID-19, along with his wife and three daughters, becoming one of the first world leaders to have been infected. Working from home under self-quarantine, neither the prime minister nor his family have any symptoms of the virus yet.

Amid a record-setting spike in the daily cases of the coronavirus (COVID-19) infections, last month the Armenian government defended its decision to ease restrictions and reopen the economy, dismissing mounting calls on May 28 for a renewed “lockdown” to prevent the spread of the virus. With more than 400 new cases reported each day, the end of May suggested that the crisis was far from over, leading many to expect a surging “second wave” of infections, mainly due to fresh outbreaks in newly re-

opened factories and businesses and a general failure by much of the public to adhere to prudent precautions of social distancing and self-isolation. All businesses were allowed to reopen in the first week of May, although under a regime of strict precautions. Meanwhile, Health Minister Arsen Torosian warned of the danger that the country's public health system would be quickly overwhelmed, defending the May 22 decision to limit hospitalization to only the most serious and life-threatening cases. As of May 29, some 150 of only 200 beds at intensive care units in hospitals treating COVID-19 patients were full.

Amid a record-setting spike in the daily cases of infections of the coronavirus, the Armenian government defended its decision to ease restrictions and reopen the economy

appointed by the previous government. This confrontation between the government and the Constitutional Court has dragged on for nearly a year, after attempts to induce or pressure the legacy justices to resign all failed. According to

this modified plan, the parliament will no longer rely on the referendum but will now seek to enact legislative changes to the court structure, while relying on the technical and legal expertise of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and other relevant international organizations.

Under the terms of this new attempt, the pro-government bloc will seek to adopt a legislative compromise involving an indirect and gradual change to the court's composition, imposing new 12-year term limits on the justices that would be applied retroactively, and thereby force the removal of two judges that were appointed in the mid-1990s. The move would also seek the removal of Hrayr Tovmasyan as chairman or Chief Justice, to be replaced in a vote by the majority of the new justices, and a further term limit-based move to remove two other sitting judges by 2022. The plan, therefore, is focused on garnering a working majority of new justices, to weaken the power and position of the legacy judges inherited from the previous government. The legislation is set to be considered in June, after consideration of the official recommendations from the Venice Commission.

Anti-Corruption Campaign Continues

The Armenian government's concerted anti-corruption campaign continued with an arrest warrant issued on May 27 for Ruben Hayrapetyan, a wealthy businessman with close ties to the former government, on charges of kidnapping and assault. Although the charges are not directly related to corruption, the criminal case arose from the broader anti-corruption campaign that investigated accusations of extortion and fraud by Hayrapetyan. Although several officials of the former government, including the notorious former Finance Minister Gagik Khachatryan, are currently in detention awaiting trial, Hayrapetyan, along with many others, fled Armenia and sought refuge in Moscow to avoid trial, as the Russian authorities have consistently blocked efforts at extradition.

Armenian Parliament Moves to Cancel Constitutional Referendum

After the scheduled April 5 national referendum on changing the constitution was suspended by the introduction of a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the pro-government majority in parliament prepared legislation on May 27 that would formally cancel the referendum. The original intention of the referendum was to offer a set of constitutional amendments that would modify the composition of the Constitutional Court and remove seven of the nine judges on the Court who were

Parliament Moves to End Direct Local Elections

Deputies from the pro-government majority joined the small parliamentary opposition on May 26 in formulating new legislation that would effectively end direct local elections. The legislation would introduce indirect elections based on "party lists" for all local communities with a population of 4,000 residents or more, with the town councils in turn choosing the mayors. Such a system is already in place for the country's three largest cities, Yerevan, Gyumri and Vanadzor, and is defended by the government as a way to "strengthen democracy... by increasing the role of political parties and alliances."

ECONOMY

Planned Property Tax Increase

The Armenian government announced on May 27 that it intends to introduce a sharp increase in property taxes for homeowners. The move, to be gradually imposed over three years, is more than a way to increase tax revenue but will also adjust the relatively low tax rate in effect compared to other similar countries. The plan is to significantly

increase the tax on expensive or "luxury" homes by introducing a new progressive tax system. While the government seeks to maintain the existing progressive tax rates of between 0.05 and 1%, it aims to modify the methodology for calculating the market value of property, which is to be conducted by the state Cadaster Committee. According to the IMF, the current property tax is long overdue for an increase, as it accounts for a mere 0.2% of GDP, well

below the level in both the West and among post-Soviet countries. Finance Minister Atom Janjughazyan estimated that property tax revenue, which is largely allocated to local community budgets, would likely quadruple as a result of the change.

