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referendum for EU
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STRATEG**EAST**
WESTERNIZATION
REPORT
2024

generalized scheme of preferences
nuclear status
EU candidacy
NATO Vilnius summit
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ABOUT STRATEG EAST



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THIS REPORT WAS WRITTEN BY:

Dr. Mantas Adomėnas	Sherali Sh. Rizoyon, Ph.D.
Ahmad Alili	Mykhailo Samus
Dr. Nika Chitadze	Artyom Shraibman
Emilbek Dzhuraev, Ph.D.	Dr. Azamat Seitov
Dinara Jangujekova, Ph.D.	Sigita Struberga
Hovsep Khurshudyan	Dmitri Teperik
Mihai Mogildea	

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StrategEast
1900 K Street, NW
Washington, D. C. 20006
office@strategeast.org
www.StrategEast.org

Concept: Michael Sheitelman
Project coordinator: Lidia Shavlo
Proofreading: Sonja Swenson
Design: Vitaly Tchirkov
Page proof: Constantin Leites

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INTRODUCTION



Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has transformed Eurasia into a social and economic battlefield, with Russia and China opposing Western efforts. The United States and the European Union have two primary objectives — to protect the countries from Moscow's economic and political pressure by enhancing cooperation in the economic and political spheres and to prevent Russia from using the region as a gray zone to escape economic isolation, acquire military components, and circumvent banking restrictions. To address the second objective, the US has shifted from warnings to imposing sanctions on specific companies from Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. Representatives from other Eurasian countries face similar threats. Although the EU and the US have only focused on secondary sanctions since the beginning of 2024, while during the period covered by this report — during 2023 — Western countries preferred a policy of encouragement and providing new opportunities for cooperation.

Our experts from Central Asian countries see the emergence of multilateral formats like the "C5+1" with the United States and the "EU – Central Asia" summit with the European Union as a promising development for the region. These formats aim to maintain multifaceted development despite the region's growing economic ties with China and its reluctance to become overly dependent on one market or center of global politics.

China is prepared to offer loans, investments, and, potentially, military defense against Russian territorial claims. Current multilateral summits between Central Asian and Western leaders are working to determine whether the West can provide a viable alternative to direct dependence on China.

The situation with Kyrgyzstan is more complex. The US has raised concerns about the potential involvement of Kyrgyz companies in gray supply chains funneling goods from Europe and the US to the Russian military-industrial complex. Additionally, Kyrgyzstan's domestic politics sometimes mirror Russia's "guided democracy."

Over the past year, Europe and the Caucasus have moved closer together. Georgia has received the long-awaited candidate status for European Union membership, fulfilling the aspirations of many Georgians, albeit with some reservations. Armenia's potential EU membership has been discussed at the highest political levels. However, the progress of these partnerships depends on whether the peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan will be facilitated by Russia or the EU. As Armenia distances itself from Russia, resolving territorial integrity issues presents Europe with a unique opportunity. Facilitating peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan will also establish Azerbaijan as a reliable energy partner.

In Eastern Europe, the main "hot" battle for the right to live in accordance with Western values has been ongoing for three years and threatens to escalate. Experts from the Baltic states highlight their preparation for a potential hot war with Russia as a key trend. Vilnius hosted a NATO summit in 2023, and Latvia has developed a new defense strategy and fortified its borders.

Ukraine, positioned on the frontline of physical confrontation with Russia, has emerged as a significant player in the arms trade and has further integrated into the Western technological ecosystem through military tech.

Moldova, granted EU membership candidate status, decided to secure its European path by holding a national referendum despite numerous threats from Russia to occupy or split the country.

Meanwhile, Belarus has acquired nuclear weapons, strengthening its position in future negotiations with the West.

Sincerely,
Anatoly Motkin
President of StratEast

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anatoly Motkin". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

ARMENIA:

European perspectives vs Russian threats

Hovsep Khurshudyan

INTRODUCTION

In September 2023, Azerbaijan conducted activities that the European Parliament later described as something that “amounts to ethnic cleansing”¹ against the Armenian people of Nagorno-Karabakh. The European Parliament’s October 2023 resolution states that the Parliament, “considers that the current situation amounts to ethnic cleansing and strongly condemns threats and violence committed by Azerbaijani troops”. On September 24, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signaled a major foreign policy shift following Moscow’s refusal to enter the latest conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and provide security to the local population. Pashinyan

told the nation² that, “it is clear to all of us that the CSTO and the instruments of the Armenian-Russian strategic partnership are not enough to ensure Armenia’s external security,” and that, “analysis of the events shows that the security systems and the allies we have relied on for many years have set a task to demonstrate our vulnerabilities and justify the impossibility of the Armenian people to have an independent state”. On October 17th, Nikol Pashinyan was hosted by the European Parliament, where his statement that Armenia is ready to move closer to the European Union, to the degree that the European Union believes is possible³, was met with a standing ovation. This statement marked the beginning of Armenia’s more active efforts to align with European and Western partners.



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Pashinyan's speech at the European Parliament was followed by the Armenia-Europe Conference organized by the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum's Armenian National Platform in Brussels in November, with participation from experts and opposition politicians, as well as high-ranking officials and deputies from both Armenia and the European Union⁴. Notably, the Secretary of the Armenian Security Council Armen Grigoryan took part in the Conference, canceling a scheduled meeting with his Russian counterpart Patrushev in Moscow.⁵ Then-Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ararat Mirzoyan became the only minister from the EaP countries who participated offline in the EaP Civil Society Forum Annual Assembly, where he spoke about Armenia's European aspirations.⁶

During that time, a number of important meetings took place between the leadership of Armenia, the EU, and a number of EU countries. Agreements were signed on deepening cooperation and establishing a strategic dialogue. On October 5, a quadrilateral meeting between the leaders of the European Union, France, Germany, and Armenia took place in Granada (Spain), on the sidelines of the Summit of the European Political Community, during which a joint statement was adopted on strengthening of EU-Armenia relations and the normalization of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁷ All of the provisions of that document had been the subject of prior agreement with the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev. However, Aliyev later canceled his earlier arrangements to come to Granada and sign that document.⁸

Based on the sequence of events presented above, it follows that Armenia has set a course for European integration while severing relations with Russia.

SECURITY "GUARANTEES" AND RUSSIAN THREATS

To explain what led to the changes in Armenia's foreign policy, it is important to briefly examine the earlier events. After the September 2022 escalation, which claimed the lives of hundreds of soldiers from both Armenia and Azerbaijan, when Azerbaijani forces drove deep into Armenia,⁹ with artillery, mortar, and drone attacks along a 200km stretch of border, Armenia's position between the West and Russia became clearer. At that time, the CSTO, led by Russia, refused to defend its ally Armenia, stating that it was not clear whether Azerbaijani troops had

actually invaded Armenian territory as the border has not yet been demarcated.¹⁰ At this point, Secretary Blinken urged President Aliyev to cease hostilities and expressed deep concerns over military action along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, including shelling in Armenia.¹¹ French President Emmanuel Macron also called on Aliyev to strictly comply with the ceasefire agreement and respect the territorial integrity of Armenia.¹² Armenia's top leadership at this point decided to withdraw from the CSTO, though they have hitherto postponed that step, following urgings from France and the United States¹³ not to rush things.

On September 17, 2022, then-US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi visited Armenia and posted the following to X (formerly known as Twitter) "Our Founders chose democracy over autocracy on #ConstitutionDay1787. For generations, we have protected and defended that choice. Today, from the US to Ukraine to Taiwan to Armenia, the world faces a choice between democracy and autocracy — and we must, again, choose democracy."¹⁴

On October 6, 2022, during the quadrilateral meeting between President Aliyev, Prime Minister Pashinyan, President Macron, and President Michel in Prague,¹⁵ an unprecedented decision was made to recognize mutual territorial integrity on the basis of the 1991 Almaty Declaration, after which, at the request of Armenia and with the agreement of Azerbaijan, the European Union deployed an EU civilian mission on the border of Armenia and Azerbaijan (EUMA).¹⁶ The Kremlin's ability to exert pressure on Armenia, as well as Azerbaijan's encroachments on Armenia's borders were significantly limited. In November of the same year, during the CSTO Summit held in Yerevan, Prime Minister Pashinyan refused to allow CSTO observers to be stationed at Armenia's border with Azerbaijan.

On December 9, 2022, self-proclaimed Azerbaijani "environmental activists" launched the blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh. An investigation conducted by media outlet Civil Net's fact-checking and investigative team,¹⁷ as well as the Radio Liberty media outlet,¹⁸ revealed that some of these "activists" were in fact former members of the Azerbaijani ruling party, while others had never participated in any environmental protests. Instead, they are employed by various NGOs funded by President Aliyev's recently established Council of State Support to Non-Governmental Organizations.¹⁹ Pashinyan was offered a corridor to Azerbaijan through Armenia's Meghri region, under the control of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).

Pashinyan rejected the offer. Simultaneously, Western leaders, including US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, urged President Aliyev to immediately reopen the four-mile corridor to commercial traffic.²⁰ In June 2023, in violation of point 6 of the trilateral Statement of November 9,²¹ Azerbaijan, with tacit approval from Russia,²² officially set up a checkpoint on the Lachin Corridor on the Hakar Bridge, and the blockade devolved into a siege.

The United States' efforts to facilitate the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan failed.²³

On September 19, 2023, not only did the Kremlin fail to prevent Azerbaijan from attacking Nagorno-Karabakh, where Russian "peacekeepers" were stationed, it even used the Azerbaijani term "anti-terrorist operation" in describing the events through Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, who stated that, "Azerbaijan informed Russia about the 'anti-terrorist operation' in Nagorno-Karabakh a few minutes before the start of hostilities". Earlier, Zakharova stated that, "Russian peacekeepers continue to fulfill their mission in the region." The Kremlin appears to view the NKR Defense Army as terrorists, despite previously cooperating with it for two years.

In an interview with Igor Kurashenko²⁴ for RT France, Zakharova also indicated that, "many expectations about Nagorno-Karabakh were related to the mediation of France and President Emmanuel Macron himself," adding: "Look what it led to. Paris tried to take over this mediation agenda and say that France would be better able to mediate than anyone else, especially Russia." According to her, "it can serve as a lesson for everyone who will turn to the West in the matter of mediation." Previously, on February 13 of this year, during a meeting with Sahiba Gafarova, the president of Azerbaijan's legislature, the Milli Mejlis, during an official visit to Russia, the president of the Russian State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, announced that "...there's a decision that was adopted at the level of the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Russian Federation. Those who make statements in favor of European institutions can simply lose the country."²⁵ According to the speaker of the Duma, involvement of the PACE and the European Parliament in resolving the Nagorno Karabakh problem "will worsen the situation, create more new problems, and if they do this, they should be responsible for the consequences." Lower-ranking officials, as well as experts and pro-Kremlin propagandists have made harsher statements against Armenia, to the point that

Armenia should no longer exist as an independent state, and instead be annexed as a Russian province.

EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES

After the events of September 2023, both Armenian political and social elites made the final and strategic decision to break the ties with Russia. In order to minimize threats and risks from both the Kremlin and the Aliyev regime, they chose to conduct this process as carefully as possible and in close contact and constant consultations with Western partners. It appears that the EU is ready to execute the European Peace Facility to provide Armenia with more security cushion.

As to the US, in mid-November, Azerbaijan refused to send its Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov to Washington for peace talks with Armenia with US support, in protest against remarks by US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien at a congressional hearing, in which O'Brien said that the US State Department "has made it clear to Azerbaijan that there cannot be business as usual in our bilateral relationship. The United States has condemned Azerbaijani actions in Nagorno-Karabakh, canceled high-level bilateral meetings and engagements with Azerbaijan, and suspended plans for future events."²⁶

Armenia still expects a more active stance from the West, along with clear steps to support Armenia's military and economic security. It is evident that the military equipment supplied to Armenia from the West and India has hitherto failed to ensure a restoration of the military

balance with Azerbaijan. The same can be said about the members of the military and military officers who traveled to the West for training, as not enough have taken part in these exercises at this time. It remains to be seen to what extent Armenia will be able to manage the risks of any economic sanctions imposed by Russia once it leaves the Eurasian Economic Union. In both cases, should the West and especially the European Union have the will, they will be able to counter much of this pressure.

Thus, the EU can do much to assist Armenia in accelerating the establishment of new logistics chains to its markets through Georgia and the Black Sea, as well as to re-equip production in Armenia and increase the quality of its deliverables. All of this requires investments and technology. Just as important is a visa-free regime for Armenian citizens. Another potential avenue is facilitating work visas to incentivize at least some of the seasonal labor migrants who have historically traveled to Russia each year to instead work in the EU.

Armenian society is ready to fight for its independence from Russia and prepared to endure

the inevitable hardships that entails. However, that struggle will be more effective and met with far more enthusiasm if the population feels supported by its new allies in the West.

CONCLUSION

There is a silent but serious struggle between the West and Russia over Armenia. The public demand for European integration in Armenia²⁷ is no secret. The authorities share this view and have been taking steps to move closer to the European Union. Two of Russia's allies, Türkiye and Azerbaijan, are still holding Armenia back from these aspirations, and the West must respond by using all tools at its disposal to reign in this aggression. Shifting Armenian foreign policy is a risky endeavor, but Russia's capacity to halt the European integration process has been more limited than ever over the last ten years. Both Armenia and the EU are trying to leverage this scenario in order to strengthen their mutual ties, develop integration programs, and take steps to include Armenia in various arrangements with the EU, right up to EU membership.

AZERBAIJAN:

The influence of EU and US platforms on the peace process

Ahmad Alili

INTRODUCTION

The region that once belonged to the Soviet Union has undergone significant changes recently. The wars in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and in Ukraine in 2022 demonstrated that the post-Soviet era has ended. For the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan's complete restoration of sovereignty over all its lands in September 2023 has already led to significant regional developments and has the potential to shape the future of Eastern Europe and the broader Eurasian region as a whole. These developments from 2023 shed light on some aspects of the new "post"-post-Soviet period and the role of Trans-Atlantic institutions in the emerging new order, in which the Western community's influence is challenged not only in Ukraine, but also in the wider post-Soviet region.

In this context, the central event of 2023 in Azerbaijan, which has also transformed regional affairs, is the military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, which led to complete restoration of Azerbaijani sovereignty over all its lands. The consequences of this military operation extend beyond Azerbaijan, as it prompted Yerevan to lodge complaints about Russia's failure to fulfill its duties as a military-strategic partner. Eventually, Armenia announced its intention to "freeze" its activities in the CSTO and intensified its narrative about further integration with Western institutions.

What lies ahead for these regional developments, and how are they linked to the outlook for the Eastern Partnership? How will the presence of the Trans-Atlantic community be guaranteed in the South Caucasus region? What factors led Baku to distance itself from Western mediation platforms?



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The developments in the South Caucasus region in 2023, especially the role of European countries and the USA in peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, require close review. Understanding these developments and the role of Brussels and Washington in this process in 2023 allows us to understand possible scenarios for the region in the coming decades.

WASHINGTON AND BRUSSELS'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE PEACE PROCESS IN 2023

The events of December 12, 2022, when Azerbaijani eco-activists closed the road near Shusha,²⁸ declaring their control over the transfer of arms and non-humanitarian aid to the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians by Russia, might be viewed as the beginning of the so-called "extended political year of 2023" for the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. The culmination of this political year came on December 7, 2023, with the joint statement²⁸ from both Armenian and Azerbaijani authorities regarding their readiness to sign a peace agreement, and Azerbaijan's announcement of snap presidential elections scheduled for 2024.

Yerevan officials described the actions of the Azerbaijani eco-activists, who closed the only land route giving Armenia direct access to Nagorno-Karabakh, as a "blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh," escalating tensions between the two countries. On April 23, 2023, Azerbaijan additionally established a checkpoint on the border bridge connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. In response to this development, Armenia turned to Russia,³⁰ which it considered to be the guarantor of safety in the Lachin corridor, while Baku increased its control over military positions in the disputed region.

In order to alleviate rising tensions, the so-called "Washington platform," Washington-hosted peace talks, took place³¹ in the first week of May 2023. This platform became an essential attempt to bring the derailed peace process back on track, when for the first time, Armenian and Azerbaijani delegations, led by both countries' Ministers of Foreign Affairs, met in Washington during a four-day meeting. The resemblance with the well-known "Camp David Accords" and other peace processes led by the USA was apparent.³² "The two sides have discussed some very tough issues over the last few days, and they've made tangible progress on a durable peace

agreement," Secretary Blinken stated at a closing session for the negotiations. Despite the optimistic statements from the US Secretary of State, real progress in this format was the restart of the peace process itself.

Later, EU Council President Charles Michel took the initiative in further peace negotiations. Despite the agreement of both Armenia and Azerbaijan for trilateral meetings in Brussels, this format also failed to yield significant results.³³ Thus, during the second trilateral meeting with President Michel in July 2023, Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders failed to reach an agreement regarding the opening of the Aghdam and Lachin roads. Following President Michel's Press Remarks (dated July 15, 2023) about the possibility of the Aghdam Road being used for humanitarian purposes,³⁴ PM Pashinyan stated that he had "neither the mandate nor the need to discuss" any alternative to Lachin Road, where the Azerbaijani checkpoint had been established few months earlier. As a result, the EU mediation mission also reached a deadlock.

With his press statement in June 2023, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell indicated that "the movement through the Lachin corridor remains obstructed, despite orders by the International Court," and that "it [was] incumbent on the Azerbaijani authorities to guarantee safety and freedom of movement along the corridor imminently," the EU mediation mission stagnated even further.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan viewed the UN Security Council's addressing the case in August 2023 as disrespectful of peace negotiations under the auspices of the EU. "Armenia's attempt to manipulate the UN Security Council for its own purposes failed once again," stated the Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry.³⁵ If we examine the messages from Baku at the time, we notice that the peace process had already been paralyzed. This became even more apparent when Azerbaijan launched a military campaign in September 2023.

