



## The Russian Perspective

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### Key Points

In the domestic arena, threats to Russia's social stability remain. Although the issue of transferring power, that has agitated Russia for months, has been removed for the time being, the main political, social, and economic issues have not disappeared and have even intensified given the second wave of the coronavirus. The unfounded rumors about the president's health do not contribute to Russia's stability. At the same time, the regime's efforts to deepen its authoritarian grip on the country continue, while it curbs the growth of any opposition. The coronavirus situation, and especially the global race for an effective vaccine, poses many challenges to Russia. The way Russia chooses to deal with these challenges will affect both its internal situation and its position in the international arena.

Over the past few months, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia have held parliamentary election campaigns in addition to the presidential elections in Belarus. In both Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, the opposition parties did not accept the results of the elections, leading to widespread public protests. While the elections in Georgia did not deteriorate to violence and undermine the country's stability, protests in Kyrgyzstan led not only to annulling the election results but also to ousting the ruling president. In contrast, presidential elections in Moldova have not, at least so far, caused any major political shocks even though they have indicated a significant change in direction, by electing a pro-Western female politician, instead of the pro-Russian president. All the above undoubtedly affects the entire region in general and Russia in particular.

As the Biden-era presidency is expected to adopt a more assertive approach toward Moscow, mutual trust between Russia and the West is at a low point. In the coming months, the Kremlin will prepare for the new incoming US administration by creating facts on the ground, if possible with the support of the outgoing Trump administration (even though the parties found it hard to reach agreements even before the elections), or by showing initiative.





This period, between the US administrations, serves as the context for the “refugee conference” (the most recent Russian initiative in the Syrian arena) and for the announcement of a Russian naval facility in Sudan. Turkey and the West boycotted the “refugee conference”, and it is doubtful whether it will advance any political, economic, or social rehabilitation processes in Syria. The Red Sea naval base will strengthen the importance of the Middle East as a springboard for realizing Russian aspirations in Africa. Meanwhile, the disputes between Russia and Turkey over Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, and Libya have shown the connections between Russian policy in the post-Soviet arena and the Middle East and the limitations on Russia’s influence therein. At the same time, Russian–Iranian rapprochement over preserving the nuclear accords, Syria, and the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan has stood out ahead of the possibility of a renewed American–Iranian discourse.

These developments, both in the domestic and international arenas, require us to follow the situation closely and to be ready to create amenable solutions to emerging problems.



## **Russia—The Domestic Arena**

During the period under review, Russia went from a state of relative calm—achieved by a referendum on changes to the constitution and the gradual lifting of restrictions due to the coronavirus—to a state of reactive behavior given both the social unrest in Russia's neighboring states and the rapid spread of the second wave of coronavirus. At the same time, Russia embarked on the process of implementing the administrative changes in the structure of the ruling system, which was authorized in the referendum and that award the president a broad set of powers.

### **The response to social protests**

At the beginning of September, a certain degree of calm had been achieved, both in terms of the overt power struggles between rival parties and the public's satisfaction with the functioning of the administration: Putin's popularity no longer was declining as he regained his lead in the polls as a figure in whom the public had full confidence (even if in practice this implied that other institutions of power had simply become less popular). While the public protests in the city of Khabarovsk continued, its distance from Russia's center and the inability to generate nationwide protests meant that the former governor Sergei Furgal's struggle to prove his innocence in murder charges have remained purely a peripheral phenomenon.

Given the situation, ruling circles close to the president were able to devote their time and effort to implementing the changes in the administrative structure of the country that were achieved by the referendum. In addition, the ruling circles are preparing for the possibility of a continued struggle for survival to keep the president in his position for at least another 16 years or, in contrast, to enable partial transition of power without harming Putin's standing.

A number of events, however—most of them outside of Russia's borders—have forced the administration to re-examine its conduct and to reactively respond to potentially troublesome hotspots inside the country, so that it can focus on a wide range of activities in the international arena. The mysterious poisonings of the regime critic, Alexei Navalny, and the grave allegations leveled by Western countries that Moscow was responsible for it, compelled the Kremlin to strive for the unification of Russia's internal forces to fight back.





Nonetheless, the fact that senior officials at the highest level, including the president himself, were forced to address the affair, while launching personal attacks on Navalny, points to their own level of distress, which did not help Moscow in refuting the grave charges of having used prohibited chemical agents, even if the Kremlin itself did not bear any practical responsibility. At the same time, despite Navalny's medical condition, the broad assault on members of his organization underlines the Kremlin's efforts to keep him out of Russia, based on the conviction that his success—exposing the regime's corruption—depends upon his being inside the country. Nevertheless, if Navalny remains outside of Russia, his position will be harmed, and he will become a figure without any real political power, much like Mikhail Khodorkovsky or Gary Kasparov.