Difficult Negotiations with Russia Over Gas Price

Deputy Prime Minister Mher Grigoryan reported on May 21 that ongoing negotiations with Russia over the price for Armenian imports of natural gas remain complicated, adding that the Armenian side will continue to press Russia for a discount after the global slump in energy prices. Armenia, joining Belarus, is seeking the gas price discount as a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU), although Russia continues to insist that both countries must agree to even deeper economic integration with Russia as a prerequisite. For Armenia, such Russian demand would require acceptance of a “single budget and system of taxation” for all EaEU members. At the same time, the Russian-owned gas distribution network, Gazprom Armenia, is seeking a further increase in its wholesale gas tariff, despite raising its charges by 10% increase in January 2019. Armenian utility regulators will rule on that further requested increase in mid-June.

FOREIGN POLICY

ECHR Ruling on Murder of Armenian Officer

The European Court on Human Rights (ECHR) issued a ruling on May 26 that determined that Azerbaijan violated a key European convention by pardoning, rewarding and glorifying an Azerbaijani army officer who brutally murdered an Armenian officer in a barbaric attack with an axe during a NATO course in Hungary in 2004. This ruling found that Azerbaijan’s actions amounted to the “approv-

IMF Approves Disbursement of Emergency Assistance

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) disbursed on May 18 a \$280 million emergency loan to help Armenia cope with the coronavirus outbreak and mitigate the negative economic consequences. The IMF noted that the COVID-19 pandemic and related global crisis “have disrupted Armenia’s above-trend growth and favorable economic conditions,” adding that “the near-term outlook has significantly weakened, with fiscal and current account deficits widening considerably this year.” The aid package includes the \$248 million “stand-by arrangement” that was allocated in May 2019, and the Armenian government is expected to request additional IMF support over the coming months. To date, the government will borrow around \$540 million in external financing for 2020, to offset a tax shortfall, meet the over \$310 million in spending needs for fighting the virus, and in anticipation of a near-certain projected decrease in economic growth, as the IMF and EBRD estimate a sharp contraction of Armenian GDP in 2020 with a recovery in 2021 dependent on broader external factors.

al” and “endorsement” of the “very serious ethnically-biased crime” committed by the officer, Ramil Safarov. Even beyond the murder, the reaction and response by the Azerbaijani authorities were as vicious and primitive. For example, after a Hungarian court convicted and sentenced Safarov to life imprisonment in 2006, his later extradition in 2016 was followed by a pardon from Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and a gesture that rewarded the convicted murderer with money, free housing and military rank.

Azerbaijan: Continued Arrests of Opposition and Executives

Turan Information Agency (Baku, Azerbaijan)

May in Azerbaijan was full of arrests: both executives charged with corruption and opposition activists alike. As for country's economy, serious pandemic aftermath is already on its way.



Photo: State Security Service of Azerbaijan conducting operational investigative measures

Photo credits: zerkalo.az

DOMESTIC POLICY

Corrupted Officials Arrested

May saw continued arrests of executive officials and other authorities in different fields. The State Security Service arrested the head of the executive power of Imishli district William Hajiyeu on charges of bribery and abuse of office. As seen in the video footage of the search, 3 million dollars and half a million euros were found in the apartment of the head of the district. He is the fourth head of executive power that has been arrested since December

2019. Some employees of administrations of some districts have also been arrested under charges of appropriation of food assistance.

In one month the State Security Office held operations and arrests of top officials in the State Border Service of Azerbaijan and Ministry of Culture. As for the State Border Service, lieutenant-general Afghan Nagiyev, a deputy head of the service, was arrested as well as other top military officials and civil servants of this institution. According to

some non-official sources, Nagiyev and others were members of one corrupted network and covered illegal fishing activities in the sea. According to the State Security Service and General Prosecutor's Office report, they stopped illegal activities committed by executives in the Azerbaijan Coast Guard. It was not, however, stated which activities exactly.

Both Rafiq Bayramov, deputy minister of culture of Azerbaijan and Zakir Sultanov, the head of the state service for the protection of cultural heritage, were arrested in the ministry of culture and tourism. In several days Abulfas Garayev, the minister of culture who had also held various ministerial positions for 26 years, was dismissed from his post following the decree signed by President Aliyev.

Continued Opposition Persecution

May also saw many mass media sharing parts of a video meeting held by the National Council of Democratic Forces, a united alliance of opposition organizations and people. The conference took place via Zoom platform. Pro-government mass media shared the parts of the video conference with negative assessments regarding some journalists, mass media and opposing politicians. The National Council assessed this fact as a cybercrime committed by the authorities.

In May there was also continued blocking of the head of Popular Front Party of Azerbaijan (PFP), Ali Kerimli, with the arrests of his close associates taking place as well. It has already been one and a half month since Ali Kerimli

Four heads of executive power have been arrested since December 2019

has been deprived of any connections with the outer world, his mobile and home phone numbers are blocked and his apartment has no Internet connection.