Since November 2020, Azerbaijan has observed continued transportation of land mines and weapons through the Lachin humanitarian corridor. Following the landmine explosions in Nagorno-Karabakh, which took the lives of eight police officers in September 2023, Azerbaijan launched an antiterror military operation against armed groups in the region. The military campaign of September 19-20, 2023 aimed to disarm all Armenian armed groups, including Armenian Army

service members still stationed in Nagorno-Karabakh. According to a trilateral agreement signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Russia after the war, all Armenian armed groups had been expected to leave Nagorno-Karabakh in November-December 2020. As a result of the Azerbaijani antiterror operation, on September 28, the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians' leader Samvel Shahramanyan signed a decree³⁶ to dissolve all political institutions of the self-declared separatist republic by January 2024. Thus, Azerbaijan achieved its goal of restoring sovereignty over all its territories.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2023 SEPTEMBER MILITARY OPERATION

European and American diplomats' reaction to the September 2023 military campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh created a new dynamic in the process: the emotions of the Trans-Atlantic community of diplomats drove Azerbaijan to refuse any foreign platforms and prefer direct, bilateral negotiations with Armenia. Thus, on September 20, the US Secretary of State deemed Azerbaijan's operation in Nagorno-Karabakh "unacceptable,"³⁷ while the European Parliament went so far as to use the term "ethnic cleansing"³⁸ in its resolution from October 2023.

European countries and the United States had previously never had an imperial presence in the South Caucasus, which was a striking contrast to the three major countries bordering the region (Iran, Turkey, and Russia). Nevertheless, the emotional reaction from the Western capitals and the fact that Armenian narratives are well represented in European and American political institutions led Baku to distance itself from Western mediation platforms. Gradually, Azerbaijan ceased to label Brussels and Washington as "honest brokers" in the process. Instead, a format where Armenia and Azerbaijan engage in direct dialogue, without any mediator in the room, was the preferred alternative.

The December 7th 2023 Bilateral Statement was a significant step in this context. On December 13, Armenia and Azerbaijan facilitated³⁹ a prisoner exchange, marking an important breakthrough since the cessation of hostilities in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in November 2020. This event was the result of a notable bilateral statement, when both nations announced a series of measures aimed at trust-building, normalization of relations, and the formulation of a peace agreement. Despite lingering unresolved matters, the recent advancements in bilateral discussions have rekindled hopes for a definitive peace agreement. This progress, celebrated internationally by entities such as the United States and the European Union, was achieved through direct negotiations between Baku and Yerevan, without external intermediation. On the same day, Azerbaijan announced its snap presidential elections; the EU and US special representatives have not been able to meet with the Azerbaijani side since then, signaling the conclusion of the "2023 political year" on December 7, 2023.

THE OUTLOOK FOR PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

Nevertheless, the meeting between German Chancellor Olaf Scholz with the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference on February 17, 2024, signaled the possible return of EU/German mediation to its original track. "Germany and Europe stand ready to do everything in their power to support the peace negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan," Scholz said after meeting with Prime Minister Pashinyan and President Aliyev. Subsequently, meetings brokered by Germany to discuss the peace agreement were scheduled, infusing new hope into the negotiation process.

Since gaining independence, Azerbaijan has actively sought to attract European and American investments to the region. A prime example of this effort is the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline project,⁴⁰ which has put Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Caspian basin on the radar of both European and American policymakers. This geoeconomic initiative has created a conducive environment for a more substantial presence of Western players in the post-Soviet South Caucasus.

The evolving “post”-post-Soviet era necessitates the establishment of a new regional dynamic, capable of

drawing further interest from European and American stakeholders. The developments in 2023, including stabilization in the South Caucasus, progress toward a positive conclusion in the Azerbaijan-Armenia peace process, and European investors’ growing interest in the Middle Corridor,⁴¹ hold the promise to shape the future realities of the South Caucasus and the wider region. With the European Union and the United States playing an increased and balanced role in mediating the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the principles of being an “honest broker” could become a foundational element for the region’s future relations.

BELARUS:

Shedding non-nuclear status

Artyom Shraibman

The crisis in the relationship between Belarus and the West has been escalating since 2020. Slowly, Belarus's previous policy of balancing between Russia and the West has been dismantled. In 2020, the brutal suppression of protests in Belarus and the emergence of hundreds of political prisoners acted as a disruptive trigger. In 2021, the forced landing of a Ryanair plane in Minsk and the migration crisis manufactured by the Belarusian authorities on the borders of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia marked a further escalation. In 2022, both Minsk's isolation by the West and the Belarusian government's alignment with Russia reached a crescendo after the Russian military used Belarus's territory, airspace, and infrastructure to invade Ukraine.

In 2023, for the first time since the mid-1990s, Russian nuclear weapons were deployed in Belarus. Although this decision did not have immediate consequences in the context of Belarus's de-Westernization, this new

phase in military integration represents a significant constraint to Minsk's potential return to a less pro-Russian foreign policy in the future.

NUCLEAR REPLACEMENT FOR CONVENTIONAL MILITARY PRESENCE

Since the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine, Russia has shifted in its use of Belarusian territory. In January 2022, under the pretext of military exercises, a 30,000-strong contingent of Russian ground forces was deployed to Belarus, along with Iskander missile systems, S-400 air defense complexes, and dozens of combat helicopters and aircraft. These forces attacked Ukraine from the north in February of that year. By October 2022, Minsk and Moscow had formed a "regional group of forces" in Belarus, a facade for training Russian reservists, peaking at 10,000 troops, aimed also at attacking Ukrainian forces from the north.



Tomas Ragina / shutterstock.com

Missile attacks on Ukraine from Belarus continued until October 2022. By August 2023, almost all Russian ground units had left the country, except for about 1,500 military personnel based in Belarus at two long-standing Russian military facilities (the Vileyka and the Volga radar stations), and up to 600 military personnel stationed at military airfields. By August 2023, almost all Russian military aviation had also left Belarus,⁴² With the exception of one Su-25 attack aircraft.

With the drawdown of conventional military presence, Russia's priorities in using Belarusian territory shifted from a military-tactical to a politico-strategic level. The two main manifestations of this trend were the temporary stationing of thousands of Wagner group mercenaries in Belarus after their failed mutiny attempt and the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW).

TIMELINE AND EVIDENCE OF TNW DEPLOYMENT

Vladimir Putin announced his plans to deploy TNW in Belarus during an interview with Russian state TV on March 25, 2023. Before this, Russia had upgraded 10 Belarusian aircraft to enable them to carry nuclear missiles and supplied the Belarusian army with the Iskander missile system, which can also serve as a launcher for TNW. Beginning that April, Russia trained Belarusian Iskander crews on handling these munitions. On June 16, Putin stated that a portion of the nuclear missiles had already

been delivered to Belarus.⁴³ In December, Alexander Lukashenko announced that the deliveries had been completed.⁴⁴

Evidence of actual deployment of TNW in Belarus is indirect but plentiful. On July 21, 2023, a representative from the US Defense Intelligence Agency informed CNN that they had "no reason to doubt" Putin's claim that Russia had moved the first batch of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus.⁴⁵ From June to September 2023, the Belarusian independent monitoring group Belarusian Railway Workers Community reported several military trains transporting ammunition to Belarus, with a high level of secrecy and concealed destination stations, typically used for transporting particularly important military cargo.⁴⁶ On March 14, 2024, the Federation of American Scientists published the latest satellite images showing a military depot near Osipovichi (Mogilev region, Belarus), which has recently been upgraded with additional security perimeters, suggesting it might be intended for storing Russian nuclear warheads.⁴⁷

MUTUAL INTEREST OF MINSK AND MOSCOW

The decision to deploy tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) in Belarus was driven by two interconnected motives: Alexander Lukashenko's longstanding desire to enhance Belarus's anti-Western deterrence capability to protect his regime, and Moscow's strategic confrontation with NATO, which intensified against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine.

Since the early years of his presidency, Lukashenko has repeatedly addressed the topic of possessing nuclear weapons. In 1996, he criticized his predecessors' decision to remove the remnants of Soviet nuclear weapons from Belarus,⁴⁸ a sentiment he reiterated in 2014.⁴⁹ Belarus's nuclear-free status and its aspiration for neutrality were enshrined in its constitution. However, after 2020, upon realizing that the crisis in relations with the West would be protracted, Minsk decided to remove this constitutional clause. The first proposal to do so came from then-Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei in February 2021, a year before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In November 2021, Lukashenko acknowledged the possibility of hosting Russian TNW in Belarus, but only if Washington deployed similar weapons in Poland.

Minsk's desire to host Russian TNW on its territory is driven by two considerations. Firstly, Lukashenko has always projected the fates of other autocrats onto himself. In his worldview, nuclear weapons are the only reliable safeguard against foreign attempts at regime change, as demonstrated by the experiences of Slobodan Milošević, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Gaddafi, compared to that of the Kim dynasty in North Korea. Secondly, after 2020, as Belarusian foreign policy pivoted away from the West, demonstrating loyalty to the Kremlin grew to be paramount. Regular manifestations of readiness to service Russian military-political interests became Lukashenko's primary "deliverable" offered to Moscow in exchange for economic support.

From the Russian perspective, the decision to store TNW in Belarus aligns with the broader strategy of escalating confrontation with NATO. The Kremlin has resorted to nuclear intimidation since the early days of its invasion of Ukraine in 2022.⁵⁰ In September of that year, Putin threatened to use "all available means" to protect Russia's territorial integrity.⁵¹ The purpose of these nuclear threats was to weaken Western resolve in supporting Kyiv by putting pressure on those actors in the West who favor de-escalation with Russia, even at the cost of Ukraine. Placing Russian TNW in a new country is meant to signal Moscow's readiness for nuclear escalation close to Ukraine's northern border and NATO's eastern flank.

Officially, both Minsk and Moscow presented the move as fulfilling a request from the Belarusian side. Disparities in their rhetoric put this theory into question. While Lukashenko initially claimed that the Russian nuclear weapons would be stationed in Belarus in response to American nuclear weapons appearing in Poland, Putin cited the impending British supply of depleted uranium shells to Ukraine as justification for deploying the warheads in Belarus.⁵²

Additionally, Minsk and Moscow have diverged in their rhetoric regarding control over the TNW and decision-making about their potential use. Any transfer of control to Minsk would violate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. According to statements from Russian officials, including Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Moscow retains full control over the TNW.⁵³ On March 31, 2023, Belarus's permanent representative to the UN, Valentin Rybakov, confirmed

Russia's stance.⁵⁴ However, on the day of Rybakov's remarks at the UN, Lukashenko surprised many observers and claimed that Minsk would control the TNW stationed in Belarus.⁵⁵ Later, he asserted a veto right over their use.⁵⁶

Russia's position seems more plausible since Moscow has no clear motive to cede even partial control of its TNW to Minsk. However, Lukashenko's rhetoric is also consistent with his interest in deploying TNW to secure his regime. To make the deterrence more credible to its intended audience – Minsk's opponents in the West – it is important to emphasize Lukashenko's ability to use nuclear weapons for self-defense. Merely acting as a warehouse for foreign TNW carries significantly less threatening potential.

LONG-TERM DE-WESTERNIZATION PERSPECTIVES FOR BELARUS

The deployment of nuclear weapons had no immediate consequences for relations between Belarus and the West. The U.S. State Department merely condemned Russia's move and emphasized that Washington sees "no reason to adjust its strategic nuclear posture," effectively downplaying the development.⁵⁷ The calm reaction from Western capitals is understandable, as they do not wish to give Moscow the impression that its nuclear pressure was effective. Given Belarus's image in the West as a military vassal of Russia even prior the TNW deployment, this move did not qualitatively alter the situation to provoke new sanctions against Minsk.

However, the effect of TNW deployment in Belarus is likely to be long-term. Moscow has stated that the condition for withdrawing TNW from Belarus is "the US and NATO stepping away from undermining the security and sovereignty of Russia and Belarus" and the removal of American nuclear weapons from Europe.⁵⁸ This condition essentially implies an indefinite stationing of TNW in Belarus. It limits geopolitical maneuvering not only for Lukashenko but for any future Belarusian government. This obstacle will remain until Moscow can be persuaded or forced to retract its nuclear presence in the country. The Kremlin's interest in maintaining a loyal pro-Russian regime in Minsk will be even more salient because any Russian leadership will prioritize the safety of its nuclear assets. In other words, with the deployment of TNW, Belarus's political trajectory has become even more tightly bound to the fate of the Russian regime and its relations with the West.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to avoid fatalism. Public opinion surveys reveal that nuclear weapon deployment in Belarus is unpopular, with only 20% support in the spring of 2023,⁵⁹ increasing to 35% by the end of 2023.⁶⁰ Thus, despite the domination of Russian and Belarusian state media in the country, most Belarusians favor returning to a nuclear-free status. If it continues, this prevailing public opinion provides a strong domestic argument for future Belarusian authorities to push for the TNW withdrawal at an opportune moment.

Secondly, the direct military significance of TNW deployment in Belarus for Russia is small, given the likely stationing of nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad. From the outset, both Moscow and Minsk have made no secret that this move is primarily politically motivated. The potential withdrawal of TNW would be far more complicated if these weapons in Belarus were not just an act of nuclear signaling but an integral part of Russia's security perimeter. The relative insignificance of the current TNW deployment in Belarus for Russia also differentiates the current situation from

the early 1990s, when Belarus hosted silos with nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles. Technically speaking, transporting a likely symbolic number of tactical nuclear warheads back to Russia is a much simpler operation than dismantling infrastructure and removing strategic nuclear weapons.

Lastly, context matters. Russia placed TNW in Belarus amidst the escalating crisis in relations with NATO due to the war in Ukraine. Sooner or later, this war will end, and a new regional security configuration will be established in Europe. If its parameters stem from negotiations between the West, Ukraine, and Russia, the issue of nuclear weapons in Belarus might be on the table as well. The TNW withdrawal could become one of the demands made of Russia in the context of returning to the pre-war balance of power and ensuring security guarantees for Ukraine on its northern front. Had Moscow stationed TNW in Belarus during "peacetime," it would have been harder for future politicians and negotiators to link this issue to any post-war settlement.

ESTONIA:

Post-election challenges to national resilience

Dmitri Teperik

TURBULENT TIMES

Estonia has entered another geopolitically turbulent period and is facing several domestic challenges that are testing its national resilience in different ways. In terms of democratic values, the Baltic state has managed to preserve its politically liberal orientation after the March 2023 parliamentary elections, which were a significant milestone, as the pre-election and post-election processes were characterized by strong competition between the various political forces with a pro-liberal orientation and those with a more conservative agenda, populist nature, and even far-right rhetoric.⁶¹ With a voter turnout of 63.5%, the elections also brought a high level of ideological rivalry and a battle of strategic narratives, as many domestic issues were heavily impacted by the consequences of the ongoing war in Ukraine.⁶²

The post-election negotiations in May 2023 have resulted in the formation of a coalition of three political parties (the Estonian Reform Party, Social Democratic Party, and Estonia 200) which share views and positions on security, human rights, climate, energy, education, sustainability, and other key issues. Moreover, the coalition agreement stipulates that Estonia is fully aligned with the Western sphere of values.⁶³ As a symbolic sign of this, Parliament legalized same-sex marriage in 2023, making Estonia the first of the formerly Soviet-occupied states and Soviet-dominated nations to do so.⁶⁴ In addition, the current government continues to proclaim its pro-European positions, open-mindedness, and innovation in trying to improve the socio-economic well-being of its citizens. Nevertheless, following some unpopular decisions, the political rhetoric has been significantly influenced by several overlapping crises that pose serious challenges to Estonia's national resilience. In



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other words, the pre-election promises of politicians and their parties have been confronted with a harsh reality that dictates its own rules for surviving multiple simultaneous crises.