The public protests in Belarus and the growing voices calling for the removal of its president, Alexander Lukashenko, have not posed any real threat to Russia's internal stability. Protestors in Khabarovsk may have openly expressed their support for the protests in Belarus and vice versa, but besides the weekly marches and the reserved support from the European Union, nothing has been achieved. As a result, the Russian authorities do not consider the Belarus events as a factor that could undermine the stability in their country.

In contrast to what happened in Belarus, the elections in Kyrgyzstan on October 4 and the widespread public disturbances that followed led to the fall of the regime of President Sooronbay Jeenbekov. The complete contradiction between the Belarussian passivity and the Kyrgyz actions seemingly constituted a warning light for the authorities, who were quick to signal to the protestors in Khabarovsk that they had crossed the boundaries and calm had to be restored: On October 10, the special police applied force against the protestors, leading to their dispersal. At the same time, Furgal himself and his family were pressured to stop supporting the protests.

It is too early to determine if the change in the response of Russian authorities will cause the Khabarovsk social protests to die down, but for the moment the demonstrations appear to be continuing and the protestors do not intend to halt their weekly protests, thus leaving the central administration in Moscow with a dilemma—whether to step up pressure against the protests or to curb them in other ways—even if other regions in the country have not launched similar protests. It is conceivable, however, that the tough Siberian winter will do the job and the protests will die down naturally, at least until the spring.



## Managing the spread of the coronavirus

At the beginning of September, Russia continued with a policy of returning to normal by renewing its aviation connections with the rest of the world. Regulatory approval of the first vaccine in the world “Sputnik 5” and the advanced stages of developing a second Russian vaccine (whose regulatory approval President Putin announced on October 13) enabled the authorities to portray a positive picture, which also served Russia in its propaganda battle against the West, both with regards to the Navalny affair and the mutual smears about manufacturing the vaccines. Nonetheless, since the beginning of October, Russian authorities reported a rapid increase in morbidity. Thus in the second week of October, the rate of infection was 20 percent higher than in the preceding week and for the first time since the outbreak of the pandemic, 100,000 a week are now infected. A significant increase in mortality has also been reported, which professional sources claimed as being the result of “overly scrutinizing the findings” compared to preceding periods.

Senior officials, headed by President Putin, have addressed the issue publicly and confirmed that the country is in the middle of a second wave, far more severe than the first one. However, on October 21, Putin said that the authorities do not intend to impose a lockdown as they did during the first wave, despite the inherent risks. The following day, the president publicly spoke about the spread of the virus and noted that the rate of infection required preparing for far-reaching changes in the coming period. Professionals also shared the view that the second wave will not pass until at least the end of the first quarter of 2021.

The rapid spread of the virus and the need to prove the superiority of Russian science over its rivals in the West have forced the administration to take rapid steps, aimed primarily at ensuring public health. However, Russia’s reactivity and its relations with the West, which have increasingly deteriorated, are also reflected in the field of health, especially in the rapid development of the vaccines. That said, like other countries in the world, Russia’s difficult economic situation has forced it to curb the drastic measures needed to halt the spread of the virus and to suffice with more moderate measures at least momentarily. Russia is trying to avoid accumulating economic debts, which, according to its leaders, could undermine its ability to stand up to the West. But if to judge according to statements by senior officials, one should not



rule out a drastic change in this trend in the near future, as a result of the continued spread of the coronavirus.

### Changes in the structure of the administration

Despite dealing with the dangers that threaten government stability in the long term, Russia continues to adhere to the constitution amendments, approved on July 1, 2020 referendum. In the final week of October, the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, voted in favor of a series of laws aimed at putting in motion procedures to alter the administrative structure of the country in line with the changes set by the referendum. Even though these are amendments to existing laws, senior members of the Duma have stressed that this is new legislation and not additions or amendments to existing legislation, with the aim of promoting the new Russian constitution.

Following legislation has been promoted: primacy of Russian law over international law; additional limitations on the functioning of the constitutional court; widespread powers of the parliament regarding the management and execution of domestic policy, as opposed to the powers granted to the president and the advisory bodies (the State Council and the National Security Council) regarding the management of foreign policy, state security, and supervision of other authorities. This clear separation not only breaks up the institution of the presidency, but it also raises the president's status to that above all other authorities.

The rumors about President Putin's health, which have appeared lately in Western media as a reason for the administrative reforms, are not new and not at all surprising. The source of the rumors is Valery Solovey, a former lecturer at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), and a harsh critic of the current regime. Solovey has made assertions about Putin's health for several years, yet he has not backed them up with concrete facts. Therefore, for the moment, these statements do not reflect anything, other than Solovey's opinion.