Two new numbers were purchased for Kerimli, however, both stopped functioning some 20 minutes after he had started using them.

Niyamaddin Akhmadov, a PFP activist and Ali Kerimli's voluntary bodyguard, was under administrative arrest for 30 days and now faces a criminal case on charges of terrorism funding. District court sentenced him to a 4-month detention. The prosecution accused Akhmadov of getting funds to finance terroristic acts from another opposition protester residing abroad. During the trial Akhmadov insisted on his innocence saying that it was simply the money he had previously lent. Another Ali Kerimli's assistant, Faig Amirli, was put under administrative arrest for 15 days as well.

According to the PFP statement, Azeri authorities are continuing the wave of repressions against the party, with its main target being the arrest of its leader.

Siyavush Novruzov, a member of parliament and a deputy executive secretary of the ruling party Eni Azerbaijan is accusing Ali Kerimli of allegedly being behind human trafficking and illegal migration. In the course of parliamentary meeting Siyavush Novruzov stated that Ali Kerimli took part in issuing false documents to the citizens of Azerbaijan in order for them to get refugee status in Europe. According to him, there is a lot of relevant evidence and documents in German, Italian and French police offices.

ECONOMY

New Free Economic Zone Created

In May President Ilham Aliyev issued a decree on creating Alat Free Economic Zone. According to this document, Baku's Garadagh district will become Alat Free Economic Zone, with former vice speaker of the parliament Valeh Aleskerov being appointed as its top executive.

The Central Bank revoked the licenses of two more banks – AGBank and NBC. Therefore, 2020 already saw four banks closing down. Insured deposits in those four closed banks will be completely refunded, which means AZN 686 mln (\$403 mln) that belong to 215 thousands of depositors.

At the same time, against the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic crisis and globally low oil prices the country's population turned to buying American currency. The Central Bank reported that in May, in the first quarter of 2020, the population purchased \$1 bn 38 mln 609 thousand more than it sold to commercial banks against the same period in 2019. Foreign cash buying and selling made up \$2.2 bn in the first quarter of 2020. The volume of operations grew by 60.8% against the same period last year.

In the first quarter deposits in Azeri banks made up AZN 20 bn 586 mln 600 thousand, which is AZN 740 mln 100 thousand short if compared to the beginning of the year. Deposits in foreign currency make up 56.5% of deposit portfolio.

Government Started Assessing Coronavirus Damage

According to the State Statistics Committee of Azerbaijan, restrictions related to coronavirus spread resulted in the following damage. March 2020 saw Azeri hospitality unrealized loss above AZN 5,9 mln (almost \$3.5 mln). In one month the number of tourists staying overnight in hotels went down three times compared to February.

In general, 135.7 thousand economic agents turned to State Tax Service under the Ministry of Economy for financial assistance, including 25,575 companies and 108.2 thousand of individual entrepreneurs. The Service agreed to provide financial help to 23,360 enterprises and organizations that provide jobs to some 205.5 thousand people. The total amount of financial aid to these tax payers will make up AZN 93.9 mln (over \$55 mln), including May figures of

approximately AZN 47 mln. The total sum of financial assistance to individual (micro) entrepreneurs of 100.7 thousand

approved by the State Tax Service will make up AZN 58.5 mln (almost \$34.5 mln) in April and May.

FOREIGN POLICY

A Note to Kazakhstan

At the beginning of May the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan sent a note to the Ambassador of Kazakhstan in Baku Serzhan Abdikarimov regarding the incident of Kazakh border guards firing at Azeri fishermen. On April, 30 Azeri citizens were detained by Kazakh border guards in the Caspian Sea, with one of them killed and two more fishermen injured. Khalaf Khalafov, deputy minister of foreign affairs of Azerbaijan met with the ambassador and stated that the usage of weapons leading to human victims does not correspond to the mechanism of cooperation between border guard services of the two countries and the spirit of friendly and brotherly relations between the two states.

USA Extended its Waiver on Section 907

In May the USA extended its waiver of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act. The section was first enacted in 1992, during the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Section 907 restricts certain types of US military and other assistance to Azerbaijan. The President George Bush Jr. waived the section prior to military operations in Afghanistan. Every administration has done the same ever since.

Khoda Afarin Triangle

In May Azeri opposition strongly reacted to the agreement “on cooperation on continued construction and operation of “Khoda Afarin” and “Giz Galasi” hydro-junctions and hydroelectric power plants on the Aras River, their exploitation and the use of energy and water resources” signed between the governments of Azerbaijan and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The project involves borderline territories of both Iran and Azerbaijan and is subjected to joint use. The Azeri part has been occupied by Armenia since 1993.