ECONOMIC STAGNATION

The energy crisis of 2022-23 and the sharp decline in exports have led to exceptionally high inflation in Estonia, where the economic outlook is rather pessimistic and characterized by low consumer confidence and declining investment.⁶⁵ As the recession reflects the loss of competitiveness, it also contributes to a higher budget deficit and reduces Estonia's general socio-economic well-being.⁶⁶

The government's decision to introduce several substantial changes to national taxation has been widely criticized.⁶⁷ As of December 2023, according to the opinion survey, 57% of the Estonian population disapproved of the changes to national taxes, with the highest number of critics (68%) among the working population aged 35-49.⁶⁸ Estonians' perception of their socio-economic well-being has decreased in 2023 as compared to 2022: 67% of the respondents agreed that they have just enough income to lead a decent life in 2023 compared to 80% in 2022.⁶⁹ Ethno-linguistic minority groups (local Russian speakers in particular) are the most vulnerable here, exacerbating the worrying trend of their lagging behind.⁷⁰ As socio-economic uncertainty can increase feelings of insecurity, it leads to various behavioral patterns: a reduction in short-term consumption, as well as a perception of the unaffordability of broader long-term life aspirations. As such negative attitudes among

citizens contribute to weakening national resilience as a whole, the Estonian government is planning to launch anti-crisis economic measures, including budget cuts, additional taxes, and investment programs related to the Just Transition.⁷¹ With serious consideration being given to the introduction of a national security tax to offset the remarkable increase in defense spending (from 2% in 2021 to 3.2% in 2024), a new debate on budget strategy will test not only the fiscal balance, but above all the political health of the coalition and its ability to deliver the promised crisis relief.⁷²

SIGNS OF POLARIZATION

Despite the government's continued attempts to explain the introduction of the austerity plan on the grounds of geopolitical security, public opinion shows a high level of mistrust towards the government and its actions. As of December 2023, 59% of Estonian people reported that they distrusted the national government, which is a record high in recent years.⁷³ Even during the COVID-19 period, with all the severe restrictions and inconsistent communication, the trust in the government was relatively high, which, among other factors and measures, allowed the nation to survive that crisis with less damage than feared.⁷⁴ The current distrust is not only due to unpopular fiscal decisions, but also by the Prime Minister's insensitive (bordering on arrogant) communication style and personal scandal,⁷⁵ the deeper frictions stem from the fault lines between Estonia's various social groups. In addition to the fact that the national government has historically been less trusted by local Russian speakers, a relatively new phenomenon emerged in 2022-2023, when a larger contestation began between those groups who share and promote the liberal values and those who claim to be defenders of conservative values.⁷⁶ As the coalition and the opposition have failed to establish a dialogue to find meaningful compromises, political life in Estonia 2023 was laced with several cases of obstruction and serious deadlock in the national parliament.⁷⁷ A total of 66% of Estonians report worrying concerns about the inability of political parties and politicians to negotiate and cooperate.⁷⁸ The political context, the risks of self-censorship, and cases of cyber-bullying against journalists were among the main factors that lowered Estonia's position in the World Press Freedom Index.⁷⁹ Many experts point to the signs of ideological polarization in Estonia, which is damaging the intergroup dialogue and undermining the cooperation required to maintain national resilience.⁸⁰

SOCIETAL COHESION

Russia's war against Ukraine has added a new dimension to the uneasy relations between Estonia's ethno-linguistic majority and its minority groups. Over the past 33 years, integrating local Russian speakers has been a rough process, heavily politicized by some political parties for decades, only to become a domestic security issue in 2014, when Russia occupied Crimea and attacked Ukraine in the Donbass region. Nevertheless, the latest Integration Monitoring of Estonian Society in 2023 states that the integration process has achieved significant results over the past fifteen years in terms of formal indicators (active knowledge of the Estonian language, increase in the number of Estonian citizens, etc.).⁸¹ Still, 52% of local Russian speakers oppose the government's decision to expedite the transition to Estonian-language teaching in schools, while 43% support the measure.⁸² However, the biggest obstacle to societal cohesion, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, remains the persistent lack of trust between ethnic Estonians and the Russian-speaking population. Moreover, there are significant differences in the opinions of ethno-linguistic communities on accepting Ukrainian refugees (supported by 65% of ethnic Estonians and 49% of local Russian speakers)⁸³ and providing more humanitarian aid to Ukraine (supported by 83% of ethnic Estonians and 56% of local Russian speakers). As these two groups are affected differently by the decline in socio-economic well-being, the Russian-speaking population is more concerned by Estonia's financial commitment to supporting Ukraine.⁸⁴ Finally, 43% of ethnic Estonians and 70% of local Russian speakers feel stressed by the spread of hate speech, which can provoke inter-group tensions and hostilities.⁸⁵

HOPE FOR RECOVERY

At present, Estonia finds itself in crisis survival mode, and despite (and also because of) these difficulties, it must maintain hope as one of the essential determinants of national resilience, which includes, among other things, the ability to recover.⁸⁶ Therefore, it is vital for Estonian society to work out how to instrumentalize hope with plans to act accordingly. Attracting foreign investment is seen as a key strategy for a small country with an open, export-dependent economy and limited resources. Although the geopolitical situation in the region remains turbulent and unpredictable, Estonia's security as a member of NATO and the EU is guaranteed by both increasing self-defense capabilities and strengthening the presence of allies for collective defense. This helps reassure the economic outlook, which has been confirmed as stable.⁸⁷ In addition, the government has initiated several structural reforms in education, the energy sector, the circular economy, etc., which are expected to increase confidence in Estonia's future. As post-election disenchantment with politicians is not a new phenomenon in Western democratic realities, the Estonian situation is neither unique nor hopeless. Nevertheless, both the ruling coalition and the opposition have a great responsibility to avoid further deepening citizens' distrust and disillusionment with democratic governance, as multifaceted crises have different long-term consequences, the anticipation of which can either discourage some social groups or better prepare them to deal with future prospects. In this regard, national and local opinion leaders have a crucial responsibility to formulate and translate credible visions to inspire citizens for post-crisis recovery. The success of the recovery will be a testament to a resilient nation.

GEORGIA:

EU candidacy for the people and new challenges for the government

Nika Chitadze

INTRODUCTION

European Council President Charles Michel described Georgia's EU member candidate status as "a clear signal of hope for their people and for our continent."⁸⁸ Undoubtedly, Georgia's candidate status for EU membership was the country's most significant political event in 2023, and a step expected to pave the way for the development for years to come. During his congratulatory speech on the day the status was granted, the Prime Minister of Georgia (2021-2024), Irakli Garibashvili, stated,⁸⁹ "With great pride and great joy, I congratulate you on the historic decision that Georgia has become a candidate country for EU membership. I want to congratulate each citizen on a historic day. This is truly a victory for our nation and our people."

It was a historic event for Georgia, both in terms of the long-awaited further development of its relations with the EU, and the current political situation within Georgia itself. In September 2023, two months before the European Commission recommended granting Georgia candidate status in the EU, while speaking at a press conference in Tbilisi, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stated that,⁹⁰ "Candidate status needs to be earned through serious reforms and adherence to the European Union values. And to be frank, there is still quite a bit of work to be done." The same month, after meeting with Georgian Prime Minister Garibashvili on the sidelines of the UN General assembly, European Council President Michel wrote on social media that, "[it is] time now for concrete delivery on necessary priorities to unlock candidate status." This is how President Michel and EU High Representative Borrell commented on



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the extent to which the Georgian government has fulfilled the “12 priorities”⁹¹ recommended by the EU for obtaining candidate status in the EU back in June 2022. Two months after these statements, the European Commission recommended⁹² granting Georgia status based on the fulfillment of only three recommendations, and a month later, the country received⁹³ candidate status, despite the fact that 9 out of 12 recommended points were not fulfilled.

THE LONG-AWAITED CANDIDATE

While congratulating Georgia on obtaining the status, President Michel mentions, first and foremost, the Georgian people, which is logical, as for many years,⁹⁴ every few months,⁹⁵ the citizens of Georgia have consistently chosen Europe in every public opinion poll, saying “yes” to Georgia’s EU membership by an overwhelming majority of respondents - around 80% each time. The NDI survey conducted on the eve of the announcement of Georgia’s EU candidate status (the survey was conducted from October 12 to November 4) again showed that 79% of respondents fully support⁹⁶ Georgia’s potential EU membership.

The fact that the EU candidate status was granted thanks to the steadfast aspirations of the Georgian people was also emphasized by the President of Georgia in her congratulatory message: “We have taken a very big, serious step towards the future,” said the President of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili after the European Council granted the nation EU candidate country status. The President stressed⁹⁷ that “[the] Georgian people’s determination made the achievement of candidate status possible.” Two days before the decision to grant Georgia candidate status was published, the role “of the genuine aspirations of the overwhelming majority of Georgian people towards EU membership”⁹⁸ was also emphasized by the European Council itself in the document “COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON ENLARGEMENT,”⁹⁹ published on December 12th.

Indeed, if you look at the official statements of European officials¹⁰⁰ after Georgia’s application for candidate status, or read various reports¹⁰¹ from international organizations¹⁰² on Georgia’s democratic development in recent years, the main term used in these materials will be “democratic backslide.” This political reality in recent years led to the June 2022 final document of the European Council stating: “The European Council has decided to grant candidate country status to Ukraine and to the Republic of Moldova,” but that “the European Council is ready to grant candidate country status to Georgia once the priorities specified in the Commission’s opinion on Georgia’s membership application have been addressed.” Unlike Ukraine and Moldova, the European Union wanted to see serious work towards democratizing the country before granting it candidate status.

On November 8, 2023, the European Commission’s recommendations to grant Georgia candidate status outlined the actions of the Georgian authorities on three priorities out of the 12 proposed to Georgia in June 2022, which the Commission deemed had been implemented:

“Georgia has adopted legislative acts and policy actions on gender equality and on fighting violence against women, on taking into account European Court of Human Rights judgments in Court deliberations and on organized crime. It has appointed a new Public Defender. Certain procedural steps have been taken in Parliament to increase scrutiny by the opposition.”¹⁰³ Some success was also noted on several other points.

Overall, despite the recommendations dated June 2022, the European Commission and the European Council decided to grant Georgia candidate status, but with the stipulation that “the following steps are taken” (the full text is available at the link):¹⁰⁴

- fight disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference against the EU and its values;
- improve Georgia’s alignment with the EU common foreign and security policy;
- further address the issue of political polarization;
- ensure a free, fair, and competitive electoral process, notably in 2024, and fully address OSCE/ODIHR recommendations;
- further improve the implementation of parliamentary oversight, notably of the security services;
- complete and implement a holistic and effective judicial reform, fully implementing Venice Commission recommendations and following a transparent and inclusive process;
- further address the effectiveness and ensure the institutional independence and impartiality of the Anti-Corruption Bureau, the Special Investigative Service, and the Personal Data Protection Service;
- improve the current action plan to implement a multi-sectorial, systemic approach to de-oligarchization, in line with Venice Commission recommendations;
- improve the protection of human rights including by implementing an ambitious human rights strategy and ensuring freedom of assembly and expression. Launch impartial, effective, and timely investigations in cases of threats against safety of vulnerable groups, media professionals, and civil society activists.

Based on the recommendations of the European Commission and the aforementioned reports on the situation of democratic development in Georgia, it is evident that the decision to grant candidate status is further advancement granted to Georgia by the European Union. Leading Georgian experts share¹⁰⁵ this position. The Director of the EU Studies Center at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, Kakha Gogolashvili, commented that, “The EU expects that Georgia will ultimately finish what was asked of us. Upon fulfilling the conditions set for opening the negotiation process, new conditions

may be put forward and the negotiations process would be opened after they are fulfilled,” he said. “The de-oligarchization plan has been started but not completed. Judicial reform has not been carried out in certain directions. It is also necessary to align with the statements of the European Union on foreign policy and security...” Gogolashvili enumerated.

THE PEOPLE OF GEORGIA: “WE ARE EUROPE”

The reason for this advancement is indicated both in the congratulations of the Georgian people by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, and in the final document of the Council dated December 12, 2023, which explicitly states that, “The Council takes good note of the genuine aspirations of the overwhelming majority of Georgian people towards EU membership.” The Georgian people not only supported the country’s accession to the European Union in words over the years as described above, but they have also conducted concrete efforts to make Georgia a full member of the EU and prevent the country from veering away from the European path of development. Immediately after Georgia did not receive candidate status in 2022, and the country’s government received recommendations from the European Commission, tens of thousands of Georgian citizens took to the streets in the “March for Europe” rally. “In what was the biggest demonstration in decades, at least 120,000 people took part in the ‘March for Europe’ in Tbilisi, according to an AFP estimate based on video footage shot from drones. Many held banners that read ‘We are Europe’ as the EU anthem, the Ode to Joy, was performed at the demonstration,” *Le Monde* reported¹⁰⁶ at the time.

Such demonstrative expressions of the Georgian citizens’ aspirations for democratic and European development in recent years will be remembered by many.¹⁰⁷ Each time, people had to take to the streets to defend this aspiration. In 2021 far-right activists physically attacked more than 50 journalists covering the counter-demonstrations against a Pride march in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, on July 5, while police failed to intervene.¹⁰⁸ “The brutal attacks against journalists in Tbilisi represent a major setback for press freedom in Georgia,” said Jeanne Cavelier, the head of RSF’s Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk. “The intensity and coordination of the violence were unprecedented. Journalists must be able to freely cover any demonstration, and the police have a duty

to protect them while they are doing their job. We are disturbed by this dangerous precedent and by the passivity shown by the Georgian authorities, and we remind them of their international obligations, and urge them to prosecute all those responsible for acts of violence against news professionals.” At the time, tens of thousands of people followed the call of independent Georgian journalists and once again found themselves forced to take to the streets of downtown Tbilisi to support the media, organizations fighting for LGBTQ+ rights, and express their protest against the government’s inaction.¹⁰⁹

In 2023, a vivid demonstration of the Georgian people’s commitment to democracy and European integration undoubtedly became the campaign of Georgian society against the “Russian law,” as the proposed law “on foreign agents” passed by the Georgian parliament was known. Various representatives of civil society, as well as international organizations, deemed that the draft law adopted by the ruling party “was inspired by a similar law in Russia that has been used to silence critics.”¹¹⁰ “The ‘foreign agent’ bills seek to marginalize and discredit independent, foreign-funded groups and media that serve the wider public interest in Georgia,” said Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “They clearly aim to restrict critical groups and crucial media, violate Georgia’s international obligations, and would have a serious chilling effect on groups and individuals working to protect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law.”¹¹¹ As a result of several days of massive street protests in downtown Tbilisi, and the preceding campaign against the introduction of this law on Georgian social media, the Georgian authorities dropped the “foreign agents” law,¹¹² which elicited a positive reaction from both the protesters and Georgia’s European partners. The European Union Delegation in Georgia responded to the cancellation of the law, stating, “We welcome announcement by the ruling party to withdraw draft legislation on ‘foreign influence’.”¹¹³ The Delegation’s statement also stated that, “We encourage all political leaders in Georgia to resume pro-EU reforms, in an inclusive & constructive way and in line with the 12 priorities for Georgia to achieve candidate status.” Georgian President Salome

Zurabishvili had directly backed¹¹⁴ the demonstrations and had vowed to veto the bill, although ultimately, the government would have had the power to override her move. “I want to congratulate society on its first victory. I am proud of the people who made their voices heard,” Ms Zurabishvili said. “There is distrust towards the government as we pursue our European path,” she added.

CONCLUSION

According to the statements and documents provided above, it was the people of Georgia and their persistent, action-backed desire to become part of the European family that helped achieve the long-awaited development in relations between Georgia and the European Union in December 2023 – obtaining candidate status for EU membership. Georgia’s future convergence with the EU at an official level, as outlined in the decision of the European Commission and reiterated in the conclusion of the European Council dated December 12, 2023, will depend on whether the nine priorities voiced by European partners are met as necessary steps towards progressing to the opening of membership negotiations and the overall development of Georgia as a democratic state. One of the imminent indicators of such development, as stated by the European Commission, should be the parliamentary elections in Georgia scheduled for the fall of 2024, in which the EU expects the Georgian authorities to “ensure a free, fair, and competitive electoral process, notably in 2024.”

Within the scope of the International Republican Institute survey conducted in March 2023, when Georgian society managed to compel the authorities to drop the “foreign agents law,” when asked about the European Union, 89% of Georgians either “fully supported” or “somewhat supported” joining the alliance. This represents an increase of four percentage points from the most recent poll, matching an all-time high. “It’s explicitly clear that Georgians want to join the European Union and continue their integration with Western, democratic institutions,” said Steve Nix, Senior Director for Eurasia at IRI. “It’s now incumbent upon leaders in the government to deliver what the people want.”¹¹⁵

KAZAKHSTAN:

Taking relations with the US to a new level in the C5+1 format

Dinara Jangujekova

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is a region where foreign policy is primarily characterized by a strategy of maneuvering. Due to its multi-vector policy¹¹⁶ (multipolarity), the countries of the region have the opportunity to build political, economic, and financial ties with different world powers, particularly the United States.

Foreign policy relations between the region and the US have been strategic since the late 1990s, with the US Congress adopting the Silk Road Strategy Act.¹¹⁷ For the United States, Central Asia undoubtedly holds significant interest both politically and economically. This region is where the interests of such global power centers as China, the Islamic world, and Russia intersect. It is home to the Trans-Caspian corridor, which, following the shutdown of logistics routes through Russia, serves as the sole land corridor

between China, the countries of Southeast Asia, and the Far East, which are a global hub for goods production, and the European Union, which is the largest market in the world.

Since 2015, Washington's multilateral cooperation with the Central Asian region has taken place at the level of the "C5+1" (Central Asian states + the United States) diplomatic dialogue platform, which was announced by then-US Secretary of State John Kerry¹¹⁸ (during the Barack Obama administration) at a meeting with the foreign ministers of the region's states. The same year, the parties adopted the Joint Declaration on Partnership and Cooperation. Until September 2023, the Platform's activities took place only at the level of ministerial meetings and consultations. Due to the absence of summits, the platform did not yet enjoy the importance it gained in 2023, when it was attended by the leaders of the states directly making strategic decisions.



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C5+1 LEVELS UP

The C5+1 Summit, which took place on September 20, 2023, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, was the first-ever high-level meeting in the format's history and highlighted its significance for both sides. The uniqueness of this summit is characterized by the fact that Washington's level of contact with Central Asian countries is intensifying significantly and shifting towards long-term, strategic cooperation due to the participation of state leaders. As US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has emphasized that, "The C5+1 actually began in 2015. It has been strengthened in the years since. And now we will see it come together at the leaders level for the first time."¹¹⁹ Washington's decision to conduct the C5+1 dialogue platform at the heads of state level gives it a special significance and thus provides further impetus for multilateral cooperation with Central Asian countries. The summit emphasized¹²⁰ both sides' aspiration to strengthen cooperation in areas such as ensuring security, supporting economic stability, and supporting the sustainable development of Central Asian states. This event marks the beginning of a new era in relations between the USA and Central Asian countries, suggesting a deepening of both bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Commenting on the meeting format, Sullivan also stated that this format of meetings exclusively represents a "positive agenda" and "is not against any country" (meaning no kind of signals were made to other states with presence in the region, particularly to China). However, it should be noted that despite this statement from the advisor and the absence of direct rhetoric in the speech of the US President Joe Biden on issues related to China or Russia's war against Ukraine, he highlighted the importance of respecting the "sovereignty and territorial integrity" of states at the summit.¹²¹

PRACTICAL STEPS

One fundamentally important aspect of the summit is the fact that it has served as a platform for expressing commitment to the implementation of initiatives and projects aimed at enhancing the overall situation in the region. For instance, in October 2023, just one month after the meeting of the heads of state of Central Asia and the United States, USAID Administrator Samantha Power announced the allocation of funding of \$14.3 million in order to strengthen cooperation between the parties. As part of the policy of ensuring security, as well as improving the quality of information in the

media and the Internet, USAID also allocated funds of \$1.5 million.¹²²

This dialogue lays the groundwork for Central Asia's future development and, opening new opportunities for reinforcing international security and economic integration.

