

family values      mass protests  
**covid-19 pandemic**  
anti-chinese sentiments  
third revolution      karabakh war  
istanbul convention

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STRATEG**EAST**  
**WESTERNIZATION**  
**REPORT**  
**2021**

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female-led government  
**fighting corruption**  
**economic crisis**  
coronavirus denial  
**donbas** negotiations  
digital transformation



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# ABOUT STRATEG EAST

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StrategEast center for a new economy has the mission to reinforce the values of the rule of law and private property protection in Eurasian and Baltic countries through the transition from natural-resource-based to knowledge-driven economies.

Its work is focused on the 14 countries that proclaimed or restored their independence after the collapse of the USSR: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

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# INTRODUCTION



Photo by Alexander Kozachenko

There is no doubt that COVID-19 became the symbol of 2020 in Eurasia – and the whole world. Directly or indirectly, the COVID-19 pandemic has become one of the key triggers of socio-political changes in the countries of Eurasia.

The pandemic has become a stress test for economic and political systems but, above all, for the current system of relations between states and citizens. The indirect consequences of the pandemic revealed many contradictions that required immediate resolution. First, the pandemic affected the economic situation – exacerbating the economic crises in remittances dependent countries (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova) and countries that started (but did not complete) the transition to fully market relations (Belarus and Ukraine), causing an economic crisis in countries whose economies are tourism-oriented (Georgia).

The governments had to take emergency measures to save the market economy and, at the same time, provide equally urgent measures of social support. So far, we can not only predict the long-term economic consequences for the countries of Eurasia, but we can even calculate the direct economic damage. Nevertheless, we can say that in some countries, the pressure was so high that, instead of delayed consequences, it led to an immediate social explosion.

Among the events selected by our experts as key for the countries of Eurasia, there was an unprecedented similarity of events related to the use of force: the revolutions in Kyrgyzstan and Belarus, as well as the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which led to an attempt to overthrow the government in Armenia. The coronavirus pandemic, which led to an increase in unemployment and restrictions on travel, has exacerbated the previously accumulated contradictions within countries or between countries and has led to the implementation of force scenarios.

**However, at the same time, the COVID-19 crisis indicated the path of development of the Eurasian countries' economies, which has potential in the future. This path is the digital economy.**

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After the transition to remote work, the IT industry both in the world and in the countries of Eurasia continued to grow, and in the countries where it was sufficiently developed (the Baltic countries, Belarus, and Ukraine) it served as a shock absorber for the economic crisis.

Even though, due to a large number of revolutionary and military events throughout the year, digital transformation was only chosen as the main topic in our report for Uzbekistan, we cannot fail to note the efforts of many Eurasian countries' governments, who, during the COVID-19 crisis, saw the high potential of digital transformation and made significant steps toward ways to develop the knowledge economy.

Some changes in Georgia should also be highlighted. Realizing that the lost revenues from tourism will not recover quickly, the Georgian government declared the IT industry the third pillar of the economy, along with tourism and agriculture, and introduced a special reduced tax rate for IT export companies. Due to these measures, the country has already attracted several global IT companies to the local market. Ukraine began to prepare a major reform of the IT industry: local government has developed a law on the introduction of a special legal regime for IT companies called "Diia City," which, if adopted, will allow Ukraine to turn from an outsourcing country into an Eastern European Silicon Valley with numerous R&D centers.

In 2020, at numerous online conferences on digital transformation, which I participated in,

it was often cited that "during the year of the pandemic, so many plans for digital transformation were implemented, which would otherwise have taken 10 years to complete." In my opinion, another consequence of the pandemic, which we partly see in this Westernization Report 2021 and the reflection of which we will be able to see in full in the Westernization Index 2022, is the acceleration of economic systems reforms in most Eurasian countries. Unlike digital transformation, the leadership of Eurasian countries may not have intended to carry out these reforms in the next 10 years either, or ever, but the new economic reality forced them to take these crucial steps towards a market economy, transparency, and good governance.

Overall, the Report showed how the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted other, social and economic diseases in Eurasian societies. And just as the world community helped the countries of Eurasia to fight the pandemic, it should help Eurasia to find vaccines against these diseases.

Sincerely,  
Anatoly Motkin,  
President, StrategEast



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# ARMENIA:

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## War with Azerbaijan Weakened Relations with the West

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### **Boris Navasardian**

On November 9, 2020, President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev, Armenian Prime-Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a trilateral statement on the cessation of combat hostility in Nagorno-Karabakh and the deployment of Russian peacekeeping forces along the line of contact. The 44-day bloody war resulted in the transfer of control over significant territories in the region to Azerbaijan. In Armenia, such an outcome is rightfully perceived as a severe defeat. Huge losses and destruction have become the biggest shocks over 30 years of independent Armenian statehood. How Armenia copes with this blow and what role external factors play in this will determine its future, including geopolitical and civilizational orientations.

In this context, some Western experts note a significant risk. While Azerbaijan is strongly and comprehensively supported by Turkey, which has declared a return to the imperial Ottoman past, the defeat of the democratically elected government taken from authoritarian Azerbaijan can be seen as an argument in favor of the incompatibility of democracy with national security. And the fact that only Russia, which intends to restore its influence on the post-Soviet area, was able to stop the war has raised the issue of the rights of small states to a sovereign choice of paths to develop, independent of strong patrons.

The efforts of the United States and France as co-chairs (together with the Russian Federation) of the OSCE Minsk Group to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict did not lead to an armistice. It caused significant damage to the collective West's author-



 Image source: Damian Pankowicz / Shutterstock.com



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ity in the region and in Armenia, above all. From the Yerevan point of view, today's South Caucasus is divided between Russia and Turkey, while the relative peace achieved on November 9 is temporary and fragile. Contrary to the previous post-Soviet times, the choice no longer lies between the Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic projects, but between these two countries. In this case, it is definite for Armenia.

During the war, Yerevan made certain efforts to engage the peacemaking potential of the West, which could have a fundamental impact on sentiments in Armenian society. On October 21, the President of RA (Republic of Armenia), Armen Sargsyan, visited Brussels, where he met with European Union and NATO leaders. However, pleas for peace made during this visit were unsuccessful. The earlier visit of now-former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, Zohrab Mnatsakanyan, timed to coincide with the peacekeeping initiative of the Donald Trump administration, did not lead to a cessation of hostilities either.

Despite the irreversibility of the war results (at this stage), the Armenian authorities continue to pay great importance to the assessments made by the West. Yerevan welcomed the Dutch parliament's initiatives to introduce individual sanctions against Azerbaijani officials for war crimes on the conflicted territory, and both chambers of French legislators recognized the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. Such actions taken by the Western countries can strengthen the positions of those Armenian socio-political circles that want to see an alternative to the unstable balance between the ambitions of Moscow and Ankara regarding the area.

At the same time, Russia has been taking large-scale practical steps to strengthen its presence from the first days of the ceasefire. On November 21, a delegation of Russian representatives visited Armenia and Azerbaijan. The delegation included Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu; Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov; Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk, responsible, in particular, for Eurasian

integration; and a number of heads of other ministries and state agencies. The visit was followed by restoration works and medical support in the conflicted area, in addition to the peacekeeping operation itself. Turkey also did not sit back and tried to compensate for its formal non-participation in negotiations by strengthening its military presence in Azerbaijan and along the western borders of Armenia. Moreover, unlike in previous years, Ankara's role cannot be assessed as a kind of Euro-Atlantic representative. Today Turkey is more of an antipode to the agent of westernization.

**During the post-Soviet years, the Republic of Armenia has been striving to combine, on the one hand, external security, and, on the other, the creation of the foundation for development. In this case, the solution to the first issue was associated mainly with the Russian integration initiatives and the second one – through interaction with the West.**

The main obstacles to the successful conduct of the so-called "complementary" policy were the conflict with the eastern neighbor, Azerbaijan, and historical contradictions with the western neighbor, Turkey. Failure to find a compromise between them back in the 1990s prevented Armenia from getting involved in large-scale regional projects on

**Is the roadmap implementation for the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement between the EU and the RA, approved in June 2019, relevant in the context of a new war in Karabakh?**

The Armenia-European Union CEPA implementation roadmap will not be affected by the recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh.

**Anna A. Naghdalyan**

**Spokesperson**

**Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia**

oil, gas, and transport communications, and agreeing on the opening of the terrestrial border with Turkey. The USA made energetic efforts on both issues, hoping thereby to bring Yerevan closer to the West. However, all of them reached a dead end.

The greatest chances for breaking this deadlock were in 2008-2009 when the “football diplomacy” initiated by Armenia led to the signing of protocols on the normalization of bilateral relations with Turkey.<sup>1</sup> However, Ankara’s submission of an additional requirement for Yerevan (not stipulated by the protocols) to de facto abandon Nagorno-Karabakh led to the denunciation of the documents signed in Zurich. And as further events showed, with the coming changes in Turkish policy the protocols had no prospects from the day they were signed.

Armenia’s next chance to “open a window” into the West occurred thanks to the initiative of the European Union’s “Eastern Partnership.” In 2013, Yerevan and Brussels completed negotiations and were ready to sign the Association Agreement, but because of obvious pressure from Moscow, RA President Serzh Sargsyan dropped out. And again the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh, along with some other issues, played its hidden

but significant role. Two months before this, Russia agreed to supply Azerbaijan with offensive weapons worth approximately USD 5 billion. There could be no doubt that this was an important stage in Baku’s preparation for the war over the conflicted territory. Thus, being the only guarantor of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians’ right to live on their land, Armenia had to fulfill Moscow’s conditions in order to acquire relatively equivalent weapons at discounted prices provided for members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

In November 2017, Armenia signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU, which differed from the draft of the Association Agreement. Despite the main distinction, which did not allow Armenia’s entering of a free-trade area, it still revived hopes for deepening westernization in all spheres.<sup>2</sup> As expected, the Armenian “Velvet Revolution” in April-May 2018 served as an additional impetus for the agenda of the Agreement. Yet the new Armenian government turned out to be extremely ineffective in their interaction with European structures and showed indecisiveness regarding the matter of institutional reforms.

Amendments to the Electoral Code were never adopted, even though work on them began immediately after the change of government in 2018. In 2020, the government finally abandoned the vetting of judges, which in 2018 was declared as a key element of the judicial reform.<sup>3</sup> The process of institutionalizing an anti-corruption policy has been delayed: the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, formed in 2019, remained understaffed for months; the creation of a multifunctional anti-corruption committee and a specialized anti-corruption court was also delayed for an indefinite period of time; and such circumstances cast a shadow of doubt on the effective, impeccable, and legal application of the Law on Confiscation of Ill-Earned Assets, adopted in January 2020.

The negative conclusions made by the Corruption Prevention Commission did not affect the parliamentary majority voting for candidates for

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new members of the RA Constitutional Court. As a result, the two-year confrontation between the country's political leadership and individual members of this supreme judicial body ended with the formation of the Constitutional Court, which has even less civil society trust than before.

The inconsistency in the implementation of institutional reforms and the strengthening of the rule of law led to a dead end, and specific investigations against the representatives of the former corrupt government transformed the related legal proceedings into the fruitless settling of political scores. In addition, a lack of proper mutual understanding with the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe revealed itself in the battles over the Constitutional Court and individual court cases.

Collaboration on the implementation of reforms, stipulated by CEPA, with the EU institutions was almost ceased. The content of the CEPA implementation roadmap, which was approved with a one-year delay in June 2019, was minimally reflected in the national strategies and concepts adopted by the government. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely influenced the intensity of the relations between Yerevan and Brussels, forcing all the countries to focus on their own problems. Thus, the integrational processes were put on the backburner. Besides, Armenia did not even use the already available possibilities and almost excluded itself from the active membership of the EU "Team Europe" initiative, which implied consolidating efforts to oppose the new coronavirus. In recent years cooperation with the EU has been the main stimulus

for the westernization of various spheres of the country's life. All of the above is evidence of a gradual decline in the level of its interaction with the West, primarily in the political as well as legal spheres.

The lack of results from reforms and the vulnerability of the new authorities against criticism allowed their ill-wishers, both from inside and outside the country, to easily discredit Nikol Pashinyan and his political team. For criticism, they used the widely exploited and artificially constructed stereotypes of the government as an executor of the external forces' will and a traitor of the national interests, which proved their viability in other countries. This phenomenon strengthened the ground for the spreading of conservative views, which also did not advance society's westernization. The defeat in the war added relevance to Pashinyan's accusations of betrayal and demands for his government's resignation.

At the same time, the sharp political discrepancy contributed to an atmosphere of openness, pluralism, as well as to the penetration of elements of the European lifestyle – especially among youth. During the war and after the cease-fire declaration, Armenian society demonstrated an unprecedented ability to self-organize and form massive volunteer and charitable initiatives in order to support those who suffered from hostilities and territorial losses. This is the foundation on which value priorities of the free world will be able to be relied upon in the future, in case of favorable geopolitical circumstances.

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# AZERBAIJAN:

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## The Deployment of Peacekeeping Troops Increased Russian Influence over Caucasus

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**Gubad Ibadoghlu**

The Karabakh conflict, which began in 1988 as a consequence of national confrontation during the Soviet era, turned into a war for territory for political purposes after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The First Karabakh War led to a catastrophic humanitarian crisis in Azerbaijan. As a result of talks, a ceasefire was reached on the frontline on May 12, 1994. Since then, the ceasefire has been repeatedly violated. On September 27, 2020, the

silence was broken again and the second Karabakh war broke out.<sup>7</sup> The Second Karabakh War has had a serious impact on the political course of the governments in the region, the economies of the countries, and the behavior of the citizens.

### AN IMPACT ON THE POLITICAL COURSE

Termination of the war by the Joint Statement of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, and the President of the Russian Federation; the



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subsequent achievement of a ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh; and the deployment of Russian troops in the conflict zone under the guise of peacekeeping forces increased the northern neighbor's influence and control over the region and the dependence of Azerbaijan and Armenia on Russia.

The fact that the signed statement serves the purpose of the ceasefire for now and the failure to conclude a final peace agreement suggests that tensions and uncertainty in the region will continue for a long time. Russian peacekeepers' control over the behavior of the parties in the conflict for at least five years and the regulation of military-political and transport communication relations in the region will expand Russia's participation in making policy decisions in both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Due to the interests in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is considered a primary problem that needs to be addressed for both countries, Azerbaijan and Armenia will not be able to implement serious projects in the near future without reckoning with the Kremlin. This will lead to changes in their foreign policy, such that Azerbaijan, which is forced to coordinate its foreign policy discussions with Moscow and Ankara, will have to balance its geostrategic interests between Russia and Turkey. The lack of interest of both countries in the course of integration with Europe, as well as the coldness of relations with the West, will affect the foreign policy priorities of Azerbaijan, which is dependent on both its northern and southern neighbors, and Azerbaijan will most likely leave its course towards integration into the Euro-Atlantic space incomplete. Azerbaijan, which is working on a strategic partnership agreement with the European Union, will postpone this work for an indeterminate period.

Anti-Azerbaijani positions and calls from the West during the 44-day war, including the pro-Armenian positions of the OSCE Minsk Group's cochairs as well as calls for sanctions against Azerbaijan and Turkey and the recognition of Na-

gorno-Karabakh in the US House of Representatives<sup>8</sup> at the federal level; in Michigan,<sup>9</sup> New Jersey,<sup>10</sup> and California<sup>11</sup> states; in the European Parliament; in the French Senate;<sup>12</sup> and in the German,<sup>13</sup> Belgian,<sup>14</sup> and Dutch<sup>15</sup> parliaments not only lead to changes in Azerbaijan's foreign policy but also to the development of anti-Western sentiment among the population. Such that support for Azerbaijan's position during the war only by Turkey, Israel, Pakistan, Ukraine, and Georgia as well as unfounded criticism in the US Department of State,<sup>16</sup> which is one of the leading Western countries, as well as in the European Union,<sup>17</sup> Canada,<sup>18</sup> France,<sup>19</sup> Germany,<sup>20</sup> and Greece,<sup>21</sup> and the ineffectiveness of discussions in the UN Security Council<sup>22</sup> will not only weaken the course of integration with the West but also reduce confidence in international law.

#### AN IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY, TRADE AND INVESTMENT POLICY

As for economic effects, this war will undoubtedly have effects on the economy of Azerbaijan. Even in the postwar period, rising military, social, and health spending in Azerbaijan will limit the ability of the state budget to allocate sufficient funds to other important areas. The government will feel this difficulty significantly during the formation of the 2021 budget. On the other hand, investments in the restoration of dilapidated infrastructure for Azerbaijan, as well as housing for IDPs returning home, will increase government spending and investment in the economy. Despite the fact that it will stimulate economic growth with the approach of Keynesian economists,<sup>23</sup> it can be concluded that meeting the costs of military spending in the medium and long term creates additional challenges for the economy.

As for investment and trade relations, changes in foreign policy will lead to significant changes in international trade relations and investment cooperation. The current situation in Nagorno-

**The Karabakh war will hurt the Doing Business and Credit rating for Azerbaijan. What measures does the Azerbaijani government plan to neutralize such negative effects?**

The temporary effect that the conflict may have on ratings is mainly due to uncertainty. However, today, after the cease of hostilities agreement is signed, the actual uncertainty is much lower than during the last years.

The scenario in which Armenia or Azerbaijan starts a war today is much less probable than during any given year of the last three decades. This marginal probability is likely to decrease as time passes from the peace deal. So, I would strongly disagree with the above take on the situation.

The post-war realities contain more opportunities than risks. An infrastructure

rehabilitation program will be implemented to the highest standards in the territories returned to Azerbaijan, and they will be re-populated by the Azerbaijani people. Agricultural lands, water resources and gold mines have returned to the Azerbaijani economy, and there are little to no factors today stopping Azerbaijan from active inclusion of the above in its local economy.

Regarding certainty in general, Azerbaijan remains adept of a conservative economic regulator with low external debt (one of the lowest versus GDP) and relatively large reserves. The COVID-19 effect on the economy is around -3.8% on GDP, which is one of the lowest.