The agreement on its implementation was already signed on February, 23, 2016 when Ilham Aliyev, the President of Azerbaijan, paid an official visit to Iran. It was signed behind closed doors, without prior discussions with the public.

Azeri Citizens Returning Home

As the border between the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan was closed during the time of lockdown, those Azeri citizens who wanted to return home gathered in Dagestan. It was only after telephone negotiations between the presidents of both countries Vladimir Putin and Ilham Aliyev that the first citizens were able to cross the border on May, 19.

Belarus: Street Parade and Elections in Time of Epidemic

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

Belarus was cut off from a single Eurasian gas market but won American oil. The election campaign started with detentions, arrests, and fines.



Protests in Minsk downtown after prominent YouTube blogger and protest leader was arrested. Photo by Franak Viačorka

DOMESTIC POLICY

Society Does Not Approve of Street Parade, Authorities Do Not Approve of Protests

Despite World Health Organization's [warnings](#), a military parade was held in Minsk on May 9. 3,000 military men and 185 units of equipment took part in it, with more

than 15,000 spectators, including veterans and the country's top leaders headed by Alexander Lukashenko. They ignored social distance requirements, and almost no one had masks and gloves on. This is despite the fact that according to a SATIO [study](#), banning all public events is the most popular measure supported by 74% of Belarusians.

As of May 10, in terms of the number of new corona-

virus infections per capita Belarus had the [top position](#) in Europe.

On May 8, at an ad-hoc meeting of the parliament, it was [announced](#) that the date of the presidential elections is set for August 9. Amidst the epidemic, the Belarusian society showed an unprecedented degree of politicization: a record 55 applications were submitted for initiative groups registration (with only 15 registered). For the first time ever, some new people with wide business experience are taking part in the campaign, among them are the former head of Belgazprombank Viktor Babariko, and the former head of the High-Tech Park Valery Tsepkalo.

The authorities started the campaign rather toughly: they detained a popular video blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky to prevent him from applying for registration of the initiative group, and suppressed street protests of his supporters in several cities

The authorities started the campaign rather toughly: they detained a popular video blogger Sergei Tikhanovsky to prevent him from applying for registration of the initiative group, and [suppressed](#) street protests of his supporters in several cities. 120 people were [detained](#), 50 of them got various terms of administrative arrests (479 days in total), and 20 were fined (for \$6,500 in total). However, Tikhanovsky's wife managed to register the initiative group,

thanks to which the released video blogger is holding legal mass pickets with thousands of participants across the country.

ECONOMY

The First Batch of American Oil for Belarus

The private business is [unhappy](#) with the package of anti-crisis measures that the authorities introduced in the time of the epidemic. The main budget support came to the state-owned companies, while the private sector must be grateful for some rent reduction and recommendations for lowering local tax rates. However, the head of the National Bank promises to provide unprofitable enterprises with loans under the government's guarantee.

Belarus [proceeds](#) with the negotiations on \$3 billion foreign loans with almost all international financial institutions: the IMF, the World Bank, EBRD, EIB, AIIB, as well as with China. No results have been reported yet.

The U. S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo [announced](#) the shipment of the first batch of American oil (80 thousand tons) for Belarus. According to Pompeo, this deal "strengthens Belarusian sovereignty and independence, demonstrates that the United States is ready to deliver trade opportunities for American companies interested in entering the Belarusian market."

FOREIGN POLICY

EU - without Expensive Visas, EAEU - without a Single Gas Market

On May 13, the European Parliament [approved](#) agreements between the European Union and Belarus on visa facilitation and readmission. Now that the borders are open, the Belarusians will be able to get Schengen visas for €35 instead of €80. For many years, Belarus has been taking the [first place in the world](#) in the number of issued Schengen visas per capita.

At the same time to get €60 million from the EU for the fight against the coronavirus, Belarus has to follow WHO recommendations [first](#).

On May 19, the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council had a video conference meeting, at which they preliminarily approved the EAEU Development Strategy until 2025. However, the single gas market was excluded from the plans; [according](#) to Vladimir Putin, this requires a "unified budget, and unified tax system".

Since such a deep level of integration is unacceptable for Belarus, in essence, this means that Belarus should not expect to win a single gas market entry permission from the EAEU, as it was with the common electric energy market, with its launch announced for 2019 and then canceled.

Georgia: Searching for a Way Out of the Deadlock

Lasha Tughushi, Liberal Academy Tbilisi (Tbilisi, Georgia)

If country's ruling party and opposition do not reach an agreement in the near future, the parliament will not have enough time to adopt constitutional amendments and the parliamentary elections in October will be held under the old system.