KAZAKHSTAN AT THE C5+1 SUMMIT

Given the importance of Kazakhstan's geographical location from an economic perspective, the issue of maintaining and developing a high level of cooperation between the United States and Kazakhstan is crucial for Washington, and Kazakhstan is considered a major priority.¹²³ Thus, trade turnover between the countries reached a record high of \$4 billion in 2023, translating to an increase by one third compared to 2022.¹²⁴ Moreover, Kazakhstan surpasses other countries in the region in terms of socio-economic development.¹²⁵

At the summit, the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, spoke after the US President. In his speech, he outlined possible points of shared interest and prospects for further development of bilateral and regional strategic partnership, political-economic interaction, trade, investment, and humanitarian cooperation, and the industrial potential of Central Asian countries, in particular Kazakhstan.¹²⁶

During the meeting, the matter of commitment to maintaining peace and stability in Eurasian countries was carefully noted - namely, various security challenges primarily associated with the threats of terrorism, extremism, cybersecurity, drug trafficking, and illegal migration. As a part of the security discussion, the head of Kazakhstan put forward the initiative to create a UN Regional Sustainable Development Goals Center for Central Asia and Afghanistan in Almaty.¹²⁷ Also at the meeting, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev once again raised the critical issue of nuclear disarmament. The President of Kazakhstan fully supported Washington's decision to adopt the Protocol on Negative Assurances to the Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty: "This step will complete the process of institutionalization of the nuclear-free status of the region and will become an important milestone in international efforts to strengthen denuclearization and non-proliferation."¹²⁸

THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SUMMIT

In conclusion, it should be noted that the first summit of the C5+1 platform at the level of leaders of the countries of Central Asia and the United States is politically significant and first and foremost aims to demonstrate the preservation of US foreign policy positioning in the Central Asia region, which

is a global player. From Kazakhstan's point of view, this means maintaining cooperation with countries participating in the platform at different levels and a readiness to intensify strategic interaction, both bilaterally and regionally, as well as continuing Kazakhstan's development of a multi-vector foreign policy, due to the significant influence of powers such as the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the country. His statement is clarified by the words of Kazakhstan's Deputy Foreign Minister Roman Vassilenko: "We will continue to be where we are geographically, we will continue to develop relations with Russia, with China, as an independent nation."¹²⁹

The fundamental practical solutions that the US projects with Central Asian countries are currently implemented, as a rule, through bilateral interactions. Nevertheless, according to President Tokayev's official statements, Kazakhstan is ready to act as a key player in economic, security, and sustainable development issues in the region as part of the implementation of the platform's objectives. Thus, in the medium and long term, Washington and the Central Asian region will continue to build economic and trade relations, work on energy security issues, expand transportation infrastructure, and interact on security and sustainability issues in Eurasia as a whole.

KYRGYZSTAN:

Freedom of the press is the first victim of fading democracy

Emilbek Dzhuraev

INTRODUCTION

Right in the middle of the year, on July 13, 2023, in reaction to alarming developments against freedom of press and expression and civil liberties in general during the first half of the year and even before, the European Parliament addressed a resolution¹³⁰ to the Kyrgyz government calling on it to reverse its course. Nonetheless, the alarming developments that led to the resolution in the first place largely continued unaffected for the rest of 2023.

Kyrgyzstan's democracy scores have been dropping since it witnessed its third pre-term, protest-driven replacement of leadership in October 2020.^{131,132} The government of President Sadyr Japarov, who came to power amid public weariness with parliamentary¹³³

government, shifted toward a sharp centralization of power. The changes resulted in a new constitution¹³⁴ that has placed vast decision-making prerogatives in the office of the president, weakened Parliament by removing many of its powers,¹³⁵ strengthened executive institutions, and taken autonomy away from local governance institutions.

One of the most important casualties of the ensuing loss of democracy has been freedom of the press. After only a brief early period of openness and begrudging tolerance of critical media and free speech, press freedoms were curtailed beginning in 2021 following a law described by CPJ Program Director Carlos Martínez de la Serna,¹³⁶ as "threaten[ing] to seriously undermine the country's fragile press freedoms." The law gathered steam in 2022¹³⁷ and was in full swing by 2023.



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This paper focuses on this negative development, with the understanding that freedom of the press (and, more broadly, of speech and expression) is a key pillar of any country's Westernization – which is to say, democratization and liberalization – and foreshadows the outlook for all other related elements.

Curbs on the freedom of the press and freedom of speech, along with other indications of authoritarian-leaning developments, took place amid a confluence of enabling factors. Domestically, the overall public mood welcomed a strong-handed government after years of unstable and corrupt politics. For the Japarov administration, this presented a fertile ground for prioritizing order and stability and legitimizing executive resolve to prevent the return of any malaise. Abroad, the war in Ukraine appeared to induce Kyrgyzstan's Western partners to become more agreeable on domestic matters, while Russia upped its efforts to ensure that policies¹³⁸ and views¹³⁹ in Kyrgyzstan were well-aligned with its own.

The following several sections outline the main events of 2022 limiting Kyrgyzstan's freedom of

the press, and inherently, freedom of speech and expression.

FREEDOM OF THE MEDIA

On July 13, 2023, the European Parliament issued a resolution on “the crackdown on the media and freedom of expression in Kyrgyzstan”.¹⁴⁰ The European Parliament's resolution noted that while Kyrgyzstan was known to be one of the most democratic in Central Asia during the 1990s and had just become a member of the UN Human Rights Council in February 2023, it dropped 50 positions¹⁴¹ in the Reporters Without Borders *Freedom of the Press 2023* rating, which catalogues all major recent events hampering freedom of expression and the press in Kyrgyzstan.

To name but a few, the resolution mentions: the forced suspension¹⁴² of *Azattyk Radio* (the RFE/RL Kyrgyz service), the groundless proceedings against *Kaktus Media*¹⁴³ (a major independent media outlet), the full-scale persecution of investigative journalist Bolot Temirov¹⁴⁴ and his team, Temirov Live (an ordeal that started in early 2022), the persecution of *Next TV*¹⁴⁵ (a television channel owned by an opposition figure), the continued detention of human rights activists and journalists under arrest in the so-called “Kempirabat affair,”¹⁴⁶ and a set of legislative initiatives aimed at shutting down the space for freedom of the press and expression (outlined in the next section).

The resolution received some attention but failed to have almost any actual positive effect on the problems that prompted it. Just over a month after it was issued, a wild charge by state prosecutors against another major independent media organization, *Kloop*,¹⁴⁷ ordered that the outlet be shut down, with its website blocked shortly afterward¹⁴⁸ in a separate allegation of false information reported in a news article.

Attacks on freedom of the press and expression continued for the rest of the year – the arrest of activist and journalist Oljobay Shakir¹⁴⁹ for calling for an August 31 Independence Day protest, the continued detention of people previously arrested, the further proceedings¹⁵⁰ of a lawsuit against *Kloop*, as well as a curious new issue of debate – the introduction of stylistic changes to the national flag of Kyrgyzstan – in which one activist¹⁵¹ was arrested for announcing a peaceful protest rally against that initiative.

As a culmination of the 2023 crackdown on freedom of speech and the press, 11 journalists¹⁵² linked to Bolot Temirov were arrested in the predawn

hours of January 16, 2024. Just one day earlier, one of the largest and most popular media organizations, 24.kg, had been searched and its editors were taken in for interrogation¹⁵³ related to criminal charges of “propaganda of war” for an article featuring a Kyrgyz national fighting for Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

ANTI-FREE PRESS LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

The worsening state of freedom of the press and freedom of speech in 2023 was accompanied by a legislative process in which several bills that would systemically curtail these freedoms more directly than the law on false information inched their way toward being adopted into law.¹⁵⁴

One example is the new Law on Media bill. Under the pretext of a significantly changed playing field, to replace the existing Law on Media adopted in 1992. The bill was initiated by the Presidential Administration, which put forward the first draft¹⁵⁵ in September 2022. In its fifth iteration¹⁵⁶ as of December 2023, the bill still contained its two most harmful provisions: the requirement for all websites to register as media outlets, and for all media outlets to go through state registration in order to be allowed to operate, with state regulators retaining the ability to arbitrarily withdraw that registration. As of early 2024, the bill was being considered in its first hearing before Parliament.

The second major concerning bill in 2023 was with regards to a new Law on Non-Profit Organizations.¹⁵⁷ As of late 2023, the bill still contained its most dangerous original provisions, including a set of cumbersome financial and operational reporting duties for NGOs, classifying NGOs as either political or social in nature, with social organizations subject to less strict surveillance but also barred from any foreign funding or exercising their right to peaceful assembly, and additional onerous regulations for the affiliates of foreign nonprofits.

The third and likely most controversial bill closest to becoming law in early 2024¹⁵⁸ was a set of amendments informally known as the “Foreign Agents Bill”¹⁵⁹ proposed by an MP in late 2022. The bill dominated much of Kyrgyzstan’s legislative debate and advocacy efforts throughout 2023 and stipulated the introduction of a label of “organizations operating as foreign representatives” for all nonprofit entities receiving

any funding from foreign sources and engaging in very broadly defined “political activities”. Such an organization would be required to register as such and comply with additional reporting, transparency, and accountability requirements. Following lengthy debate on all sides, a previous section of the bill introducing criminal liability with up to 10 years of imprisonment for any violations of the policy was removed from the latest version as of February 2024.

All three bills were largely copies of equivalent Russian legislation,¹⁶⁰ and mimicked the same repressive mechanisms and loopholes used by authorities in that country. The way in which all three bills advanced toward imminent adoption was highly illustrative of 2023’s crackdown against freedom of the press and freedom of speech, along with the blatant disregard for any critical and independent voices.

ENABLING GEOPOLITICS

Curtailling freedoms in Kyrgyzstan has unfolded against a backdrop of the severe geopolitical dynamics around the world that were unleashed by the Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine. Arguably, this geopolitical phenomenon directly contributed to the negative dynamics for civil liberties in Kyrgyzstan.

The scope of Russia’s war has extended beyond the military campaign itself in Ukraine; it has also included heavy activity in many regions, including Central Asia, with the aim of imposing Russian views. Overt confirmation of this included the admission by Sergei Shoigu¹⁶¹ in February 2024 that many major NGOs in the Central Asian countries had stepped up anti-Russian activity since the start of the war and that Russia had been undertaking preemptive measures as a response. Other indications of Russia’s hand in stifling press freedoms in Kyrgyzstan include the repressive legislative initiatives directly copied¹⁶² from Russian laws, the court-ordered de facto ban on peaceful protests in Bishkek issued shortly after protests¹⁶³ began to break out in front of the Russian Embassy in February 2022, and the recent criminal probe against the 24.kg news agency for “propaganda of war,” which, according to trusted sources, stemmed from an article¹⁶⁴ featuring Central Asians fighting alongside the Ukrainian military.

Western countries’ flirtation with Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries did have some impact. German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier¹⁶⁵ and President of the European Council Charles Michel¹⁶⁶ each paid visits to Kyrgyzstan in June 2023. The

European Parliament resolution mentioned above was adopted in July. The American C5+1 meeting brought together heads of state hosted by President Joe Biden in New York¹⁶⁷ in September, and was quickly followed by a summit in the same format in Berlin¹⁶⁸ hosted by Chancellor Olaf Scholz. In these and other events, reportedly, Western partners raised their concerns about the narrowing space for the press and civil society under Kyrgyz leadership. However, issues relating to cooperation on supporting Ukraine, upholding sanctions against Russia, developing alternative connectivity and trade routes to bypass Russia and reassure Kyrgyzstan that the West (the United States, EU, Germany, and others) had good intentions took on much greater precedence.¹⁶⁹

The Kyrgyz government has come to realize that in such a geopolitical scenario, Russia was a far more formidable player. Western partners were polite, undemanding, uncommitted in any tangible way to pressuring Kyrgyzstan or providing it with any incentives to behave in a certain way. That calculus was in display in notable events like the move to close down Kloop Media and the arrest of 11 journalists in January 2024, shortly after Western partners had called on the government to respect press freedoms. In January, 2024 when the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken¹⁷⁰ sent a letter to President Japarov, calling on him to reverse the adoption of the “foreign representatives” bill. While the removal of the criminal persecution amendments was seen as a result of the Blinken letter, Japarov’s reply¹⁷¹ was telling: he called on the United States to not meddle in domestic affairs of Kyrgyzstan and cited a popular page from the Russian propaganda playbook when he wondered why the United States could have their own Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) while a similar law was not fit for Kyrgyzstan.¹⁷²

CONCLUSION

It will come as no surprise when World Press Freedom 2023 further downgrades Kyrgyzstan – the march against freedom of the press was unrelenting throughout 2023, and this worsening scenario has been far more significant than a mere statistic in

Kyrgyzstan’s profile, and the media and civil society were far from the only victims. Kyrgyzstan has generally grown less tolerant to diversity and more anti-Western in its public discourse, as the government has become less accountable to the public, and the information space has grown more complacent and superficial. The Japarov Administration, which was described in depth by OSCE Academy in Bishkek senior lecturer Dr. Asel Doolotkeldieva in her report, “Populism à la Kyrgyz: Sadyr Japarov, Nationalism, and Anti-Elite Sentiment in Kyrgyzstan in 2021”,¹⁷³ has established a space for its messaging that is largely devoid of questioning. Ordinary citizens have grown more mindful of how they use social network platforms, and opposition-minded political activists and groups (or what remains of them) have increasingly found themselves unable to access the public space.

Assessments by *The Diplomat* in October 2022 noted that Kyrgyzstan has moved backward on most Westernization criteria,¹⁷⁴ as its leadership has successfully appealed to sentiments of tradition, suspicions of the Western agenda, and a public demand for strong government. Such a public taste for illiberal policies coincided with a geopolitical situation in which accepting Russia’s preferred repressive policies toward the press and ignoring Western appeals to the contrary appeared to be the most pragmatic choice. All of this coincided with decisive leaders who clearly enjoy the payoffs of autocratic rule-¹⁷⁵ a point described in detail in the Freedom House “Freedom in the World 2023” report, which rated Kyrgyzstan as “Not Free” in its annual study of political rights and civil liberties worldwide.

Kyrgyzstan faced a perfect storm against freedom of the press and freedom of expression, which dominated the political landscape throughout 2023. For the storm to subside, at least some components need to change- the public must stop demanding strong-handed leaders and instead begin to question the Kyrgyz and/or Russian government, along with Russian influence, in order to see changes for the better, and Western partners need to grow stronger and more persuasive in their advocacy on behalf of press freedoms and other civil liberties.

LATVIA:

New defense strategies on the eve of the 20th anniversary of NATO membership

Sigita Struberga

As Latvia approaches its 20th anniversary as a member of NATO on March 29, 2024, significant strides have been made in bolstering its defense in light of recent geopolitical tensions, particularly due to Russia's escalated activities since 2014 and the events following February 24, 2022. This backdrop makes 2023 a crucial year, signaling a significant overhaul in Latvia's defense policy to address these emerging challenges. These developments reflect Latvia's commitment to NATO's principles, enhancing regional security, and underscoring the strategic alignment of Latvia's defense goals with the alliance's objectives. This analysis delves into the alignment between Latvia's defense objectives and NATO's

strategic imperatives, assessing the consequential effects on regional security dynamics and Latvia's contribution to the alliance.

BACKGROUND

In commemorating the 20th anniversary of Latvia's NATO membership and evaluating steps taken in 2023 to strengthen its defenses, acknowledging the multifaceted influences that have sculpted the nation's defense policy over these two decades is crucial. Latvia's strategic journey within the NATO framework has been profoundly influenced by a blend of internal and external factors, each playing a pivotal role in shaping its defense orientation and capabilities.



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Internally, Latvia's defense policy has been influenced by its political leadership, which has skillfully navigated NATO integration while managing domestic fiscal realities and political dynamics, including such as election-cycle thinking, for example. The trauma of surrender and subsequent occupation has deep influence on historic memory and influences nation's security perception and approach to defense strategy. Economic factors have also been pivotal, shaping the level of Latvia's defense investments and modernization efforts to meet NATO's standards and requirements. This was especially evident during the economic crisis, when the defense budget was cut twice, leaving a significant gap in the defense budget increase trend, which had been adopted previously with success and in line with NATO standards. The period before 2014 was marked by cautiously optimistic expectations for a more peaceful regional security environment and the development of defense strategies based on limited financial investments.

Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine prompted the Baltic states, including Latvia, to reassess their defense strategies, leading to a significant increase in defense budgets and initiating talks to fortify NATO's eastern flank, shifting Latvia's stance from cautious optimism to proactive defense planning. Thus, Latvia's defense policy dynamically responded to the shifting regional environment, particularly in reaction to escalating aggression from Russia, characterized by an increase in both rhetoric and practical actions, from

the conflict in Ukraine to hybrid attacks targeting Latvia. It has also adapted to transformations within NATO itself and the broader range of security threats the alliance faces globally, from pandemics and cyberthreats, to terrorism and other challenges that might not be as prominent on the Baltic security agenda.

This multifaceted approach has necessitated continuous refinement of Latvia's defense posture, ensuring its strategies remain robust and capable of deterring diverse threats within the evolving NATO framework.

2023 UPDATE ON LATVIA'S DEFENSE POLICY AND STRATEGY

February 24, 2022, is widely regarded as a pivotal moment due to the unprecedented missile strikes on major Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv. The Baltic states, which benefitted from NATO's intelligence sharing and collaborative defense framework, were forewarned of the potential for extensive Russian aggression, enabling them to prepare and extend crucial support to Ukraine in a timely manner. These reactions reaffirmed that the Baltic States are part of the NATO framework, which ensures quick response and security. While supporting Ukraine, Latvia revised its defense approach and Latvia, along with several allies, promptly initiated NATO Article 4 consultations, reflecting a united front in response to the situation in Ukraine.

