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Socio-Political Conditions and Developments

The region of South-Eastern Europe or the Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries is comprised of sixteen relatively small countries (excluding Ukraine) all of which – except for Greece – were until the early 1990s ruled by communist regimes and had effectively no political, economic or cultural relations with New Zealand during their communist past. Following the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and the opening of the European Union's Eastern Enlargement process, three post-communist states from the Balkans – Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia – joined the EU by 2013. All their remaining Balkan neighbours, labelled (together with Croatia) by the EU 'the Western Balkans', have also expressed a strong desire to follow the pathway of these three. Currently, North Macedonia (which was until recently known as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), Montenegro, Serbia and Albania hold the status of official EU candidates, while the remaining two – Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo – have a longer way to go and are still considered as only potential candidates for EU membership. Unlike Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, the six countries from the Eastern Partnership are not offered a membership perspective to the European Union. The Eastern Partnership which is an offshoot, and the Eastern dimension, of the European Neighbourhood Policy is the EU's policy initiative to forge closer ties with the six countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus (namely: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine). The partnership seeks to promote regional stability through trade agreements and democratic institution-building. The Programme offers partner countries tariff-free access to the EU's single market in exchange for their adoption of trade-related and political EU legislation.

Despite the much greater political and economic openness of all these countries during their post-communist history,

New Zealand's political, economic, cultural, trade and tourist relations with all the post-communist Balkan states and the Eastern Partnership countries have remained marginal at best. However, some positive recent trends, especially in relations with the new EU member states from the region of post-communist Europe, indicate that there is potential for significant improvement of all types of relations between New Zealand and both the Balkan states and the Eastern Partnership countries. In addition to academic relevance, the main objective of these policy Briefs is to raise awareness among the NZ intellectual community and wider public, particularly the political and business elites, of the main social-political and economic trends in these two groups of states as a pre-condition for identifying potential opportunities for the improvement of cooperation. The two policy briefs that this Jean Monnet Chair will issue annually for the period September 2017 – September 2020 will cover the following aspects of the contemporary developments of the Balkan States and the Eastern Partnership countries:

- General macroeconomic and social trends in the region and their impact on NZ trade, tourism and its socio-cultural and people-to-people links with the Balkan and the Eastern Partnership countries;

- Socio-political conditions and developments in the respective countries with regard to intra-regional cooperation and progress in democratisation and the European integration process. Particular attention will be paid to providing an overview of the current state of play as regards the Western Balkan states' attempts to meet the official political and socio-economic conditions for EU accession, EU relations with the Eastern Partnership countries, and the latter's progress in democratisation and in complying with the socio-political and economic requirements of the Eastern Partnership programme.

1. General socio-political conditions and developments

Socio-political developments in the Western Balkan states and the Eastern Partnership countries are of evident political significance for the European continent and beyond. The 2019 year was marked by political turmoil in both regions. In some cases, a trend of hurried legislation and limits on opposition involvement in the elections has long been a jeopardy of the democratic process. Absolute or partial parliamentary boycotts by opposition parties in Albania, Georgia, Montenegro and Serbia have interrupted the functioning of parliaments and shown a lack of justice and legitimacy. For instance, the year in Montenegro began with numerous local environmental demonstrations, followed by major political protests against the government. Moreover, Georgia is still gripped by a power struggle between the governing Georgian Dream and the United National Movement (UNM), further radicalising the political environment in the country. Autocratic rule in Azerbaijan and Belarus has further strengthened as the incumbent rulers have used their well-established control over state institutions to further reinforce their own positions. Perhaps in order to avoid scenarios like the Velvet Revolution in Armenia and successful reformation process, the presidents of these two countries substantially strengthened their position by exercising unquestioned power without any legislative or judicial controls. These included a continued detention and prosecution of opposition leaders and independent journalists by Azerbaijan and banning opposition leaders from taking part in elections in Belarus.