**Emil Majidov**

**Advisor to Minister of Economy of Azerbaijan**

Karabakh will also have a significant impact on the region's international and domestic integration processes. Nevertheless, the Second Karabakh War will not lead to significant changes in the composition of Azerbaijan's export trading partners; Italy, Turkey, and Israel will remain the main buyers of oil and gas. As for imports, Russia, Turkey, and China will continue to be the main trading partners, but trade relations with Western countries, which are ranking in the next places, are expected to weaken.<sup>24</sup> Most likely, in the near future, Azerbaijan will continue to purchase innovative equipment and weapons (PUA, radio-technical observation and reconnaissance equipment) from Turkey and Israel, and traditional equipment and weapons (armored military vehicles, missiles, etc.) from Russia to renew and modernize the lost military equipment and machinery. This will lead to a reduction in the share

of Western countries in the composition of imports, including arms imports.

Although Azerbaijan is in dire need of Western technology in the context of investment cooperation, it will not be easy to attract investment from the West during the postwar period, especially in the liberated territories. Such that Russia's deployment of troops to Karabakh under the guise of peacekeeping and the possibility of establishing a military base in the region in the future will undoubtedly worsen Azerbaijan's credit rating, investment attractiveness, and business index.

Article 9 of the joint statement signed by Russia with the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia states<sup>25</sup> that "All economic and transport links in the region shall be unblocked. The Republic of Armenia shall provide for transport communication between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous

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Republic in order to organize the unhindered movement of citizens, vehicles, and goods in both directions. Control over transport shall be exercised by the bodies of the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia. By agreement of the Parties, the construction of new transport communications linking the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic with the western regions of Azerbaijan shall be provided.” Thus, Russia, which has taken control of key transport and communications in the South Caucasus, will be able to influence the global freight chain, such as the international North-South and regional East-West transport corridors. Russia can achieve this by controlling access to the transport hubs passing through Khudafarin and Nakhchivan and can easily provide access to the Middle East by controlling the means of transport and communication in these areas. This will bring Russia closer to its main geopolitical goal in the South.

In this case, the importance of the existing international transport infrastructure between Georgia and Azerbaijan, which is more integrated into the West in the region, decreases for both countries. At the same time, keeping the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict frozen increases the stress and risks of attracting foreign investment to the region. These risks will lead to foreign exchange outflows from the country, a negative impact on the value of the national currency and a sovereign credit rating.

To neutralize the negative effects in this direction, the way out of the crisis for the Azerbaijani government is to liberalize the economy through reforms, open regional trade, increase capital mobility through privatization of state property, and eliminate corruption and monopolies. The effectiveness of structural changes in this area by the government, which was preparing for large-scale privatization before the war, depends on the involvement of institutional investors in the process. The above also applies to attracting healthy investors to privatization.

**It is obvious that the Russian factor in Karabakh increases the risks in both the domestic policy and the foreign policy of Azerbaijan. Russia must leave the region in order to eliminate these risks and continue Azerbaijan’s pro-Western policy. Otherwise, rapprochement with the European Union and, in the long run, joining NATO and this union will be nothing but meaningless talks between Azerbaijan and the European Union.**

On November 18, the Minsk Group’s cochairs from the United States and France met with their colleagues in Moscow.<sup>26</sup> It is too late for the West to understand this one week after the signing of the ceasefire agreement in Nagorno-Karabakh because Russian “peacekeepers” are already in the South Caucasus region. It is also a sign that democratic changes will not take place in Azerbaijan. In this case, the only promising ally for the West in the South Caucasus is Georgia, where government revenues are mainly from transit revenues and are declining.

In addition, France’s extremely harsh anti-Azerbaijani stance on the Second Karabakh

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War, the Dutch parliament's decision to impose sanctions on Turkey and Azerbaijan, and threats from the United States have strengthened anti-Western public opinion.

### AN IMPACT ON BEHAVIOR OF THE CITIZENS

During the war, there were calls to boycott fast-food companies such as McDonald's, Burger King, and Papa John's operating in Azerbaijan by refraining from buying products belonging to these companies. Even though McDonald's wrote "Karabakh is Azerbaijan!" with a map of Azerbaijan and flags by delivering a message of support to the local audience since the beginning of the war, after, this message of support was met with "surprise" in the Russian and Armenian media, and even by several news websites, McDonald's rejected the post – the

slogan "Karabakh is Azerbaijan!" – and was met with widespread protest.<sup>27</sup>

In a survey<sup>28</sup> conducted by Kanal 13 (Azerbaijan) among 5,400 respondents to the question "What is your attitude to the peace agreement signed on the Karabakh issue?", 57% of the participants answered, "I consent with the agreement but the arrival of the Russian army in Karabakh is a bad thing"; 22% answered, "I do not consent with the agreement, it was necessary to go to any lengths and liberate Khankendi"; 14% answered, "I support peace, in all cases, peace is better than war"; 6% answered, "I am satisfied with the agreement: we have taken back most of the land, I consent with"; and 1% answered, "I'm not interested, this is not my war, I do not interfere with."

More than half of the respondents were satisfied with the agreement signed between Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia but condemned the arrival of the Russian army in Karabakh.



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# BELARUS:

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## Mass Protests Showed Society's Commitment to Democracy

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### Sergiy Solodkyy

Mass protests against Alexander Lukashenka, who has been in power in Belarus since 1994, have become a crucial stage in the country's sociopolitical development. Outside observers, who followed the presidential elections in the country in August 2020, did not doubt that this time the CEC (Central Election Commission) would declare Lukashenka the winner. With complete control over the "power vertical," the complete absence of independent monitoring of the elections, and the absolute dominance in the information field,

one could hardly count on a different outcome of the "Lukashenka election."

The mass protests have become a personal surprise for the seemingly permanent president; also, the mass protests were no less a surprise for neighboring states, which were initially caught off guard and did not know how to react (especially in Ukraine and partly in Russia). The most consistent and strong support for the Belarusian society came from Poland and Lithuania. Countries that had experienced revolutionary events several decades earlier (Polish strikes in the early 1980s and anti-Soviet protests in Vilnius in 1990)



 Image source: Andrei Bortnikau / shutterstock.com

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immediately declared their endorsement for the anti-Lukashenka movement. For a long time, such basic characteristics of the westernization process as free elections, independent mass media, political competition, or the rule of law turned out to be unfamiliar to Belarusian citizens.

Thus, in the latest Westernization Index, out of 14 studied countries in the region, Belarus took 11th place – even some Central Asian countries have outrun this country. Only Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan that took the last three positions in the rating could not compete. In the section “Political Westernization” Belarus received the lowest scores. In terms of the level of political freedom in 2019, the country was noted 2.5 points out of possible 10. There were almost no pro-Western politicians in the Belarusian parliament (1.5 points out of 8). Only the moderate pro-Western sentiments of Belarusian society minorly aided in this section (therefore receiving 3 points out of 7).

Anti-Western rhetoric has become an integral part of Lukashenka’s messages for most of his presidency; although there were some periods when political statements were no less critical towards Russia.<sup>29</sup> Russian television also helped to form a hostile image of the West among the population of the country. After the start of unprecedented protests in Belarus, anti-Western messages became more intense. Just a few examples of these messages included:<sup>30</sup>

- Belarusian protests are organized and coordinated by the West.
- The aggressive West wants to undermine friendly relations between Belarus and Russia.
- NATO is building up its military potential to take control over Belarus.
- The Belarusian opposition is a Western puppet.

This kind of rhetoric was primarily aimed at Russia in order to get its support to retain power. Meanwhile, in recent years, Alexander Lukashenka has tried to establish cooperation, primarily with the European Union. European countries even agreed to slightly soften their

strict policy towards the Belarusian authorities. In this context, there was a sharp aggravation of contradictions between Minsk and Moscow – Lukashenka openly criticized the Russian authorities’ policy, which, in his opinion, violated the agreements in the economic sphere. But a conditional honeymoon between the EU and Belarus did not last long; it was thwarted by yet more repressive measures against the political opponents of Alexander Lukashenka.

For the first time, the EU imposed sanctions against the Belarusian authorities in 2004 in response to the disappearance of four opposition activists.<sup>31</sup> Later, several new waves of restrictive measures took place after other attacks against peaceful protesters – in 2004, 2006,<sup>32</sup> 2010,<sup>33</sup> 2011,<sup>34</sup> and 2012.<sup>35</sup> The release of political prisoners in 2015 led to the EU softening the sanctions regime a little – 170 people and three companies were removed from the “blacklist.”<sup>36</sup> These events created specific conditions for more productive relations between the EU and the country’s civil society. Improving the dialogue with the West, as noted by observers, was essential for Alexander Lukashenka for more effective negotiations with Vladimir Putin (for example, on the issue of energy supplies and related taxes). For the first time, Minsk aimed to find a balance in foreign policy after the war between Georgia and Russia in 2008 – a year later, Belarus was included in the “Eastern Partnership” program of the European Union. Russia’s aggressive actions against Ukraine could also have forced the Belarusian leadership to seek a competent counterbalance to the more assertive Kremlin policy.<sup>37</sup> The recent years’ balancing principle could open a window of opportunity for the country’s pro-democratic movement. For example, in 2018, Belarus decided to decriminalize the activity of political parties and civil society organizations without official registration.<sup>38</sup>

Simultaneously, the informational discourse and the personal rhetoric of Alexander Lukashenka evidently changed in 2020. At the beginning of

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August, he accused Moscow of interfering in internal affairs, called his political opponents “Russia’s puppets,” and accused the Kremlin of preparing a special operation to overthrow him. A few days after the elections, Russia became his main ally and support, and all media and diplomatic resources were devoted to “denouncing” the West.

Stability is the key argument of the Belarusian authorities regarding the undesirable political changes in the state. Lukashenka’s camp tried to build its dialogue with citizens based on some kind of social contract: the political class ensures economic stability; citizens, on the other hand, accept the condition of political stability, that is, the irremovability of the ruling elite. Belarus, indeed, showed good indicators in terms of living standards, compared to other countries of the former Soviet Union. According to statistics, in 2019, the largest number of unemployed among the CIS countries was in Russia and the smallest in Belarus. Belarus also ranks high in the level of average wages – almost USD 550, with only Russia left behind.<sup>39</sup> However, the truth is that a year later, in the fall of 2020, this figure dropped to USD 484.<sup>40</sup> The narrative about Belarusian stability was strong and widespread – not only in Belarus itself, but also, for example, in neighboring Ukraine, whose citizens had the greatest confidence in Alexander Lukashenka among all the foreign leaders.<sup>41</sup> In this way, in the minds of the region’s citizens, some kind of antagonism was built: westernization and democratization lead to ruin and poverty, while the authoritarian model contributes to more successful socio-economic development.

The reckoning of the Belarusian elites failed in 2020 when it turned out that a significant part of the country’s society was not going to tolerate the order that Alexander Lukashenka had been diligently creating for a quarter of a century. Neither total control in politics and the media nor the atmosphere of fear, which is inherent to closed societies, could stop the massive protests endorsed by many Western governments. So far, few studies that ana-

lyze the impact of Western values in general and individual initiatives to support the country’s civil society. The fact that draws attention is that Belarusian oppositionists are trying to set their protest movement aside as something unique, not related to the past democratic revolutions in the region. The most frequently drawn opposition in this context is “Belarus is not Ukraine.” It looks like this is the way the demonstrators have reacted to informational attacks that the revolution was directed by the West and would inevitably lead to bloodshed.

**In this context, the opposition especially emphasized that while in Ukraine the “Maidans” (revolutionary events) were of a vivid geopolitical nature (in this case, pro-Western), in Belarus these protests do not concern foreign policy, but declare the intent to implement changes without any external interference. At the same time, representatives of the country’s opposition movement sought help either from Western capitals or Moscow to launch an internal dialogue between the protesters and the authorities.**

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Apparently, in the ranks of the opposition, two factors were taken into account: first, the Kremlin would not have allowed another pro-Western government in its sphere of influence as a result of the revolution; second, many Belarusians still maintain close relations with Russia. On August 19, the Coordination Council (the representative body of the Belarusian opposition) made it clear in the adopted resolution that it “does not set the goal of changing the constitutional order and course of foreign policy.”<sup>42</sup> This means that at this stage, the Belarusian democratic movement does not question either the country’s membership in the Union with Russia or membership in the Eurasian Union or in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, where Moscow also plays a central role. In September 2020, the Coordination Council also published an appeal to the Russian public and officials, where the following emphasis was made: this body “... had never and does not aim to worsen relations between Belarus and Russia.”<sup>43</sup>

As sociological polls show in recent years, public opinion in Belarus has inclined more towards cooperation development with the European Union. Every year, integration with associations, where Moscow plays the central role, has been losing support from the Belarusian society. This can be largely explained by the Russian policy of economic blackmail, which created a corresponding informational tone. Thus, during 2019, the number of supporters of an alliance with Russia in Belarus fell from 60% to 40%. At the same time, there was an increase in pro-European sympathy from 24% to 32% during the same period.<sup>44</sup> Another poll has shown that almost 90% of Belarusians have a positive or neutral attitude towards the EU. Only 10% have a negative attitude. 51% of the country’s population trusted the EU (4% more than in 2018), which exceeded the number of those who trusted the Eurasian Union (48%).<sup>45</sup> Another significant trend is that in 2020, the number of supporters of an alliance with Russia began to decrease in Belarus. So, while in Sep-

tember 51.6% of respondents still supported such an alliance, in November only 40% did.<sup>46</sup>

Despite moderately cold political relations between Belarus and the USA and the EU, some Western institutions tried, in every possible way, to help the civil society of the country, where opposition to the authorities was associated with significant risks. On the one hand, financial support was provided for projects that were often forced to be implemented in neighboring Poland or Lithuania. On the other hand, numerous educational and scientific programs were established. Among other things, Western countries provided political asylum for those Belarusians who fled from persecution in their state. Among others, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, Lukashenka’s rival in the last presidential elections, moved to Lithuania.

Belarus was considered a rather mobile state in terms of travel to the European Union in the pre-pandemic period. For many years, Belarus was the country with the highest number of Schengen visas received per capita. In 2019, the number of applications for Schengen visas in Belarus reached almost 650 thousand. Such visits also may have played a certain role: they allowed Belarusians to compare how freedom and stability are correlated in the EU countries and Belarus. Naturally, not in favor of the latter, the EU countries have shown that irremovability of the authorities is not a prerequisite for the successful economic development of the country. Since July 2020, Belarus has also achieved a simplification of the visa regime with the EU (with visa fees being significantly decreased). The biggest number of visas was issued by the embassies of neighboring Lithuania and Poland. These two countries have taken a decisive position in the European Union to support the pro-democratic movement in Belarus. These states have previously made an important contribution to the development of Belarusian civil society. Thus, the Belarusian-language channel “Bel-sat” was created in 2007 due to the initiative and support of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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The creators of the Nexta Telegram channel, the main mobilization mouthpiece for the protests, also lived in Poland. After being closed by the Belarusian authorities in 2004, the private European Humanities University continued its work in Vilnius (95% of university students are citizens of Belarus). Since 2009, Erasmus+ has organized more than three thousand exchanges for students and teachers between Belarus and the EU.<sup>47</sup>

The protests against Lukashenka marked a turning point in the post-Soviet history of Bela-

rus. It is not only the outcome of oppositional actions that matters but also the fact of public disobedience, which testifies to serious changes in Belarusian civic behavior. Many observers called Belarus the “frozen Soviet Union” and “the preserve of Soviet history.” Incidentally, this is the only country among the former Soviet Republics that kept the Soviet flag as a state flag (with minor alterations). As we can see from the Belarusian example, society is more westernized than the state.

# ESTONIA:

## Populists Incite Battle over Family Values

**Maiti Vilson**

Following the general elections in spring 2019 in Estonia, a coalition government consisting of the left-leaning Centre Party (Keskerakond), the populist radical right Conservative People's Party of Estonia (Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond or EKRE), and the right-wing Christian democratic Pro Patria (Isamaa) took office. The move, which outmanoeuvred the winner of the elections – the liberal Reform Party, brought far-right populists into Estonian government for the first time.

On January 13, 2021, Prime Minister Jüri Ratas (Centre Party) resigned due to a corruption scandal involving his party, which also led to the dissolution of the government. On the same day, the

second reading of the draft resolution on holding a referendum on the issue of the definition of marriage was not supported by the Parliament. However, some parties have already moved to submit an alternative bill on marriage equality, which may indicate that the debate on the issue in Estonia is far from over.

By triggering and exploiting the nationalist and anti-establishment sentiment in society, EKRE has become the third most popular party in the country, consistently gathering about 15-20% of the popular support. One of the cornerstones of their policy portfolio is an emphasis on (the return to) traditional values, which has been manifested through the proposal to hold a referendum in spring 2021 over the constitutional definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman.



Image source: Olha Tytska / shutterstock.com

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## THE RISE OF POPULISM IN ESTONIA

The rise of EKRE is characteristic of a wider development in the context of the populist wave in Europe and the US. Similarly to other countries, the emergence of populism in Estonia can be associated with the popular disillusionment with the political elites, the persistence (and rise) of socio-economic insecurity, and the ensuing clash of values in the society. Estonia has been championed as the most democratic and neoliberal country that has managed to overcome much of its Soviet legacy and successfully complete its transition to democracy. However, as in other countries, the process has not been so straightforward in reality.

The challenges of the democratic transition that began in the 1990s brought along changes on the societal as well as institutional level and resulted in social inequality which gave rise to the anti-establishment sentiment. The expectations after joining the EU and NATO in 2004 were high, only to discover that international achievements would not immediately solve all domestic problems. Along with socio-economic transformation, social liberal values such as gender equality and LGBTQI rights came to the fore. The frustration over rapid social change, coupled with the impact of the financial crises, which indicated the failure of capitalism, resulted in a significant rise in protest votes among the parts of society that were left feeling vulnerable and marginalized by the political elite.