### Russia and the situation in Belarus







The unbridled anti-Russian rhetoric that characterized the position of Belarus's president, Alexander Lukashenko, during his election campaign has been replaced by desperate pleas for help directed at Moscow, as the public protests against falsifying the election results began and have since refused to die down. The position of the Belarusian president and his attempts to engage both Moscow and the West by means of imprisoned opposition members have created the impression that he is still trying to maneuver between East and West, so he can remain in a stable position.

However, his conduct at the end of the day drags Moscow into a situation that it has tried to avoid—of taking overt responsibility for the events in Belarus. This situation could hurt the Kremlin's attempts at dialogue with the West. In contrast, it is highly probable that Russia will not want to lose the last buffer zone remaining under its influence, which separates Russia from territory controlled by NATO. Presumably, the Russian response to events in Belarus will depend on the state of relations between Moscow and Brussels (primarily) and Washington: improvement might influence the Kremlin to open a dialogue, and vice versa, should relations worsen, the probability of a clash in Belarus will increase.

The Belarusian opposition understands the Russian dilemma well, and thus most of its members, with the exception perhaps of the most radical nationalist circles such as Zianon Pazniak (of the Belarusian Popular Front), have resolutely declared that their only wish is for Lukashenko to go, and they do not intend to agitate for significant changes in their country's foreign policy. Given the above, in the coming period, Russia will find itself before a Belarusian challenge: whether to be dragged in by the Belarusian ruler's unpredictable behavior, which is causing his country to decline to a status similar to that of North Korea's (only without nuclear weapons) or to find additional points of dialogue with the West (primarily Europe) while maintaining its geopolitical interests.

### Summary and the forecast

During the past two months, Russia has been forced to conduct a clearly reactive policy in the domestic arena in response to a series of significant challenges often connected to its status as a regional power and as a major global player. At the same time, with the spread of the coronavirus, Moscow faces a more severe challenge than it did in the first wave: preventing socioeconomic deterioration without a disastrous health scenario. Above all Russia's administration and its leader are battling for survival, primarily focusing on implementing the changes aimed at strengthening Putin's position and postponing the war of succession to a later date.



## Relations between Russia and the West

The fall of 2020 in Moscow was dedicated to the preparations for the US presidential elections, traditionally a major event that has shaped Russia's multi-year foreign policy cycle. Russia had hoped to use 2020 to mitigate tensions with the West. Nonetheless, the coronavirus pandemic, the ongoing erosion of mutual trust between Moscow and Washington and unforeseen crises have thwarted all the rapprochement ideas that Moscow has raised.

In October, prior to the US presidential elections, Russia and the United States were seemingly racing against time to reach a compromise and agreement on a one-year extension of the START nuclear arms reduction treaty, which is set to expire in February 2021.



**Putin briefs Lavrov on Russia's position on arms-monitoring talks with the United States. Source: Kremlin Website, October 16, 2020**

American and Russian national security advisors held a rare and

amicable meeting in Geneva at the beginning of October. Following quiet diplomatic contacts, the United States adopted a stance of "megaphone diplomacy" and presented Russia with an ultimatum, requesting an intrusive verification mechanism of the number of nuclear warheads in Russian arsenal. On October 16, Putin responded personally through a video in which he instructed Foreign Minister Lavrov to refrain from any further compromise. On October 20, however, the Kremlin proposed a compromise: a proposal to freeze the number of nuclear warheads for a year. The parties couldn't agree, however, as the Americans insisted on a verification mechanism.

About a week before the elections, Putin announced a new initiative to instate a moratorium on the deployment of short and medium-range surface-to-surface nuclear missiles in Europe. In fact, he tried to propose to reinstall, on a voluntary basis the limitations of the INF Treaty that was abolished at the initiative of the Trump administration in 2019.







The United States and the European countries immediately rejected the idea on the grounds that Putin's proposal does not solve the problem of Russian violations of the INF Treaty, when it was in force. Also, [Putin's](#) proposal from late September to resume dialogue with the United States about security of the "information space" (a Russian term that includes, inter alia, the realms of cyber and cognitive warfare) fell on deaf ears.

Over the past few months, the official Russian media related positively to President Trump, while American authorities accused Moscow of trying to intervene in his favor in the elections. Even if there were Russian attempts to influence the election campaign, they disappeared in the sea of disinformation within the United States and did not play a significant role. From the beginning of October, Putin himself [made it clear](#) in a number of public appearances that he would work with whichever administration was elected. At the same time, President Putin [has refrained](#) from congratulating Biden on his victory, as he "waits for official results of the elections."

The poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, using a chemical warfare agent from the Novichok family led [Europe to impose](#) sanctions on senior Russian officials, including from the Presidential Administration. The sweeping and vigorous Russian denials regarding the poisoning or responsibility for it—after a number of accredited European labs proved he had been poisoned—have made it even more difficult for the Europeans to conduct a constructive dialogue with Russia. In the fall, only two European leaders held talks with President Putin: French president Macron spoke with him four times on the Middle East, Libya, Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabakh, while Austrian chancellor Kurz called, after Putin sent a letter of condolence following the ISIS terrorist attack in Vienna. The Navalny affair also [harmed Germany's previously strong commitment](#) to complete the controversial Nord Stream gas pipeline (from Russia to Germany via the Baltic Sea). Moscow's resolute backing for President Lukashenko against the opposition protests also [did not contribute](#) to building bridges between Moscow and the European capitals.

Areas of Russian-Western cooperation remain limited: Russia and France increased the coordination of their positions on Nagorno-Karabakh and Turkey and even succeeded in issuing a number of joint documents (together with the United States) calling for a ceasefire but did not succeed in ensuring that it was carried out. The Russians and Europeans continued to cooperate in preserving the JCPoA, in contrast to the efforts of the Trump administration to completely dismantle it.





Russia's calls for cooperation in the battle against the coronavirus—including joint manufacturing of the Russian "Sputnik 5" vaccination—[were met with a cold shoulder](#) by the European Commission, which declared that it would only authorize the use of vaccines that underwent European approval procedures.

About a week before the elections, [President-elect Biden defined](#) Russia as the major threat to the US national security. There is a consensus that Biden's presidency might cause further deterioration in the relations between Russia and the West. However, some in Russia [see Biden's administration](#) as a far more predictable partner than Trump's administration. From Moscow's perspective, it will devote the coming months to preparing the agenda for the Biden presidency by setting facts on the ground, even by agreement with the Trump administration (even though it is likely that Moscow will find it difficult to do so, as it did prior to the elections) or by presenting diplomatic initiatives.





## Russia—The Middle East and Israel

The number of burning conflicts that Russia has had to deal with in recent months in the post-Soviet arena, in the Middle East, and elsewhere raises the question of whether Moscow is capable of dealing successfully with so many crises, and whether its attention to Middle East affairs is diminishing as a result. In our view, the “bandwidth” of Russian diplomatic, military, and intelligence work mechanisms enables Moscow to deal simultaneously with all these crises. Channeling foreign policy decision-making processes to President Putin's close circle contributes to synchronizing diplomatic steps. On the other hand, the crises have highlighted the limitations of Russian power vis-à-vis the regional actors in the Middle East.

The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in which Turkey backed Azerbaijan's military moves, contrary to Russian efforts to establish an immediate ceasefire, illustrates the deep connection between Russian policy in the post-Soviet area and the Middle East. Since the beginning of 2020, the dispute between Russia and Turkey has increased over events in northern Syria and Libya. In both arenas, Moscow and Ankara have fought each other through proxies and have conducted a policy of escalation, while connecting the two arenas through the transfer of combatants, weapons, info-ops and diplomatic moves.

Moscow perceives the war in Nagorno-Karabakh as another violent and aggressive Turkish attempt to [challenge the status quo in an arena](#) that is critical to Russia's national interests. During the crisis, the Russians made a number of moves in an attempt to apply pressure on Ankara. On October 26, [Russian](#) planes suddenly attacked a training camp of Faylaq al-Sham (the Legion of Sham), in northern Syria, killing almost 100 combatants. Turkish president Erdoğan responded [by publicly criticizing](#) Russia, stating that Moscow was not interested in stability in the area. Senior Russian officials [warned](#) against the transfer of terrorists to the Caucasus, referring to the transfer of Syrian and Libyan mercenaries to the battle zone in Azerbaijan, with their comments directed at Turkey. The announcement on October 8, [Russian-Egyptian naval maneuver in the Black Sea](#), another arena of competition between Russia and Turkey, may have been intended [to express Moscow's](#) dissatisfaction with Ankara.

Russia, which holds the position of joint chair (alongside the United States and Russia) of the Minsk Group that has been mediating between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the past 30 years has consistently rejected the Turkish demand to establish an alternative mediation framework, under joint Russian-Turkish leadership, out of concern that it would legitimize Turkey's aggressive policy and expand Turkish influence in central Asia and the Caucasus.



[The armistice agreement, signed by Armenia and Azerbaijan on November 9,](#) leads to a new situation that is not as convenient for Moscow: Instead of a delicate balance between the two sides that require Russian mediation, Armenia has been battered and defeated, while Azerbaijan has been victorious due to its alliance with Turkey, despite Russia's opposition.