In contrast, significant democratic transitions have been ongoing in Armenia and Ukraine. Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky carried out some important reforms, for example, the "2019-2023 Strategy for Judicial and Legal Reforms" in Armenia and the creation of the High Court for Anti-corruption in Ukraine.

General democratisation trends in the Western Balkans in 2019 and the first half of 2020 have been deteriorating. According to indicators presented in Table 1, the countries from the South-Eastern Europe region (as in most of their post-communist counterparts parts in other parts of Europe) changed for the worse – resulting in democratic backsliding, increased authoritarian tendencies, corruption and political division. According the annual global reports of Freedom in the World and the Transparency International, the scores of democratisations in political rights and civil liberties have been declining in almost all countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia. On the contrary, the overall indicators of democratisation in the East-Central Europe and the Baltic states remained the same since 2016, except Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, which showed setbacks in their democratisation scores.

There were a few milestones in 2019 regarding the EU accession of the Western Balkans. The 2019 French veto on the opening of accession talks between the EU and North Macedonia and Albania was lifted on 24 March, 2020 when the foreign ministers of EU member states greenlighted the launch of accession talks with these two countries.[i] Only three days later, on 27 March, North Macedonia also became NATO's 30th member. On the other hand, the two regional frontrunners for EU membership, Montenegro and Serbia, have continued to progress very slowly with their accession talks. Serbia opened its 17th and 18th (out of 34) negotiation chapters in June and December

2019 respectively and Montenegro opened its last chapter (on Competition policy) in June 2020. However, both countries have so far closed only a few chapters – Serbia 2 and Montenegro 3.[ii]

In 2019 the Eastern Partnership programme marked its 10th anniversary. The Eastern Partnership was established in May 2009 under the revised European Neighbourhood Policy umbrella to enhance relations between the EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Since the implementation of the programme, the EU could develop new country-tailored political and economic bilateral agreements with each of the participant countries based on their interests and preferences towards the EU integration. On 13 May 2019, the Eastern Partnership ministerial meeting brought together EU foreign ministers and their counterparts from the six Eastern Partnership countries. At the end of the meeting, the parties signed the new EaP Agenda of "20 deliverables for 2020". The document is the work plan that focuses on 20 goals stretching over four priority areas of cooperation which include: Cross cutting deliverables (civil society, gender equality), Stronger Economy, Governance, Connectivity and Society). [iii]

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in the first half of 2020 poses a range of new threats to both regions. In this new reality some countries were more successful in fighting the deadly virus than others, such as Georgia, which was included by the European Union on 30 June 2020 in the list of 15 non-EU nations to open the borders with.[iv] Meanwhile, some regimes have responded to the pandemic in ways that suit their political interests, often to the detriment of public health and fundamental freedoms. For example, Belarusian President Lukashenko was criticised by the World Health Organization for 'lack of appropriate social reduction initiatives' to fight the coronavirus pandemic. Last of all, the European Union has assisted the Eastern Partnership countries in its global coronavirus outbreak response and has mobilised €80 million for the most immediate needs and €883 million for the short and medium term to support social and economic recovery.[v]

Table 1. Indicators of democratisation in post-communist Europe

East-Central Europe and the Baltic states	2017		2018		2019	
	FW*	TICPI**	FW*	TICPI**	FW*	TICPI**
Czechia	95	55	93	59	91	57
Hungary	79	48	72	46	70	45
Poland	93	62	85	60	84	60
Slovenia	92	61	93	60	94	61
Slovakia	89	51	89	50	88	50
Estonia	94	70	94	73	94	71
Latvia	86	57	87	58	87	58
Lithuania	91	59	91	59	91	60
South-Eastern Europe						
Albania	67	39	68	36	68	38
Bosnia and Herz	57	39	55	38	53	38
Bulgaria	80	41	80	42	80	43
Croatia	87	49	86	48	85	49
Kosovo	52	36	52	37	54	39
Montenegro	70	45	67	45	65	46
North Macedonia	57	37	58	37	59	35
Romania	83	41	84	47	81	43
Serbia	78	42	74	39	67	41
Eastern Partnership						
Armenia	46	33	44	35	51	35
Azerbaijan	16	30	12	25	11	31
Belarus	17	40	21	44	19	44
Georgia	64	57	64	58	63	56
Moldova	60	30	61	33	58	31
Ukraine	61	29	62	32	60	30