While EKRE was established in 2012 through a merger between a nationalist party and an agrarian centre-right party, it began to rally political support especially in and after 2015 due to two political developments. The first was the adoption of the Registered Partnership Act in the Estonian parliament, allowing civil partnerships, widely perceived as a recognition of same-sex unions; although some implementing acts remain unadopted as of the end of 2020. The second was the Estonian government's decision to participate in the EU's refugee relocation scheme during the

migration crisis in 2015. According to this, Estonia (which has a history of large-scale immigration during the Soviet period) agreed to accept 373 refugees within the EU framework, which resulted in considerable domestic uproar and rise in anti-immigration sentiment.

As a response to these developments, EKRE successfully mobilized public support by adopting the rhetoric similar to populists all over the world and offering a set of principles related to the return to traditional (and simpler) ways of life. The policy initiatives proposed can be characterized as ethnonationalist (anti-immigration, racist, and protectionist), anti-establishment (rhetoric of "deep state" and the erosion of national sovereignty) and conservative (emphasis on family values and traditional gender roles, pro-life and Christian values).

Promoting the role of the Church in Estonia, which is widely considered one of the least secular countries in Europe,<sup>48</sup> is driven by not only EKRE but also the minor partner in the coalition, Pro Patria. The latter holds the position of the Minister of Population Affairs, in charge of policies related to population and family planning, integration of new immigrants, and religious affairs. Under the guidance of the minister, for example, more funding has been secured from the state budget for religious communities and for family planning policies designed to increase Estonia's currently unsustainable fertility rate.

## A REFERENDUM TO DEFINE "MARRIAGE"

It is against the backdrop of these political developments that EKRE pursued to fulfill one of their electoral campaign promises of holding a popular vote – a referendum – to amend the constitution in order to define marriage explicitly "as a union between a man and a woman." In addition to seeking to exclude any prospect for the recognition of same-sex marriages in Estonia in the future, EKRE also sought to fulfill another one of its political

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goals and pave the way for using referenda regularly as a mechanism of direct democracy.

The promise of the referendum was included in the coalition agreement<sup>49</sup> despite the fact that the coalition partners were reluctant to address the issue in a popular vote due to significant public outcry. EKRE continued to use the issue as a bargaining chip in various political negotiations and made concessions on other matters to ensure the popular vote would be held as a matter of urgency.

**After a series of mixed messages to the public, in October 2020, the coalition agreed that the vote would be held in spring 2021 with a question “Should marriage in Estonia remain as a union between one man and one woman?”<sup>50</sup>. This sparked debate, not least because the Family Law Act in Estonia already stipulates that a marriage is contracted between a man and a woman.<sup>51</sup> According to a statement by EKRE, “[t]he institution of marriage must be strengthened, not dismantled – this is one of the guarantors of our statehood.”<sup>52</sup>**

The statement was thus clearly posed as a value question to avoid the potential extension of the concept of marriage to same-sex couples in the future, which was discursively tied to the preservation of the Estonian state.

While the discord in the parliament is undermining the prospect of holding the popular vote as planned at the time of writing, it is still relevant to explore the conditions under which it is projected to be held, especially as it might set a precedent for the future. For one, the legal status of the proposed vote has varied between a “plebiscite” (*rahvaküsitlus*) and a “referendum” (*rahvahääletus*), the major difference being that the result of the former is not legally binding while the latter would be. However, the process of changing a constitution as a result of a referendum would be extremely complex in Estonia where holding referenda has so far been an exception to the rule. It is, therefore, more likely that any popular votes such as this would formally be plebiscites. The politicians have kept using both terms interchangeably, which has contributed to the confusion.

In case of a plebiscite, the result can be considered politically binding at best. However, the precise legal and political repercussions of the vote remain unclear. The coalition has stated that, in the event of the “yes” side prevailing at the public vote, marriage between a man and a woman would be reconfirmed and marriage equality could not be institutionalized in Estonia without holding another popular vote. Yet, if the “no” side would win, status quo would be reinforced with no legal or political action towards marriage equality, which is deemed insufficient by some legal specialists.

In addition to the varying degree of constraint of the vote, the credibility of the result may be undermined because there is no threshold to the voter turnout and the vote is considered successful even in case of a low participation rate. This may happen, since, according to the surveys published in late 2020, a slight majority of the respondents do not approve of holding the vote



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(50% “not approve” and over 45% “approve”) or do not think the issue would be a “relevant matter of the state” (58% “not relevant” and 37% “relevant”).<sup>53</sup> This may, however, change when public campaigns from the supporters of both sides are launched.

Irrespective of whether the popular vote takes place in spring 2021, the potential for polarization over the issue is significant because it has exacerbated divisions in the Estonian society and, therefore, also for all political parties. The public surveys cited above indicate that the public is split. Of the major political parties, only EKRE has adopted a clear position on the matter and stated that they support the definition of marriage as that between a man and a woman. The other parties have either taken time to deliberate or have carefully avoided taking a position. The two small parties outside the parliament – the liberal Eesti 200 and the Estonian Greens – were the first to support marriage equality; the same position was later also adopted by the Social Democrats (opposition party in the parliament), albeit they are likely to lose some supporters because of that. Messages from the coalition party Pro Patria have been mixed: while the high-ranking members of the party have declared support for the traditional definition of marriage, the internal opposition group Parempoolsed (right-wingers) has clearly stated their support for marriage equality. The Centre Party and Reform Party – the biggest parties in Estonia and currently on opposite sides in the parliament – are unlikely to take a position for or against because their supporters remain firmly divided.

As a result of the lack of will by the political parties to adopt a position on the matter, Estonia witnesses the rise of civic activism. The two sides are represented by the Foundation for the Protection of Family and Tradition, established in 2011, campaigning for the traditional marriage, and the Foundation Liberal Citizen, founded in 2020 with the aim to promote the opposite result of the vote. Also, other groups, such as youth organization of political parties or minority rights NGOs,

have become actively involved. This, however, increases the likelihood for divisions and confrontation in the society.

## VALUES AND WESTERNIZATION

As indicated above, the popular vote on the definition of marriage is set up as a value question and is currently driven by the far-right EKRE alone, who argues that it is of utmost importance to the conservative part of Estonian society that the issue be resolved once and for all. Those opposing the popular vote argue that the initiative does not deal with an acute problem for the Estonian society but is rather distracting the government from addressing serious issues and causing further polarization in society.<sup>54</sup>

While EKRE’s argument is valid in the sense that their policies have mobilized about half of the voters against marriage equality, it is less clear if this would have been the case without their decision to elevate the (non)issue on top of the political agenda. There was no immediate urgency to “solve” the definition of marriage because there is widespread, if silent, consensus that the missing implementing acts concerning civil unions would not be adopted during the current term of the parliament. Rather, EKRE’s actions seem to have been motivated by similar debates from abroad which have successfully translated into electoral success in other Central and Eastern European countries as well as the US.

In the wider European context, Estonia, with its current status of recognising civil unions in a limited form, is located in the middle ground between (Western and Northern European) countries who recognize same-sex marriages and those who do not.<sup>55</sup> While a referendum has been used elsewhere to legalize same-sex marriages, its aim in Estonia is the exact opposite, thus indicating Estonia’s anchoring position further away from the more liberal parts of Europe. At the same time, it places Estonia rather clearly among the group

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of countries with whom it shares similar historical and cultural legacies, including the struggles with social transformation.

All in all, it remains questionable whether holding a rushed popular vote in a potentially polarizing environment is the appropriate measure of achieving the main aim that the coalition has envisioned for it, i.e., ensuring the preservation of the Estonian people according to the constitution. Even without the popular vote, all who have been reluctant to take a position in

this value debate will be forced to do so, and the outcome will likely depend on the aggressiveness of the public campaign.

Estonia's social transformation has been rapid, while value systems change more slowly. Whatever way this round of debate ends for Estonia, it will reflect the inbetweenness of the Estonian society on the issue of same-sex marriage and minority rights and is unlikely to win either of the sides over, thus perpetuating the standoff further.

# GEORGIA:

## COVID-19 Pandemic Ruined Tourism Industry

### Salome Minesashvili

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit travel and, especially, tourism throughout the world with devastating effects. Georgia was no exception; however, its decision to maintain the halt on travel even when other countries opened up, has put it in unprecedented isolation. Just a short while ago, Georgia celebrated visa-free movement with the European Union. In March 2017, the EU transferred Georgia to the list of the third countries whose nationals are exempt from visa requirement for short stays in

the Schengen area. Visa liberalization and free movement are significant parts of fostering people-to-people contacts and the westernization of lifestyle that Georgians have met as a “historic achievement.”<sup>56</sup> However, the coronavirus pandemic has not only reduced these contacts to a historic low but also brought a shock to the Georgian economy, highly dependent on tourism, including from the West.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Georgian government has taken quick measures to contain the outbreak. Shortly after the first case in late February 2020, the country closed its



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**What is the plan for recovering from the COVID-19 effects on the economy and, specifically, on tourism?**

Tourism is at the frontline and among the most vulnerable sector in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the Government of Georgia, tourism represents a priority pillar in post-crisis and economic recovery plans.

We aim to support tourism businesses to adapt and survive. With this, it is important to sustain domestic tourism and support the safe return of international tourism. In the new post-COVID reality,

Georgia will continue to develop adventure-, medical-, eco- and agro-tourism products that will be in high demand in the international tourism market. Furthermore, there will be an investment in the development of new skills by providing various trainings for current and future tourism professionals.

The crisis is an opportunity to rethink and act on sustainability to reach a more resilient and inclusive tourism economy.

**Medea Janiashvili**

**Acting Head of Georgian National Tourism Administration**

borders and schools, suspended public transportation, imposed a night-time curfew and imposed a ban on large gatherings. As a result, Georgia kept infection and mortality levels low in the first months, for which it received plaudits from international<sup>57</sup> as well as domestic society.<sup>58</sup> However, such initial success was achieved at the exchange of an unavoidable hit to its economy and tourism, amid the international travel restrictions.

The pandemic hit the booming tourism economy in Georgia. The year of 2019 marked an unprecedented increase in international tourism when the number of overall tourists reached its historic high as almost 7% more visitors (5 million) entered Georgia for touristic purposes in comparison to the previous year. Generally dominated by tourists from Russia, 2019 tourism particularly saw an increase from European countries such as Germany, Poland, France, the UK and the Netherlands as the number of visitors rose by 30%.<sup>59</sup> The increasing interest was in line with the wider awareness of Georgia that has topped international rankings for travel destinations since 2016.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, an increasing number of Georgians have been visiting the EU. By the three year mark of visa liberalization, over

500,000 Georgians had made more than a million visits to the Schengen zone.<sup>61</sup> This exchange was undoubtedly contributing to increased awareness, grassroots contacts, and interaction between people. In addition, tourism is seen as an opportunity for the national economy as its revenues comprise up to 8% of the country's GDP.<sup>62</sup> Airbnb supply in Tbilisi alone has increased 2.5 times between 2016 and 2018 and has generated a market of USD 23 million.<sup>63</sup> These numbers were to further surge. At the beginning of 2020, tourism revenues were predicted with over 12% growth and tourism with a further 10%.<sup>64</sup> All these hopes have been lost after the pandemic started.

In response to the first cases, already in March 2020 the government closed its land borders, suspended air traffic, and banned all foreign nationals from entering the country. Despite the gradual reopening from the end of April, restoring regular flights was not envisioned yet.<sup>65</sup> From July 1, the EU opened its borders for a selected group of countries, including Georgia for its low level of infection rate. But in a "peculiar role reversal," Georgia did not reciprocate, despite stating earlier that border opening would depend on the EU policy.<sup>66</sup>

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By July 1, Georgia had only 122 active COVID-19 cases and postponing the reopening was explained with the goal of a further successful containment. Movement was never restored in summer and the government has held to the idea of restraining the possibility of virus importing. Even though from August, Georgia symbolically opened its air corridor for Germany, France, and the three Baltic countries whose nationals could enter Georgia without quarantining or testing, movement was limited due to the restriction on flights. This approach sparked some criticism. For instance, the Greek ambassador in Tbilisi raised questions as to why Georgia opened to France with a higher infection rate and not to Greece, which belonged to the “green zone.”<sup>67</sup> Lack of mobility also spread the fear that some of the airline companies would stop their operations from Georgia, including a low-cost Hungarian airline Wizzair, which despite not refusing the rumor, pledged to restore the flights once allowed.<sup>68</sup>

As a result, the summer season was brought to a standstill. In August 2020, only 48,000 foreign nationals visited Georgia, which was a 96% drop in comparison to the previous year.<sup>69</sup> Instead, the government tried to encourage local travel and appealed to Georgians to explore their own country. As neither foreigners could enter Georgia nor Georgians could leave, the local resorts were crowded with locals.<sup>70</sup> Despite this, domestic tourism did not replace foreign tourism as its share accounted for only 20-25% in comparison to international tourism. The capital was especially hit, which cannot compensate from domestic tourism.<sup>71</sup> In addition, as Georgians took a rather relaxed approach to the pandemic, unsurprisingly, the first wave of the pandemic in late August hit from Adjara and Svaneti, the most popular travel destinations in Georgia. As the infection numbers increased, Georgia further restricted foreign visits by reintroducing mandatory testing for foreigners, but this time a broad lockdown was no longer in sight.<sup>72</sup>

Tourism has been affected all over the world. However, Georgia, which has been seeing increas-

ing growth and dependence on this sphere, has felt the loss even stronger. The ban on international travel has affected anyone from residents, who earn from the peak summer season; to individual landlords of Airbnb flats; to hotel owners and the overall economy. The tourism industry was predicted to lose USD 1.2-2.8 billion from the most optimistic to the pessimistic scenario.<sup>73</sup> By September 2020, the GDP had already contracted by 5%.<sup>74</sup> In response, the government introduced an Anti-Crisis Economic Stimulus Package worth of USD 330 million, which includes an exemption for tourism businesses from income taxes and co-financed bank loans for small hotels and guesthouses. However, the measures are not considered sufficient, taking into account the changing scope of the crisis.<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, to counter the devastating effects on tourism, the Georgian government sought to attract long-term tourists with its relatively successful epidemiological situation in September, and introduced a new plan called Remotely from Georgia. It allows foreign remote workers into Georgia if they commit to at least a six-month stay, go through quarantine, and have a relatively high income. The list of eligible nationals showed that Georgia primarily aimed at Western Europeans and North Americans. Post-Soviet countries, including Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, were not included.<sup>76</sup> But the outcome is rather moderate as by the beginning of November 2020, only 800 applications were confirmed and 274 foreigners entered Georgia.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, regular flights were not restored until November 1, but by that time the EU had imposed entry restrictions for Georgia due to its worsening epidemiological situation with over 2,000 cases a day, which put Georgia in a “red zone.” As a result, the airline companies canceled most of the planned flights.<sup>78</sup>

Limitations on international travel have also spilled into the political sphere as Georgia’s opposition blamed the government for exploiting the ban for political purposes. They claimed that the restric-

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tions served Georgia's isolation in the run-up to the parliamentary elections held on October 31. In addition, the government was blamed for an intention to keep the international observers from arriving in Georgia.<sup>79</sup> While keeping the infection levels low with halted international mobility might very well have served the gain of political scores, the observers' argument did not hold as the government proposed charter flights for international observers so they could attend the elections.<sup>80</sup> In fact, it was the international legitimation of the elections (primarily based on the OSCE reports) that gave the ruling party confidence after the election results were contested from the opposition.

**Even though people-to-people contacts were significantly restricted between Georgia and the West, Georgia's Western-leaning is believed to have affected its response to the pandemic while Western support in the crisis was deemed essential.**

After meeting with the NATO secretary Jens Stoltenberg in May 2020, Georgian president Salome Zurbishvili even claimed that despite the crisis, Georgia's relations with NATO and the EU were strengthening.<sup>81</sup> But while Western involvement in the country is sometimes seen from the spectre of geopolitics and the traditional understanding of security, the pandemic has shifted cooperation to another level, especially in aiding with response mechanisms to the pandemic.

The US government quickly allocated USD 1.7 million of emergency health assistance to aid Georgia in fighting the pandemic.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, the EU has delivered several waves of medical supplies for frontline medical workers in Georgia and allocated EUR 129 million to assist Georgia in coping with the outbreak. While part of this money will go to assist the Anti-Crisis Economic Plan, the rest will be targeting the economic development of the regions outside of Tbilisi.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, in response to the pandemic, the IMF also extended its cooperate package to USD 450 million, and with other international donor organizations altogether, Georgia was to receive USD 3 billion by the end of 2020.<sup>84</sup>

In addition, the topic of cooperation with the West has been very much present in the pandemic, especially concerning the Lugar Center Laboratory, a central institute in fighting the virus in Georgia. The Lugar Research Center opened in 2011 with US investment through biodefense cooperation agreements with Georgia. The center has long been a target of conspiracy theories from Moscow and Russia-leaning organizations, blamed for the production of biological weapons<sup>85</sup> and even for the spread of COVID-19 in spring 2020.<sup>86</sup> The Center has become instrumental in fighting the COVID-19 with diagnostic tests and highly accurate medical recommendations. The tribute to the center was frequent in media and from medical officials, which has presumably affected Georgians' perceptions. In nation-wide polls from June 2020, 66% of Georgians said the laboratory was preventing the spread of the virus in contrast to the 4% who thought that it was spreading the virus. At the same time, while every second Georgian knew about the support from the EU and the US, 19% noted that the pandemic has changed their attitude towards the EU to be more positive.<sup>87</sup>

Georgia, like many other countries, has suffered from the pandemic with presumably years needed to recover. But in addition to its devas-

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tating effects on almost every area, the crisis also starkly hit its Europeanization process, in which people-to-people contact is one essential component. Stalled mobility between Georgia and the West has isolated the country from the Western world without a prospect of full recovery at least in the short term. However, at the same time, the

West, whether recognizing Georgia's initial success or supporting in fighting the pandemic, has very much been present in Georgian politics and society. COVID-19 has not only expanded Georgia-West cooperation to another level but also affected public perceptions and attitudes of the West in a positive light.