Photo: Georgian opposition protests

Photo credits: <https://eadaaily.com/>

DOMESTIC POLICY

Two Out of Three Arrested Opposition Activists Pardoned

On May, 15 the President of Georgia Salome Zurbashvili made the first step to escape from a political deadlock and signed a decree on pardoning opposition leaders: Gigi Ugulava, the leader of "European Georgia" party, and the former Georgia's minister of defense Irakli Okruashvili.

"I am not pardoning political prisoners here, as I can state with full responsibility that today there are no political prisoners in Georgia. A politician that is in prison for committing a serious crime everybody knows about is not a political prisoner but simply a guilty politician", the President of Georgia said.

The release of three opposition leaders was the key point of the agreement between the ruling and opposing parties reached on March, 8 with such mediators as US and EU ambassadors present. However, Giorgi Rurua, one of founders and shareholders of Mtavari TV Channel, is still under arrest. While Ugulava and Okruashvili had already been sentenced by court and the president could resort to presidential pardon, with Rurua the situation is different as there is still no sentence and the trial is ongoing.

Implementing the agreement clauses was supposed to unblock the review of constitutional amendments in order to have enough time for reforming the electoral system and

hold parliamentary elections in October according to the system that would be as close as possible to proportional representation. To do that the government needs opposition votes, while the opposition itself is not ready to compromise. According

to the opposition, the agreement implied the release of all arrested politicians, even though the ruling party denies that.

When tensions intensified on both sides, the ruling party turned to ambassadors, who were mediators when signing the agreement, with a request to clarify its conditions. The latter backed out in a diplomatic way. At the same time yet another warning to “Georgian Dream” was given by Senator Jim Risch, the chairman for the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In his statement the senator used the term “political prisoners” and called on Georgia to implement the

According to the opposition, the agreement implied the release of all arrested politicians, even though the ruling party denies that

March agreement releasing all prisoners.

Strong warnings are also voiced in the European Parliament and they are addressed to the “Georgian Dream” as well. Andrius Kubilius, Co-president of Euronest and a Lithuanian

MP in European Parliament, made an extensive statement and reminded Georgian authorities about EU financial assistance that Georgia may lose if the government does not fulfill the obligations under the agreement.

The nearest future will see the Parliament considering the final draft of the constitutional amendments that were agreed upon. The majority needs opposition votes. Otherwise, the agreement will fail and changes will not be adopted, which will result in undermining the current situation.

ECONOMY

Pandemic Aftermath

In April 2020 Georgia’s GDP went down by 16,6% against the same period last year. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the recession was mostly determined by lower foreign trade turnover numbers, as well as lower turnover numbers of enterprises-GDP payers in construction, trade, processing industry, transport, real estate, culture, entertainment and leisure, hospitality as well as in restaurant business.

For instance, building materials import went down by 34%, cement and clinker – by 65%. Trade recession is mostly the result of lower trade volume in cars and spare parts. Cars re-export level decreased by 87%, while the import of petroleum products dropped by 27%.

Yet at the same time Georgian government announced its decision to end lockdown restrictions by the end of May. Therefore, starting May, 29 public transport in cities resumed its operation in the country, as stated by the prime minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia at the meeting of Coordination Council. Transportation between cities and towns will be resumed starting June, 8, with masks being obligatory for passengers. Those companies responsible

for municipal transport or owners of private transportation facilities will be in charge of making sure passengers stick to the rules.

Starting June, 1 all shops will open including shopping centers, open-air and indoor markets as well as open-air restaurants, while starting June, 8 it will be possible to visit indoor premises of restaurants as well. Moreover, hotels will open their doors too, but only those that get previously checked by the relevant institutions of the Ministry of Health and will have a special permit.

Despite the fact that the prime minister announced the beginning of tourism season, there are still many questions that have not been answered yet: which countries will be able to ensure crossing Georgian borders for their citizens, where exactly tourists will be accommodated etc. So far only general guidelines have been developed – the so-called green zones will be created while hotels will have to be ready to correspond to relevant standards.

At the same time international mass media, for instance, CNN, Washington Post, Financial Times and others actively promote Georgia’s successful fight against COVID-19 as well as the country’s big tourism potential, however, more information is needed.

FOREIGN POLICY

Russia Wants to Check Lugar Laboratory

In Georgia there is a crucial aspect in its successful fight with coronavirus, namely, it is believed to be a top level research facility that is first and foremost connected with the so-called Lugar laboratory. Low mortality rates are directly related to expert studies and research.

During the pandemic crisis the Russian side renewed their own conspiracy theory against Lugar Research Cen-

ter and strongly requested to inspect the laboratory. The ministry of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation made a statement that Russian specialists need to have access to all facilities of the Lugar center in order to examine the activities of the center.