* Freedom in the World (FW) is an annual global report on political rights and civil liberties, composed of numerical ratings and descriptive texts for each country and a select group of territories. The report's methodology is derived in large measure from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. Freedom in the World operates from the assumption that freedom for all people is best achieved in liberal democratic societies. The aggregate Freedom Scores are based on a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 representing the highest level of freedom and 0 the lowest. The 2019 edition covers developments in the respective countries from January 1, 2019, through December 31, 2019.

** Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (TICPI) is published annually in December and gives information about the corruption level in each country of the world for that calendar year. Science 2012 the TICPI has ranged from 100 (very clean) to 0 (highly corrupt).Although it is already included in the NIT's democracy scores, the level of corruption in the respective countries as measured by the TICPI is also given here as a separate indicator – for simplicity's sake, it has been covered to a 100 to 0 scale for all years shown in the table – in order to address the importance of this factor of democratisation, which is often used as an expression of not only the existing level of corruption in the public sector but also as a reflection of the general stability of democratic institutions and the rule of law in the respective countries.

2. Country developments

The 2019 year in **Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)** marked yet another period of post-electoral political stagnation. This trend was best demonstrated by the months-long chaos of the absence of a state-level government following the 2018 general election (See previous Briefs). In mid-November, the political stalemate, which was sparked by disagreements over BiH's inclusion in the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), unexpectedly came to an end. Bosnia and Herzegovina took the big step in addressing its leadership deficit when a member of the Bosnian Serb ruling Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) Zoran Tegeltija was nominated as prime minister on November 19[thvi] and, later on, appointed as the new President of the Council of Ministers (the state-level government) which was officially set up on 23rd December.[vii] Furthermore, the judiciary had its own controversy of the year. The Chairman of the High Judicial and Fiscal Council (HJPC), Milan Tegeltija (who is not in any blood relation to Zoran Tegeltija) faced allegations of corruption in a widely publicised case. Amid minor protests and calls for his resignation, the lack of viable measures for his dismissal allowed him to remain in office, raising further questions about the legitimacy of the judiciary[viii]. Meanwhile, persistent tension between the political actors of Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially the leaders of Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the perpetual stagnation and instability of the country have been overshadowed by the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Starting around March 10, 2020, all political reactions, regardless of whether they were coming from Bosniaks, Serbs or Croats, along with news reports, began to concentrate almost exclusively on the spread of the troublesome virus in the country. According to Government projections, Bosnia and Herzegovina's economy is expected to fall to between -3.3% and -5% in 2020 due to the coronavirus outbreak.[ix]

Kosovo had a convulsive year in 2019, marked by a weak, unstable and ineffective coalition government. Furthermore, all attempts to establish a new dynamic and continue the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue were fruitless in 2019, as efforts were generally undermined by insufficient planning, poor timing and lack of consensus.[x] Furthermore, Germany and France did not initiate a new round of talks over the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue via the Berlin Summit.[xi] The appointment of the US ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, as a special envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue in October 2019 was seen as a significant development.[xii] However, Grenell's attempt to renew the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue after nearly two years suddenly failed when just two days before a scheduled meeting with Vučić in Washington on 27 June the special international prosecutor indicted Kosovo's President Thaçi for war crimes committed against Serb civilians in Kosovo.[xiii]

The government of Kosovo introduced some reforms aimed at strengthening democracy and civil society in Kosovo although reform efforts were largely stalled due to the lack of political will[xiv]. Weaknesses in the overall functioning of the Kosovo Assembly/Parliament persisted, including interruptions and delays in legislative action due to the deeply divided political nature of the Assembly (ibid). The country had Parliamentary elections on 6 October 2019 following the resignation of the Prime Minister Haradinaj on 19 July after he was questioned by the International Tribunal in the Hague as a suspect for war crimes.[xv] The results of the election led to a significant change in Kosovo's political landscape.