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# KAZAKHSTAN:

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## China's Growing Influence and the Rise of Anti-Chinese Sentiments

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**Zhar Zardykhan**

From the perspective of Kazakhstan, the decade following the global financial crisis turned into a period of steady growth of Chinese economic dominance throughout Central Asia that gradually deprived Russia of its economic and financial high ground. Along with the economic decline, the expansionist and at times militaristic endeavor of Russia in the former Soviet space, which led to violent conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine, raised fears and concerns in Kazakhstan regarding similar scenarios, making the prospects

of a partnership with China initially seem like an ideal engagement, as some would even see China as the guarantor of Kazakhstan's territorial integrity.<sup>88</sup> This came especially useful for the politically stagnant authoritarian regimes as the Chinese policy of noninterference into domestic affairs and generous unconditional (in terms of political demands) financial backing appeared to be an attractive partnership model.

In the meantime, this tendency came as a blow to the overly unsteady process of westernization in the country. Unlike the patterns of interactions with Western nations or the European Union, the



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current partnership with China undermines several key aspects of westernization. The effect could be particularly felt in the area of political westernization as the overall secretive and nontransparent nature of the economic interactions between China and Kazakhstan brings about enormous political pressure on the Kazakh side. Unlike the Western counterparts, most of the Chinese companies in Kazakhstan are directly or indirectly linked with or financially backed by the Chinese government, which often appeals to political leverage to promote their interests.<sup>89</sup> At the same time, media and press freedom also came under attack. Not only were many journalists arrested and assaulted by the police while covering the anti-Chinese manifestations,<sup>90</sup> but they often encountered public accusations and attacks on their credentials by the Chinese Ambassador to Kazakhstan himself. Interestingly, Ambassador Zhang Xiao as well as the official Twitter account of the Chinese Embassy to Kazakhstan became known for their undiplomatic and emotional parlance, often loaded with personal attacks and accusations, to the point where an open letter complaining about him was addressed to the President, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Attorney General.<sup>91</sup> The same could be said about the legal aspects of westernization: the judiciary system of the country faced severe criticism, the public accused the courts and other judiciary institutions for succumbing to political pressure from the Chinese government, and claims for asylum by ethnic Kazakhs that escaped detention camps were systematically denied.

The prompt and aggressive advance of the Chinese capital and infrastructure into the region that until recently was regarded as Russia's backyard was boosted by the deterioration of the Russian relationship with the West, economic sanctions and political isolation, which eventually pushed Russia closer to China, making it more dependent on Beijing's whims. It comes as no surprise that the stirring up and formal institutionalization of the vague and amorphous ini-

tiative previously known as One Belt One Road took place at the time of Russian estrangement from the vanguards of global politics and imminent economic decline. After 2016, in light of its transformation, the official English translation of the project changed to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The initiative was backed, or rather accompanied, by President Xi Jinping's ambitiously aggressive foreign policy aspirations for a Sino-centric alternative to globalization, which duly reflected the decades of economic growth and technologic advancement.

Thus, considering the global economic and political environment, the Belt and Road Initiative emerged as the only viable plan for the Central Asian region (and Kazakhstan in particular). Already in 2016, Chinese trade with Central Asian states almost doubled that of Russia.<sup>92</sup> Due to the resource-based economy, geostrategic location and vast lands, Kazakhstan seemed first in line to benefit from the Chinese-led initiative as the country hoped to reconstruct its transportation infrastructure, attract investments and technology, and, eventually, relieve socio-economic tension by creating new competitive jobs. This would seem especially timely as the volatility of the energy markets, failure of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and overall mismanagement of the economy had already lead to widespread popular misgivings.

The response of the population, however, came as a total surprise for the Kazakh government, Chinese investors, and experts as the incorporation of Kazakhstan into the China-centered economic system further activated anti-Chinese sentiments and protests. At the domestic level, this was partially due to the failure to build responsive governance, a lack of transparency, and widespread corruption as many prominent China-sponsored projects, like Khorgos International Center for Border Cooperation and Astana Light Rail Transit Project, were accompanied by massive corruption scandals. On top of that, the launch of

**How do close trade and economic relations between Kazakhstan and China affect the country's domestic and foreign policy? Do you have any concerns that the Chinese influence may have a negative impact on the development of the situation in Kazakhstan?**

Regarding the first question on how close trade and economic relations between Kazakhstan and China influence the country's domestic and foreign policy, one needs to highlight that the Republic of Kazakhstan pursues a multi-vector foreign policy based on good neighborliness, mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, and equality. According to the Concept of Foreign Policy of Kazakhstan for 2020-2030, further development of a comprehensive strategic partnership with China is one of the priorities in terms of Kazakhstan's regional and multilateral diplomacy.

In relations with China, we stand for mutually beneficial cooperation in order to increase the well-being of the population and ensure sustainable economic development. We seek for attracting quality investments and advanced technologies.

This coincides with the message that was noted in the Joint Statement between the leaders of Kazakhstan and China, adopted during the state visit of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to Beijing in September 2019. In particular, the parties reaffirmed their commitment to ensure fair competition terms and to promote the implementation of a more open, balanced, and mutually beneficial economic policy.

Kazakhstan is an active participant in the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian

Infrastructure Investment Bank. The country accounts for 70% of transit traffic passing from China to Europe and vice versa as well as in many other directions across the Eurasian continent.

A particular feature of this cooperation is the creation of high-tech industries, the implementation of the industrial potential of Kazakhstan, the modernization of infrastructure, the stimulation of the non-commodity sector of the economy as well as the creation of new jobs for the citizens of Kazakhstan, and an increase in revenues to the country's budget.

Regarding the second question, we would like to note that relations between the two countries have long-standing historical roots. At present, the level of bilateral relations has been elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership, one of the main principles of which is respect for mutual interests.

Over the years of cooperation with China, effective mechanisms of dialogue and consultation have been built, thanks to which important agreements have been reached.

Kazakhstan and China are successfully cooperating in large bilateral and international projects and joint ventures as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

**Askar Abdrakhmanov**

**Chairman of the International Information Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs The Republic of Kazakhstan**

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horrendous repressions towards the Muslim population of China, including thousands of ethnic Kazakhs, and the inactivity, or at times complaisance, of the Kazakh government in addressing the issue, led to further distrust towards the government and intensified anti-Chinese protests in a country whose demographic, ethno-religious, and socioeconomic makeup had thoroughly transformed in the last few decades.

At the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, around 4.5 million ethnic Kazakhs or 35% of the global Kazakh population permanently resided outside the borders of the newly independent Kazakhstan, with the Kazakh population of China estimated to be 1,500,000.<sup>93</sup> Between 1991 and 2019, 1,057,343 ethnic Kazakhs officially repatriated from abroad to Kazakhstan for permanent residency, of which 13.2% (or about 140,000) migrated from China.<sup>94</sup> As for 2020, around 12,000 ethnic Kazakhs officially repatriated to Kazakhstan so far, of which 55.5% came from China alone.<sup>95</sup> Since this number does not include the children of repatriates born in Kazakhstan, students, entrepreneurs and those who decided to retain their formal links with the country of origin, some even claimed that the actual number of repatriates from China already reached half a million.<sup>96</sup> Between 1991 and 2010, 3.4 million people, mainly non-Kazakhs, left Kazakhstan,<sup>97</sup> which, added with a massive inflow of ethnic Kazakhs and higher birthrate among them, irreversibly changed the demographic picture in the country. As of January 2019, ethnic Kazakhs made up 70.23% of the country's population, with the share of ethnic Russians dropping below 20%.<sup>98</sup> According to demographic predictions, by 2029, the ethnic Kazakh population of Kazakhstan is expected to reach 80%, with ethnic Russians making up 15% of the population.<sup>99</sup> This growing statistical dominance of ethnic Kazakhs and steady growth of other Muslim minorities due to a higher birthrate, including ethnic Uyghurs, modified the popular response to Chinese policies.

Unlike many other nations, especially those who do not share common borders with China, the widespread rhetoric of the potential Chinese territorial expansion resonates with Kazakhs' historical fears, which were well entrenched into collective memory throughout Soviet rule as well. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan inherited 15 sectors of approximately 2,240 square kilometers of disputed land, most of which lingered from the Sino-Soviet border disputes of the 1960s and 1970s, and had to cede more than third of it to China through a series of treaties.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, the partial secession of the disputed territories to China and the physical demarcation of the border did relieve Kazakhs from fears of imminent Chinese territorial expansion as controversial statements and insinuations continue to emerge from the Chinese side. Just a few months ago, in April 2020, upon public outrage, the Kazakh Foreign Ministry had to summon the Chinese Ambassador to protest over an article that appeared on a prominent Chinese website, which is a rather unusual way to resolve an issue with Chinese authorities. The notorious article "Why Kazakhstan is Eager to Return to China" claimed, among other things, that historically Kazakh land had been part of Chinese territory and that Kazakhs did not have many complaints about repeated Chinese invasions in the past.<sup>101</sup> Interestingly, almost simultaneously, an article with similar claims titled "Why Kyrgyzstan did not rejoin China after gaining independence?" appeared on another prominent Chinese website.<sup>102</sup>

Among present fears, in late 2015, the government modified the Land Code, which now stipulates the potential privatization of agricultural land as well as its lease to foreigners for a period of up to 25 years. The land reform instigated massive anti-Chinese protests throughout 2016, the year the modified Land Code was about to come into effect, along with accusations of corruption and lack of transparency directed at the government. Interestingly, the new regulations fueled anti-Chinese, rather than overall xenophobic, anger as the

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public feared that once Chinese come, they would not leave.<sup>103</sup> The protests and anti-Chinese manifestations became so widespread that the then President Nursultan Nazarbayev quickly revoked the governmental decision and delayed its implementation referring to the lack of public trust for the reform,<sup>104</sup> a rare occurrence in the so-called one-man rule.

**The fear of the purchase of land by Chinese and the outrage it sparked was so intense that Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the current President of Kazakhstan, had to officially address the issue on several occasions in recent months. On July 10, 2020, amid the horrendous surge of COVID-19, which claimed hundreds of lives within a few weeks, and the total collapse of the healthcare system, he stated at the Cabinet meeting that, “We figured out the principle problems [of the new Land Code]. Land will not be sold to foreigners. We will not return to this issue again.”<sup>105</sup>**

He did, however, come back to the issue within less than two months as he declared again in his address to the nation that, “Our land will not be sold to foreigners.”<sup>106</sup>

The incurable optimism over the Belt and Road Initiative audibly expressed by the Kazakh government and enormous benefits the country was expected to derive would soon crash against the popular outrage towards the repressive policies of the Chinese government targeting the Muslims and hundreds of internment camps and detention centers for the Muslim minority. Unlike other countries with a predominantly Muslim population, the overly politically correct initial response (or rather denial) of the Kazakh government would soon crumble under the avalanche of personal stories, first-hand witnesses and even internal whistleblowing. For Kazakhs, the stories about the detainment camps for Muslims were not just amorphous “Uyghur camps” in Xinjiang since thousands of Kazakhs, including the citizens of Kazakhstan, were detained, tortured, and harassed. But more importantly, they and their families had real faces and voices, and very soon the country was flooded with cries for help for those detained and survivors, which the government chose to ignore in an attempt not to irritate Chinese authorities.

In March 2019, Serikzhan Bilash, a Chinese-born Kazakh activist who campaigned for the awareness about the camps and advocated for the fate of those detained, and who had been able to document almost 10,000 cases of detained ethnic Kazakhs,<sup>107</sup> was arrested by the Kazakh police for “incitement to hatred,” causing massive criticism of the government. Interestingly, just a few days later, at the meeting with the then Kazakh Foreign Minister Beibut Atamkulov, Chinese State Councillor Wang Yi thanked the Kazakh government for their support in their “deradicalization” policies in Xinjiang.<sup>108</sup> On top of that, already since 2018, the government continued to arrest, persecute, and threaten to ex-

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tradite to China numerous ethnic Kazakhs who had escaped the detention camps, including the prominent whistleblower Sayragul Sauytbay, an ethnic Kazakh doctor from China who had been an employee at one of the camps but later fled to Kazakhstan where her husband and children lived. Her extradition to China by the Kazakh court had been halted by massive public and media support, and although she was found guilty for illegally crossing the border and her asylum claim was denied, she avoided imprisonment and sought refuge in Sweden.

However, even after years of outcry and thousands of documented cases, the Kazakh government continued to ignore the horrendous repressions against Muslims in China, estranging itself from people's concerns even further. In December 2019, in an interview with Deutsche Welle, the Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev still linked the claims of the detention camps for Muslims in China with geopolitical games around the US-China trade wars, adding that there were deliberate attempts to pump up the situation around the repressions of ethnic Kazakhs in China.<sup>109</sup> He went even further, stating that the information

about the camps was not in accord with reality and blamed certain international institutions and organizations for presenting a distorted picture of the repressions of ethnic Kazakhs in China. At the height of the global infuriation with the treatment of Muslims in China, President Tokayev initiated the adoption of Chinese surveillance and digitalization technologies, publicly praising Hikvision,<sup>110</sup> the company blacklisted by the United States for human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Today, amid global pandemic, overall economic decline and massive distrust towards the government for their failure to properly respond to and prevent the healthcare crisis that cost hundreds of lives, the government seems to finally be aware of the overall potential of anti-Chinese sentiments and is trying to resolve explosive issues, at least in appearance. Thus, in August 2019, after more than five months of detainment, activist Serikzhan Bilash was released, although sentenced to a fine, while in late October 2020, two ethnic Kazakhs from China, who escaped repressions and illegally entered Kazakhstan, were granted temporary refugee status by the Kazakh authorities for the first time.

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# KYRGYZSTAN:

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## Third Revolution may Result in Attack on Liberal Values

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**Elmira Nogoibaeva**

Kyrgyzstan is, to some extent, a unique state for the Central Asian region. Despite all the stereotypes about Asian states, gravitating towards authoritarianism and long-term, individual rule, Kyrgyzstan has gone through four power changes over the past 15 years. Moreover, in October 2020, the third revolution took place in the Kyrgyz Republic. Such revolutionary events are closely related to the process of westernization in

Kyrgyzstan, which, despite all the weaknesses of development, is the state with the most freedom in the region.

### KEY FEATURES OF THE KYRGYZ DEMOCRACY

In the Westernization Index 2020, Kyrgyzstan was close to the “golden mean,” occupying ninth position; it left behind such countries as Kazakhstan, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turk-



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menistan. Rated higher are the traditional leaders – the Baltic states as well as most of the countries of the “Eastern Partnership” of the European Union. At the same time, according to the “political freedom” indicator, Kyrgyzstan showed a rather high rate of seven points out of ten (the same level as Ukraine, Georgia, and Armenia). European Belarus is far behind in comparison with Asian Kyrgyzstan.

A primary analysis of the socio-political field of Kyrgyzstan creates the impression that democratic tendencies in the country have become stronger and irreversible. Parliamentary form of government, high civic engagement, and a wide range of points of view presented in the media are all present. However, at the same time, the election of almost every new president in Kyrgyzstan has been accompanied by an attempt to amend the Constitution to usurp power and return to a purely presidential model of governing. An active civil society, which has rather developed relations with Western institutions, is a serious issue that prevents the state from the slide towards authoritarianism. The role of civil society is recognized as decisive in hindering any attempts to narrow the country’s democratic field.

There is a certain cyclicity of the political struggle in Kyrgyzstan. Four out of five former presidents tried to usurp power by expanding corruption schemes, tightening control over parliament, and creating a single monopoly party. However, at the same time, each of their presidencies ended with either escape from the country, their imprisonment, or premature withdrawal. Thus, two former presidents were forced to flee the country. The first President of Kyrgyzstan Askar Akayev (1991-2005) found shelter in Russia, the second Kurmanbek Bakiyev (2005-2010) – in Belarus. Former President Almazbek Atambayev (2011-2017) ended up in prison; in 2020 he was sentenced to 11 years in prison. The Prosecutor General’s Office found signs of “corruption,” “abuse of office,” and “illegal enrichment”

in his actions as president. The last leader of the country, Sooronbai Jeenbekov (2017-2020), was in the presidency for half a term and managed to resign and receive the privileges of the ex-president (this status provides immunity). He left his post voluntarily after the revolutionary events on October 15, 2020. The country’s political crisis was triggered by controversial parliamentary elections. According to official data, four parties overcame the 7% barrier following the October 4 vote, three of which were associated with the country’s leadership. 12 parties refused to recognize the election results. Mass protests forced the Central Election Commission to cancel the previous election results.<sup>111</sup>

Each of the elected presidents became an outcast in the eyes of fellow citizens. The only exception in this series of leaders, who have lost their support, is Roza Otunbayeva, who took office in 2010 as a “president of transitional period” and held it for just over a year. However, in that short year, she managed to gain credibility both in her homeland and in the international arena. In particular, she is a member of the Club de Madrid, an independent organization whose aim is to promote democracy. This club is composed primarily of former heads of state and government. The post-Soviet states are currently only represented by Valdas Adamkus (Lithuania), Mikhail Gorbachev (Russia), and the former leader of Kyrgyzstan.

Democratic transformations in Kyrgyzstan started in 1991 when the country gained independence. This time was characterized by overestimated expectations in society and an unthinkable need for the transformation of the state according to the Western model; to a certain extent, it was a demand for westernization. It was in the early 1990s that the metaphor of an “island of democracy” was entrenched in Kyrgyzstan. On March 24, 2005, Kyrgyzstan experienced its first revolution. The abuse of the office of Askar Akayev, who was in the country’s top position for almost 15 years, caused a massive wave of public

**How does the third revolution in Kyrgyzstan differ from the first two revolutions? What changes does the country await as a consequence of the latest revolution?**

The third revolution in Kyrgyzstan was a spontaneous event.