Russia may have tried to present itself publicly as the sole guarantor (without Turkey) of the agreement between the countries and can take comfort in the fact that the United States and France are not signatories to the agreement; however it is clear to all the players in the Caucasus that Moscow had to make compromises and that Turkey strengthened its position in the arena. Even so, Putin still sees Erdoğan as a “partner” who allows him to advance opportunities in the Middle East and beyond.

The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis has also been a significant opportunity for the strengthening of the Russian–Iranian diplomatic dialogue in recent months. Both countries are traditional allies of Armenia. Russia assisted Tehran to survive the final months of the Trump presidency by isolating the United States in the UN Security Council over its attempts to extend the arms embargo on Iran. With the expiration of the embargo, Russia [declared](#) that American threats will not deter it from military cooperation with Iran; in practice, however, [Moscow has not hastened](#) to sign new arms deals that could create friction with Washington. In any event, it is not clear whether the battered and bruised Iranian economy [is capable](#) of making wide-scale arms purchases at the current time.

Russia and Iran have also reportedly strengthened their military cooperation in [transferring aid to Armenia](#), although Tehran [denies](#) that it transferred military equipment. Furthermore, it has been reported that a Russian ship [secured](#) an Iranian tanker carrying oil to Syria along its route between the Suez Canal and the Syrian coast.

Low oil prices have forced Russia to continue [coordinating](#) its energy policy with other Middle Eastern countries. Contrary to the price war in March, a cautious dialogue is taking place between Russia and its “OPEC plus” partners, including [frequent consultations](#) between Putin and the Saudi heir to the throne, Mohammad bin Salman.

Middle Eastern countries are among [Russia's central partners](#) in efforts to develop and market the Russian “Sputnik 5” vaccine against the coronavirus.



Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt have all partnered in various ways in the Russian vaccine project. Israel has also contacted Moscow about it. In Russia-Israel relations, prominent in recent months was [the first meeting](#) on October 26 between Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and his counterpart Lavrov in Athens, where they emphasized good relations between the two countries and coordinated positions on pressing issues in the Middle East. Furthermore, the Russian Foreign Ministry [expressed its satisfaction](#) that the Israel Ministry of Justice renewed the process of recognizing Russian ownership of the “Alexander’s Court” compound in the Old City of Jerusalem. This compound has significant importance to the Russian Orthodox Church, and Moscow has been fighting for several years to recognize Russian ownership of it.



Meeting between foreign ministers Ashkenazi and Lavrov in Athens Source: Russian Foreign Ministry Website

Although Russia did not directly criticize Israel for giving military aid to Azerbaijan during the war, the official Russian media has been relatively critical of Israel. [It has portrayed Israel](#) as having sent arms to Azerbaijan to extend the fighting, as being motivated by greed, and as seeking to preserve Azerbaijan as a strategic outpost against Iran.

Joe Biden’s victory in the US presidential elections has placed Russian policy in the Middle East in a holding position ahead of the inauguration of the new administration in Washington. The Kremlin expects more tension between the two capitals’ diplomatic positions on the region. Nonetheless, Russia will be cautious not to provide the Biden administration, which is expected to be more assertive toward it, with any grounds for new sanctions.

At the same time, the last weeks of Trump tenure might hold a potential opportunity for “last-minute deals” with Putin (perhaps in the Syrian arena) or ballooning proposals for cooperation with the Biden administration (for example, ahead of the possibility of a resumption of the US–Iranian dialogue).

Two Russian moves in the period between the US elections and the entrance of the new administration stand out:







- A. **The Damascus conference on the return of refugees to Syria on November 11–12:** This conference appeared to be an attempt by Moscow to seize a diplomatic initiative. Ahead of the conference, President Putin held [a video call](#) with Syrian president Assad, with whom he had not spoken since March 2020. From Moscow's perspective, the conference was a **partial success**: Representatives from 27 countries attended, and it served as a prominent platform for Russia to call for cooperation in normalizing relations with Syria and for announcing its intention to invest around a billion dollars in the country's reconstruction. However, the West [boycotted](#) the conference, Turkey was not even invited, and [the conference is neither expected to advance](#) a solution to Syria's fundamental political problems nor to the return of the refugees in practice. Also ahead of the conference, an agreement was reached [on the opening](#) of the al-Nassib border crossing between Jordan and southern Syria, which will be apparently controlled by the Russian-backed Syrian 5<sup>th</sup> Corps.
- B. **Establishment of a Russian naval base in Sudan:** On November 16, Putin authorized the Russian defense ministry to sign an agreement with Sudan. [The draft agreement](#) published officially in Russia, determines that for a period of 25 years (with an extension for a further 10 years) Russia will lease a dock in the Sudanese navy's Port Sudan base. The Russia will be able to dock up to four ships there, including nuclear powered ones and up to 300 soldiers. The Sudanese [did not "confirm or deny" the Russian publication](#), which also claimed that the Khartoum have accepted the agreement. A naval base on the Red Sea in Africa is in line with Moscow's aspiration to rehabilitate its global naval [posture](#) to support its growing political and economic interests in the continent. This also may be a "show of relevance" by Moscow, in response to the "Abraham Accords" in which it was not a partner.