The two former opposition parties won the largest number of votes, while all governing parties lost. Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (VV) came first, followed closely by Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës (LDK), thus leaving the coalition partners of the previous government behind.[xvi] The two parties formed a coalition government and lbin Kurti, (VV-LDK governing coalition) became the prime minister of Kosovo in February 2020. However, just 51 days later, the

Assembly of Kosovo passed a motion of no confidence in Kurti's Government. The coalition between the VV and LDK seemed to be fragile from the start and broke down after Kurti dismissed the LDK's interior minister following a dispute over the handling of coronavirus prevention measures. Consequently, on June 3 2020, the parliament of Kosovo voted to install a new prime minister, Avdullah Hoti, who is from the centre-right Democratic League of Kosovo.[xvii]

In 2019, **Montenegro** experienced a reversal of its overall democratisation as a result of a series of simultaneous constitutional conflicts and scandals in all facets of society. The year began with numerous local environmental protests, followed by major political protests against the government (prompted by explosive corruption revelations) and ended with huge demonstrations by the Serbian Orthodox Church and its adherents against the new Law on Religious Freedoms. Moreover, a number of controversial appointments were made by the Parliament in 2019. For instance, Sreten Radonjic was appointed as Head of the Agency for Human Data Protection (ACD), following his shortcomings as Head of the Agency for corruption prevention. He further appointed Zorica Kalezić as a Vice Governor of the Central Bank of Montenegro, despite the fact that the court case contesting the illegal dismissal of the previous vice governor was still ongoing.[xviii] Furthermore, in 2019, a court in Montenegro found 13 Russians, Serbians and Montenegrins guilty of an attempted coup against the Djukanović government in 2016[xix]. As a result, in May, two Montenegrin opposition Democratic Front leaders, Andrija Mandić and Milan Knežević, were each sentenced to five years in prison. However, Mandić and Knežević, who denounced the verdict as Djukanovic's political plot, were not imprisoned and have remained free with the right to appeal.[xx] They were both very active in founding the broad oppositional coalition which won the Parliamentary election in August 2020 (see below).

Meanwhile, Montenegro has entered the eighth year since the start of EU accession negotiations. However, the country has not achieved the anticipated results at this stage, as it continues to face major challenges in reaching EU standards. Consequently, Montenegro did not open or provisionally close any chapters during 2019, for the first time since the start of negotiations. The beginning of 2020 was marked by the continuation of the crisis caused by religious demonstrations (supported by the Montenegrin opposition) against the adoption of a new religious law in December 2019. [xxi] Under the law, the State will take over the property of a religious community if it cannot prove its ownership from before 1918, when the Kingdom of Montenegro joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes that was renamed to Yugoslavia in 1929.[xxii] This however led to the first electoral defeat of Djukanovic's ruling DPS since the first Montenegrin multi-party election in 1990 in the Parliamentary elections held on 30 August 2020.

The study of political trends in **Serbia** during 2019 indicates that patterns from previous years have persisted. However, the absence of elections gave political life in Serbia this year a slightly different dynamic compared to previous years (see this JM Chair's Brief No. 2/2018-19), which revolved around electoral campaigns. Nevertheless, public discourse continued to deteriorate throughout the year driven by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SPS) attempts to suppress political discussion. Its officials did not hesitate to even publicly 'protest' against the opposition activities as did the minister of defence Aleksandar Vulin and Belgrade Deputy Mayor Goran Vesić on 11 April when they began a hunger strike in protest against the supposed violence of anti-government protesters. However, they abandoned the hunger strike after intervention by the Serbian and SPS president Vučić the next day. [xxiii]