Since the geopolitical shifts in 2014, Latvia has recalibrated its national defense towards NATO's vision, targeting 2% GDP for defense spending and enhancing crisis preparedness. In 2016, Latvia became the host country for the NATO Force Integration Unit. It prioritized a comprehensive defense system in 2019 aimed at improving societal resilience and

inter-agency cooperation. By 2021, legal reforms strengthened critical infrastructure protection. These initiatives reflect Latvia's continuous enhancement of its defense capabilities, aligning with NATO's strategic emphasis on efficient crisis management. Yet, in 2022, recognizing the shifts in geopolitics and security, policymakers significantly revised their defense-building strategies. Subsequent initiatives included vital arms acquisitions and professional service expansion.

In 2023, the Latvian government approved two critically important documents- a new National Security Concept and a new National Defense Concept. Both strategic updates respond to long-term threats, particularly from Russia, drawing lessons from the conflict in Ukraine to ensure Latvia's readiness to strengthen its resilience and defend every inch of its territory. The Defense Concept focuses on strengthening air and coastal defenses, introducing advanced military technologies, and expanding the armed forces. It also highlights the importance of NATO's increased presence in Latvia, aiming for a brigade-size force by 2026, and underscores the necessity of boosting defense spending to 3% of the GDP by 2027 to meet these strategic objectives.¹⁷⁶

On March 9, 2023, the Latvian Parliament approved the 2023 state budget and the financial plan for 2023-2025, earmarking 986.83 million euros (2.25% of the GDP) for defense in 2023, an increase of 163.55 million euros from 2022. Defense spending is set to rise annually, reaching 2.4% of the GDP in 2024 and 2.5% in 2025. Key priorities include enhancing military capabilities, establishing a comprehensive national defense service, and developing military infrastructure. The 2023 budget allocations are 38% for personnel, 31% for maintenance, and 31% for investment, with significant funding dedicated to air defense improvements over the next three years.¹⁷⁷

Following the NATO Madrid summit in July 2022, Latvian Defense Minister Artis Pabriks declared the reintroduction of the national defense service, aiming to bolster the country's defense forces. This move is part of a broader strategy to expand the National Armed Forces and enhance the reserve system, with goals to reach 31,000 active-duty personnel and 30,000 ready reserve soldiers. Under the State Defense Service Law, Latvian men aged 18 to 24 still in education are drafted, with an option for 18-27-year-olds to volunteer. The inaugural voluntary draft started on July 1, 2023. The second

volunteer enlistment concluded successfully on July 21, 2023, avoiding the need for a mandatory draw. Volunteers for Latvia's State Defense Service can now opt for a 5-year stint with the National Guard, involving annual 28-day active-duty training. This opportunity, targeting 200 youths, includes placements in various brigades, with an emphasis on proximity to their residence. Additionally, 50 higher education students can volunteer for a 5-year reserve officer training. By December 1, 2023, 515 citizens had volunteered for the third enlistment round.¹⁷⁸ Despite the fact that no draft wave surpassed 520 conscripts, by the end of 2023, volunteer slots were filled. This is attributed to numerous factors, including limited appeal among youth, demographic trends, and the prevailing health issues among the young men in Latvia. The Ministry of Defense's initial communication challenges somewhat hampered the restoration of compulsory service. While support among the population, particularly the older generation, grew due to their understanding of the security landscape, this did not translate into a significant boost in youth motivation. Despite these hurdles, the 2023 relaunch of compulsory service is deemed a success, achieving its objectives and setting clear future directions.

In 2023, Latvia advanced the rollout of National Defense Education in secondary schools, building on its 2022/2023 introduction as an elective in 147 schools, with over 10,000 student participants.¹⁷⁹ ¹⁸By September 2024, the program will be mandatory, aimed at equipping students with essential military skills and leadership qualities for future roles in the State Defense Service and related fields.

In 2023, bolstering military infrastructure was a major focus, with Latvia upgrading facilities in response to NATO's initiative to increase its presence to brigade level. This included the Latvian Parliament's June 22, 2023 approval of the Selonia military base as crucial for national interests, reflecting Latvia's commitment to meeting NATO's infrastructure requirements for this expansion. Decision-makers believe the new military base will bolster Latvia's security and stimulate local development, enhancing infrastructure, healthcare, education, and business services in adjacent areas. The base's strategic position is also seen as advantageous for enhancing security through collaboration with the Lithuanian armed forces. The initial phase of constructing the Selia training area is expected to conclude by the end of 2025.

In June 2023, Canada augmented its military aid to Latvia, deploying 15 Leopard 2 tanks and personnel, culminating in November with the arrival of Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians). This enhances Canada's leadership in the highly multinational NATO eFP battlegroup in Latvia, featuring forces from numerous countries.¹⁸⁰ Currently, it is the largest Canadian deployment abroad with 1,000 troops, and plans are underway to increase this to 2,200 by 2026,¹⁸¹ solidifying Canada's commitment to NATO's presence in the region. The eFP battlegroup in Latvia is NATO's most multinational battlegroup under the brigade level, and includes personnel from Albania, the Czech Republic, Iceland, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain. Canada's expanded military role in Latvia includes a strong focus on integrating multinational forces and enhancing Latvian armored capabilities. Additionally, Canada emphasizes gender equality as a distinct issue, for example, by advocating for the implementation of a gender advisor position within Latvian armed forces, a move that addresses a longstanding gap.

In 2023, Latvia's Defense Ministry made pivotal acquisitions to boost its military capabilities and Baltic regional security, including the procurement of an IRIS-T air defense system jointly with Estonia, a US-supported \$105 million Naval Strike Missile project for coastal defense, and a \$179.8 million deal for six HIMARS systems, enhancing both Latvia's defense in particular and that of the Baltic states more generally, and signifying a commitment to NATO's collective defense. These efforts underscore Latvia's dedication

to aligning with NATO standards and improving military efficiency.

Enhancing public resilience and involvement is key to Latvia's comprehensive defense strategy, which involves cultivating a culture of readiness and addressing challenges like low mutual trust and unclear crisis roles. There's a need to shift perceptions of NATO from an external rescuer to embodying collective defense responsibilities, emphasizing self-defense readiness and reinforcing that Latvia's commitment to NATO transcends the 2% GDP defense spending.

CONCLUSION

In 2023, Latvia intensified its defense initiatives in light of escalating regional tensions, particularly due to Russian activities. This involved adopting new defense strategies, investing more in security measures, and collaborating closely with NATO to reinforce the eastern flank's defenses. Significant achievements included the modernization of military assets and bolstering society's resilience. Moving forward, Latvia will need to focus more on enhancing its eastern border defenses, ensuring NATO forces are well-accommodated, and continuing to upgrade its military capabilities, with a strong emphasis on fostering societal resilience and defensive capacity. To realize the plan, economic growth to boost defense funding is essential, and cultivating political resolve to shift public and policymakers' views on broader community engagement in defense efforts is equally crucial.

LITHUANIA:

The EU Eastern Neighborhood development on the NATO Vilnius Summit

Mantas Adomėnas

If one looks at the political processes in Lithuania in 2023, by far the most crucial event – and factor – in its domestic politics was exogenous: Russia’s ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine. In a similar fashion, the most important event which happened in Lithuania itself was also of an external nature: the NATO Summit which took place in Vilnius on July 11-12, 2023. “The NATO summit undeniably constituted the focal point of Lithuania’s political agenda in 2023. It can be argued that the big part of the nation became actively engaged in fervent deliberations, which revolved around inquiries into the Alliance’s role within the framework of regional security, strategies for fortifying NATO’s Eastern flank, and above all, the prospect of extending a promise of NATO membership to Ukraine in Vilnius,” writes¹⁸² Professor Margarita Šešelgytė, the Director of the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University. It is useful to

look at the NATO Vilnius Summit as a concentrated expression and culmination of Lithuania’s policy of integrating the Eastern Neighborhood region into the European Union and Euro-Atlantic security structures. I will not delve into an analysis of the Summit as such but will rather look at it as a reflection of Lithuania’s Westernizing integrationist policy.

A NATO SUMMIT AMID UKRAINIAN FLAGS

When the leaders of 31 NATO countries (including newly-acceded Finland), NATO candidate Sweden, NATO partner-countries in the Indo-Pacific, such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand, as well as the leaders of the European Union and of NATO aspirant countries, including Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelensky and the foreign affairs ministers of Georgia and Moldova, gathered in Vilnius on the



eve of the Summit, the Lithuanian capital could easily be mistaken for a Ukrainian city: posters in support of Ukraine war effort and signs advocating for Ukraine's NATO membership lined the thoroughfares leading from the city center to the Summit venue, and the blue-yellow Ukrainian flags were everywhere – there were 33,000 Ukrainian flags around the city, symbolically referring to Ukraine as (potentially) the 33rd NATO ally (following Sweden). “A flag from war-torn Bakhmut was raised in the city's central square and large crowds welcomed President Zelensky.”¹⁸³ Even the city buses, specially painted with Ukrainian and NATO colors for the Summit, admonished: “While you are waiting for this bus, Ukraine is waiting to become a NATO member.”¹⁸⁴

Lithuania's support for Ukraine didn't stop at the visuals. At the joint press conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda did not mince words in support of Ukraine's NATO membership: “We understand that Ukraine has to fully integrate into the Trans-Atlantic security structures and become a NATO Member. The time for repetition of promises is over, the time has come to agree on a clear plan for how we will achieve that. We have no other way but to reach an agreement and to send a strong signal to Ukraine.

The outlook for membership in NATO is enormously important to Ukraine, which has now been heroically fighting the Russian monster for a year and a half. Vilnius must be the place from which good news will reach the Ukrainian people.”¹⁸⁵ At the Social Dinner for the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defense, Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis spoke of Ukraine as an “equal and indispensable part” of NATO and the Trans-Atlantic partnership, and, recalling the invitation for Lithuania to join NATO issued by US President George W. Bush two decades earlier, said, “Now Ukraine is longing to hear those words and it is us who can turn their night into dawn. We cannot let this opportunity go to waste.”¹⁸⁶ Behind the scenes, Lithuanian diplomats intensely lobbied their counterparts in NATO countries for more positive and daring language in the Summit Communiqué.

SUMMIT OUTCOMES I: REINFORCEMENTS FOR LITHUANIA

As the Summit outcomes and expectations concerning both Lithuania itself and Ukraine were intensely discussed in the public arena, the expectations were extremely high – both among the public and the political elites. When the Summit results came out, the initial reaction was relief.

In the run-up to the Summit, Lithuania, along with the other two Baltic states, pressed strongly for the permanent presence of brigade-sized NATO forces on their soil, which are necessary in order to replace the earlier concept of “deterrence by punishment” with “deterrence by denial” – meaning that every inch of NATO territory must be defended. It was argued that, absent strategic depth, “deterrence by denial” required the permanent presence of at least a brigade of combat-ready NATO forces, along with the national army units. The existing multinational battle groups, which were suitable for acting as a “trip wire” in case of a Russian attack, but not being able to defend their territory

until reinforcements arrive, were no longer suitable for that purpose.

As NATO allies agreed¹⁸⁷ on significant measures to further enhance NATO's deterrence and defense position in Vilnius, Germany confirmed the earlier announcement by the German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius that his country would station a "robust brigade" with 4,000 troops in Lithuania. Three new regional defense plans were agreed upon to defend NATO allies on all flanks, along with new command and control arrangements. Enhancements were also made to NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defense position, including rotating modern air defense systems across the eastern flank.

SUMMIT OUTCOMES II: BUCHAREST 2.0 FOR UKRAINE?

When it came to the question of Ukraine's NATO prospects, however, the Summit results were inevitably a huge public disappointment. This feeling was reinforced by President Zelensky's grim and weary demeanor, even as he spoke of "bringing home a significant security victory for Ukraine" in public¹⁸⁸ (he was considerably harsher out of the earshot of journalists). Despite the fact that the Summit marked "a step change in the discussion about Ukraine's membership prospects,"¹⁸⁹ and Ukraine received more space on the NATO agenda, as evidenced by its 48 mentions in the Vilnius Summit Communiqué (as opposed to 13 mentions in the 2022 Madrid Summit Declaration),¹⁹⁰ it was interpreted as a lost opportunity to bring Ukraine closer to NATO – and out of Russian aggression's way. The wording of the Communiqué on the outlook for Ukrainian membership was deliberately ambiguous and lukewarm: "We will be in a position to extend an invitation to Ukraine to join the Alliance when Allies agree and conditions are met," and failed to provide Ukraine with a concrete membership perspective, as well as to give any substance to the document's earlier grandiloquent statement which said, "Ukraine's future is in NATO."¹⁹¹

In the end, Vilnius Summit wording did not differ substantially from the lines of the Bucharest Summit Declaration that said, "We agreed today that these countries [Ukraine and Georgia] will become members of NATO."¹⁹²

Admittedly, there was one substantial difference compared to Bucharest: the removal of the Membership Action Plan (MAP) requirement, instead offering to review the "progress on interoperability" through the Annual National Program. Also, the NATO-Ukrainian Council was established, which involves Ukraine in direct coordination with NATO.

Nevertheless, despite these accoutrements, the overall view of the Summit's results as far as Ukraine's Trans-Atlantic aspirations are concerned was bleak. It was dubbed a "symbol of lost opportunities,"¹⁹³ as well as "Bucharest 2.0,"¹⁹⁴ the latter referring to equally vague NATO promises issued to Ukraine and Georgia at the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit. Following that event, Russia invaded Georgia, and in 2014 it seized Crimea, as well as starting a war in Donbass, Eastern Ukraine, which it later turned into a full-scale war in 2022.

ANOTHER VILNIUS SUMMIT, A DECADE AGO

However, in the wake of NATO Vilnius Summit, the summit that most resonated in the memory of the Lithuanian policy-makers was not that of Bucharest, but another Vilnius Summit: the 3rd European Partnership Summit held in Vilnius almost exactly 10 years earlier, in 2013. It also featured Ukraine at a crossroads on its way to the West; it was there that, on November 28, 2013, despite intense lobbying and pressure, the pro-Moscow Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU. It was this decision by Yanukovich that provoked the popular pro-European youth revolt in Kyiv, known as Euromaidan, which led to Yanukovich's ousting following his violent attempts to put down the uprising. As the subsequent Ukrainian government adopted a resolute pro-European and pro-NATO course, this was followed by Russian reprisals in the form of the annexation of Crimea and start of the bloody proxy war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. It is significant that what led to this course of events was a setback in Ukraine's integration into the Western political structures in 2013 Vilnius Summit, the setback which then led first to protests, to the removal of obstacles hindering Ukraine's pro-Western orientation, and, eventually, to a totally new political constellation.

The similarities may seem superficial: the 2013 Vilnius Summit was about closer ties with the EU, whereas Vilnius 2023 was about NATO; in the former

case, a pro-Russian president of Ukraine refused to sign an agreement after strong lobbying to do so by Ukraine's Western partners, in the latter, pro-Western Ukrainian president and his allies failed to get what they wanted from the reluctant West. In the first instance, Russian aggression followed in the wake of Kyiv's pro-Western pivot, whereas in the second, it was the already ongoing Russian aggression that made the need for Ukraine's integration into NATO so urgent.

WESTERNIZATION OF THE REGION AS FOREIGN POLICY GOAL

Nonetheless, it is no accident that Vilnius was the stage of both of these incomplete Westernizing moves on Ukraine's part. The goal of promoting democratic reforms in the post-Soviet space and its integration into the Western political and security structures have been central to Lithuania's foreign policy since its accession to the EU and NATO in 2004. Admittedly, Lithuania was not one of the founding members of the Eastern Partnership initiative which Poland and Sweden jointly proposed in 2008 in order to overcome EU enlargement fatigue, as well as to promote pro-European reforms and integration in the EU Eastern neighborhood. Nevertheless, since its founding at the Prague Summit in May 2009, Lithuania was one of the most active champions and supporters of the Eastern Partnership initiative. Lithuania's efforts were directed chiefly towards Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine; assistance to the pro-Western reforms and deepening Euro-Atlantic integration of these countries were Lithuania's foreign policy priority, upheld across the political spectrum.

Only when this context is taken into account can the central role of the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit in 2013 in Lithuanian foreign policy be understood. The 2013 Summit was marked by hope; it should have been the most important achievement of Lithuania's Presidency of the Council of the EU. The historic Association Agreement with the EU, negotiated since 2007, was to be signed in Vilnius on November 28, 2013 by the trio of Eastern Partners: Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. However, pressure from Russia meant that Ukraine withdrew from the agreement, and it was not signed. Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovich, who attended the Summit in Vilnius, gave his reason as potential sanctions from Russia if it was irritated by the agreement with the EU. "Unfortunately, so far it seems that [...] the arguments have not reached the Ukrainian President's ear or mind, and so far we

can see that positions have not yet changed," said then-Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė at the conclusion of the EU Eastern Partnership Summit.¹⁹⁵

Upon his return to Kyiv, President Yanukovich was greeted by thousands of Euromaidan protesters. He later fled Ukraine in February 2014, as Russia invaded Ukraine for the first time, annexing Crimea and parts of Eastern Ukraine and triggering a war that has continued ever since. When, on June 27, 2014, Ukraine joined Moldova and Georgia in finally signing the Association Agreement with the EU, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko did so by using the pen that had been prepared for Yanukovich to sign the agreement in Vilnius the previous November. "It did not happen then, but the pen is the same, demonstrating [that] historic events are unavoidable," Poroshenko said. "The document that we will sign today is not just political and economic. It is a symbol of faith and of unbreakable will."¹⁹⁶

OPERATION CONSISTENT SUPPORT

Lithuania's unwavering support for the Eastern Partnership countries' growing links with the EU has continued, concentrating primarily on Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. However, with the onset of democratic backsliding following the 2012 and 2013 elections in Georgia, relations started to grow cooler and more distant; this trend became especially pronounced during the political impasse and persistent parliamentary crisis which followed Georgia's 2020 election. Lithuania's focus shifted towards Moldova and Ukraine. In the spring of 2022, following Ukraine's bid for EU membership in February 2022, a hundred-strong network of Lithuanian experts and civil servants informally helped their Ukrainian counterparts in preparing responses to the EU legislative questionnaire which Ukraine submitted in record time – in just over a month.¹⁹⁷

Lithuanian diplomats actively lobbied their EU partners and institutions to extend EU candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine, which was eventually granted in June

2022. Ukraine and Moldova were designated as priority partners for Lithuania's development cooperation policy agenda, which it has consistently supported in its efforts to achieve political association and economic integration with the EU.