The leadership that came to power as a result of the revolution does not satisfy the democratic part of society. Therefore, the struggle continues, but now it is a political struggle, not a forced confrontation. After the presidential election, the referendum is planned on the form of government – presidential or parliamentary. This is the main discussion topic in society today. That is, the October events continue, but in the format of public policy.

After the October revolution and overthrow of the government, some forces were willing to destabilize the overall situation in the country, and in Bishkek city in particular. But its citizens, vigilantes, went out to defend the city by them-

selves, thereby preventing disastrous consequences in our country and even, perhaps, in all of Central Asia. These events lasted for 10 days, while there was no government in our country. It has shown that we have a strong civil society.

As for the changes that await our country, the democratic-minded part of society is fighting for a parliamentary form of government. The forces that are trying to come to power now are opposed to this. Perhaps there will be some new events. But I believe that the democratic forces will win sooner or later, and parliamentarism will be established in our country. That is, the changes caused by the October events have not yet been completed. Moreover, these changes will become a logical consequence of not only the third but also the first two revolutions.

**Azis Abakirov**

**IT entrepreneur, Founder of High-Tech Park of the Kyrgyz Republic, and active participant of the third revolution in Kyrgyzstan**

outrage. In the post-Soviet space, this was already the third revolution in a rather short period – the Rose Revolution took place in Georgia in 2003, and the Orange Revolution took place in Ukraine in 2004. All three revolutionary events became a key stage in the struggle between two development models – democracy following the example of Western countries (a clear manifestation of westernization) and post-Soviet authoritarianism. Incidentally, during the defense of her dissertation in Moscow, Bermet, the daughter of Akayev, blamed the “brought standards of Western society” and “alien ideologies” for the revolution.<sup>112</sup> On April 7, 2010, the second revolution took place. Kurmenbek Bakiyev, who came to power on the wave of the first revolution, rather quickly aban-

doned the initially declared democratic guidelines and returned to the habits of the Akayev era; corruption and nepotism were again in demand. However, it is necessary to mention an external factor. Bakiyev did not withdraw the American base “Manas” from Kyrgyzstan, as he had originally promised the Russian leadership. During the presidency of Almazbek Atambayev, who came to power in 2011 after the short reign of the “transitional president” Roza Otunbayeva, authoritarian tendencies intensified sharply again. Among other things, the country’s foreign policy orientation towards meeting many of Russia’s requirements became more obvious. For example, in July 2014, a decision was made to close the American base “Manas.” To date, only the Russian military airbase



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that remains in Kyrgyzstan is “Kant.” Furthermore, in 2014, Kyrgyzstan became a full member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) along with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia.

In public, there was a strengthening of nostalgia for the USSR and the “powerful hand.” Such narratives were fueled mainly by the Russian media. About 40% of the population still prefers to watch television programs in Russian, and just over 50% prefer to watch in Kyrgyz.<sup>113</sup> Russian TV channels continue to enjoy high popularity in the country. Channel One (Russia) in 2018 became one of the three most popular channels in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>114</sup>

In this context, it is impossible not to mention the state of migration from Kyrgyzstan. According to various estimates, from 600,000 to one million Kyrgyz citizens live and work in Russia; some of them even already have Russian citizenship.<sup>115</sup> Migrants from Kyrgyzstan are often referred to as a “collateral source” for Moscow’s influence on the country since their remittances to their homeland are a significant part of investment and support of the socio-economic component of Kyrgyz society. Kyrgyzstan is one of the leading countries in the world in terms of the volume of money transfers from migrants to their homeland in relation to GDP. In 2019, the inflow of remittances amounted to USD 2.4 billion (98% of which were transferred from Russia).<sup>116</sup> The pandemic will, of course, seriously affect these statistics.

#### CHALLENGES FOR WESTERNIZATION – CORRUPTION AND ISLAMIZATION

An increasing Russian influence is not the only factor inhibiting the westernization of Kyrgyzstan. Thus, the country is experiencing a gradual Islamization of society. To date, almost 90% of the population shares values of Islam, mainly of the Hanafi wing.<sup>117</sup> Islam is getting deeper and deeper into both social, cultural and state life, influencing, among other things, political processes. The theologian Kadyr Malikov, well-known in Central Asia,

believes that “Kyrgyzstan will increasingly face the threat of various terrorist transnational groups that will restore their human resources through the constant recruitment of young people from the countries of Central Asia and Russia.”<sup>118</sup>

**China continues to play a significant role in narrowing the scope of westernization; at this stage, we are talking primarily about the economic sphere. In this regard, one can even talk about the displacement of Russia, in terms of large infrastructure projects (road construction, extraction of land resources, education, science, etc.) for example. Thus, 400 official Chinese enterprises are operating in Kyrgyzstan; meanwhile, there are less than 300 Russian ones.<sup>119</sup>**

40% of direct foreign investments in the economy of the state are of Chinese origin, and the trade turnover has grown rapidly in recent years. Almost half of Kyrgyzstan’s external debt is with China, which has refused to grant any respite on its huge payments despite the coronavirus crisis. Observers associate Beijing’s tough stance with their seeking to achieve Bishkek’s concessions

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on several important issues in the framework of further negotiations.<sup>120</sup> Nevertheless, during the 2020 revolution, China distanced itself from the country's internal political ups and downs.<sup>121</sup>

This brief description of the intricacies of challenges that Kyrgyzstan is facing bears witness to the difficult struggle for democratic development. As one can see, from year to year, the level of threats is only growing. Civil society remains the ultimate prerequisite for the country not going off the path of protecting rights and freedoms under the pressure of external influences and the abuse of power of local politicians.

One of the unexpected results of the recent revolutionary processes in Kyrgyzstan was lobbying for a referendum to introduce amendments to the country's Constitution. In particular, the draft Constitution contained the following initiatives:

- the transition from a parliamentary system to a presidential one;
- a reference to traditional values and morals. For example, it was noted in the preamble that the nation should accept the Constitution, proceeding not only from the "precepts of the ancestors" but also "the traditions and precepts of Manas the Magnanimous." Manas is the name of the main character of the Kyrgyz epic – the hero who united the Kyrgyz; and
- the return to the traditional institution of Kurultai, which is essentially a proto-parliamentary basis (proposed as an alternative to parliament).

References to traditional values are yet another manifestation of the attack on liberal values, on the basis of westernization. The Venice Commission criticized the legitimacy of the decisions in the transitional period claiming that at first, a new parliament should be elected: "During the prorogation period (the continuation of the term – StrategEast), the parliament will not have democratic legitimacy to carry out constitutional reform."<sup>122</sup> Most articles of the new Constitution testify to a rollback from democracy and pluralism. This phenomenon has already been called

"Khanstitution" (the addition of the two words "Khan" and "Constitution") in society.<sup>123</sup> The United States has taken a fairly proactive stance in defending Kyrgyz democracy. Thus, the US Embassy urged politicians to postpone the decision on constitutional changes.<sup>124</sup> A similar appeal was made by the Embassy of the European Union.

The inner circle of Sadyr Japarov, who after the revolution temporarily acted as president, immediately began to occupy key positions in the state and promote anti-democratic initiatives. For example, Akin Toktaliev, the former lawyer of Japarov, director of the State Commission on Religious Affairs expressed the opinion that the concept of "secularity" should be removed from the Constitution of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>125</sup>

Although there are many reasons for optimism, it should be noted that youth were the driving force behind the latest protests in Bishkek. The new generation, which also demonstrated solidarity and provided support to many citizens during the difficult period of the pandemic, can be an additional reason to hope for the country's further democratic development, including its westernization.<sup>126</sup> The third revolution at its beginning was called "young" because of the huge number of youth who took part in the protests. One of the important features of the last parliamentary election campaign was that many parties included young people in their lists. "Young people should come to power" is one of the popular slogans of the last year. 90% of Kyrgyzstanis also believe that there should be more youth in politics (as shown in the results of a survey of the International Republican Institute).<sup>127</sup> However, there are many prerequisites that, due to the third revolution, people who do not show sympathy for democracy will gain authority. This indicates that the struggle in the country will continue along different lines – along the lines of regional clans, of external influence, of corrupt officials and civil society, and, ultimately, of different generations. 2021 will be largely symbolic for the country's future development – its westernization; Kyrgyzstan will elect a new president, a new parliament, and will possibly acquire a new Constitution.

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# LATVIA:

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## Failure to Ratify the Istanbul Convention Leaves Women Unprotected

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### Ilvija Brūge

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence,<sup>128</sup> widely known as the Istanbul Convention, was opened for signing by the member states in 2011 and entered into force in 2014. Latvia signed the Convention in May 2016,<sup>129</sup> but to the date remains one of the very few EU Member States that has failed to ratify it. The argu-

ments used against it are varied, ranging from legal compliance with the Latvian Constitution, misinterpretation of the use of the term “gender” and populist statements that it is against Latvian “traditional values” and is paving a way for same-sex marriage – arguments that are also present in other Council of Europe Member States that have failed to ratify it,<sup>130</sup> with the single most important difference that they, unlike Latvia, are known to have a strong presence of religion in society.



Image source: asiandelight / shutterstock.com

**Latvia has signed the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, otherwise known as the Istanbul Convention, and was on the path to ratify it. Why has the political will to ratify the Istanbul Convention in Latvia changed?**

The Latvian government signed the Istanbul Convention on May 18, 2016. According to Article 68 of Satversme (Constitution of the Republic of Latvia), for the Istanbul Convention to take the full effect, it must be ratified by the Saeima (Parliament of the Republic of Latvia). However, the bill ratifying the Istanbul Convention has not been submitted to the Saeima until now because the political parties represented in the Saeima have failed to agree on a uniform interpretation of Convention's provisions, their constitutionality and need to adopt these legal acts. Likewise, several groups of society are actively debating the content of the Convention and the possible impact on the national legal system.

To avoid any speculations about the constitutionality of the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, the Constitutional Court has been asked to review the constitutionality of the Convention. An application was submitted on behalf of 21 members of the Saeima. The Constitutional Court launched the Istanbul Convention constitutionality review on August 3, 2020. The review shall formally start on January 4, 2021.

According to Article 16.2 of the Constitutional Court Law, the Constitutional Court shall adjudicate matters regarding the conformity of international agreements signed or entered into by Latvia (also until the confirmation of the relevant agreements in the Saeima) with the

Constitution, whereas Article 32.2 of the Constitutional Court Law regulates that "Constitutional Court judgement and the interpretation of the relevant legal norm provided therein shall be obligatory for all state and local government authorities (also courts) and officials, as well as natural and legal persons."

We are confident that the Constitutional Court will be able to provide more clarity with regard to a uniform interpretation of the Convention's provisions from a constitutional perspective and provide members of the parliament with all the necessary constitutional and international law guidance required to make a well-informed and rational decision. The Constitutional Court ruling should also reduce tensions between various groups of society supporting different opinions on the Istanbul Convention.

We believe that we must wait for the results of the review conducted by the Constitutional Court for the Cabinet of Ministers to embark on a comprehensive analysis and debate on the findings of the Constitutional Court and then decide on presenting the draft law ratifying the Istanbul Convention in the parliament.

**Andris Teikmanis**

**Head of the Chancery  
of the President of Latvia**

The main aim of the Istanbul Convention is to ensure that the states have a coordinated approach and hold a responsibility to prevent all forms of violence against women and other victims, as well as to ensure the prosecution of perpetrators. The main controversy concerning the Convention is related to its definition of gender as a social role, which many groups in the countries that have failed to ratify it interpret as an at-

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tempt to pave the way for expanded transgender rights or same-sex marriage.

It must be said that heated discussions, regarding the Convention, already started before its signing, with discrepancies in the views of the two involved ministries – the Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Welfare. At the time, the Minister of Justice was Dzintars Rasnacs, a member of the National Alliance – the most nationalist of the political parties, promoting so-called traditional family values and having a strong stance against sexual minorities. On the other side, the Ministry of Welfare was run by Janis Reirs, representative of the Unity (Vienotiba), a liberal-conservative, center-right party, usually considered as one of the more progressive political parties. Arguments used against the Convention at the time by the Ministry of Justice were quite typical. The Minister insisted that the situation in Latvia is better than in many of the countries that have ratified the Convention, failing to take into account that improved legislation also results in improved reporting of the cases of violence by the victims. The legal assessment done under the orders of the Ministry had some curious statements. Perhaps among the more interesting ones was the following: “The Preamble of the Latvian Constitution clearly states, that Latvian people honor their freedom fighters, and commemorate victims of foreign powers. That is why the Latvian people cannot agree to an implication by the International treaty that Latvian men are discriminating against women.”<sup>131</sup> Another interesting argument was that the Convention is against the Latvian Constitution and international human rights documents that ensure the rights of parents regarding the education of children, their religious freedom and rights to educate the children according to their religious and philosophical views.<sup>132</sup> Failing to find a solution, discussion on ratification became frozen; although, it has never fully left the political agenda, to a large extent, thanks to the continued pressure from the European Parliament and other institutions.

To a detriment of ratification of the Convention, following the Parliamentary election of 2019, the Ministry of Welfare went to the populist KPV.LV with the Minister Ramona Petravica. Mrs. Petravica has openly expressed that in her view the Convention is against Christian values: “It threatens traditional family values, Christian values. Why is this “gender” term in so many places in the Convention?”<sup>133</sup>. The minister’s statements are dangerous, no matter if she truly believes these statements or has not taken time to understand a crucial international document clearly pertaining to her responsibility. But the problem is not limited to the political will of the Ministry alone.

**The Istanbul Convention remains one of the mere five issues that the political parties creating a coalition government in late 2018 agreed to keep their rights to vote individually.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, the issue has gotten so contentious that in August 2020, 21 members of the Parliament (representing the progressive parties – For Development! and New Unity) submitted a claim to the Constitutional Court to evaluate whether the Convention is in line with the Constitution.**

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The reasoning behind this is clear as the discrepancies with the Constitution and the values written in it are the main argument used by the critics of the Convention.

The timeline for preparing the case is January 2021;<sup>135</sup> however, it is highly probable that the Constitutional Court is unlikely to find an issue with the compatibility of the two legal documents. This could potentially clear the path for a smoother ratification process while it remains unlikely that this Convocation of the Parliament will have the necessary votes for it.

There are several crucial underlying issues for this document to have caused such a controversy. Firstly, the nationalist and populist parties appeal to the more conservative part of Latvian society, which are often anti-LGBTQI empowerment and anti-feminism and see more traditional gender roles as a key value to their worldview. To illustrate this, a large part of society, which also holds more conservative views, still believes that domestic violence is a family's internal issue (32%).<sup>136</sup> Another poll uncovered that an even larger share (46.5%) of respondents would not interfere in the cases of domestic violence in the family.<sup>137</sup> Together with the failure (in some cases intentional) to explain the Convention and populist statements about "danger" that it poses to the "traditional values" and "family institute," this has resulted in a cycle where the issue can be used for political mobilization. This demonstrates immaturity of the political culture in Latvia as voters can often be motivated by loud, unverified statements, and politicians are often not elected due to their merit or experience.

Another important issue that has complicated the solving of the matter is the role that various church organizations have played in the process. The heads of the largest Latvian church organizations have repeatedly addressed the government calling it not to ratify the Convention: "The Convention contains articles that would enable it to be used for the remodeling of society in line with the genderism ideology."<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, the Riga

Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church, Zbignevs Stankevics, met with Augusts Brigmanis, the faction leader of one of the then-ruling parties, the Green and Farmers Alliance, convincing him to vote against the ratification. The churches' main argument against the Convention was its reference to discrimination against women due to traditions, culture, and religion. Although, at least, in this case, there is such reference in the Convention, it has once again been misinterpreted and portrayed to society as a threat to its values. Such church influence and the blurring of the line between religious and political domains, even though Latvia is not traditionally seen as one of more religious societies, is dangerous and once again demonstrates Latvia as an immature democracy.

It must be noted that there are also other, more positive trends in Latvia, especially among civil society and even the smaller, more progressive church institutions that are expressing their disagreement with the statements issued by the leaders of the larger organizations. However, that has not translated into political will to ratify the Convention, and it is unlikely that such political will should appear during the current Convocation of the Parliament unless the progressive coalition parties succeed in attracting the votes of the opposition. Luckily, as a member of the Council of Europe and the EU, Latvia is still under pressure from the international institutions to move forward with adjusting its legislation to European standards. For instance, in November 2019, the European Parliament once again called for the ratification of the Convention by those Member States that had to date failed to do so, and condemned any efforts to consciously misinterpret the document and misinform the public (a resolution was passed with 500 "for" and 91 "against").<sup>139</sup> Although this resolution is not and cannot be binding, it brings the issue back to the political domain.

From the perspective of legal westernization, the failure to ratify the Convention is not the worst issue. It is estimated that approximately 80%<sup>140</sup> of laws covered by the Convention are in place, as the

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Ministry of Welfare has been working towards the implementation of the Convention. But it is clear that it was with the Convention in mind that this work was done. More than laws, the Convention demonstrates the will of the state to recognize gender-based violence as a real issue and address it in a noncompromising, concerted manner. The inability and unwillingness to do so is the reflection of a not yet fully developed society and state where discrimination is seen as an issue that should remain contained to the private domain and where

women or gender-based rights are seen as a threat to the “traditional way of life,” whatever that may comprise of. Furthermore, the entire process of the signing and ratifying the Convention in Latvia has been tainted by populism, the use of LGBTQI and women’s rights as a threat to “traditional values,” and the blending of religious and political domains. These are trends that are oddly similar in most of the former Soviet countries and showcase that a true westernization of the political process and mindset of society is still underway.

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# LITHUANIA:

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## New Female-Led Government Is a Sign of Improved Gender Equality in the Country

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### **Agniete Pocyte**

The parliamentary elections in Lithuania in October 2020 brought the country a conservative liberal government coalition with a female prime minister (Ingrida Šimonytė) and female leaders of all three coalition parties (Liberal Movement led by Viktorija Čmilytė Nielsen and the newly formed socially liberal Freedom Party led by Aušrinė Armonaitė).

