

LESSONS FROM BELARUS: HOW THE EU CAN SUPPORT CLEAN ELECTIONS IN MOLDOVA AND GEORGIA

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SUMMARY

- The European Union was largely on the sidelines when the Belarusian regime rigged the 2020 presidential election, but upcoming votes in Georgia and Moldova pose a different challenge.
- The EU should make use of its significant leverage in Georgia and Moldova to counter their ruling parties' extensive repertoire of electoral dirty tricks.
- The bloc will need to account for the obstacles created by the coronavirus crisis, not least the difficulty of conducting large-scale monitoring missions.
- The EU will also need to adjust to the ruling parties' use of pandemic assistance for political gain, and their efforts to prevent citizens abroad from voting.

Introduction

Elections can have enormous consequences beyond the transfer or legitimation of power. The election fraud in Belarus in August 2020 sparked the biggest protests in the country's history. Ultimately, the demonstrations may usher in a completely new political system and sense of national identity; President Alyaksandr Lukashenka may retain power by sacrificing national sovereignty to Russia, with massive implications for the security and well-being of all Belarus's neighbours. Either way, Belarus will not be the same again. And, while the European Union has been unable to shape the course of events in Belarus, it could play a more significant role in upcoming elections in Moldova and Georgia.

Other powers in the region may draw lessons from Belarus on the dangers of mass fraud. Russia's referendum on constitutional change in June and July also appeared to be marked by huge numbers of falsified votes – but that came before events in Belarus. The Russian authorities [claimed](#) a “Yes” vote of 77.9 per cent on a turnout of 68 per cent, while [independent calculations](#) put “Yes” at 65 per cent but turnout at just 42–45 per cent. In Belarus, a parallel vote count [gave](#) Lukashenka only 40.5 per cent and opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya 47.9 per cent, in stark contrast to the official figures of 80.1 per and 10.1 per cent respectively. The Kremlin may need to think carefully about how it will manage the next cycle of elections – for the Duma in 2021 and the presidency in 2024. “Manage” is the key word. These votes will involve fraud, but the regime will hide it better, by ensuring that there is a roster of new parties and candidates to draw the sting from protest votes.

The EU should learn different lessons. The bloc may have been on the sidelines during the egregious fraud in Belarus, but it has greater leverage to prevent such activity in the upcoming elections in Georgia and Moldova, two Eastern Partnership countries with which it has a much closer relationship. Conversely, given that influence, the elections will be a more direct test of the EU's credibility – and also of its ability to focus on more than one country in the neighbourhood at once, especially given that the protests and acts of repression in Belarus are far from over.

Georgia's next parliamentary election is scheduled for 31 October. It is a particularly significant vote, as constitutional changes in 2017 and 2018 have given parliament much more power than it once had: the next president will be chosen by an electoral college. Meanwhile, Moldova has a presidential election scheduled for 1 November – and may hold a snap parliamentary election, given that the government controls only 51 of 101 seats, and that disgraced oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc is actively working to undermine that majority. Under Moldovan law, the new president can dissolve parliament if the prime minister resigns and there are two failed attempts to find a successor.

The EU, the United States, and the Council of Europe brokered in March 2020 an agreement between Georgian parties on a new electoral system, an arrangement that provides a model of decisive EU influence – though the agreement is far from solid. The fact that public opinion in both Moldova and Georgia is more pro-EU than pro-Russian constrains local politicians' choices (even if it fluctuates somewhat). According to surveys conducted by the EU earlier this year, **63 per cent of Moldovans trust the EU**, while just 33 per cent trust the Eurasian Economic Union; and 49 per cent of Georgians **have** a positive image of the EU, while only 7 per cent a negative view. Even Plahotniuc, who is now in exile in the US, has tried to win back influence by portraying himself as Moldova's best hope for resuming a more reliably pro-European course.

Therefore, the EU will not be as marginal in Georgia and Moldova as it has been in Belarus. Nonetheless, there is a possibility that local elites will exploit the coronavirus pandemic to hide or justify fraud, such as voter suppression. The crisis makes it difficult for the international community to monitor elections with a large number of observers on the ground. Moldovan and Georgian citizens abroad may find it more difficult to return home, or to vote in host states. But the EU can work around the threat of the coronavirus if it engages in careful planning.