Numerous projects were carried out on good governance in Moldova, such as strengthening the administrative and institutional capacity and governance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Moldova, to name but one, in order to strengthen Moldova's administrative and institutional capacity to implement the reforms related to its EU membership bid, and to transfer experience in public sector reforms.¹⁹⁸ With its experience in democratic governance and reforms, Lithuania continued actively sharing its experience in Euro-integration and other areas through joint implementation of development cooperation projects. This goes beyond state policy: Lithuanian citizens have been, and continue to be, among the most determined supporters of Ukraine's EU membership within the European Union: according to a Eurobarometer poll, 79% of Lithuanians (as opposed to 61% of all Europeans) were in favor of granting EU candidate status to Ukraine.¹⁹⁹

Against this background of support for Ukraine's (and Moldova's) European and Trans-Atlantic integration, the importance of Ukraine at the 2023 NATO Vilnius Summit is clear. Indeed, as Professor Margarita Šešelgytė wrote, speaking in the context of the NATO Summit, "the question of Ukrainian membership in NATO revived not very old memories of Lithuania's own successful accession to the Trans-Atlantic community and how Lithuania had managed to use a narrow window of opportunity when Russia was at its weakest and the US was at its strongest at the nineties."²⁰⁰ The role Lithuania sought to play at the Summit – to be the facilitator of Ukraine's Trans-Atlantic integration – can be seen as the culmination of its long-standing policy of seeking to catalyze pro-Western integration in Europe's

Eastern neighborhood. This policy perceives EU and NATO integration prospects for countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova not in terms of two distinct policy directions, but rather as two mutually supporting tracks towards achieving an irreversible transformation of the region into a secure, democratic space deeply integrated within the Western political, economic, and defense structures.

A SETBACK, BUT NOT THE END

The inconclusive results of the Summit for Ukraine's NATO membership prospects were broadly perceived as a major setback, despite the attempts of the official representatives to save face and gloss over the issue. Influential senior statesman Albinas Januška encapsulated the majority view when he opined that, "In terms of Ukraine, the Vilnius Summit was a failure for Lithuania, and all other explanations and reservations are just evasions."²⁰¹

Will this setback – compounded by the fact that, for the second time in a row, a summit which might have been a major historical turning point for the region, failed to achieve that objective – affect Lithuania's foreign policy priorities and dampen its proactive role in the region's European and Trans-Atlantic integration? That is unlikely; Lithuanian policy-makers and its expert community are broadly in agreement with Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishyna, who concluded during a public briefing for NATO ambassadors and representatives of think tanks, that the real work on Ukraine's integration with NATO only started after the Vilnius Summit: "The difference between the reality before the Vilnius Summit and after it is that before the Summit, everything related to our Euro-Atlantic integration was mostly based on the framework of cooperation, collaboration, various formats, the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP) format, etc. After the Vilnius Summit, the real process of Euro-Atlantic integration began," she said, specifying that after Vilnius, Ukraine "focused on implementing the decisions and launching the formats agreed at the Summit."²⁰² So the hard slog towards Ukraine's NATO membership continues, despite the disappointing setback in Vilnius – and Lithuania continues to be Ukraine's steadfast supporter on its way.

It is hardly a coincidence that the reformist Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine gave these remarks at the Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania in Kyiv, which organized the briefing.

MOLDOVA:

Referendum for EU accession as an unpredictable test for the European path

Mihai Mogildea

On December 24, 2023, Moldovan president, Maia Sandu announced²⁰³ an initiative to organize a national referendum on Moldova's EU accession in the autumn of 2024. The announcement came three years after Sandu's inauguration and just ten days after the European Council's historic decision to open EU accession negotiations with Moldova. A few days later, the Moldovan Parliament amended electoral laws, allowing a national referendum on the same day as parliamentary or presidential elections. Therefore, it is expected that the referendum will take place at the same time as the first round of presidential elections planned for October 2024.

According to²⁰⁴ President Sandu, this will be a constitutional referendum, meaning that as its aim is to incorporate European integration into the Moldovan constitution, any law approved by Parliament will be required to respect European standards and norms.

The idea of a referendum on European integration is nothing new. In the past two years, this was actively promoted by the pro-Russian opposition, including former President Igor Dodon. Dodon, together with other pro-Russian political figures, contested the legitimacy and popular backing for Moldova's application for EU membership and for other steps taken by the current government on EU accession. This was done intentionally in order to deepen geopolitical divisions and minimize the weight of the EU's historic decisions regarding Moldova.

Furthermore, after Sandu's announcement, Moldovan political parties financed and supported by Russia stated²⁰⁵ that the move was an electoral maneuver for presidential elections and that they would not engage in the exercise. The Kremlin has reassessed its strategy for the Moldovan presidential elections and is likely to focus its efforts on the referendum.



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That being said, there are three concerns regarding the upcoming referendum. The first is related to voter turnout, which needs to be greater than 33.3% in order for the results to be valid. The second concern focuses on the level of support for EU accession among the voters, which needs to be greater than 50% in order for the referendum to pass. Last, but not least, if one of the first two concerns materializes and the referendum does not pass, Moldova's political competitiveness and the sustainability of its pro-European movement needs to be reevaluated.

MOLDOVAN SUPPORT FOR EU ACCESSION

According to different opinion polls²⁰⁶ conducted in Moldova, up to 60% of respondents are in favor of EU accession. This approval rate has fluctuated over the last five years, and is strongly linked with respondents' confidence in the performance of pro-European political parties, especially those in power. However, the polls do not include the Moldovan diaspora, which is widely pro-European and represents up to 15% of the electorate. Therefore, one could estimate that around 2/3 of the Moldovan citizens are in favor of EU accession.

One of the most recent surveys,²⁰⁷ conducted in February 2024 by the International Republican Institute (IRI), shows that 48% of respondents would vote for EU accession in a referendum, while 40% would vote against it. Coupled with the support from the diaspora, support for EU accession is likely to receive a majority of the votes.

CONFIRMING REFERENDUM RESULTS

Given that the referendum is likely to take place simultaneously with the first round of the presidential elections, the President and the parliamentary majority expect that it will not be difficult to obtain a voter turnout of at least 33.3%. However, this expectation is somewhat distorted.

During the first round of presidential elections in 2016 and 2020, voter turnout has fluctuated between 1.35 and 1.41 million voters. In order to ensure that the referendum is valid, turnout must not be lower than 1.1 million. If pro-Russian parties boycott the referendum, this threshold will be difficult to meet. Support for these parties is estimated²⁰⁸ at around 30% of the electorate, which might be sufficient to keep turnout below one million votes.

Given the popularity of EU accession, it is plausible that the pro-Russian parties will leverage a boycott in their favor. The EU's strategic role in Moldova's modernization and reform process has become more visible and tangible both at the national and local levels. During the COVID-19 pandemic and energy crisis, the EU's financial support has been focused on direct beneficiaries from whole regions of Moldova. An electoral debate on the benefits of EU accession would be detrimental to the pro-Russian opposition. Therefore, a widespread boycott of the referendum and mobilization of resources to delegitimize its results might be the opposition's trump card. With little chance at winning the next presidential elections, the only remaining move for the Kremlin and its proxies in Moldova will be working to undermine the referendum.

POTENTIAL IMPACT OF THE REFERENDUM

If the referendum is to be successful, it will cement Moldova's European trajectory. A positive result would signal to Brussels that Moldova backs the EU accession process and is aware of the opportunities that this journey will bring. Moldova and the EU are currently carrying out the screening process, which might end by this autumn. In the meantime, there might be a window of opportunity for the first intergovernmental conference and to initiate the formal negotiation process across the 35 chapters by the end of this year.

Furthermore, the referendum could offer a large mapping of EU support across different regions, providing incentives for Brussels to engage more with skeptical communities and better understand how to manage its communication and visibility efforts at the local level. For the pro-European parties, this result would mean a consolidated baseline for next year's parliamentary elections and greater chances at forming a stable parliamentary majority after 2025.

On the other hand, a failed referendum might have serious repercussions for the upcoming parliamentary elections. The pro-European electorate's trust in the current political leadership, including in Maia Sandu, might decrease and create greater uncertainty regarding the results of parliamentary elections. A defeat would also mean that Russia will invest more resources in its "pro-European" proxies, which might use the opportunity to improve their image and electoral score.

The EU's reputation at the national level might suffer in the short term, similarly to Moldova's advocacy efforts in various EU capitals. Chisinau's quest for an accelerated accession path would be weakened by its domestic societal clashes. Consequently, the idea of another EU accession referendum would be seriously weakened.

CONCLUSIONS

The presidential initiative to organize a referendum on EU accession is risky in the current political and electoral context. Its success will greatly depend on the capacity of pro-European parties to form a broad pro-

referendum coalition and mobilize electoral support from within Moldova and among the Moldovan diaspora. An electoral deal between the Party of Action and Solidarity, which is currently in power, and other, smaller parties might be fundamental to preserving the coalition.

An extensive communication campaign regarding the importance of the referendum and its strategic role might generate a higher interest among potential voters. EU member states could allocate financial resources for increasing the visibility of their previous and current support for Moldovan society. One specific focus should rely on business stories, local development projects, and opportunities for various ethnic and linguistic groups. According to the latest data,²⁰⁹ half of Moldovan citizens are already aware of one or more projects financed by the EU in their community in the last five years.

A turning point could be interaction with Euroskeptical voters. These groups must be convinced to participate in the referendum, even if they plan on voting against EU accession. These votes are needed in order to ensure the election results. In any scenario, greater voter turnout will strengthen the legitimacy of the result.

Nonetheless, Moldova should learn from the experience of other countries that have organized EU accession referendums over the last 30 years. A contingency plan should be developed in case this referendum does not pass, as any potential negative repercussions can be mitigated with anticipation and planning.

TAJIKISTAN:

On the path to the Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus

Sherali Sh. Rizoyon

INTRODUCTION

The new geopolitical reality that has unfolded in the post-Soviet space opens a window of opportunity to expand cooperation between Tajikistan and the European Union, as well as with other developed Western countries.²¹⁰ In this regard, it is critically important not to miss the moment and to strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Based on our observation, conditions right now are favorable for establishing such relations. For instance, 2023 has become an active phase in the relations between the countries of Central Asia and the European Union. Against the backdrop of general geopolitical instability, Western countries have increased their interests in the region as a whole and in Tajikistan in particular. This process can be traced by the number of bilateral and regional meetings and their level of organization.

The European Union was one of the first external players to launch a format for multilateral cooperation with the Central Asian states back in 2007. As of yet, nearly 20 ministerial “Central Asia–EU” meetings have taken place. In June 2023, the Second “Central Asia–EU” Summit took place in Kyrgyzstan, and in September, President Biden hosted a summit of Central Asian and US leaders in New York. Uzbekistan is expected to host the Third “Central Asia–EU” Summit in April 2024, which will unlock new opportunities for expanding multi-format cooperation between Tajikistan and the European Union. Another important event of immense value for Tajikistan–EU cooperation was the bilateral meeting between Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Mukhriddin and EU Commissioner for International Partnership Jutta Urpilainen in October 2023.

The aforementioned meetings, which were both political and purely practical, demonstrate that in 2023,



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against the background of Russia's war in Ukraine and the difficulties in relations between Washington and Beijing, Western countries have significantly intensified their activities in the Central Asian region.²¹¹ But while Western countries' interest, given geopolitical realities and the region's importance from a transportation and economic point of view is generally understandable, the question of the goals, practical opportunities, and specific benefits that intensified relations with the EU and the US offer Central Asia and Tajikistan itself are worth considering separately.

If we consider key events of 2023 in relations between Tajikistan and the West, we can identify three crucial directions for the country, based on officials' statements and actions. Firstly, it is the attraction of investments for the "National Development Strategy of Tajikistan for the period until 2030,"²¹² which sets three ambitious objectives: "1) achieving a level of socio-economic development matching the middle segment of middle-income countries; 2) ensuring sustainable development through diversification and enhancing the competitiveness of the national economy; 3) expanding and strengthening the middle class." Secondly, Tajikistan's request for financial support for the completion of the construction of the Rogun Hydropower Plant is noteworthy. As President Emomali Rahmon noted at the "Central Asia–EU" summit held in Kyrgyzstan, "It seems appropriate for European countries to provide investment support to Tajikistan in the field of hydropower. We hope that the European Union, as part of its 'Global Gateway' strategy, will participate in financing the completion of the Rogun Hydropower Station, as well as the modernization of existing hydroelectric power stations."²¹³ Thirdly, the central event in Tajikistan-EU relations was the official submission in November 2023 of an application for Tajikistan's inclusion in the European Generalized Scheme of Preference Plus (GSP+).

Undoubtedly, after the extremely difficult COVID-19 period, the issue of economic cooperation has become paramount to negotiations between Tajikistan and Western countries in 2023. In this text, we will focus on the third component of such cooperation and its prospects — the GSP+.

TAJIKISTAN'S APPLICATION FOR ACCESSION TO THE GSP+

Tajikistan's official submission to join the European GSP+ system, which theoretically could bring considerable revenue to Tajikistan's budget, was the

key event of the year.²¹⁴ The GSP+ is the main tool of EU trade policy to support exports from developing countries to the EU. By obtaining GSP+ status, countries are exempted from paying taxes on exports of more than 6,000 goods to the European market. This system offers many additional opportunities to boost trade volume between the EU and member states, as eliminating tariffs on certain exports such as textiles, clothing, and plastic products. For example, exporters from Uzbekistan, who managed to enter the system in 2021, saved €28 million on import duties in 2022 thanks to GSP+. "This is a significant contribution from the EU in developing the private sector in Uzbekistan. From 2019 to 2022, it has grown more than tenfold,"²¹⁵ stated the Uzbekistan Ministry of Investments, Industry, and Trade.

Tajikistan's keen interest in this scheme is understandable and has been on the agenda of both parties' representatives since 2018. In 2018, the volume of product exports from Tajikistan to the EU amounted to €47 million, and from the EU to Tajikistan, this figure was €174 million, the lowest among countries of the region. As the head of the GSP+ program, Julika Peschau,²¹⁶ stated at the time that, "If a country does not use GSP+ benefits, it pays high customs duties, and European consumers are reluctant to buy the products from such countries. When a country joins this system, the customs duty for the goods supplied to the European Union becomes zero, the volume of exports will increase, and prices will decrease."

Tajikistan is already a beneficiary of the EU's Standard GSP system. Unlike GSP+, a standard GSP beneficiary can export only 3,000 types of goods to the EU without paying customs duties, and 3,200 at reduced rates. According to EU monitoring data,²¹⁷ Tajikistan has the highest preference utilization rate among all standard GSP beneficiaries at 98%.²¹⁸ In 2023, trade volume between Tajikistan and the European Union increased to \$401.5 million.²¹⁹ Thus, the active diplomatic labor of Tajik authorities and the application for the transition to the GSP+ system at the end of 2023 is a logical step in toward economic development. For example, also in 2023, due to the increase in imports of Tajik precious metals, Switzerland became Tajikistan's third major trading partner (over \$1.3 billion), catching up with Russia (over \$2.9 billion) and China (\$1.5 billion) which currently occupy first and second places respectively.²²⁰ Accepting Tajikistan into the European GSP+ system will translate into real opportunities to enhance trade turnover, which will certainly have a favorable impact on the country's economic development and diversifying its foreign economic relations.

TAJIKISTAN'S CHALLENGES ON THE ROAD TO GSP+

In 2023 alone, negotiations on Tajikistan's accession to the GSP+ system were held within the framework of the June meeting of the Tajikistan-EU Cooperation Council,²²¹ during the October meeting in Luxembourg between Tajik Foreign Minister Sirodjiddin Mukhriddin and EU Commissioner for International Partnership Jutta Urpilainen,²²² and in at the annual Human Rights Dialogue²²³ in December.

What is the essence of the transition challenge to the highly advantageous GSP+ system, and what does it have to do with human rights? The issue is that the GSP system, of which Tajikistan is already a member, does not have prerequisites related to governance and the state of various democratic institutions. By joining the GSP+ system, countries commit to strictly adhering to 27 major international conventions concerning human rights, labor rights, good governance, environmental protection, and climate. The conditions of this program involve continuous monitoring of the commitments made by GSP+ beneficiaries. The European

Union cites this factor as the main reason why Tajikistan has not yet been able to move to the most beneficial cooperation format.

In the latest meeting between the Tajik authorities and the EU delegation in December 2023, which followed Tajikistan's formal application submission, the EU representatives once again "expressed concerns about restrictions on freedom of political participation and freedom of expression — especially on increasingly restricted space for civil society and independent media"²²⁴. The EU delegation also "reiterated the urgent need to engage with the local population and civil society in view of building trust," and "called on the government of Tajikistan to immediately and unconditionally release human rights defenders, journalists, and activists that remain imprisoned, highlighting their important role as vital pillars of any democracy and expressing support for their work in Tajikistan."