Previously, the outgoing parliament (Seimas), consisted of 23.1% seats held by women. In the recent elections, 38 women have been elected, amounting

to 27% of the Seimas – the highest number since the restoration of the country’s independence. While at its highest percentage, the representation of women in the Seimas still has not reached a one-third representation. Historically, the representation of women in the Seimas has moved in waves, increasing and decreasing in subsequent elections. This may be attributed to the role of women’s NGOs who advocate for greater representation of women whenever the number of women in the Seimas has decreased after an election.

While this is a laudable outcome, pundits in Lithuania are torn between whether this is a pro-



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gressive shift towards gender equality and whether women in power equals a sincere fight for women's rights.<sup>141</sup> Natalija Arlauskaitė, a professor and chief researcher at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University, claims that in the past, when women held high positions "it was seen as an alibi to not pay attention to the composition of the entire Seimas, to the composition of the government. As if the leading woman in itself eliminates the problem."<sup>142</sup>

Currently, there are no formal restrictions on the participation of women or minority groups in Lithuanian politics. While some women hold senior political positions, women and women's interests are underrepresented in Lithuanian politics.<sup>143</sup>

## WESTERNIZATION AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

The World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report 2020 includes a sub-index called Political Empowerment, which measures the gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making through the ratio of women to men in ministerial and parliamentary positions for each country.<sup>144</sup> This sub-index is the worst-performing dimension of the Global Gender Gap Report, with women having secured just 25% of available parliamentary positions, a figure that slips to 21% at the ministerial level. WEF notes that in the past 50 years, 85 states have had no female head of state.

The top-performing region in Political Empowerment is Western Europe (0.409), with countries such as Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Sweden leading in the charts. While Western Europe is clearly the leader in women's political empowerment, North America (0.184) trails behind the global average and ranks 5th globally, after South Asia (0.387), Latin America and the Caribbean (0.269), and sub-Saharan Africa (0.211). Globally, Lithuania (0.207) ranks 65th in Political Empowerment, behind post-Communist or post-Soviet states such as Albania (0.376),

Latvia (0.355), and Estonia (0.294). As the Gender Gap Report deals with data up to 2019, Lithuania may climb a few ranks with the 3.9% increase of women in the Seimas, but this would still leave Lithuania far behind the Western European average.

## WHAT'S HOLDING WOMEN BACK?

The barriers of entry for women's participation in politics are often structural, sociological, and cultural.<sup>145</sup> A range of impediments – from gender stereotypes to political culture, structural inequalities, and even a lack of self-confidence – are important factors.

**Political scientist and Director of the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University, Margarita Šešelgytė, claims that although there are no legal barriers that exist for women to participate in politics, women in Lithuania do reach a "glass ceiling" when aiming to participate. She argues that this glass ceiling in Lithuania is personified by two social barriers: the division of labor in the home and gender stereotypes.**

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The first, the division of labor in the home, falls largely on the woman's shoulders in the average Lithuanian home. According to the 2020 Gender Equality Index, 79% of women cook, clean, and do other housework every day, compared to just 28.8% of men.<sup>146</sup> While this figure is very close to the European Union average, it is still a staggering inequality in the division of labor at home. In an interview with TV3, Šešelgytė claimed that with children, the balance becomes even more uneven leading to women not having the time to get invested in politics or their careers.<sup>147</sup> When the same question about the involvement of housework was asked of couples with children, 96.6% of women respondents were involved in house-work, compared to 23.2% of men.<sup>148</sup>

Gender stereotypes also play an important role in the representation of women in politics. Overarching stereotypes about the types of roles and jobs that women may occupy compared to men still persist in Lithuanian society. In an interview with Reuters, Ingrida Šimonytė states that "a lot of our society is defined from the traditional upbringing, which tells girls to be nurses or teachers, while boys are set to become leaders and decision makers." She adds that "these things are slow to change on their own."<sup>149</sup> Margarita Šešelgytė also mentions a potential lack of self-confidence of women asserting themselves as political leaders as traditional patriarchal norms about successful leadership continue to exist in Lithuania.<sup>150</sup>

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

One possible solution that has been explored to increase the representation of women in politics is gender quotas. A quota is a measure-

ment that lays down requirements for each sex to be represented by at least a given minimum proportion to accelerate the achievement of gender-based participation and representation. A growing number of countries are currently using this mechanism. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 127 countries around the world have either legislatively or electorally introduced laws or rules establishing quotas.

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Lithuania does not regulate any gender quotas for the Lower Chamber or the Subnational Level. However, the Social Democratic Party regulates a quota that specifies the necessity of having at least one-third of either sex elected.<sup>151</sup> In a study analyzing the impact of quotas on the average proportion of elected women in Europe, quotas appear to have had a positive effect on the proportion of women elected representatives.<sup>152</sup>

However, quotas do not directly address the underlying barriers for women's political entry in Lithuania, namely the unequal division of labor and stigmatizing attitudes towards women. Aspects of gender inequality, such as the political empowerment of women is an all-encompassing issue, which requires a holistic approach.<sup>153</sup> The WEF notes that while ongoing cultural and social transformation requires a long time to occur, effective policies that directly offer solutions to home care needs (e.g., daycare options for working professionals) or change the incentives for men and women to rebalance the burden of household and child care duties (e.g., paternity leave) are likely to have a significant impact on not only women's professional career opportunities but also on potentially improving women's' access to politics.

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# MOLDOVA:

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## Election of Maia Sandu as President in Moldova Delivers Hope in Fighting Corruption

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### Leonid Litra

The election of Maia Sandu as president of Moldova marks the beginning of a new model of doing politics in Moldova. Since its independence, Moldova's presidents were usually connected to the old political elite with strong ties, and in many cases, to the Soviet establishment and shadow business. Also, the East-West divide used to be exploited in the electoral campaigns, building narratives around geopolitical choices and steering polarization. This

time, however, Moldova made a step forward and elected a person whose style and narrative is distinctive from previous presidents. The electoral campaign had a strong focus on the domestic agenda with a special emphasis on fighting corruption. This could mark the beginning of the renewal of the political elite and a move away from geopolitical divisions.

The results of the first round of presidential elections on November 1, 2020, were no surprise to the followers of political life in Moldova. As expected, the then president Igor Dodon



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and the leader of the opposition Maia Sandu got the majority of the votes. However, both of them lacked sufficient votes to get elected in the first round: Maia Sandu got 36.16% and Igor Dodon 32.61%. The run-off was held on November 15, 2020, and Maia Sandu received a confident victory with 57.72% against 42.28% for Igor Dodon.<sup>154</sup> The run-off between Sandu and Dodon was already transformed into a political series since the two competed in the 2016 run-off presidential elections, but Dodon won those elections in a tight race with Sandu. The original element in terms of participation in the elections was the high turnout among the diaspora. In the first round, more than 150,000 people participated in elections while in the second round over 260,000 voted abroad which is approximately 8.5% of the population with voting rights, of which 93% voted for Sandu.

The victory of the first female president is even more special due to the difficult election environment marked by political harassment and fake news against her. Unlike her opponent, Sandu and her party members do not own media, have the financial support from tycoons or large businesses or control state institutions. All in one, Sandu's election was a clear sign that there was a big demand for change and a significant disappointment with Dodon's presidency and its results.

Not to underestimate the merits of Maia Sandu, but Igor Dodon assisted her in winning the elections. Compared to 2016, Dodon lost 17% of the votes. This happened mainly due to many corruption scandals involving Dodon. In the release of a video with a hidden camera, Dodon appears to confess to the already fugitive oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc that he received hundreds of thousands of dollars every month from Russian authorities,<sup>155</sup> while in other footage, Dodon appears to be bribed by Plahotniuc. In addition to corruption scandals, Dodon did

not manage to deliver on his promises, grossly mismanaged the COVID-19 pandemic, and led the country to international isolation. Ultimately, the accusations towards Sandu and toward diaspora saying they are living in dissonance with people from Moldova and are a "parallel electorate," prompted anger and a high mobilization in diaspora voting against Dodon in the second round.<sup>156</sup> The accusations of Dodon were widely contradicting with the real figures. Moldovan diaspora sent almost USD 2 billion in remittances in 2019 which equates to 15.97% of the GDP.<sup>157</sup>

The most interesting observation, however, is that the 2020 presidential campaign was unique in many senses. Above all, the usual narrative of the East-West divide was weakly exploited and became a secondary topic, precisely because Sandu did not follow Dodon's campaign strategy to polarize the electorate over geopolitical choices. Sandu's key message in the campaign was the eradication of corruption and cleaning up the state institutions of corrupt people. Other important messages were related to reducing poverty and ensuring economic growth. Only as a secondary matter did Sandu mention that the EU is the right model of development for Moldova.

The campaign also showed positive steps in terms of political westernization. Sandu's party (Solidarity and Action) collected almost all of its campaign funds through small donations from ordinary people. There have been such attempts before from other parties but none succeeded. The support and victory in presidential elections are interpreted by Sandu as a strong mandate offered by people for fighting corruption and cleaning up the institutions.<sup>158</sup>

Despite the optimism prompted by the election of Sandu, one should not exaggerate: her victory should not yet be viewed as a victory over the current system. It is rather the first step out of the many necessary. That is why delivering results will be a difficult task since the

**Moldovan President-elect Maia Sandu said that as president she would make it her priority to tackle corruption in the country. What first steps will the President-elect take in the new post to combat corruption?**

Combating corruption is at the core of Maia Sandu's political agenda. This is the main reason why the government led by Maia Sandu was toppled after only five months in office last year. It was because of an anti-corruption measure – the External Evaluation of Judges and Prosecutors – that caused the fall of the government. Maia Sandu remains committed to this complex reform agenda. After receiving a strong mandate in a historic landslide election victory, it is important to continue with snap parliamentary elections in order to have a representative and legitimate parliament, which in turn can produce a

stable pro-reform majority government that will carry out the vision put forward and endorsed wholeheartedly by the majority of Moldovan voters in the presidential elections. Rooting out corrupt elements from the justice system and increasing its capacity is a cornerstone of this agenda. Furthermore, building resilience in state institutions to resist capture is also part of this plan. Some of the first steps will include designating corruption as a national security threat and employing the National Security Council in mitigating this threat. Later on, more legislative and governmental actions will be required. That is why snap elections are so important.

**Mihai Popsoi**

**Deputy Speaker, Parliament of Moldova  
Vice President, Action and Solidarity Party  
PhD Candidate, University of Milan**

resistance is high in the system and many targeted officials have a lot to lose, including their freedom if their guilt is proven.

The bounds of Sandu's reforms agenda derive from the limited competencies of the president in Moldova. The president has certain competencies in the area of foreign policy and defense but has very little to say when it comes to other areas. Sandu's victory is still good for the reputation and image of the country, which seemed hopeless in 2020. But in order to move from rather limited impact to deep reforms, she needs to have the parliament on her side.

The legislature was elected in 2019 during a very different political configuration. Since then, the informal leader of the country, Vlad Plahotniuc, lost most of his control and fled Moldova. Others, such as Ilan Shor who is also

suspected of managing the USD 1 billion bank fraud, followed. Igor Dodon lost the presidency, and there is no formal majority in the parliament; these are just a few reasons why the current legislature does not reflect the political situation and has lost legitimacy in the eyes of many. At the same time, Dodon and his allies in the parliament have a different perspective and will try to obstruct the work of the president and retain power through the parliament. Considering this, the only viable strategy for Sandu to take the lead in the country is to dissolve the parliament and win the early elections. The renewal of the political class without the renewal of parliament seems impossible.

As a president, Maia Sandu has two legal options to dissolve the parliament: its inability to adopt laws for three months in a row and its fail-

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ure to approve a new government for 45 days<sup>159</sup> – a process which is currently ongoing after the resignation of the government in late December 2020. Considering the poor results of Dodon during the presidential elections, he will try to avoid early parliamentary elections as long as possible so he can strengthen his position and expect people to get disappointed from Sandu's election. Dodon will also continue to challenge the presidency of Sandu in order to associate it with inefficiency and chaos. He already did this in early December 2020 when the parliament voted and stripped the president's control of the Moldova's Intelligence Service.<sup>160</sup> That is precisely the reason why Sandu has to deliver quick results before early elections are taking place and a new majority is formed.

In order to strengthen her position and influence of the political life, Sandu, having access to many platforms and documents as a president, will focus on revealing and stopping corruption schemes that are taking place. Also, she will likely concentrate on sound, infamous corruption cases such as the USD 1 billion bank fraud,<sup>161</sup> concession of the airport,<sup>162</sup> Russian laundromat,<sup>163</sup> and illegal financing of political parties.<sup>164</sup> This means she will have to attract media writing about this and get the support of the people.

At the same time, she also has some other legal instruments, but the impact is expected to arrive later. Above all, during her four-year mandate, Sandu will nominate almost half of the judges. According to her promises, the judges will go through a process of detailed investigation by her team before being promoted. In this context, she already called specifically only for candidates with high integrity standards to apply. In continuation of this, Sandu wants to introduce the procedure of vetting the sitting judges, including international vetting. This is precisely the draft law that Sandu was unable to pass in the parliament and was dismissed for

as prime minister in 2019 after a brief mandate of five months. The vetting of judges is aimed to clear the judiciary of corrupt judges – including by correlation of their assets with incomes and by analyzing the quality of their decisions in terms of possible corrupt episodes.

The critics of the proposed vetting process say that this will result in direct political pressure on the judiciary and jeopardize the independence of the judiciary, thus undermining the ability of judges to adopt decisions free of political influence. This narrative is adopted mostly by the supporters of Igor Dodon.

**Maia Sandu is increasingly framing corruption as a threat to the national security and, thus, is trying to use the institutional power she has to galvanize the work of relevant structures in the field.<sup>165</sup> In this respect, one institution she will attempt to use for the streamlining of the fight against corruption is the Supreme Security Council of the country. Within the Council, Sandu coordinates the work related to security, defense, and other issues that pose a risk to Moldova.**

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She can use this institution, but it is not clear yet to what extent the decisions taken by the Council are mandatory and, if these are, for which institutions they are.

The westernization of the country is likely to also take place on a different dimension: framing and restoring the country's foreign policy, which can be done without a parliamentary majority. During Dodon's mandate, Moldova was isolated, and Russia was more or less the only country where Dodon was welcomed. That explains why during his mandate, Dodon visited Russia almost 35 times and had no visits to the neighboring countries of Ukraine and Romania, nor did he officially meet the presidents of these countries. For Sandu, rebuilding Moldova's foreign policy is an achievable goal in the immediate future as the president is tasked with competencies in the area of foreign policy. Judging by the previous relations she had as a prime minister in 2019 and by the openness to support her from Germany, Brussels, the US, Romania, and Ukraine – Sandu has

high chances to take Moldova out of international isolation and advance the agenda of reforms in Moldova. She already made the first steps by meeting Romanian president Klaus Iohannis and Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky. Sandu also has the opportunity to develop a practical dialogue with Russia, but that highly depends on the will on both sides to move away from political slogans and focus on practical projects such as, for instance, a bilateral agreement on social protection.

The corruption in Moldova is deep-rooted, and one should certainly not expect to have significant and sustainable results during one political cycle. The presidency of Maia Sandu is only one of the elements necessary for reforms in Moldova and integration with the EU. The renewal of the political class alongside the growing importance of the economic agenda is in high demand at the societal level. This should pave the way for subsequent steps to bring Moldova back to normality.

# TAJIKISTAN:

## Pandemic-Aggravated Economic Crisis De-Westernizes Society

**Parviz Mullojonov (Mullojanov)**

In recent decades, the transformation of Tajikistan's society traditionally has been moving along the "modernism – traditionalism" vector. During the Soviet period, there was large-scale modernization and, paradoxically for the USSR, a kind of westernization of Tajik society built on a unified "all-Union" model. One of the main directions of "Soviet modernization" was the struggle against religion. The state aspired to create an atheistic society and completely exclude religion from all spheres of public life. Another related direction was economic modernization and industrialization, which also implied serious shifts in the public consciousness, education and culture, identity and mentality.

However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the civil war that followed, halted the modernization process in Tajikistan – and, moreover,

turned it back. The de-modernization process slowed down somewhat during the economic recovery in the 2000s; however, the financial and economic crisis of recent years has led to the resumption of previous trends. Today, in times of a new round of global crisis caused by the pandemic, we can talk about the acceleration of the process of de-Westernization of society, the revival of a number of features and traits that characterize a traditional society. In this article, we will look at how exactly the deepening economic crisis affects the processes of social transformation and the de-Westernization of the Tajik population.

### ECONOMIC CRISIS

The most characteristic feature of the Tajik economy is dependence on external factors, primarily labor migration and imports. The volume of imports exceeds the volume of exports by almost





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three times, and for Tajikistan, the main importing countries are Russia, China, and Kazakhstan. It means that any problems in the world economy or one of these three countries immediately affects the state of the Tajik economy – it is resembled in higher prices, lower business activity, tax collection, etc. The country's economy depends on labor migration as a significant part of the state budget and inflow of foreign currency to the country is formed by migrant remittances. In addition, remittances constitute the main source of income for many Tajik families, significantly reducing the level of social tension in a community. It is sufficient to say that money transfers from migrants make up two-thirds of the purchasing power of Tajikistan's population.

How does dependence on external factors manifest in practice – in today's context of a global crisis? The following mechanisms can be distinguished here:

First, there is a sharp decline in the income of migrants in Russia where almost 90% of Tajik Gastarbeiters work. Foremost, we are talking about a reduction in sectors of the economy where Tajik migrants mainly work – trade, construction, and the service sector. In 2020, the number of Tajik migrants who went to work abroad decreased by 57% compared to last year, and their incomes fell on the average by 50%.<sup>166</sup>

Second, a diminution in the volume of remittances to Tajikistan corresponds to a drop in the income of labor migrants. At the same time, migrants are still forced to spend money on housing, rent, and food – but mostly at the expense of their savings. Accordingly, in current circumstances, they are forced to send fewer funds to their relatives and families left in their homeland. Due to the devaluation of the Russian ruble against the US dollar, the quality of transfers also decreases; that is, even if the same amount is sent in rubles, its real value is much lower.