“It’s been already 30 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Russia and Moscow are not our rulers anymore”, - replied Amiran Gamkrelidze, the head of the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC). It seems that tensions are going to intensify in the near future.

The Moldovan Political Chess Game Started

Ludmila Nofit, Foreign Policy Association (Chisinau, Moldova)

Last month the Moldovan society witnessed a series of controversial movements on behalf of the decision makers that left many open questions and debates inside the country and beyond.



President Dodon started campaigning despite all the quarantine restrictions.

Photo by <http://www.presedinte.md/>

DOMESTIC POLICY

Spectacular Political Clashes During the Pandemic Crisis

Despite the whole world is concerned about how to effectively combat the ongoing pandemic crisis and its severe consequences, the President of the Republic Moldova Igor Dodon is carrying out a number of visits outside of Chisinau, obstructing any precautions rules and measures. According to him wearing a face mask [is not mandatory](#), even though he is paying visits to families with children

and elders. However, his careless behavior is strongly criticized by most of the society as irresponsible and endangering people. In the meantime, the number of [confirmed COVID-19 cases is increasing, by May 31 there are 8098 out of which 1564 are medical staff, and 294 deaths](#), double compared to the previous month. Obviously, Igor Dodon is making use of the pandemic crisis building his political image for [the presidential election planned for November 1st 2020](#). At the same time, the Constitutional Court is examining the possibility to hold at once the pres-

idential and snap parliamentary elections in accordance with law, which the parliamentary opposition supports.

Meanwhile, the infodemic issue is another concern for Moldovan society, despite authorities have information from the official and reliable sources only. However, the [misinformation and conspiracy theories](#) are spread by some church representatives. [The Moldovan Christian Orthodox Church on May 19](#) called on the country's leadership to ensure that a potential anti-coronavirus vaccination will be voluntary, claiming conspiracy by a "world anti-Christ system" that will allegedly insert microchips into humans to control them via 5G technology. This statement triggered immediate [critics](#) on behalf of society, high officials including the [Prime-minister Ion Chicu](#), stating the importance of education. Meanwhile, the President Dodon had a biased response to this case. Nevertheless, this issue is of a high concern, with the church interfering in the politics and promoting fake news.

Fighting against infodemic and pandemic crisis represents just one part of the hidden Moldovan political iceberg. The parliament majority of the Democratic and So-

The parliament majority of the Democratic and Socialist parties is becoming more fragile with 52 mandates out of 101 as a number of Democrats left the party and joined the "Pro Moldova" parliamentary group

cialist parties is becoming more fragile with 52 mandates out of 101 as a [number of Democrats left the party](#) and joined the "Pro Moldova" parliamentary group, created by the ex-Speaker and former Democrat Andrian Candu. The later one launched an appeal to the parliamentary opposition to create an "anti-governmental bloc" aimed at bring-

ing down the current Moldovan leadership including the President Dodon, warning him to be prepared for upcoming surprises. And the surprise came out soon enough with a [video record published](#) by the MP Iurie Renita on May 18, exposing the controversial oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc who is offering a bag (allegedly with money) to the President Dodon. Nevertheless, the compromising video cannot be used as a proof to initiate a

criminal case against Igor Dodon, according to the [Prosecutor General Alexander Stoianoglo](#), as it requires necessary expertise on video's authenticity. Dodon [claims](#) that video is a revenge of the oligarchy that lost the power in June 2019. However, the President managed to draw away the society's attention while visiting his potential electorate around the country, strengthening his positions for the presidential elections.

ECONOMY

The Uncertain Finality of the EU Macro Financial Assistance

On May 7, [the Constitutional Court \(CC\) annulled the controversial Russian credit agreement for 200 million Euro](#), declaring it unconstitutional and contrary to the interests of the Republic of Moldova. The President Dodon classified the CC's decision as "[cynical and against its own citizens](#)", exaggerating the consequences of annulling the Russian credit, e.g. cuts of pension and salaries. However, the real purpose of the credit was indeed unclear.

In the meantime, the famous bank theft investigation reappeared in the center of attention. Prosecutor General Alexander Stoianoglo on May 18, [announced](#) that Vladimir Plahotniuc is the one of the main beneficiaries of the billion dollar theft. On May 22, the [Moldovan judges issued](#) an arrest warrant for V. Plahotniuc (in his absence) for involvement in the bank fraud. According to the [expert and ex-minister of finance, Veaceslav Negruta](#), the bank theft case will remain a top issue impacting the budget, as long as the financial burden is on the shoulders of taxpayers, that is until 2041 according to the law adopted in 2016 during the Filip Government. That explains the urgent need

of money recovery, as well the full transparency in investigation and prosecution processes.