Informal practices

Neither Moldova nor Georgia traditionally experiences, or is likely to experience, the kind of mass fraud seen in Belarus. Direct manipulation of elections accounts for only a few percentage points of the vote in Moldova and Georgia. But that can

decide their outcome, as politics in both countries is highly polarised. In Moldova's 2016 presidential election, the margin of victory was 4 percentage points; in the first round of Georgia's 2018 presidential election, it was less than 1 percentage point.

The 2020 Moldovan presidential election will be a partial replay of 2016: once again, the leader of the pro-Russian Socialist Party, Igor Dodon, will face off against Maia Sandu, head of the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity. For almost a decade, politics in Georgia has been polarised between Georgian Dream on one side, and the United National Movement (UNM) of former president Mikheil Saakashvili and its successors on the other. In both countries, politics is dominated by what Georgian politician and political scientist Thorniké Gordadze calls “the politicisation of informal networks”^[1], by patronage practices beyond obvious vote-buying, and by so-called political technology – covert methods of political manipulation. Effective observation of, and pushback against, election manipulation requires much more than observation of the final vote count. Efforts to minimise fraud will demand effective early warnings of such activity, as well as scrutiny of all aspects of the campaign.

The last time around: Georgia

In both countries, polarised politics and dirty tricks have been a feature of political life for years. Georgian Dream, informally led by the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, has dominated Georgian politics since 2012. Indeed, the secret of Georgian Dream's success is no secret: money. “Even in 2012, Georgian Dream was not in power, but they had unlimited financial resources – much more than the governing party”, as Gordadze puts it.^[2] “In the whole country, politics is informal. The de facto head of state has no official function. It starts at the top.”^[3] In 2019 Georgian Dream received 84 per cent of all official donations for parties in Georgia – and, unofficially, even more. Bolstered by Ivanishvili's money, Georgian Dream won 85 seats out of 150 in the parliamentary election in 2012, before increasing its tally to 115 in 2016. The Georgian Dream candidate won the presidential elections in 2013 and 2018. Since Saakashvili's 2003–2013 tenure as president, the UNM and European Georgia have served as the main opposition parties. The UNM has nominated Saakashvili as its candidate for prime minister in 2020, but he remains a

polarising figure.

Georgia's 2016 and 2018 elections were marred by numerous dirty tricks. Vote-buying was common. In the 2018 presidential election, Georgian Dream's Salomé Zurbishvili and the UNM's Grigol Vashadze were separated by less than a percentage point after the first round. Most of the eliminated candidates backed Vashadze. The governing party extended the delay between rounds from two weeks to four, before buying votes and making use of its informal networks to help raise turnout by 9.5 percentage points. There was also an unprecedented financial intervention in the election: the Ivanishvili-linked Cartu Foundation provided mortgage debt relief of 1.5 billion lari (\$560m) to 600,000 individuals, or one-third of the adult population. Social media and public billboards were full of fake news stories claiming that Vashadze had worked for the KGB, as well as vicious attacks on "bloody killers" the *natsebi* (a play on "National Movement" that implies "Nazis"). Zurbishvili [won](#) the second round with 59.5 per cent of the vote.

Since then, the political environment has become even more polarised. Georgian Dream has created alliances of convenience with several pro-Russian and far-right groups – the Alliance of Patriots, Georgian March, the Alliance of Orthodox Parents, and Georgian Power – as well as anti-LGBT organisations managed by prominent nationalists Guram Palavandishvili and Levan Vasadze. Both sides have [used](#) social media for dirty tricks: Facebook posts intended to smear opponents, fake support pages that create the impression of solidarity with controversial groups, disinformation platforms designed to look like real news outlets, and local troll factories.