As in previous years, the same comments have been replicated in the studies and statements from the institutions and officials of the European Union regarding Serbia, suggesting that there has been little change in freedom of

the media, the rule of law, corruption and democratic institutions.[xxiv] Moreover, the report from the watchdog organisation, Freedom House, put Serbia, together with Hungary and Montenegro, for the first time in many years in the category of "hybrid regimes" rather than democracies due to declining standards in governance, justice, elections and media freedom.[xxv] The policies of President Vučić did not yield a successful outcome regarding tensions with Kosovo as well. Alongside the handling of the coronavirus crisis, the Parliamentary elections which were held on 21 June were the main political events in the country in the first half of 2020. The elections were von by Vučić's SPS, which scored one of Europe's biggest landslides, with a 53-point difference with the party that came in second, its coalition partner the Socialist party of Serbia (SPS).[xxvi] The turnout was very low at 49% as the main opposition parties boycotted the elections.[xxvii]

After the unsuccessful attempt in June, US special envoy Grenell succeeded in bringing Sebia's and Kosovo's leaders to the negotiation table in Washington and opening a new chapter in their tumultuous relationship. On 4 September, Serbian President Vucic and Kosovo's Prime Minister Hoti reached a landmark agreement on mainly economic issues under the auspices of Grenell and US President Trump.[xxviii] Both sides agreed to continue working on earlier agreements on restoring air and rail links. They also agreed to start building new connecting roads and highways.

In the course of 2019, **North Macedonia** recorded a degree of democratic change amid increasing public discontent with the ruling coalition, which had agreed to restore the rule of law (see Brief No. 2/2018-19). The main event of the year was the implementation of the constitutional changes in January, stipulated by the Prespa Agreement between North Macedonia and neighbouring Greece in 2018. The country's name was thus changed from "the Republic of Macedonia" to "the Republic of North Macedonia," paving the way for the beginning of the NATO accession

process, which had been pending since the Greek veto was imposed due to the naming issue in 2008. However, despite the name-change deal with Greece, the European Union refused to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania at the European Council summit on 17-18 October, even though the former was previously (officially) denied the opening of negotiations only due to the Greek veto over the 'naming issue'. The opposition at the Summit was led by French President Macron who claimed that the EU enlargement process needed substantial restructuring before negotiations with these two countries could be opened.[xxix] Meanwhile, the presidential elections were held on 21 April 2019 which led to the victory of the ruling coalition candidate, Stevo Pendarovski. There were fewer problems in the vote than in previous polls.[xxx] Around the same time as the presidential elections, there were also municipal elections for three vacant mayoral seats. In all three races, the incumbent parties prevailed. In general, 2019 year was much less eventful in terms of public demonstrations in North Macedonia than the previous years. Noteworthy is the first-ever Pride Parade in the country which took place in June, continuing with full support from the authorities and without any disturbance.[xxxi]

2020 year has been much more important regarding the country's progress in Euro-Atlantic integration. After a protocol on accession to NATO membership was granted in February 2019, following the signing of the Prespa agreement, the parliaments of all NATO-member states had voted to ratify the country's membership, and Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski signed the final accession document for the country's entry into the alliance on March 20.[xxxii] Furthermore, the EU finally gave its formal approval for the beginning of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania in March 2020. Last of all, in the midst of a coronavirus outbreak, early parliamentary elections were held on July 15 2020. The ruling Social Democrats (SDSM)-led coalition won 36.3 percent. The Social Democrats' closest rival, the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE, won 34.9 percent and the ethnic

Albanian party, Democratic Integration Union (DUI) came third with 11.48%.[xxxiii] Consequently, the SDSM and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) agreed to form a coalition government. On August 31 2020, the parliament of North Macedonia approved the country's new government cabinet led by (incumbent) Prime Minister Zoran Zaev.[xxxiv]