In tough times of weak economy affected by the pandemic crisis, the Council of Europe Development Bank approved a loan of [70 million Euro](#) for Moldova, aimed to support the health system and small and medium enterprises, affected by COVID-19. Therefore, the Moldovan authorities have to start the negotiation process in this regard.

On the other hand, the disbursement of the second financial tranche of [30 million Euro approved last year](#), within the EU financial program worth up 100 million Euro, still has an uncertain finality with the Socialist MPs hindering the process. The Deputy Speaker Mihai Popsoi [urged](#) the immediate Parliament convention, since the [institution is in quarantine](#) from May 22. In spite of the presumed excuses of the Socialists that there's a risk of infection after [the four confirmed COVID-19 cases in the Parliament](#), the draft law regulating the activity of the civil society organizations is a real reason for their concern. And the [President Dodon is threatening](#) that even if passed he won't promulgate this law, considering the importance

of so-called charity foundations during the electoral campaigns. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party announced that they will ensure the necessary Parliament majority for adopting laws which are the EU preconditions in order to access the second tranche, including the abrogation of the law on citizenship by investment, the adoption of an action

plan for the reform of justice and the reform of the Superior Council of Magistracy. At the same time, it is not clear if the Moldovan leadership have any chances to access the third tranche worth 40 million Euro, the deadline for which is in July 2020.

FOREIGN POLICY

A Failed Foreign Policy towards Partners

The Moldova's foreign relationships with its traditional development partners have visibly suffered either because of the hidden interests of small political groups, or the lack of political maturity on behalf of the current Moldovan leadership. The latest example is the Facebook dispute between the Prime-Minister Ion Chicu and the Romanian Member of European Parliament, Siegfried Muresan. The later one criticized the Chicu Government that "[failed in the COVID-19 crisis management because it failed in the reform implementation](#)". Nothing surprising at first sight, at least for Moldovan society. However, the Prime-minister Ion Chicu offered an inappropriate [response](#), describing Romania as the most corrupted state in Europe and pointing out that only in Suceava district of Romania the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases is half of what is registered in the entire Moldova. The fevered reactions

came both from Bucharest and Chisinau sides, most of them condemning Chicu's declaration. It stirred up the Romanian foreign office to publish a [reaction](#), considering Chicu's statements derogatory and unacceptable.

That happened after the Romanian government approved the unconditional support for Moldova on April 30 by sending a mission with [42 medical staff](#), for two weeks aimed to help the Moldovan medical staff in fighting the pandemic crisis. Also, on May 7, [20 trucks with medical aid](#) from Bucharest arrived to Chisinau, kindly welcomed by the Moldovan society, but unfriendly by the Moldovan leadership. Deliberately or not, the Moldovan Government decided to keep those trucks away from the city center. Therefore, the welcome ceremony occurred under a bridge at the outskirts of Chisinau, which generated a wave of criticism from the opposition, civil society and internet users.

Ukraine: Diplomatic Actions, Financial Expectations and the President's May Theses

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

May 2020 saw some positive and negative developments in Ukraine. On one hand, two high-profile international scandals with longtime allies, the United States and Georgia, broke. On the other hand, the issues of financial support from the IMF and the EU were settled. However, these complications and progress in foreign policy were both dependent upon the domestic political processes.



President Zelensky's press conference.
Photo by <https://www.president.gov.ua/>

DOMESTIC POLICY

A Year of Zelensky's Presidency: Report and New Initiatives

In May, domestic policy in Ukraine had a certain dynamics that kept the Ukrainians and international observers alert. The report of the sixth President of the country V. Zelensky on the first year of his rule, addressed to the Ukrainian society, became the key political event of the month.

V. Zelensky, in his natural semi-formal style, gave a big press conference for Ukrainian and foreign media in the park of Mariinsky Palace. For more than three hours, the Head of the State was answering journalists' questions. Among many covered topics, the President spoke about the "Minsk process" and the no less complex and tragic Crimean issue. Besides, the President of Ukraine mentioned that the sanctions against the aggressor country, Russia, are tied to both the "Minsk" and the Crimean processes. 'Without a positive for Ukraine solution to these pressing issues no international sanctions against the Russian Federation can be lifted', said V. Zelensky. At least Ukraine is constantly working on keeping it this way.