Despite the fact that, according to the EU, Tajikistan has ratified all 27 international conventions,²²⁵ including seven UN conventions on human rights, eight ILO conventions on labor standards, eight conventions on environmental protection, and four conventions on aspects of good governance, the EU delegation notes that "the country should commit to ensuring effective implementation of the conventions, agree to the reporting and monitoring requirements of the conventions, and agree to the European Union's GSP+ monitoring process."²²⁶ Thus, one of the substantial conditions of Tajikistan's accession to the GSP+ system is to improve the situation in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The statement that followed the 10th meeting of the EU-Tajikistan Cooperation Committee, which took place on November 27, 2023 in Brussels, asserted "the need to refine the human rights and fundamental freedoms agenda in the country. The EU asked to bring it in line with UN and OSCE recommendations, in particular on freedom of association, peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, freedom of the media, and freedom of religion and belief..."²²⁷

According to the EU rules, such favorable opportunities for cooperation in the GSP+ framework (Tajikistan's authorities are actively working on the accession to

the system) directly depend on the country's various institutions' compliance with European standards. If Tajikistan is included in the GSP+ in the upcoming years (for example, in 2024), the European entities will demand that Dushanbe fulfill its commitments in order to extend the beneficiary status of the system for new cycles. For instance, Uzbekistan joined the system in April 2021 and by 2024 was able to extend its GSP+ beneficiary status until December 31, 2027. Thus, accession to the GSP+ framework requires intensive work at the country level. Still, extending this status will also require serious actions from various state bodies of Tajikistan so that the country can maximize the benefits of this opportunity.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, we can conclude the following:

Firstly, Tajikistan's accession to the GSP+ is an important condition for the expansion of trade and economic relations and the export of national products to the EU markets. Tajikistan's accession to the GSP+ framework may also contribute to job creation, which will have a favorable impact on the country's economy. Tajikistan is rich in minerals and rare metals, which are necessary for the economies of EU countries²²⁸ against the backdrop of global

geopolitical turbulence,²²⁹ which increases Tajikistan's attractiveness for European markets.

Secondly, the Dushanbe's accession to the GSP+ may have geopolitical consequences for both the European Union and Tajikistan. On the one hand, it helps EU countries gain a foothold in the Central Asia region, where Russia and China have traditionally exerted strong influence.²³⁰ On the other hand, it can become an important factor for the expansion of the multi-vector foreign policy for Tajikistan itself, something sorely needed in the current situation.²³¹ This aspect can act as a balancing factor in the system of foreign economic relations with other countries.

Thirdly, although public opinion in Tajikistan assesses the activities of European institutions (which have been operating in the country since the 90s) in a consistently positive manner, studies show²³² that Tajik society has developed some phobias to modern European values. This is primarily associated with the negative propaganda of the EU's geopolitical adversaries in Central Asia,²³³ who reinforce this narrative via their media. The next crucial step is to strengthen the support of civil society, media, and Tajikistan's expert community, and create positive narratives aimed at expanding multi-format cooperation between Tajikistan and the European Union.

TURKMENISTAN:

The Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline may present an alternative for dependence on China

INTRODUCTION

Export of Turkmen gas to the EU market has long been considered as an ambitious goal for both parties. The idea of building the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline arose almost immediately after Turkmenistan's independence. However, the restructuring of geopolitical architecture in the wider region in recent years has given this idea new life.

On September 29, 2023, Chairman of the Halk Maslahaty of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, made a clear statement in Berlin on the sidelines of the first Germany-Central Asia summit that the European path has been and remains on the agenda of Turkmenistan's international energy cooperation.²³⁴ He added that Turkmenistan is ready to restart exchanges with the relevant bodies of the European Commission, individual European

states, and companies on exporting the reserves of the Caspian natural gas to the West. Turkmenistan also reaffirmed its determined stance on sending gas supplies to Europe through the construction of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline.

Previously, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan had published a statement explaining its position and willingness to begin the Trans-Caspian pipeline project.²³⁵ According to the statement, Turkmenistan firmly believes that there are no political, economic, or financial factors blocking the construction of the gas pipeline. Rather, it continued, the Trans-Caspian pipeline is a completely realistic project. Based on this, Turkmenistan is committed to its strategy of diversifying energy flows and reiterates its readiness to continue cooperation with partners in implementing the Trans-Caspian pipeline project.



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As specified in the statement, the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea,²³⁶ adopted in 2018 by the coastal states of the Caspian Sea, is the main document establishing the legal norms for this project. In light of this document (Article 14), the construction of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline is directly related to the identification and mapping of the border between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan along the bottom of the Caspian Sea. Against this backdrop, the political agreement signed on January 21, 2021 between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to jointly explore the Dostlug field, which has been a source of disagreement for decades, marks a crucial first step towards enabling Turkmenistan's gas to eventually reach Europe.²³⁷

It should be noted that the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline envisages the supply of 30 bcm of natural gas annually for at least 30 years from Turkmenistan to the EU via Azerbaijan.²³⁸ Meanwhile, natural gas production in Turkmenistan in 2023 amounted to more than 80.6 bcm, about half of which is accounted for by domestic consumption.²³⁹

According to the British Petroleum Statistical Review, Turkmenistan is a major gas-producing power and one of the top four countries in terms of proven natural gas reserves, amounting to 19.5 tcm.²⁴⁰ In accordance with the state "Program for the Development of the Oil and Gas Industry of Turkmenistan to 2030," it plans to increase the annual production of natural gas to 250 bcm by 2030.²⁴¹

State-run company Turkmengeology reports that currently 38 oil and 82 gas condensate fields have been discovered in Turkmenistan. More than 30 fields are under development. The richest of them is Galkynysh, with natural gas reserves estimated at 27.4 tcm, making it the second largest gas field in the world after the North/South Pars field, which is shared by Qatar and Iran. The Galkynysh field has been in operation since 2013. Today, 33 bcm gas is produced here per year, and this figure is expected to increase to 200 bcm. Turkmenistan used its own resources to build and begin operating the domestic East-West gas pipeline, which measures 773 km long and at a cost of 2.5 billion dollars, allowing it to pump gas from the Galkynysh and Dovletabad fields in the east of the country to the shores of the Caspian Sea, where the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline will originate.

RUSSIA AND IRAN'S OPPOSITION

Russia and Iran have previously opposed²⁴² the pipeline's construction for a long time as it bypasses both of them. They frequently voiced their "concerns" about the environmental safety of such a project. They fear competition in the European gas market and have used the environment as a pretext to thwart Turkmenistan's efforts to build a gas pipeline through the Caspian seabed. This approach is purely politically motivated, since Iran is currently considering the construction of a pipeline under the Persian Gulf to Oman, and Russia has built Nord Stream gas pipelines which also run under the sea.

On August 18, 2018, the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Iran signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea at a meeting in Aktau. The convention aimed at ending decades-long uncertainty over the use of the Caspian Sea's resources. According to this document, laying a pipeline along the bottom of the Caspian does not require the approval of all Caspian countries, but rather just those through whose sectors of the sea the pipeline will be laid.

Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has radically changed the whole nature of gas market²⁴³ for the greater Eurasian region. As a result of this shift, Russia's stance on Trans-Caspian gas pipeline has also shifted. Against the new geopolitical backdrop that emerged after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China is supposed to replace the market for Russia's lost gas supplies to Europe. Russia now provides about 5% of Chinese gas imports, which are supplied only through the Power of Siberia gas pipeline, which is expected to reach its maximum capacity of 38 bcm. That share of imports to China from the Russian Federation could increase to 20% with the implementation of Power of Siberia 2 project. Russia expects to complete the construction of Power of Siberia 2 by 2030.

However, according to sources, China decided to prioritize a new branch of the Line D gas pipeline from Turkmenistan, rather than the Power of Siberia 2 project, which has a capacity of 50 bcm. Beijing was seeking to delay negotiations on the construction of the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline in order to conclude more favorable terms,²⁴⁴ and is apparently cautious about becoming heavily dependent on any one supplier. In this regard, Russia's pivot to the Chinese market after the EU's sanctions is an opportunity for Beijing to diversify suppliers.

GROWING DEPENDENCE ON CHINA

When talking about the outlook for the Trans-Caspian pipeline project, it is important not to disregard the China factor. China is Turkmenistan's largest natural gas trading partner. At the same time, Turkmenistan is the largest supplier of gas to China via pipelines. In 2023, gas exports from Turkmenistan to China amounted to about 40 bcm, which is approximately half of its production.²⁴⁵ According to the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, Turkmenistan supplied \$9.6 billion worth of pipeline gas to China in 2023, down from \$10.25 billion a year earlier. Turkmenistan is followed by Russia (\$6.3 billion) and Myanmar (\$1.4 billion).²⁴⁶ During the visit of Turkmenistan's President Serdar Berdimuhamedov to China in January 2023, the intention was announced to increase supplies to 65 bcm per year.

Note that Turkmenistan delivers its natural gas through the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline network. The pipeline network comprising A, B, and C lines passes through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (more than 1900 km in total) and China (4500 km), with a designed gas transmission capacity of 55 bcm per year. The three strings of the gas pipeline were built in 2007. Starting from January 2023, Beijing and Ashgabat began to intensify negotiations on the construction of the fourth string, Line D. In October, 2023, China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) announced that it will accelerate the construction of the D line with a designed gas transmission capacity of 30 bcm per year which will pass through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.²⁴⁷

The construction of the fourth branch of the gas pipeline has been on the agenda of Turkmen-Chinese relations since at least 2012. But there have been some impediments to expanding Turkmen gas exports to China. Sources indicate that the main disagreement was over prices, which caused a delay to the Line D's construction, along with finalizing the upstream gas supply contract.²⁴⁸ Moreover, an additional dispute lies in the fact that the Chinese authorities have reportedly started to insist on the transition of some gas payments to yuan.²⁴⁹

In a nutshell, the construction of Line D will undoubtedly further increase Turkmenistan's export dependence on China and put Ashgabat in a situation

in which Beijing will be able to dictate terms and prices for Turkmen gas. Due to the above problems in cooperation with China, Turkmenistan has shown a desire to diversify its gas exports to obtain higher profits.

CONCLUSION

Turkmen leadership is in search of a multi-vector gas policy and moving towards diversifying its gas markets. Turkmenistan has been expressing an interest in exporting natural gas to Europe for several years. In this regard, the EU's interest in energy supply diversification is in line with Turkmenistan's export diversification plans. Although the EU has maintained its strategic interest in Turkmenistan's natural gas for several years, it has not demonstrated tangible support for this idea becoming a reality. However, against the backdrop of sanctions imposed by European countries and the United States against Russia, new opportunities are emerging for the development of Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project.

Azerbaijan is also an important part of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project, and generally views its construction positively. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev drew attention to the fact that the implementation of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project depends on financial sources.²⁵⁰ Interestingly, the Vice-President of the European Commission, Margaritis Schinas also stated that the implementation of the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project does not depend on political decisions, but rather on commercial interests and the availability of sales markets.²⁵¹

To summarize, building the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline in a context of shifting geopolitical conditions is more realistic now than ever. Two main factors lead to such optimistic thinking. Firstly, it is no longer as critical as it was for Russia to block the entry of other major players from the European gas market in an effort to maintain its monopoly. Secondly, in China, which has already emerged as the largest gas market for Russia following sanctions by the West, Turkmenistan is Russia's main rival. This time, Russia is more interested in reducing the share of Turkmen gas in the Chinese market, which could naturally give it more room to maneuver with gas prices during

negotiations with the Chinese. Thus, we can say that Russia, which has hitherto been the main political obstacle to the implementation of this project, will now give the green light to its implementation. However, finding financial support for the project is still the primary reason for pessimism. In general, the situation depends on Europe's desire and willingness to come up with a solution.

In light of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, the EU is trying to reduce its dependence on Russian energy resources. It is constantly looking for ways to diversify its own sources of natural gas. In this regard, the potential introduction of Turkmen gas into the EU market plainly serves the diversification of energy imports, which is a strategic objective of the EU's energy policy. Therefore, the Ukrainian crisis, which has had a strong impact on the European gas market, may well drive a change in the EU's previously inconsistent and unenthusiastic attitude about the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline project.

Reconsidering the overall geopolitical and commercial realities implementation of this idea would be realistic in the near future. Needless to say, joint efforts in this direction should now be further encouraged.

UKRAINE:

Military tech integrating the weapons industry into the Western ecosystem

Mykhailo Samus

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Ukraine and its transition away from its Soviet past has varied significantly across different historical eras. Prior to 2014, particularly with regard to the defense sector, this domain was predominantly viewed as a lucrative business venture. Remarkably, the Ukrainian defense industry scarcely supplied armaments to its own armed forces, with approximately 95% of defense deliverables earmarked for export. This trend stemmed largely from the disinterest of Ukraine’s military and political leadership in prioritizing the needs of its own military.

During Yanukovich’s presidency (2010-2014), the defense industry became enmeshed in a pervasive corruption network. The establishment of Ukroboronprom in 2011 was primarily driven by the

Yanukovich regime’s pursuit to exert control over the financial channels within the defense sector.

The onset of Russia’s war against Ukraine in 2014 marked a seismic shift in the perception of the defense industry’s role in bolstering the combat readiness of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Suddenly, weapons production became an imperative for Ukraine, particularly as Western allies hesitated to provide what was ambiguously termed “lethal” weaponry.

Yet, the path forward was far from smooth. Lingering post-Soviet legacies of bureaucracy and corruption entrenched themselves within the system. Like a stubborn ailment afflicting the body, these vestiges of the Soviet era impeded progress, even two decades after its collapse. Ukroboronprom, conceived under Yanukovich’s tenure, persisted largely unchanged until 2019. Operating within the confines of a state concern framework, it hindered



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constructive engagement with international partners, thwarting investments and impeding technology transfers. It wasn't until 2020 that Ukroboronprom initiated reforms, transitioning into a joint-stock company poised for modern modes of collaboration.

Together with the adoption of a law on military procurement aligned with NATO standards, a gradual shift in approaches to organizing procurement and financing of defense industry projects in support of the Ukrainian Armed Forces ensued. Furthermore, the establishment of the Ministry of Strategic Industry emerged as a pivotal development. Serving as the singular executive authority to oversee the activities of the defense industry, both public and private, it played a crucial role in coordinating efforts within the sector.

Significantly, alongside these reforms, pivotal laws pertaining to national resilience and a comprehensive package of state documents on security and defense were ratified concurrently. These legislative measures distinctly outlined the trajectory for expeditiously aligning the Ukrainian Armed Forces and other security agencies with NATO standards. Such a move necessitated shedding the Soviet-era equipment and weaponry that had long served as the cornerstone of the Ukrainian military. It is evident that the initiation of reforms in 2020 laid the groundwork for swift responsiveness and adaptation to the new challenges posed by Russia's large-scale aggression in February 2022.

NETWORK-CENTRIC WARFARE AMIDST UKRAINE'S EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLE

Amidst Ukraine's existential struggle, the overhaul and modernization of its defense industry emerged as a pivotal undertaking. Rooted in principles of asymmetry and cutting-edge technology, this transformation became imperative for the nation's survival.

In the face of a relentless onslaught from Russian forces, Ukraine's chances of survival hinged on the adoption of unconventional, asymmetrical, and technologically advanced tactics. It was imperative for Ukraine to transcend conventional warfare strategies, embracing asymmetry not only in weaponry but also in doctrines, tactics, and overarching strategy.

This is largely about using network-centric warfare as the main idea in how the Ukrainian Armed Forces fight today. Network-centricity means putting

intelligence, control, and firepower together into one system. This system needs to find where the enemy is as fast as it can, in real time, send that information to command, and then, once a decision is made, send it to the weapons. In today's battles, the winner is often the side that is able to perform these steps, known as the control cycle (finding the target, making a decision, and taking action) most quickly.

The idea of network-centric warfare isn't new. For many years, advanced military forces have aimed to speed up their control cycles to gain an edge in battle. Using unmanned and autonomous systems, like drones, has been a big breakthrough. Drones can conduct both scouting and attack tasks at the same time, which has totally shifted how we think about fighting. Now, the time it takes from spotting an enemy to deciding to attack and actually defeating them has shrunk to just a few seconds. This process is getting even faster with the help of artificial intelligence, which can identify and attack targets without needing a human to step in. In these systems, the commander's job is mostly to decide when to attack - the technology does the rest.

At the same time, the widespread use of drones and the avalanche-like growth of information that is transmitted and processed for decision-making requires the same rapid improvement of automated control systems. At this critical juncture, the swiftest strides in modernizing the Ukrainian Armed Forces must be made in the realm of command and control systems. Put simply, the shift towards NATO standards and the extensive adoption of state-of-the-art technologies should commence with enhancing tactical awareness and integrating information systems. One example is the Kropyvna and Delta tactical command and control systems. Thanks to the systems, data from aerial reconnaissance, satellites, drones, stationary cameras, radars, chats, etc. are pulled into the integrated informational platform and provide information to commanders and soldiers.

In light of the advancements in technological solutions and the development of new drone models, electronic systems, and weaponry, Ukraine has established several innovation hubs. These hubs serve as focal points for rapidly integrating these innovations into the testing and adoption procedures of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Their purpose is to streamline bureaucratic processes and expedite the necessary stages for implementation.

NEW ECOSYSTEM OF MILITARY TECHNOLOGIES

The Ministry of Defense of Ukraine has created a special platform, – the innovation development Accelerator, which is responsible for optimizing the process of adopting new weapons and military equipment into the service of the UAF.²⁵² As a direct outcome of the Accelerator’s initiatives, the process of integrating weapons and equipment into the service of the Ukrainian Armed Forces has been streamlined to just 1.5 months, a substantial improvement from the previous timeline of over 2 years. The Accelerator’s influence has been especially pronounced in the incorporation of new military technologies, given the continuous emergence of innovative developments from Ukrainian companies.

The Ministry of Digital Transformation also created *Brave1*,²⁵³ a cluster to promote the development of MilTech. The main task of Brave1 is to coordinate the activities of government agencies — the Ministry of Defense, the Armed Forces, the Ministry of Digital Transformation, the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Strategic Industry, and the National Security and Defense Council — in the development of defense technologies and production. Overall, the Accelerator and Brave1 form a new ecosystem for the development, production, and adoption of military technologies.