Democracy in **Albania** weakened in 2019, raising long-standing concerns over growing authoritarianism and fragmented processes for regulating and managing government forces (see Brief No. 2/2018-19). After a year of public protests, legislative boycotts and a tumultuous political climate, the radicalised political atmosphere was further intensified with the boycott of local elections by the opposition on 30 June 2019.[xxxv] After months of political turmoil, the opposition parties refused to take part in the elections, accusing the government and the Prime Minister of buying votes and relations with criminal organisations that contributed to victory for the Socialist Party in previous elections. President Ilir Meta attempted to postpone the election date to 13 October following a number of demonstrations organised by opposition parties, some of which turned out to be violent. However, the Government and the Central Election Commission of Albania did not accept the president's view and decided to continue with the process on the set date. The ruling Socialists won in all municipalities except Finiq (Southern Albania).[xxxvi] The second half of 2019 was dominated by tensions between the president and the parliamentary majority led by Prime Minister Edi Rama, which in November escalated further when constitutional judges were chosen.[xxxvii] Since the outbreak of the coronavirus in Albania, all activities and gatherings were cancelled and the only channels for political communication have been mass media and social networks. The Albanian government introduced a full lockdown of the whole country just one week after the first reported cases of COVID-19 on 13 March 2020.[xxxviii]

The parliamentary elections in **Moldova,** which were held on February 24 2019 were the most important political event of the year. Of the 101 seats in Parliament, 35 were won by the PSRM (Socialist Party), 30 by the PDM (Democratic Party) and 26 by the pro-European electoral bloc ACUM (see Brief No. 2/2018-19). In June, two parties of radically different visions – the pro-Russian PSRM and pro-European ACUM —created a "compromise alliance" to overthrow the oligarchic system of the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM).[xxxix] PSRM leader Zinaida Greceanîi was elected as Speaker of Parliament, while PAS leader Maia Sandu was elected as Prime Minister. The new government prosecuted key figures from the former regime, such as the PDM leader and powerful oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc, who has fled the country. However, the new alliance between the two parties was very weak and lasted just five months, collapsing in November 2019, following a vote of no confidence by the PSRM.[xl] This restored a formal alliance between the PDM and the PSRM, as the two parties were united to establish a new government, with former PSRM leader and current President Igor Dodon's advisor - Ion Chicu - serving as Prime Minister. The coalition also started the process of changing the leadership and governance of key state institutions such as the PDM-controlled Intelligence and Security Service (SIS). However, this attempt has failed, as the PSRM and Dodon have effectively placed their own loyalists in these institutions.[xli] And, according to the Freedom House, by the end of the year, Moldova was on the verge of a hybrid regime with strong features of an authoritarian system.[xlii]

The start of 2020 was as turbulent as the previous year in Moldovan politics. In March, a new coalition government was formed between the PDM and the League of Democratic Parties of Moldova.[xliii] The outbreak of the corona virus crisis resulted in the government requesting urgent financing from international lenders and the EU to implement restrictive emergency measures.[xliv] As part of the EU's global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Republic of Moldova will receive over €87 million to support immediate and short-term needs.[xlv]