As a result, in 2020, the volume of remittances, on average, decreased by 40-50% compared to the pre-crisis period.<sup>167</sup>

Third, following the ruble, the Tajik somoni began to fall. As a result, the official exchange

rate of the American currency in Tajikistan increased from 9.68 to 11.30 somoni per US dollar from the beginning of March to December 2020. Meanwhile, the devaluation of the somoni against the US dollar causes a number of inter-related consequences – among them, the rise in prices for all types of imported goods and food.

Fourth, the reduction in state budget revenues will ultimately cause the budget, financial and banking sectors of the country to suffer. Today such a situation takes place in all countries of the world, but due to the aforementioned dependence on external factors, in Tajikistan, the blow to the budget turned out to be especially large. According to government forecasts, at the end of 2020 the budget deficit would be USD 300 million or 3.7% of the GDP.<sup>168</sup>

Fifth, there is a blow to small and medium-sized businesses and civil society. As can be seen from other countries' experience, the first and foremost victim of the current crisis is small and medium-sized businesses. In Tajikistan, under threat primarily are those companies that specialize in the delivery and trade of imported goods, enterprises engaged in the services and the entertainment sector.

The government has not yet developed an effective anti-crisis strategy as it is focused mainly on fiscal measures to maintain the national currency and economic stability. All the more, the planning of economic reforms and the transition to another economic model, which would not base on remittance income, are out of the question.

In such circumstances, the main efforts are directed at strengthening the current political system and tightening control over civil society, informational space and religious organizations.

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

Today, it can confidently be assumed that even if the pandemic does not last more than a few months, the current crisis will largely change the

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face of modern society. In particular, in Tajikistan, the process of societal transformation is already observed in the following main directions:

First, there is a change in the structure of society. The quarantine regime and the economic crisis lead to the bankruptcy of the middle class representatives, many of whom “slipped” into the category of the poor. The proportion of the poor and socially vulnerable population, in turn, is sharply increasing, and the gap between the poor and the rich is growing.

Meanwhile, it is the middle class in Tajikistan (as in other post-Soviet countries) that is traditionally considered one of the main promoters and supporters of the process of modernization and westernization of society.

**Since Soviet times, the basis of the Tajik middle class (its core) is small and medium-sized business as well as technical, academic, and creative intellectuals. However, in recent years in the country, the process of narrowing and the erosion of the middle class have accelerated.**

Primarily, we are talking about the most educated and westernized part of it, the so-called old intelligentsia, formed back in the 1960-70s. The erosion of this social stratum means that a social group that played a key role in the modernization and westernization of society for decades in the country is disappearing.

Second, in times of crisis, there is a revival and strengthening of traditional civil institutions, such as *avlods* (extended patriarchal families), *mahallah* (quarter) councils, councils of eldest, various informal groups at the community level, and compatriot associations.<sup>169</sup> Historically, traditional civil institutions have played a special role in Tajik society, ensuring its survival in the face of various social and political upheavals. In the Soviet period, the traditional institutions relegated to the background; however, with the outbreak of the civil war and during the recent socio-economic upheavals, their role in society has increased significantly.

Today, in conditions when the government is unable to fulfill its social obligations to the population (in the form of paying decent pensions and salaries and providing jobs), traditional institutions de facto assume many of the above functions of the state. Thus, traditional institutions are much more successful than official bodies in regulating the job search and fair distribution of income among their members, providing protection against police arbitrariness, corruption, and so on.

Third, the Tajik political elites (both from the side of the ruling regime and the political opposition) are increasingly demonstrating the policy of retreating from westernization. Thus, traditionalism is cultivated to some extent by the authorities since westernization is perceived as a potential threat to the existing system. Apparently, the Tajik government hopes to continue the modernization of society while at the same time refuse to westernize and democratize it, which looks very difficult to achieve. In the conditions of the economic crisis, the Tajik authorities are betting on forceful pressure while at the same time trying to integrate traditional civil institutions, such as mahallah councils or traditional clergy into the system of governance and control over society.

There is also an increasing trend towards de-westernization in the political opposition. The

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political opposition today is almost exclusively Islamist, ranging from the moderate IRPT (Islamic Renaissance Party) to clandestine Salafi and jihadist organizations. And if the top of the Tajik opposition in exile is still moderately pro-democratic, the younger generation of opposition activists is increasingly radicalized, often being quite negatively disposed towards both the West and the process of westernization itself.

Thus, it can be concluded that the current financial and economic crisis greatly enhances the already existing tendency towards the de-westernization of Tajik society. How far the process will go in this direction largely depends both on the duration of the crisis and on the effectiveness of the anti-crisis strategy and activities taken by the current government.

# TURKMENISTAN:

## Denial of the Coronavirus Becomes Official Policy of the Authorities

**Serdar Aitakov**

Out of the more terrible and obvious the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the more absurd is becoming the ostentatious “COVID-nihilism” of the Turkmen authorities, who completely deny even isolated cases of the disease on the territory of Turkmenistan. On November 13, 2020, President Berdymukhamedov said at a government meeting: “As a result of the preventive measures taken, no cases of coronavirus infection have been registered in the country so far, which is a positive indicator and our great achievement.”<sup>170</sup>

The chronicles of the denial of COVID-19 in Turkmenistan are indicative of the usual Turkmen authorities’ behavior. The political decision to completely deny the penetration and existence of COVID-19 in the country was primarily dictated by the fact that

from 1997 to 2007 (the year he became president), Berdymukhamedov headed the Ministry of Health of Turkmenistan. He conducted medical reforms in terms of the National Program “Saglyk” (health), which may cause some questions about the level of preparedness of the health system for emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In Turkmenistan, naturally, any discussions on this topic are impossible. It is also impossible that with a PhD in Social Hygiene and Healthcare Organization, Berdymukhamedov did not understand the full danger imposed by a pandemic that has engulfed almost the whole world. Nevertheless, the decision was made, and the authorities didn’t acknowledge the presence of COVID-19 in the country throughout 2020, coming up with more and more absurd explanations for this.<sup>171</sup>

Nevertheless, one should give credit to the authorities that despite all the peremptory rhetoric of



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COVID-19 denial, they consistently closed the borders with neighboring countries, canceled flights with most of the countries, transferred the remaining flights to the airport of the city of Turkmenabat (Chardzhou) in the east of the country, and established a 14-day quarantine for all arriving flights.<sup>172</sup>

However, no social or general preventive health-care measures were taken in the country until the end of June. Wearing of protective masks was strictly prohibited “to avoid panic,” and authorities did not normalize social distancing; on the contrary, they organized and carried out forced mass events<sup>173</sup> (with the participation of civil servants, students, and military forces). In the meantime, foreign and Turkmen emigrant media began to publish alarming data about the sick and the dead<sup>174</sup> as well as about measures of concealing information.<sup>175</sup>

## BIRTHDAY OF THE PRESIDENT AMID THE PANDEMIC

When it became clear that the epidemic was developing into a pandemic and it would not end quickly, the authorities of Turkmenistan imposed a taboo on any mention of COVID-19 in the country and determined punishment for disseminating “false information.”<sup>176</sup> The main reason for this was the approaching date of President Berdymukhamedov’s birthday (June 29), who turned 63 this year and has reached the “age of the Prophet Muhammad.”<sup>177</sup> The Turkmen authorities associated this event with a sacred meaning. Thus, there should have been no negative news in Turkmenistan on the eve of the national holiday. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan harshly accused the US Embassy in Turkmenistan of spreading “fake news”<sup>178</sup> through the embassy’s website, which posted a warning for US citizens to comply with safety standards regarding information about sick people with COVID-19 symptoms.<sup>179</sup>

On May 22, 2020, Turkmenistan adopted the National Plan of Preparing for Prevention and Response to Acute Infectious Diseases.<sup>180</sup> On July 3, 2020, the President of Turkmenistan approved the Plan of Op-

erational Socio-Economic Measures to Counteract the COVID-19 Pandemic.<sup>181</sup> The texts of these plans have not been published, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan was appointed responsible for implementing the latest plan. As it became clear from the government’s following actions, all practical activity turned out to be the imitation of activity at the “international level”<sup>182</sup> since there was no publicly known plan of consistent actions for the prevention and control of the pandemic.

## WHO MISSION’S VISIT

For a long time, the Turkmen authorities sabotaged the visit of the WHO special mission, referring to “logistics difficulties in terms of the pandemic.” More than two months elapsed from the beginning of the visit coordination to the arrival of the WHO mission itself.<sup>183</sup> Local observers associate the visit delay with the celebration of President Berdymukhamedov’s birthday. The WHO mission visit began on July 6, 2020, the day the president sent the entire government on vacation and went on holiday himself.<sup>184</sup> The following day, bazaars, shopping centers, and service enterprises were closed, and, finally, a mandatory regime for wearing protective masks was introduced, with fines for their absence.<sup>185</sup>

Soon the authorities came up with an absurd idea<sup>186</sup> according to which the coronavirus can be carried by dust. They also put forward another idea that the dust’s place of origin is the ecological disaster zone of the Aral region.<sup>187</sup> At the same time, the authorities did not cite any scientific data, referring only to anonymous sources. It was this “discovery” that allowed the authorities to justify the introduction of a mandatory mask-wearing regime<sup>188</sup> since it is the dust that can “damage the lungs”<sup>189</sup> and “with this dust, the coronavirus can enter the body.” President Berdymukhamedov himself later announced the same version of the coronavirus long-distance transmission.<sup>190</sup> It was intended to justify all the authorities’ actions and mistakes in preventing an epidemic in the country. The denial of COVID-19 cases by Turkmenistan

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authorities has led to several problems for the population. In addition, even after a person's death, they are pursued by the "phobia of denial." After independent organization Acca Media, based on the results of satellite monitoring, had discovered a radical increase in the number of graves in cemeteries and linked this fact with the coronavirus epidemic,<sup>191</sup> the authorities of Turkmenistan demanded citizens "to make graves flat, so that they cannot be seen from above, and not to erect any tombstones."<sup>192</sup>

At the same time, no measures of economic and social support for small- and medium-sized businesses as well as for private entrepreneurs were announced or even considered by the state. Moreover, when markets and shops in shopping centers closed, entrepreneurs were required to pay rent. All this led to massive bankruptcy, the ruin of private entrepreneurship and aggravation of the unemployment situation in Turkmenistan, which was already going through an economic crisis associated with a fall in world prices for hydrocarbons and a reduction in natural gas purchases by its monopoly buyer, China. As a result, part of the retail trade went underground.<sup>193</sup> After all of this, at the meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan following the results of 11 months of the year 2020, the reports of members of the government declared sustainable economic growth in all sectors without exception.<sup>194</sup> The reports noted an increase in the GDP growth rate by 5.8%, and the fact that "the volume of retail trade compared with the same period last year increased by 18%." At the same time, the factor of influence of the pandemic on the country's economy, as well as the global economic crisis associated with COVID-19, was not mentioned at the government meeting. Nothing was said about the drop in cross-border trade, the reduction in foreign economic activity, and the impact of these factors on the country's economy as a whole. There was also no mention of any actions or programs of the government in connection with the pandemic.

All observations of the response of the Turkmenistan government to the challenges and threats of the

**Turkmenistan authorities have extensive experience in the concealment of information about natural and human-made (industrial) disasters.<sup>195</sup> However, the entire behavioral history of the authorities in crises suggests that it is more important for them to "save face" than to admit the problem and, therefore, to solve it with dignity.**

COVID-19 pandemic indicate that the authorities have traditionally preferred to hide problems and challenges rather than to take specific actions, recognize their seriousness, and realistically assess their consequences. Such behavior creates additional threats not only to Turkmen society but also to its closest neighbors, making Turkmenistan an unpredictable partner. Departure from the principle of openness once again confirms the lack of political will of the Turkmen government for real democratization and integration into the modern system of relations based on the rule of law, respect for the interests of society, and solidarity principles of international politics. The denial of the pandemic once again indicates the closed nature of Turkmenistan's political system. The authorities' reaction to the pandemic is a unique case both in the post-Soviet space and on the world stage. Such a situation is the most striking evidence of the catastrophic state of affairs in Turkmenistan in the context of westernization. According to the majority of the indicators, the country has been occupying the last positions of the Westernization Index for some time now.

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# UKRAINE:

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## Negotiations on Donbas Might Affect the Pro-Western Course of the Country

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**Alyona Getmanchuk**

During his presidential campaign, Volodymyr Zelensky promised to put an end to the war in Donbas. However, at the same time, the President of Ukraine declared the continuation of the course towards the integration of Ukraine into the EU and NATO, which was inserted in Ukraine's Constitution a few months before the presidential elections. To what extent are these two goals – (1) to end the war with Russia on conditions that will

be acceptable for Kyiv and (2) to continue west-ernization by promoting EU and NATO integra-tions – compatible with each other?

During the first year and a half of his presi-dency, Zelensky persistently followed his pree-lection promise to end the war in Donbas. Solving this issue has clearly become both the internal and external priority for him in 2020; although, he also had to focus on other hot topics such as reacting to COVID-19 or the con-stitutional crisis.



Image source: Denis Kuvaev / shutterstock.com

**What programs related to economic recovery and restoration of the war-struck Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine are now being implemented with the help of EU and/or US institutions?**

The Ministry for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine implements several dozen projects in cooperation with international partners, local authorities, and NGOs. I will mention a number of these, which are in the process of implementation in cooperation with our partners:

1. The "Housing for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)" is joint project of the Ministry for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine, the State Fund for the Promotion of Youth Housing Construction and the German state-owned Reconstruction Credit Institute (KfW) launched in November 2020. Implementation of the project will create an opportunity for IDPs to get around EUR 40,000 mortgage for commissioned housing for up to 20 years on favorable terms – 3% interest per annum and 63 square meters of area per family. This project foresees housing to 680 families or 1,768 IDPs during the next two years.
2. The agreement of the Project "Eastern Ukraine: Recovery, Reunification and Revival" (3R) with the IBRD was signed in December 2020 (credit line of USD 100 million from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development). Implementation of the project will facilitate transport connection, restoration, and modernization of the agricultural sector in those areas of the Luhansk

region, which are controlled by the Government of Ukraine. The Agricultural Logistics and Service Hub and the Regional Agricultural Testing and Food Safety Laboratory will be created. The implementation of the project will increase the investment attractiveness of the region, population mobility, and business activity in the agricultural sector.

3. The implementation of the railway construction project to connect the Lantrativka – Kindrashivka-Nova line with the rest of Ukraine's railway network has started. The approximate project cost comprises EUR 84 million. European Investment Bank (EIB) is the partner of the project. The construction completion is planned for 2025.
4. Water supply projects in collaboration with the Government of France. The water supply project "Modernization of the Water Supply System in Mariupol" in Donetsk Oblast. The Government of France provided a credit line for EUR 64 million. Implementation of the project will ensure proper access to drinking water supply for nearly 600,000 persons. Also, there is a project of a comprehensive upgrade of the engineering network of the "Popasna District Water Supply" in the Luhansk Oblast. The expected expenses are estimated to the amount of EUR 71 million.

Of course, our partners help in other significant projects such as legal assistance, mine risk issues and humanitarian assistance. We are sincerely grateful to our partners from embassies, governments, international organizations, and NGOs that care about the temporarily



occupied territories of Ukraine. Among the latest joint projects, one can mention service centers and EECs. The first one was opened on November 10 in Shchastia. From now on Shchastia has become the new standard. In December 2020, a new service center was opened at the Novotroytske EEC. In 2021, such centers will be established on all EECs. The list of services one can get in such centers is impressive: from receiving pensions to the issuing of any documents. Again, we are thankful to our partners for assisting our citizens from both sides of the contact line.

**Oleksii Reznikov**

**Deputy Prime Minister - Minister  
for Reintegration of the Temporarily  
Occupied Territories of Ukraine**

In order to fulfill his promise and break the deadlock negotiation process on Donbas, Zelensky dared to make compromises. For example, to make the summit of leaders of the Normandy Four (Ukraine, Russia, France, and Germany) happen, he accepted the conditions put forward by Russia for holding such a meeting in Paris in December 2019: he agreed to the so-called Steinmeier Formula and the withdrawal of troops and weapons in several areas. Both decisions were utterly unpopular in Ukrainian society and sparked protests from the active part of the population, for whom the line between compromise and surrender remains extremely thin.

In 2020 Zelensky also managed to arrange a conditional ceasefire in the Donbas, during which the number of injured and killed was significantly reduced. However, a year later, after the Normandy summit, the level of implementation of its re-

sults is rather modest – most of the points remain unfulfilled, primarily on the Russian side. At the same time, the level of political enthusiasm of the Ukrainian president has noticeably diminished; although, he continues to declare he believes in the agreement on the peace treaty with Putin.<sup>196</sup> Obviously, this is the reason he avoids personalized public attacks against the Russian leadership that were often used by ex-president Poroshenko.

Attentive observers noticed that with the election of president Zelensky there has been less political rhetoric regarding Ukraine's intentions to join the EU and NATO. Unlike his predecessor Petro Poroshenko, Zelensky did not make the issue of joining these organizations an integral component of his public communication. Likewise, he has not announced any public deadlines regarding accomplishments of certain stages of the integrational process.

The opponents of the incumbent president saw in this, among other things, intent not to provoke Putin once again amid negotiations on Donbas and first achieved results on this path (hostage exchange and Normandy summit), which apparently gave the Ukrainian president reason to believe that he can come to an agreement with Putin.