### Instability in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia

Over the past few months both Kyrgyzstan and Georgia have held parliamentary elections. In both cases, the opposition parties did not accept the results of the elections, leading to widespread public protests. While the elections did not deteriorate into violence in Georgia and did not undermine the country's stability, protests in Kyrgyzstan not only led to the annulment of the election results but also to the ouster of the ruling president, Sooronbay Jeenbekov. In both cases, the political instability poses a challenge for the control of the Russian Federation in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Political battles within Kyrgyzstan could lead to the country's economic collapse and increased dependence on China, while the entrenchment of the ruling party in Georgia would bring the country closer to the United States and NATO.





## **The elections to the Kyrgyz parliament and the formation of a new political reality**

Many parties took part in the elections to the Kyrgyz parliament held on October 4, 2020. The election campaign was characterized by extraordinary violence, including several clashes between supporters of rival parties. Shortly after the polls closed, but prior to publicizing the results, opposition parties announced that they would not recognize the results and held protests in the capital Bishkek. The leaders of the opposition party Ata-Meken labeled the election process the “dirtiest elections” in the country’s history.

The turnout in the election was 56.5 percent. Three pro-government parties passed the electoral threshold and together received over half of the votes cast. These parties, whose voter base is in the north and center of the country, supported the status quo with Russia and called for the integration of Kyrgyzstan in the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, while developing closer security ties with Russia. Butun Kyrgyzstan (United Kyrgyzstan) was the only opposition party to pass the electoral threshold. The party, founded in 2010 to support Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia, has a national ideology, and its support base is in southern Kyrgyzstan. Other opposition parties failed to enter parliament.

Shortly after the results were announced on October 5, some 4,000 opposition activists staged violent protests in front of the parliament building in the capital, Bishkek, and were forcibly dispersed by security forces. The violent opposition protests led to the annulment of the election results and the setting of a new date for the parliamentary elections on December 20, 2020 and the presidential elections on January 10, 2021. Opposition forces released former Kyrgyzstan president Almazbek Atambayev, who had been sentenced in June 2020 to 11 years in prison for corruption, former Parliament member Sadyr Japarov, and former prime minister Sapar Isakov.

Sadyr Japarov had been appointed as Kyrgyzstan’s new prime minister following the resignation of the previous prime minister, Kubatbek Boronov, although the move was criticized by the rival factions of the opposition. Following the resignation of the incumbent president Sooronbay Jeenbekov on October 15, Japarov was appointed acting president. Japarov, who advocates a nationalist line (he is the first Kyrgyz leader to speak in the Kyrgyz language) and promises to restore to the people privatized gold mines and “stolen” national wealth, has become a national hero in the wake of the recent riots.





Kyrgyzstan's Supreme Court also acquitted Japarov and the chair of the National Security Committee Kamchybek Tashiev, and his deputy Talant Mamytov for trying to overthrow the government in 2012. The same day, Japarov announced that he would stand in the presidential elections in January 2021 and began advancing the required constitutional amendments.

Of the countries in the post-Soviet arena, Kyrgyzstan's affiliation with Russia is the strongest in terms of economic dependence, and a high percentage of its citizens working in Russia. Russia did not delay its reaction to the events in Kyrgyzstan. Deputy Chair of the Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs Vladimir Dzhavarov, referring to demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan, said "there is a struggle of clans" in the country, and all elections there would end in protests by the losing side. From Russia's perspective, Kyrgyzstan is an important partner, and therefore political stability in the country is crucial. The Kremlin expressed its dissatisfaction with the social protests in Kyrgyzstan following the recent parliamentary elections by freezing some \$100 million in financial assistance. Furthermore, Russia has placed its Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan on high alert. As a result, acting President Japarov had no choice but to immediately declare, after his appointment, that Kyrgyzstan would fulfill all its obligations to Russia, adding that Russia is Kyrgyzstan's most important strategic partner.