The President also touched upon the language issue, a sensitive one in Ukraine. In particular, the leader of the state replied: "The language issue in Ukraine... is not on the agenda. This issue is artificial... all the national minorities must know Ukrainian'. However, contrary to President's statement, there were some other trends concern-

ing the Ukrainian language. For example, the speaker of the Parliament [Dmitry Razumkov believes](#) that the current Law "On ensuring the functioning of Ukrainian as the state language" should be changed. The draft law was already submitted to the Parliament, although it will not be considered in the coming days. It can be assumed that the speaker, who belongs to the pro-presidential party "Servant of the People", in such a way tests the public opinion, and the President will formulate his final attitude to the language issue based on the reaction of the Ukrainian politicians and society.

Personnel issues did not go unnoticed by the President as well. [V. Zelensky commented](#) on the accusations of non-transparency of appointments to public positions and said that neither the head of the President's Office nor the first aide influences any personnel decisions: "For all positions we hold interviews, then comes a competition." Thus, [V. Zelensky answered](#) the journalist's question about the fact that the President "surrounded himself with his people".

Although the President's press conference overshadowed other political events, the Ukrainian Parliament did not sit idly by. In mid-May, in the second reading the Parliament passed one of the vital laws — the so-called "banking law" that opens further cooperation with international financial institutions.

ECONOMY

Financial Thaw in Relations with the IMF and the EU

Changes in Ukrainian legislation and the adoption of the "banking law" created the preconditions for a thaw in relations between Ukraine and the IMF. On May 7, Ukraine and the Fund switched from the previously [agreed Extended Fund Facility](#) (EFF) to the 18-month Stand-by program. The volume of loan did not change and will amount to about \$5.5 billion. During the meeting with the Speaker of the Parliament D. Razumkov, [G7 ambassadors emphasized](#) the need for cooperation between Ukraine and the IMF to strengthen democracy and the economy of Ukraine. [It is expected](#) that the decision to allocate the first tranche should be made on June 5.

Some progress was noticed in the financial sphere

of Ukraine–EU relations. First, the EU Representative in Ukraine, Matti Maasikas, [welcomed the adoption](#) of the above-mentioned "banking law", and stressed its importance for continued financial assistance from the EU and the IMF. Secondly, the President of Ukraine V. Zelensky had telephone talks with the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, during which they discussed the provision of 1.2 billion euros macro-financial assistance to Ukraine.

It is already clear that Ukraine will need this money, [as UNICEF estimates that](#), due to COVID-19 crisis, more than 6 million people in Ukraine may find themselves below the poverty rate, the poverty may rise from 27% to 44%, and the Ukrainian economy's losses caused by the quarantine introduction [could amount to \\$50 billion](#).

FOREIGN POLICY

Scandals and Hopes

The beginning of the month was marked with a huge scandal linked both to foreign and domestic policies. In early May, President Zelensky [appointed M. Saakashvili](#), ex-president of Georgia convicted in his home country, as

the head of the executive committee of Ukraine's National Reform Council (a subsidiary body of the Ukrainian leader). Such a decision of the Ukrainian side was not welcome in Tbilisi. [Georgia decided](#) to recall the Ambassador for consultations. The only thing that gives reason for optimism in this situation is the fact that there is no talk about the

revision of bilateral relations between the countries or the termination of diplomatic relations.

Even larger scandal was caused by the so-called “Derkach tapes”, the recordings of alleged talks between the previous President of Ukraine P. Poroshenko and then Vice-President of the United States, and now the leading candidate for the President of the United States from the Democratic Party J. Biden. The scandal was caused not so much by the records as by V. Zelensky’s statement that these records could be qualified as a treason by P. Poroshenko. Washington reacted to the President’s of Ukraine statement extremely vehement-

Sanctions against the aggressor country, Russia, are tied to both the “Minsk” and the Crimean processes and will not be lifted without a positive for Ukraine solution to these pressing issues

ly. Some [former US ambassadors to Ukraine called](#) for Ukraine not to interfere in the internal affairs of the United States, and [according to unofficial information](#), the State Department urged Kyiv not to interfere in the US presidential race.

Among the positives in foreign policy, one can name the first post-quarantine visit paid by the Minister for Foreign Af-

fairs of Ukraine D. Kuleba to Budapest. [According to the minister](#), with this visit, the parties have demonstrated their readiness to seek common solutions, which is undoubted progress against the background of recent cool relations between Ukraine and Hungary.

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www.prismua.org



Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) is an independent think-tank, founded in 2007 by a group of leading scientists and civil activists. BISS's mission is to provide a holistic picture of socio-political processes in Belarus based on empiric studies.

<https://belinstitute.com/>



The Regional Studies Center (Armenia) is an independent think tank based in Armenia. The RSC conducts a wide range of strategic analysis and objective research, implements a number of educational and policy-related projects, and develops policy initiatives aimed at bolstering political and economic reform and conflict resolution in the broader South Caucasus region.

www.regional-studies.org



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

www.ei-lat.ge



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

www.ape.md