Several programs are propelling Ukrainian drone and other Military Technology (MilTech) advancements. First and foremost is the Army of Drones project as part of the national crowdfunding campaign *United 24*.²⁵⁴ Thousands of drones have been purchased and far more than 10,000 drone operators have been trained as part of the Army of Drones project.²⁵⁵ Also as part of the United 24 campaign, the process of creating maritime drones was launched, which later became a separate area of development of maritime platforms at the state level. One development in maritime drones is Project FURY (First Ukrainian Robotic Navy), which has recently seen the Ukrainian Navy achieve dominance over the Russian Black Sea Fleet. The launch of the Army of Robots project has also been announced, to develop the latest robotic systems in the interests of the UAF. In addition, the creation of the Army of Electronic Warfare Systems has begun to give impetus to the mass production of electronic warfare systems.

To grasp the magnitude of the burgeoning technological landscape in Ukraine, consider this: as

of early 2024, there are approximately 200 Ukrainian drone manufacturers, the majority of which operate as private enterprises. According to information from various sources, by the end of 2023, up to 50,000 different types of drones were being manufactured in Ukraine monthly. The majority of them are First Person View (FPV) drones, which have truly changed the nature of combat operations. For 2024, there are ambitious plans to further increase drone production. Ukraine’s state budget for 2024 allocates 1.1 billion euros for drones (both aviation and maritime systems).²⁵⁶ According to Minister of Strategic Industry Oleksandr Kamyshyn, Ukraine has set ambitious production goals for 2024, aiming to manufacture 1 million FPV drones, over 10,000 medium-range strike drones, and more than 1,000 drones with a range of approximately 1,000 kilometers.

SIGNIFICANCE OF COLLABORATION WITH WESTERN PARTNERS

Once again, while rapid advancements in battlefield technologies and solutions are underway, they still cannot fully address the fundamental requirements of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The necessity for manned modern aircraft, tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery, and millions of rounds of ammunition remains unparalleled in the 21st century. For Ukraine, which is grappling with challenging economic circumstances amidst the conflict, fulfilling the frontline’s needs

independently proves to be a daunting task. Hence, the significance of defense and industrial collaboration with Western partners and allies cannot be overstated in sustaining Ukraine's resilience against the aggressor.

The announced initiatives to establish joint ventures with Rheinmetall for the production of a new generation of armored vehicles, alongside projects with Bae Systems, among other undisclosed collaborations, signify a new chapter in the evolution of the Ukrainian defense industry. This phase will focus on maximizing the integration of Ukraine's defense

industrial strategy with that of Europe, marking a significant stride towards bolstering Ukraine's defense capabilities.

The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, was very clear about the next steps on this path. "As we look to the future, we need to think about Ukraine's defense capabilities as part of our own, and we need to think about the Ukrainian defense industry as part of our defense industry. That is why we have involved Ukraine in the development of our defense industrial strategy," she said.²⁵⁷

Ukraine's integration into the Western defense industry is still in its infancy. Yet, amidst wartime urgency, there is optimism that processes which previously took years could now unfold at an accelerated pace. Moreover, Western defense firms might also find compelling reasons to engage in robust cooperation with Ukraine. The Ukrainian Armed Forces possess invaluable battlefield expertise, potentially offering fresh perspectives that could invigorate the advancement of Western military technologies.

UZBEKISTAN:

The Trans-Caspian transport corridor is a central element of expanding cooperation with the EU

Azamat Seitov

INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan's foreign policy is usually divided into several stages, where the current stage is characterized by Tashkent's open and proactive disposition under the governance of President Mirziyoyev. The primary feature of Uzbekistan's current foreign policy strategy is to focus its efforts on the Central Asian region,²⁵⁸ though this does not mean that Tashkent simply refuses to develop constructive political dialogue and multi-format cooperation with world leaders. On the contrary, it aims to expand interregional cooperation in order to create a joint representation of the region in various formats with the EU and the United States. It is not by chance that the first official summit of Central Asian countries and the EU is scheduled to take place in Uzbekistan in 2024.²⁵⁹

In 2023 alone, Central Asian leaders held several meetings with Western partners, both at the ministerial and head-of-state levels. These include the Central Asia-EU event in Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2023, where regional leaders met with European Council President Charles Michel, the Central Asia-US Summit in New York, and the ministerial meeting in Luxembourg in October.

The interest in enhancing cooperation is evident. Against the backdrop of the unfolding geopolitical situation and negative trends in the global economy, Central Asia is demonstrating steady growth thanks to, among other things, collaboration with the EU. According to estimates of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, economic growth in the region as a whole in 2024 will be 5.4%. In Uzbekistan, European experts predict an average annual growth rate of 6.5%.²⁶⁰ Meanwhile,



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Uzbekistan plans to double the volume of its GDP²⁶¹ and its population's incomes and to enter the ranks of upper-middle-income countries by 2030. One of the primary factors in achieving this goal is drawing foreign investments. All these crucial steps for Uzbekistan directly depend on the foreign policy partners' consistent support of its national development programs.

EU-CENTRAL ASIA/UZBEKISTAN

The Central Asia-EU meeting with participation from all regional leaders and the President of the European Council, Charles Michel can be considered the main event of 2023 for Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan had significantly strengthened its cooperation with the EU in many areas since Charles Michel's previous visit. During his speech at the Central Asia-EU Summit in 2023, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev characterized the role of cooperation with the EU, stating, "Following your historic visit to Uzbekistan, Mr. Michel, contacts at all levels have significantly enhanced. We have held meetings with the leaders of France, Germany, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. We have opened our embassies in Budapest and Stockholm. [...] Our trade with the European Union is growing steadily thanks to the GSP+ beneficiary status granted to Uzbekistan. While last year, trade turnover increased by 20%, since the beginning of this year, we have witnessed almost 70% growth. The portfolio of promising projects to create high-tech production and new jobs with leading European companies and banks exceeds 20 billion euros."²⁶²

The President's press service reported that in 2023, the volume of mutual trade between Uzbekistan and EU countries had already increased by 30%,²⁶³ which is largely the result of interaction within the framework of the GSP+, which allows duty-free exports to EU countries for more than 6,000 goods from Uzbekistan. During the Central Asia-EU summit, President Mirziyoyev paid special attention to the direction of trade development, stating that, "First is trade. Uzbekistan is interested in drastic expansion of trade relations with the European Union, primarily in establishing sustainable trade and logistics chains and creating effective tools for supporting mutual supplies."²⁶⁴ During his speech, Mirziyoyev also noted that Uzbekistan is interested in extending the GSP+ regime for a new period of time, noting that "the extension of this preferential system to the countries of the region will be advantageous for the growth of our industrial potential and the competitiveness of our economies."

Just five months after the summit, on November 23, 2023, during a press conference on the European Union's Generalized Scheme of Preferences for Uzbekistan, EU Ambassador Charlotte Adrian announced that the program had been extended for Uzbekistan until 2027. "Indeed, I am very proud to announce that the European Parliament and the European Council decided yesterday to extend GSP+ until December 31, 2017, under the exact same conditions. I hope that this predictability will also encourage new businesspeople to turn their eyes towards Europe, find partners, and benefit from the exemption of import duties,"²⁶⁵ stated Ambassador Adrian. Ambassador Adrian also noted that "GSP+ has become a real success story," in the closer daily partnership between the EU and Uzbekistan.

Indeed, the summit of Central Asian and EU leaders is becoming an actual mechanism for accomplishing the Central Asian countries' aspirations to expand economic and investment cooperation. The region's main economic partners include many members of the European Union. There is a consistent deepening of interaction between Central Asia and the European Union in areas such as ensuring compliance of industrial goods from Central Asia with high European standards and technical regulations.²⁶⁶ creating efficient transport and logistics corridors for optimal access to EU

markets considering current restrictions, and first and foremost, the development of the Trans-Caspian multimodal route.

THE TRANS-CASPIAN INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT ROUTE

Speaking at the Central Asia-EU Summit in June 2023, Uzbek President Mirziyoyev called for united efforts²⁶⁷ to improve transport and communication links between Central Asia and Europe, primarily through the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. Six months later, in January 2024, during the Global Gateway Investment Forum in Brussels, speaking about the Trans-Caspian Corridor, European Commission Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis claimed that “the international community will commit to a total package of €10 billion for sustainable transport connectivity in Central Asia.”²⁶⁸ Vice President Dombrovskis noted that “the EU remains a strong, committed, and reliable partner for the countries of Central Asia,”²⁶⁹ and “is already the region’s largest investment partner and accounts for more than 42% of all foreign direct investment in Central Asia.”

Several months after President Mirziyoyev’s June statement on the need to unite efforts to develop transportation links, during a summit with the EU in June, the Minister of Transport of Uzbekistan presented new proposals for improving operations within the so-called Middle Corridor (the Trans-Caspian route, or Middle Corridor, connects Asian countries through the Caspian Sea to European countries, notably running through China, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. This route is an alternative to land routes passing through the territories of Russia, Belarus, and Poland— author’s note). At the Tbilisi Silk Road Forum on October 27, 2023, Minister of Transport Ilkhom Makhkamov made several proposals to deepen partnerships with the participating countries of the Middle Corridor. Specifically, according to the Ministry’s press service,²⁷⁰ the focus was on “the need to jointly develop a mechanism for utilizing the corridor’s potential, organizing regular meetings of

representatives from the transportation ministries of the region and the European Union, efforts to increase the capacity of infrastructure, as well as the number of marine vessels in the Caspian Sea,” among other activities.

CENTRAL ASIA AND RUSSIA IN THE ASSESSMENTS OF EUROPEAN PARTNERS

Regarding the development of transportation infrastructure between the EU and Central Asia, EU High Representative Josep Borrell reminded that the EU has imposed serious sanctions against Russia and “for the sanctions to be effective, we need the full cooperation of our partners.” “We are following closely the trade between us [EU – author’s note], between Central Asia countries, with them and Russia,” Borrell stated at the Global Gateway investment forum in January 2024. He noted that, “we have to strengthen our partnership in a way towards increasing our respective economic security.” Previously, in November 2023, during a visit to Uzbekistan, the EU Sanctions Envoy David O’Sullivan also addressed this topic, noting that the EU “fully understands and respects the sovereignty of Uzbekistan, the fact that Uzbekistan does not want to be a party to this conflict [between Ukraine and Russia – author’s note].” O’Sullivan expressed concerns that “Uzbekistan could be used as a platform to circumvent or evade our sanctions. The Uzbek authorities have clearly stated that they do not want this.”²⁷¹

CONCLUSION

Vice President of the European Commission Valdis Dombrovskis encapsulated the crucial approaches for EU-Uzbekistan and EU-Central Asia partnership during his speech at the Global Gateway Forum, where Dombrovskis stated that, “In the spirit of collaboration and progress, the Investors’ Forum marks a pivotal step towards realizing the ambitious vision of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor. Together, we strive to achieve a faster, more reliable connection between Europe and Central Asia, fostering stronger ties and opening new avenues for cooperation and trade.” The first official Central Asia-EU Summit, scheduled for April 2024 in Uzbekistan, will undoubtedly be another significant step towards actively developing mutually beneficial cooperation.

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AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Mantas Adomėnas

is a Lithuanian scholar and politician who served in the Lithuanian Parliament (2008 – 2020). He was later the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (2020 – 2023) in the administration of Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė. Dr. Adomėnas earned his Ph.D. in Classics from the University of Cambridge. He is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Baltic Institute of Advanced Technology and also serves as a board member of OSMOS, a Lithuanian think-and-do-tank based in Vilnius devoted to building international partnerships with countries beyond Europe.

Ahmad Alili

is a Director of the Caucasus Policy Analysis Centre (CPAC) and a researcher in International Public Policy and Conflict Resolution. Mr Ahmad conducts qualitative and quantitative research on Foreign Policy, International Public Policy, and Regional Security in the South Caucasus. He has gained experience from various local and international organizations dealing with international relations, public policy, and peacebuilding and is a member of several international initiatives on peace, regional security, and cooperation. Mr Alili is also a lecturer at the Academy of Public Administration on such topics as geopolitics, comparative politics, and the role of NGOs in good governance and public policy. He has managed projects with international organizations' funding, presented speeches at various international and local conferences, and trained government employees, teachers-researchers, students, youth activists, civil society actors, and sensitive group representatives on multiple topics, including good governance, peace, and regional security, conflicts in the South Caucasus, the role of international organizations in mediating peace, the regional economy and peace, radicalization, the role of NGOs in consulting public institutions, etc. He has authored, edited, and co-edited various handbooks on regional security, radicalization, and media reporting.

Dr. Nika Chitadze

is a specialist in Caucasus geopolitics, global politics, and strategic affairs. He is currently a Professor at the Department of Social Sciences at the International Black Sea University and a visiting Professor at the European University and Caucasus International University in Tbilisi, Georgia. He is the Director of the Center of International Studies at the International Black Sea University and also President of the George C. Marshall Alumni Union, Georgia – International and Security Research Center. Dr. Chitadze previously served as senior advisor on the National Security Council of Georgia and was head of the Public Relations Division of the State Agency for Regulation of Oil and Gas Resources of Georgia. He has also held senior

positions in the Department of Strategic and Military Policy at the Georgian Ministry of Defense and the Foreign Policy Research and Analysis Center of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Dr. Chitadze is the author of 12 books and about 400 scholarly articles.

Emilbek Dzhuraev, Ph.D.

(University of Maryland), is a political scientist and analyst based in Kyrgyzstan (the Kyrgyz Republic). He has taught the undergraduate and graduate political science programs at the American University of Central Asia and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. His research and teaching focus areas include geopolitics, international relations, and security pertaining to Central Asia, as well as issues of democracy, state-building, and constitutionalism in Central Asia. He is a co-founder and a fellow of Crossroads – Central Asia, a Bishkek-based think-tank.

Dinara Jangujekova, Ph.D.

is a research Associate at the Kazakhstani Center for Humanitarian and Political Trends, Research Associate at the Association of Political Studies of Kazakhstan, and a Ph.D candidate at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University.

Hovsep Khurshudyan

is the President of the “Free Citizen” Civic Initiatives Support Centre, based in Yerevan, Armenia. He was a senior analyst at the Armenian Center for National and International Studies and is the author of numerous research papers and scientific articles. He was also an associate expert at the Armenian Institute of International and Security Affairs. Mr. Khurshudyan is a certified trainer and hosts his own analytical blog.

Mihai Mogildea

is the Deputy Director of the Institute for European Policies and Reforms (IPRE). He previously conducted research at several institutions, such as Collegium Civitas (Warsaw), Leibniz Institute for Studies in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (Regensburg), and Slovak Foreign Policy Association (Bratislava). His research interests are focused on studying foreign and domestic policy in Moldova, as well as foreign policy and security developments in the Black Sea region. Mr. Mogildea is a graduate of the Master’s program in European Political and Administrative Studies from the College of Europe (Bruges).

Sherali Sh. Rizoyon, Ph.D.

is a political analyst and independent researcher with fifteen years of research experience. He has Ph.D. in Political Sciences and his field of interest covers current issues of Tajikistan’s foreign policy and regional processes in Central Asia, including the influence of Afghanistan on its northern neighbors. He is the author of two monographs and over 100 scientific publications.

Mykhailo Samus

is the Director of the New Geopolitics Research Network in Ukraine. Having served 12 years in the Ukrainian Armed Forces after graduating from the Kyiv Naval Academy, Mykhailo is a seasoned security and defense expert. As the Deputy Director of The Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies (CACDS), one of Ukraine's most prestigious non-governmental think-tanks and voluntary association of experts from the armed forces, security, and defense industry, Mykhailo's work includes the promotion of Ukraine's defense industry in the EU. For over six years he has been consulting Western companies on how to enter Ukraine's defense market.

Artyom Shraibman

is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center. His research focuses on Belarus-related developments, including domestic politics and foreign policy. He is also the founder of Sense Analytics, a political consultancy. Shraibman is the former political editor of the TUT.BY website, the most popular non-state media outlet in Belarus, and frequently writes for Zerkalo.io (a media outlet created by former TUT.BY staff) on Belarusian politics. Shraibman has also worked as a senior political advisor to the United Nations in Minsk and as an intern at the German Bundestag. Shraibman has an MSC in Politics and Communication from the London School of Economics and an international law degree from Belarusian State University in Minsk.

Dr. Azamat Seitov

is the head of the Laboratory of Anthropology and Conflictology at the Institute of Advanced International Studies at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy. He is a Doctor of Sociological Sciences. Dr. Seitov is responsible for developing and publishing analytical articles and materials, policy briefs, and research works. Dr. Seitov has also worked in various national research and scientific organizations, such as the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies, the Regional Policy Foundation, the Academy of State and Public Construction, and the National University of Uzbekistan

Sigita Struberga

is a Ph.D. candidate in political science specializing in international relations. She is a lecturer and researcher at the University of Latvia and the Secretary General of the Latvian Transatlantic Organization, where her work is dedicated to informing the public about NATO, promoting international partnerships, fostering the international community's understanding of Latvia's foreign and security policy aims, and developing research and policy recommendations in related fields. Ms. Struberga is the Visegrad Insight Fellow for the year 2022/2023.

Dmitri Teperik

was the Chief Executive of the International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS) in Tallinn, Estonia. He also served as Director of the Resilient Ukraine development cooperation program. From 2007 to 2015, Mr. Teperik worked for the Estonian Ministry of Defense. He holds an MS degree from the University of Tartu, has completed several internships abroad, including at Vilnius University

and NATO HQ, and has participated in various professional security training courses in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Belgium, Germany, France, Spain, the Netherlands, the United States, and Canada, as well as NATO and the EU. Mr. Teperik studies factors contributing to national resilience, situational awareness in the information environment, and the role of social media, as well as interdependencies between communication and behavior. He focuses on the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Eastern European countries.



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.

Over the last few centuries, Westernization has served as a catalytic influence in the acceleration of global growth and modernization.

Rather than a reflection of a single society's values, however, Westernization is more than the 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 the countries in which Western ideas originated.