In addition to political instability in the country, Kyrgyzstan is also in the middle of a worsening economic crisis further intensified by the coronavirus pandemic. This has led to increasing dependence on its two neighboring powers, China and Russia. According to the National Bank of Kyrgyzstan, as of October 10, the damage from the political instability in the country has amounted to a loss of an estimated \$104 million in revenues, which is a significant amount in terms of GDP. In accordance with his nationalist stance, Acting President Sadyr Japarov declared that Kyrgyzstan would pay its external debt with its "own resources." This has greatly increased the country's economic dependence on China. Kyrgyzstan's total external debt as of the end of July 2020 stood at \$4.8 billion, of which it owes \$1.7 billion to China. According to the Center for Global Development, such a large debt puts Kyrgyzstan in an "economically vulnerable" position vis-à-vis China. If Kyrgyzstan is unable to repay its debts on time, China will have the right to demand assets in the country through international courts. Japarov is trying to solve the problem by increasing intra-regional cooperation with neighboring countries.



Following the meeting between the foreign ministers of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan has agreed to provide financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, participants in the meeting noted the importance of going ahead with the construction of a China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway line and establishing trade and logistics centers on the borders, as well as projects in the field of hydro-energy. Regional cooperation of this nature strengthens Chinese influence in the region and increases tensions between China and Russia over the expansion of regional control.

While it indeed seems that the current round of political instability in the country is close to being exhausted, it is clear that both internal and external power struggles will continue to affect both the situation in Kyrgyzstan and relations between Moscow and Beijing.

### **Elections to the Georgian parliament**

As already mentioned, the parliamentary elections in Georgia have not led to any social and political unrest as the elections in Kyrgyzstan did. The elections were held using a new format, intended to provide greater weight to proportional representation, thus enabling representatives from various regions to be elected to the country's parliament. The ruling party, the "Georgian Dream," proposed the changes to the election system after it did not receive the required support of 75 percent of members of parliament in the June 2019 elections. At the beginning of March 2020, the ruling party reached an understanding with the opposition and agreed that the October 2020 elections would be held according to a new system, in which out of 150 seats in parliament, 120 would be elected by proportional representation and 30 seats by the majority system. The elections were held on October 31. The ruling Georgian Dream party received 48.15 percent of the vote, and the main opposition bloc of the United National Movement (ENM), which ran Mikheil Saakashvili as its candidate for prime minister, received 27.14 percent of the vote. The voter turnout was 56 percent.

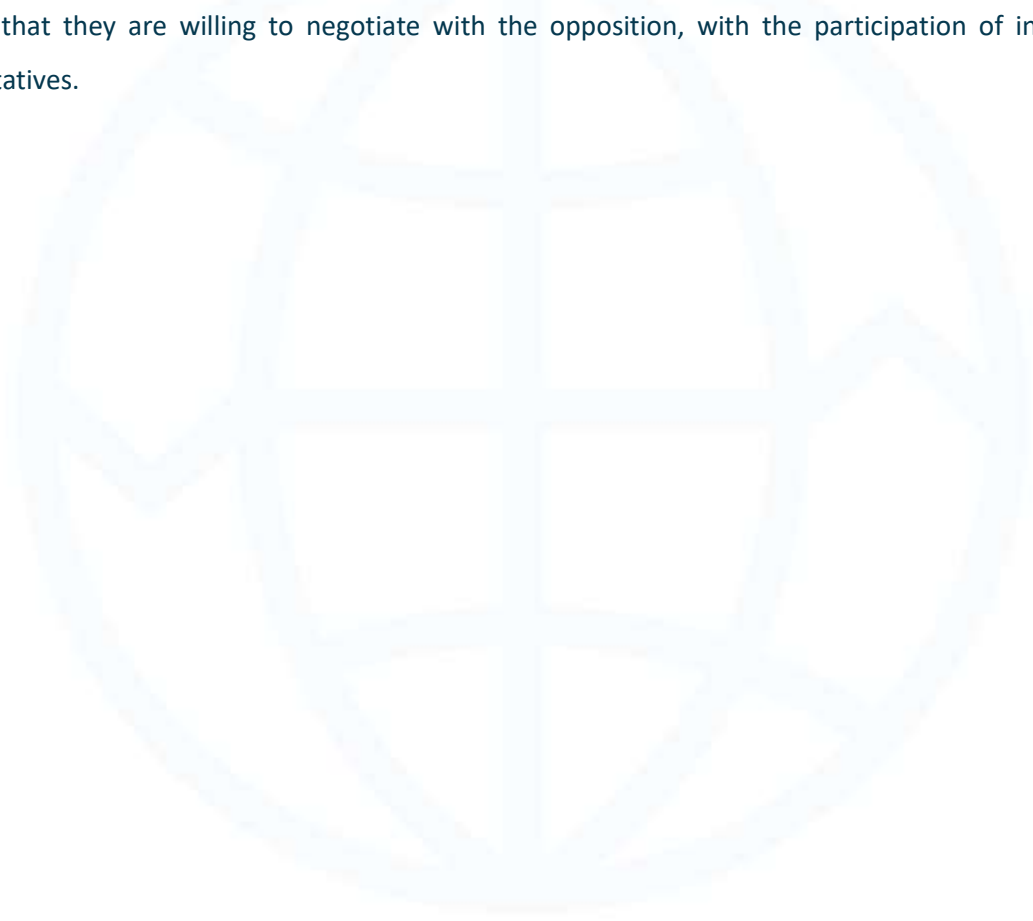
According to the Transparency International Georgia organization, the current elections had more significant violations than in the 2018 presidential elections and the 2016 parliamentary elections. One of the more serious problems was the violation of electoral secrecy. Immediately after the elections were over, opposition representatives held a protest vigil outside the parliament in Tbilisi against the parliamentary election results.