Zelensky and his team's representatives explain such reduction in the level of pro-European rhetoric as a departure from the Poroshenko policy, which allegedly had many pretentious political statements but not so many practical results. The new government declared the transition to achieving practical results in dialogues with its main Western partners, in which economic diplomacy is to play an important role. In addition to the search for allies in the war with Russia, the focus shifted to finding investors.<sup>197</sup>

Some caution in the dialogue with the EU was also initially explained by the fact that certain representatives of the European institutions and individual member states were associated with the support of the previous Ukrainian president. First of all, we are talking about the

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former head of the European Council, Donald Tusk. It is still widely believed that some European bureaucrats still feel sympathy with Petro Poroshenko and the opposition.

Thus, the decrease in Zelensky's rhetoric towards the EU and NATO may be associated not only with the intent to find a common language with Russia, but also with the willingness to be different from Poroshenko – to find another positioning in this topic. That is, Zelensky has acted more anti-Poroshenko than pro-Putin.

Until recently, there was a common thought among the representatives of the presidential team and his political force ("Servant of the People") that the EU and NATO are topics of Poroshenko and his political party, which he even branded accordingly in 2019 – the party of the former president "Petro Poroshenko Bloc" has been changed into the "European Solidarity" (that is ES for short, and it sounds similar to EU in Ukrainian).

Zelensky and his team faced a peculiar dilemma – to recognize Poroshenko's conditional monopoly on the EU or NATO or to break it. Judging by the synchronized work of various government institutions related to the EU and NATO and more frequent statements of the Ukrainian president on European and Euro-Atlantic integration, he chose to break Poroshenko's conditional monopoly regarding this issue.

Moreover, Zelensky's method of setting fewer public deadlines, delivering fewer pretentious speeches, and focusing on "unadvertised" practical work was unexpectedly, perhaps even for him, backed up by some concrete results. Thus, in June 2020, NATO invited Ukraine to become a member of the Alliance's Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP) program. The very fact of inviting six countries – participants of the program – to the club became a confirmation of NATO's recognition of Ukraine's contribution not only to the operations and missions of the Alliance, but also to the achievement of a sufficiently high level of interoperability of the

Ukrainian armed forces with the NATO armed forces; since the EOP is part of the Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII) launched by NATO at the Wales Summit in 2014. Ukraine was actively trying to get an invitation to this Program at the time of the presidency of Poroshenko, who used to talk a lot on the subject publicly during the last two years in power, but the country managed to become a program participant only under President Zelensky, who did not declare it publicly. Moreover, Kyiv received an invitation to participate in the program "ahead of schedule," since the Ukrainian capital expected that the Alliance would make the appropriate decision closer to the end of 2020, and not on June 12 (which also happens to be Russia Day).

Another important fact that President Zelensky should constantly keep in mind in his negotiations on ending the war with Russia is the Ukrainian society's attitude to the EU and NATO course. Volodymyr Zelensky, who is hypersensitive to public opinion, could not ignore the rather high level of support for the Euro-Atlantic and especially European vectors, not only in the country in general, but also among his party's supporters. For example, when asked how one would vote in a referendum regarding Ukraine's accession to NATO, 52.9% of the "Servant of the People" presidential party voters would support it.<sup>198</sup> Moreover, in a referendum on joining the EU, 73.3% of the presidential party's electorate would vote "for." In both cases, these numbers are noticeably higher than, for example, among the voters of former Prime Minister of Ukraine Yulia Tymoshenko's political party which is widely perceived as pro-Western.

Ukrainian society also reacts quite sensitively to possible concessions to Russia during the process of peace negotiations. For Ukrainians, this issue is deeply emotional, since it is about the sovereign right of states to determine their foreign policy choices. In addition, both revolutions that took place in Ukraine over the past fifteen years were

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mostly revolutions in support of the country's European course. No country in the world has paid such a high price as Ukraine for having an Association Agreement with the EU signed – with no guarantees to become a member or even an official candidate for membership in the European Union. In the Ukrainian context, it is essential to understand that even though many residents of the eastern regions of Ukraine, particularly Donetsk and Luhansk, do not support Ukraine's membership in the EU, they are in favor of the European course of the country's development.<sup>199</sup>

Besides, Ukrainians are very skeptical that Russia will stop its aggressive policy towards Ukraine, even if Ukraine "sacrifices" its Euro-Atlantic or European choice for peace in Donbas. Most Ukrainians (58,4%) believe that even such a sacrifice will not force Russia to stop interfering with Ukraine.<sup>200</sup> This opinion is supported by the recent experience when at the time of the Viktor Yanukovich presidency, Ukraine officially declared its non-aligned status at the legislative level. However, it should be noted that it was in the status of a non-aligned country, and not a candidate for NATO membership, that a military invasion and illegal occupation of part of the Ukrainian territory took place.

Zelensky also takes into great account the moods within his political force, part of which is determined to uphold the European and Euro-Atlantic course of Ukraine enshrined in the Constitution, and will not accept concessions by means of this course in negotiations with Russia. It became obvious when the Ukrainian negotiators in Minsk agreed to create a so-called Consultative Council, which was to include representatives of the so-called ORDLO (certain districts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions) on equal terms with the Kyiv officials. It would be the first step towards direct negotiations between Kyiv on the one hand and Donetsk and Luhansk on the other, while Russia could transfer from the category of a conflicted party to a guarantor

state or a mediator – something that the Russian authorities have been diligently seeking since the beginning of the conflict in Donbas, insisting on direct negotiations between Kyiv and the occupied regions. The Consultative Council was never created. One of the main reasons for the failure of this idea was exactly the acute reaction of the pro-European deputies of the "Servant of the People" party, who made a public statement on the matter, to the creation of such an entity.<sup>201</sup>

**Some experts name the noticeable delay in the approval of the National Security Strategy of Ukraine as one of the signs of how the unwillingness to hurt the Donbas negotiation process affects the declaration of European and Euro-Atlantic agenda. The Strategy had been kept in the Office of the President for more than half a year before it was promulgated. The new national Strategy contains 11 references to NATO and eight references to Russia as an aggressor.<sup>202</sup> The goal of joining the North Atlantic Alliance is stated clearly.**

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Significantly, that the document appeared two days after the failed negotiations of the Normandy advisers in Berlin that, according to some government officials, was an additional motivation to make public the Strategy, which is quite tough towards Russia and quite complementary to the course towards the EU and NATO.

It is worth mentioning that the National Security Strategy adopted during the presidency of Petro Poroshenko in 2015 had more clear signs of the impact of the negotiation process with Russia on Donbas that also took place at that time. In particular, the goal of Ukraine's membership in NATO was defined rather vaguely. Instead of a fixed goal of entering the Alliance, the plan was to achieve the standards necessary for joining NATO.

Rather interesting is the case of Zelensky's attitude to the issue of responsibility and punishment of Russia for prolonged aggression towards Ukraine, particularly, to preserving and strengthening Western sanctions against Putin's regime. If under Poroshenko it was the main narrative of the Ukrainian government in its dialogue with the West, today we see a less definite picture. On the one hand, it was under Zelensky that the post of the special representative of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry on sanctions policy was established in Ukraine. On the other hand, the issue of Russia's responsibility for an act of aggression toward Ukraine does not appear in top state official's discourse, as it used to do before, and to a lesser extent determines the nature of Zelensky's dialogue with the West.

Thus, when we are talking about how negotiations on Donbas are affecting integration into the EU and NATO and Ukraine's westernization process in general, there is no serious basis to record such an impact. On the tactical level, negotiations on Donbas rather help maintain regular contact between the Ukrainian government and the leaders of Western countries, with Germany and France in the first place – as the Normandy Four members. It is unlikely that the Kyiv dialogue with the two European capitals would be as intensive if Paris and especially Berlin did not participate in the Normandy format and if Chancellor Angela Merkel was not involved in the preparation of Minsk agreements.

Besides, the question remains whether Ukraine would have received an invitation to participate in the NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP) if the Ukrainian president was a politician hostilely perceived by the Kremlin, or would NATO member countries decide to postpone the invitation momentarily for fear of possible provocations from the Russian Federation?

However, there is every reason to suppose that in case of progressing in negotiations on Donbas, the issue of Ukraine's refusal to integrate into the EU, and especially NATO, would be a rather acute concern for the Russian side. Particularly, through reintegration and granting certain veto power on Kyiv's foreign policy decisions to the occupied regions of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which may be critical towards the country's Euro-Atlantic course. But Ukrainian society is unlikely to pay readily such a price for peace.

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# UZBEKISTAN:

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## The Authorities Conduct a Comprehensive Digitalization of the Country

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**Dr. Farkhod Tolipov**

### DIGITALIZATION

In January 2020, the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in his address to the parliament, proposed to declare the year 2020 as the “Year of Development of Science, Education and the Digital Economy.” During his speech, the President said that Uzbekistan needs innovations because the country has a goal to

join the ranks of the developed countries. This goal will be achievable if the country has highly qualified cadres and the best education system. “We must deeply master new knowledge and innovative technologies. This will make it possible to follow the shortest path of progress,” said Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

In this context, on October 5, 2020, the President signed the Decree “On Strategy ‘Digital Uzbekistan’ and measures on its effective realization.” The Decree stipulates that the modern in-



Image source: Lukas Bischoff Photograph / shutterstock.com

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formation-communication technologies are being introduced in all branches of the economy and the social sphere as well as in state management, healthcare, and agriculture. In particular, 220 priority projects have been launched envisaging the improvement of the system of the e-government and the development of the market of program products. Also, the “Digital Tashkent” program is being realized, which will launch a geoportal integrated with more than 40 information systems and the creation of an e-system for the management of the public transport and public services infrastructure among others.

In the framework of the year of digitalization, the novel IT Park was established in Tashkent, which has a modern infrastructure. Such IT Parks are envisaged to be built in other cities – Nukus, Bukhara, Samarkand, Gulistan, and Urgench. With the view to prepare highly qualified specialists in the sphere of informational technologies, the joint project is launched with the foreign partners “1 Million Programmers.” In this project, Uzbekistan partnered with the Korean Inha University and the Dubai Future Foundation. The realization of this project is supposed to involve large groups of people adapting to new professions in the IT sphere and to employ young people. The program implies the distant learning of programming through the portal UzbekCoders.uz to train a new generation of specialists on digital technologies. In the first stage, the project will encompass the four most demanded specialties in the global job market—data analysis, Android programming, full-stack development, and frontend development.<sup>203</sup>

Digitalization, in particular, is deeply penetrated in the banking and financial sphere. This year the Ministry of Innovative Development worked out the conception of “Smart Bank,” which will lay the groundwork for the creation of independent online banking for customers.

Another interesting sign of digital progress is that Uzbekistan reached a USD 2 million agreement with South Korea to set up the Research

Center for Cooperation on E-Government in Tashkent.

Meanwhile, according to the new UN Review on the level of development of the e-government (E-Government Development Index, EGDI), Uzbekistan’s position worsened: the country took 87<sup>th</sup> place among 193 countries (in 2018 it was 81<sup>st</sup>).<sup>204</sup> On the second index of e-participation (E-Participation Index, EPI), Uzbekistan’s position improved with 13 points: the country took 46<sup>th</sup> place.<sup>205</sup> According to official sources, by 2023, the share of the digital economy in the GDP of the country will be doubled, the size of services in this sphere will be tripled, and the export of such services will reach USD 100 million.<sup>206</sup>

John Deere, one of the leading companies in the world dealing with the digitalization of the agricultural sector, created its official dealer company in Uzbekistan “Landtech,” in turn helping the digitalization of agriculture of Uzbekistan. This company also realizes the training programs for young cadres in this sphere.

Silverleaf Capital Partners, an Uzbek-American joint company, is engaged in the modernization of the cotton industry of Uzbekistan. The US government, the US Department of Commerce, leading banks, as well as the International Labor Organization supported this company and its project.<sup>207</sup> This company has tasks not only in spheres of its main business but also in social spheres such as:

- To modernize the agro-business and related industries through attracting innovation for the region Western technologies, meeting the demands of the international market;
- To integrate the local population and specialists in the process of modernization through training and practical improvement of their qualifications;
- To increase the earnings (and accordingly the living standards) of workers who are engaged in the project through acquiring technical skills and principles of international management;

- To contribute to filling the domestic market with qualitative, competitive products with parallel provision of this product for the international market, primarily Western Europe and the USA; and
- To assist in the development of social and educational programs as well as active cooperation between the US and Uzbekistan in the realization of humanitarian projects in the spheres of education, medicine, and sport.

By the end of 2022, high-speed internet will be provided to all regions of the country; its speed will be no less than 10 Mbps. Also, by January 1, 2022, all popular touristic places will be provided with high-speed internet. Nowadays, however, there are serious problems related to the availability of internet and internet speed in remote, rural areas and even in some provincial towns of the country.

## EDUCATION

There is an official foundation in Uzbekistan called “El-Yurt Umidi” which means “The Hope of the Country.” It was created by the President’s Decree in 2018 and acts under the Cabinet of Ministers. This Foundation organizes trips of scholars, professors, and teachers abroad for conducting research and professional growth. In 2020 it was announced that more than 700 people would be sent to leading foreign institutions.

Since 2019, the American Webster University is functioning in Tashkent. This university provides the degrees of Bachelor of Science in Business Administration; Bachelor of Arts in Media Communications; Bachelor of Arts in Economics; Bachelor of Arts in International Relations; Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language; and Master of Business Administration. The university has announced that more programs will be introduced soon. Besides Webster University, branches of other Western universities, such as the Polytechnic University of Turin and Management Development Institute of Singapore, also operate in Uzbekistan.

**Currently, there is an ongoing process (2017-2021) toward adopting the program of fundamental improvement of education programs in universities and the independence of universities corresponding to the requirements of the market economy. The president adopted the Decree on October 8, 2020, about the “Concept of development of the higher education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan for the period till 2030.” This Decree envisages the gradual introduction of the most advanced global higher education standards.**

In particular, universities of Uzbekistan are tasked to adopt a credit-module system in the education process. A credit-module system will be introduced in 16% of higher education institutions by 2023, 57% by 2025, and 85% by 2030.

Accreditation of education institutions in Uzbekistan is based on the European Standards and

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Guidelines (ESG), which were formulated with due account of the experience of leading Western countries. Currently, the inspection of education jointly with the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Special Education undertakes efforts on the integration of the national education system into the international one. In 2020, Uzbekistan joined the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) as an observer.

Step by step, Uzbekistan is adapting to the Bologna Process. The Bologna Process is an integrative body of efforts of European countries aiming to raise the quality of higher education, ensure competitiveness of universities, and create mobility in education and teaching, as well as joint scientific research and the employment of graduates. The Erasmus Mundus and Tempus programs of the European Union have been successfully implemented from 2014 till 2020. Currently, the Erasmus+ program coincides with deep reforms of the university and post-university education systems as well as the system of development of professional growth of teachers of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan completely transitioned to the three-stage education: BA, MA, PhD.

One of the “fashionable” trends nowadays is the mushrooming of private education centers that provide English courses for different categories of people, including special IELTS and TOEFL courses. The US Embassy also supports teaching English via its unique programs.

In general, Western education standards (for instance the Finnish school system) are attracting more and more attention on the part of the government as well as students and young scholars.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the American organization IREX was very active and successful. Unfortunately, its activity was stopped because of tense relations between Uzbekistan and the United States in the wake of the tragic events of the 2005 Andijan un-

rest. Nowadays, in the context of the growing strategic partnership of these two states, IREX is returning to Uzbekistan. This organization supports education and scientific institutions and individuals by providing various projects including research exchanges between the US and Uzbekistan scholars.

In the same context, it was notable that in November 2020, the official delegation of the MFA of Uzbekistan visited the United States. During the visit, Uzbekistan and the US agreed on closer cooperation. They transformed the Annual Bilateral Consultations into the Strategic Partnership Dialogue (SPD), which will include closer cooperation in the political, economic, security, cultural, education, as well as human dimension spheres. The first Strategic Partnership Dialogue will be held in Tashkent in 2021. Among other things, the Strategic Partnership Dialogue is supposed to stimulate increasing opportunities for bilateral trade and investment, including opportunities for US exporters and bidders on public tenders and Uzbekistan’s Ministry of Investment and Foreign Trade’s opening of a dedicated office to support US investment. Also, the SPD envisages further collaboration on the digital economy and cybersecurity as well as supporting women’s economic empowerment and increasing leadership opportunities. One of the important directions of the SPD will be close cooperation in the fields of energy, health and environment, information and communications technology, and tourism development. The United States reaffirmed its continued support for Uzbekistan’s economic policy reform efforts, including its World Trade Organization accession process.<sup>208</sup>

In summation, it should be said that digitalization, education, and the technological advancement of Uzbekistan go hand-in-hand and reflect some form of westernization of the country. At the same time, the same non-Western direction of the modernization of Uzbek-



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istan is also taking place. For instance, technological advancement and modern education are connected to the “Belt and Road Initiative” that China is enthusiastically promoting in the region since 2012. The BRI is supposed to be a comprehensive endeavor including such dimensions as transport, infrastructure, investments, education, and technological supply.

Another challenging trend is related to cooperation of Uzbekistan with Russia. In particular, the two states agreed on the construction of

the nuclear power station in the territory of Uzbekistan – the question which caused debates between proponents and opponents of this project.

These two states – China and Russia – are also partners in the technological, educational, and scientific advancement of Uzbekistan. In this respect, the question arises as to whether the geopolitical dimension is implicit and immanent in the overall partnership of Uzbekistan with key powers of the world.

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## WESTERNIZATION

Westernization is a process whereby societies adopt Western standards for cultural norms and codes of conduct, such as individual freedom, liberal democratic governance, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, rule of law, secularism, and protection of private property in areas such as industry, technology, law, politics, economics, and lifestyle.

In the last few centuries, Westernization has served as a catalytic influence in the acceleration of global growth in equatable ways as with modernization.

Rather than reflective of a single society's values, however, Westernization is more than a unidirectional influence of one country over another. Over time, the process of Westernization can produce a two-sided exchange. As a country becomes more Western, it, in turn, can also produce reciprocal influence on countries in which Western ideas originated.