In 2019, **Ukraine** had the first peaceful transfer of parliamentary and presidential power after the Euromaidan event in 2014 (see Brief No. 2/2018-19). The new Government adopted a pro-European and pro-reform approach, focusing once again on counter-corruption, economic development and peacebuilding in the region of Eastern Donbas which has been under separatists' control. The new parliament, which comprises more than three-quarters of newly elected members, has been headed, for the first time since Ukraine's independence, by a single party majority of President Zelenskiy's newly-founded People's Party. The Cabinet also includes mainly new representatives to the public sector with the average age being 39, and the youngest minister just 28 years old.[xlvi] With the single party majority, the Parliament has speeded up the legislative process, often avoiding debate and ignoring other parties' opinions or inputs.[xlvii] A number of improvements to the framework of Ukraine's electoral process have been adopted, including an open and closed party list system for the proportional representation of parliamentary elections, as well as a new system for municipal elections which is determined by the size of each municipality. In September, the High Court for Anti-corruption (HAC) was created to proceed on cases investigated by the Anti Corruption Bureau NABU.[xlviii] Through the HAC in place, Ukraine has completed its institutional structure to handle high-level corruption criminal investigations and the court is now hearing the first infamous proceedings. Progress in the Donbas talks on peacebuilding became Zelenskiy's key focus. On 29 December 2019 the exchange of 35 prisoners of war and mariners captured by the Russian Border Guard in the Azov Sea in November 2018, was the first successful move.[xlix] Moreover, after a 3-year break, President Zelenskiy's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in December 2019 restored the 'Normandy Format' for the resolution of the Donbas war, established by the leaders of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine who met informally during the celebration of the 70 year anniversary of the D-Day in Normandy in 2014. However, developments on the 'domestic front' did not

progress as expected and hoped for and, on March 4 2020, President Zelenkiy fired his entire cabinet of ministers, including finance, foreign and defence ministers for their poor performance.[l]

Georgia's strongest hit in 2019 was the violent displacement of anti-government demonstrations in June. Anger erupted when Sergei Gavrilov, the Speaker of the Russian Duma, addressed an assembly of Orthodox Christian countries from the Parliament of Georgia (see Brief No. 2/2018-19). Democratic stagnation within Georgia was followed by increasing dissatisfaction of the people with the government's socio-economic policies. The two major political parties, the governing Georgian Dream and the United National Movement (UNM), and their informal leaders Bidzina Ivanishvili and Mikheil Saakashvili respectively, intensified political division in 2019, further radicalising the political arena. Significant developments took place in Georgia's media and judicial system during 2019. The method of hiring new Supreme Court judges was criticised as non-transparent and politically motivated by opposition and civil society. Following constitutional changes and revisions to Georgia's Organic Law on Common Courts, the total number of judges in the Supreme Court increased to 28. Around the same time, ten-year mandates were changed to lifetime terms, and the High Council of Justice was given the power to recommend candidates for parliamentary appointment.[li]Furthermore, a number of notorious cases have raised further suspicions about politicising the justice system, such as money laundering charges against Georgia's major commercial bank and a family member associated with Georgian opposition TV channel - TV Pirveli.[lii] The year was also marked by continued and intensified youth activism, and several political and social protests, such as the two weeks of protests over electoral reform in November.[liii] The protestors demanded the electoral reform to come into force in 2020 instead of the scheduled 2024, which would allow the country to move from the so-called single-mandate constituency to a proportional constituency. 2020 is a decisive

year for Georgia's democracy with the parliamentary elections scheduled for 31 October. The new parliament will possibly be more pluralistic because of a more proportional electoral structure and an election threshold of 1%. After the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, Georgia received rare plaudits for its response to the crisis.[liv] On June 30 2020, the European Union included Georgia in the list of 15 non-EU nations to open the borders with. With a total population of 3.7 million, Georgia has reported fewer than 1,000 cases of Covid-19 and only 15 people have died as at July 2020.[lv]

Belarus has an authoritarian and highly centralised regime headed by President Aleksander Lukashenko, who has been holding office for 25 years. The president and his administration exercise unquestioned power without any legislative or judicial controls. There were no substantial changes in the functioning of the government or in the political environment of the country throughout 2019. In November 2019, parliamentary elections were held 10 months earlier than planned. This decision was made without meeting the constitutional conditions of holding early elections.[lvi] The legislative campaign itself was carried out in a regulated, uncompetitive and non-transparent way.[lvii] Some of the leading contenders, including the only two members of the parliament from the opposition, were banned from running because of minor technical errors. Therefore, no member of the opposition secured the new parliamentary seats. President Lukashenko has constantly been campaigning for the August presidential election and claimed that a lockdown for the coronavirus would be inefficient, unjustified and bad for business and society in Belarus. This has been criticised by the World Health Organisation which stated that Belarus expressed a 'lack of appropriate social reduction initiatives' to fight the coronavirus pandemic.[lviii] After president Lukashenko declared victory in the August Presidential election, the Belarusian Democracy Movement, which comprises the opposition groups and individuals, organised mass protests across the country, which is still