Salome Samadashvili, a member of the United National Movement party, said demonstrations will be held daily until new elections will be held. Central Election Commission of Georgia Chair Tamar Zhvania has announced that the second round of the parliamentary elections will take place, despite a potential boycott by the opposition.

It is not yet possible to summarize political developments in Georgia after the elections. Currently, the opposition party is insisting that results of the elections should be annulled, and new elections should be held. At the same time, representatives of the regime claim that the election process was fair but have declared that they are willing to negotiate with the opposition, with the participation of international representatives.



## Moldova after the 2020 presidential elections

In the second round of the Moldovan presidential elections held on November 5, Maia Sandu, the representative of the pro-European party, scored an impressive victory. In doing so, she ousted President Igor Dodon, the representative of the pro-Russian socialist party. Sandu succeeded in uniting opponents of Dodon ahead of the second round and won with an impressive 15 percent margin.

Dodon's loss was no less impressive. Just six months ago, he was extremely popular; his party controlled the parliament and the government and in the fall 2019, his party was elected to the mayorship of Chișinău. Now the presidential palace is in the hands of the opposition and a big question mark hangs over the fate of Dodon's party in parliament. Most importantly, the opposition, which until now had seemed completely fractured, may be inspired and could find reason to unite following the victory of Sandu, who enjoyed not only the support of right-wing ally Andrei Nastase but also of Renato Usatii, the mayor of Moldova's second-largest city, Bălți. In winning the elections, Maia Sandu shattered several myths in one fell swoop: She proved that a single, careerist woman is capable of sweeping relatively patriarchal Moldova and that a representative of the national right is capable of breaking sectoral boundaries and gaining the votes of various publics, in addition to its voter base with a deep Moldovan ethnic identity.

Interpretations that narrow the election results to the geopolitical dimension and focus on the pro-Western orientation of the winner and the pro-Russian orientation of the loser should be avoided. Firstly, internal political agendas seem to have determined the results of the election. Sandu benefited from the voters' wish to get rid of the perceived old and corrupt politics, which began in 2019 with the heavy defeat of the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc. Now, his main rival, Igor Dodon, has also lost to a figure who is not identified with the old political establishment and not even directly associated with the local elites.

There has been much talk over the years about the expected political impact of the Moldovan diaspora, composed of migrant workers who have been working for years in Europe and North America and are impressed by the relatively low level of corruption, the rule of law, and other achievements of thriving democratic regimes. With this election, it seems that we have witnessed the full impact of the diaspora vote.

Secondly, even in the purely geopolitical aspect, nothing is absolutely certain. It is not by chance that shortly after her victory, Sandu declared that she would meet with the Russian ambassador the same week.





This is a realistic recognition of Russia's weight in the Moldovan economy, and it is reasonable to assume that Russia, for its part, will continue to seek opportunities to increase its influence.

The Kremlin's red line is drawn at the possibility of a union between Moldova and Romania, which seems quite far from materializing at the moment. It is notable that in recent years, the parties that have championed the flag of unifying with Moldova's western neighbor have not had any electoral achievements.

Thus, Sandu's victory may symbolize a change in direction of the political evolution of Moldova, but it does not necessarily constitute a dramatic development in the short term. Following the parliamentary elections, even if a government is formed that is subject to the influence of President Sandu, the Sandu administration will have to prove over time that it can navigate the various interests of its composite elements. Furthermore, it will have to show it can navigate between the powers that are important to the survival of the Moldovan economy: the European Union, with an emphasis on Romania, Italy, and Germany; Russia; the United States; China; and Turkey, which are all highly involved in the struggle for influence in Moldova.