ongoing as of 9 September 2020. Opposition presidential candidate, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya claimed that she has won the elections and formed a Coordination Council to facilitate the peaceful transfer of power, but Lukashenko does not have plans to step down.[lix] Moreover, the protestors have faced violent persecution and according the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, there have been reports of 450 documented cases of torture and ill-treatment of people.[lx] The EU refused to recognise the election results and imposed sanctions on Lukashenko's regime.[lxi] Charles Michel, President of the European Council, made clear that the EU did not recognise the outcome of the elections and requested president Lukashenko to release hundreds of protesters who have been imprisoned.

During 2019 the already poor condition of freedom of speech and media freedom in **Azerbaijan** continued to deteriorate. However, according to Freedom House, electoral process rating slightly improved from 1.00 to 1.25 as opposition candidates increased their participation in the December local election.[lxii] The government continued to detain and prosecute opposition leaders and independent journalists, despite the release of a number of political prisoners in 2019. The year started with a big wave of support for imprisoned journalist and blogger Mehman Huseynov.[lxiii] When new charges were suddenly brought against Huseynov just two months before his planned release, Baku's biggest protest in years was held on 19 January and the government immediately backed down, dropped the charges and released the journalist as expected on 2nd March. Moreover, Azerbaijan is negotiating a new Cooperation Deal with the EU. Talks started in 2017, and diplomats from both Azerbaijan and the EU expressed hope in 2019 that an agreement would soon be concluded.[lxiv] Experts indicated that institutional changes and prisoner pardon could be measured to boost Azerbaijan's position at the negotiation table by demonstrating improvements in the country's economic climate and human rights situation. However, in his speech in November

2019, President Aliyev expressly opposed the concept of European integration, describing the EU as an economic crisis zone with anti-Islamic attitudes.[lxv]

2019 was the first year in which the post-revolutionary authorities in **Armenia** had consolidated their power to enact institutional reforms. The 2018 Velvet Revolution ended the Republican Party's (HHK) decades-long domination, culminated in snap parliamentary elections with the overwhelming mandate of the revolutionary political forces (The 'My Step' alliance led by current Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan) (see Brief No. 2/2018-19). After the Velvet Revolution, reforms occurred in almost all sectors. Those included schools, minimum wages, increased pensions and changes in conditions within the army. Regarding the judicial system, the Minister of Justice Rustam Badasyan, in collaboration with the local civil society groups and international organisations, such as the Venice Commission, developed a detailed "2019-2023 Strategy for Judicial and Legal Reforms."[lxvi] This document aims to establish an efficient and independent judicial system. Nonetheless, throughout 2019, local councils held many elections, all characterised as being largely free and fair.[lxvii]

The fight against corruption is slowly becoming institutionalised. Armenia does not have a single anti-corruption body according to the new authorities' plans. However, the government has established a corruption reduction commission with legal powers to investigate and prosecute corrupt acts, which will be set up in 2021. In 2019, Armenia had difficulty stabilising its relations with Azerbaijan. The 2020 clashes between the Armenian and Azerbaijani Armed Forces started on July 12. Initial clashes have occurred at the Armenian-Azerbaijan State Border between Movses Province of Tavush. On 13 July, the clashes resulted in at least one civilian and 16 military victims on both Armenian and Azerbaijanian sides. [lxviii] The OSCE and the European Union have called on Azerbaijan and Armenia to cease fire. The escalation ended after a few days. The clashes highlighted once more the dangerous nature of the existing status quo around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

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