Between 2017 and 2019, a pro-government businessman gradually took over the main opposition TV channel, Rustavi 2. In 2018 thousands of young Georgians protested against heavy-handed police raids on nightclubs, a situation that escalated into a broader confrontation with the government. Even bigger demonstrations broke out in 2019 after a Russian Communist MP Sergey Gavrillov took the seat of the chair of the Georgian parliament during a meeting of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. Hundreds were arrested and injured in protests in June 2020, with the government using *zonderebi* (counter-demonstrators) to beat up and otherwise intimidate those who had taken to the streets. The hostility between the sides subsided after the government promised

political reform, but resumed in November after it appeared to backtrack on this – hence the importance of the March 2020 reforms.

The last time around: Moldova

Politics in Moldova was dominated by the Communist Party between 2000 and 2009, then by two iterations of a pro-European coalition. That coalition, however, was gradually taken over by the country's most powerful oligarch, Plahotniuc, and his Democratic Party of Moldova. Plahotniuc was ousted after the 2019 election, resulting in a short-lived, experimental grand coalition that included pro-European parties and the pro-Russian Socialist Party (which, since 2009, has drawn most of its votes from former supporters of the Communist Party). Dodon and Sandu had been rivals since he defeated her in the 2016 presidential election by 52.1 per cent to 47.9 per cent. But the Socialist Party abandoned the coalition in October 2019, and has governed with the remnants of the Democratic Party since then.

Recent Moldovan elections have involved large-scale vote-buying. In 2019 the government bussed in 37,000 voters from the occupied territories of Transnistria, while making it more difficult for Moldovans who lived abroad to vote. The local press continues to be dominated by Plahotniuc and the Socialist Party. Fake news and smear campaigns against the opposition are common. For instance, after Moldovan NGO Trolless exposed online chicanery in 2019, Facebook [shut down](#) 200 pages and accounts for “coordinated inauthentic behaviour” linked to “employees of the Moldovan government”.

Threats to the Georgian election this time around

Following clashes in Tbilisi in 2019, the Georgian Dream government promised to make concessions to protesters. The March 2020 election agreement [reduced](#) the number of parliamentary seats representing territorial constituencies from 73 to 30, as the opposition had always argued that the MPs who held these seats were more prone to bribery than those elected through proportional representation. Other elements of the deal include a “fair composition of election districts”, a reduction in the threshold for parliamentary representation from 5 per cent to 1 per cent, and a stipulation “that no single party that wins less than 40 per cent of

the votes should be able to get its own majority in the next parliament”. In a parallel statement, the main parties recognised “the necessity of addressing actions that could be perceived as inappropriate politicisation of Georgia’s judicial and electoral processes”. The opposition believed that this meant the release of its members whom they deemed to be political prisoners, although the agreement mentioned no names.

However, there remain many obstacles to free and fair elections. Parliament passed the electoral reform in June, but the legal system remains highly politicised. Although Zurabishvili pardoned opposition politicians Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili in March 2020, she continued to refer to them as common criminals. Ugulava is a former UNM mayor of Tbilisi, who had been sentenced to three years for embezzlement from the Municipal Development Fund; Okruashvili is a former defence minister who was sentenced to five years for participation in “group violence” during the 2019 protests. And opposition politician Giorgi Rurua [remains](#) in prison.

Georgian Dream now has what Gordadze calls a “well-organised voting machine that covers the whole country”.^[4] There are many forms of vote-buying and voter inducement that target poor voters or those who do not traditionally participate in elections, as well as the elderly, residents of remote regions, and ethnic minority groups. These techniques were key to the 9.5 percentage point rise in turnout between the two rounds of the 2018 election. Cash payments of up to 20–30 lari (€5–8) are common in parts of Georgia that are difficult to monitor. Even more important is a vast network of informal social assistance known as “onions and potatoes”, in which Georgian Dream coordinators distribute food packages to voters. And Georgian Dream operates a second network of local activists who resolve social and health problems in return for votes. Every district or neighbourhood “courtyard” has one.

The UNM maintained a similar network when it was in office, but Georgian Dream’s system is much better funded. It is also more effective at expanding into family and informal networks. And it collects data to ensure that it receives votes as promised. Georgian Dream even asks voters, especially state employees, to take pictures of their ballot papers on their phones to show that they voted for its candidates. (This may account for the high number of spoiled ballots, over 3 per

cent, at the last two elections.)

Georgian Dream networks also promise to deal with legal issues informally, often in coordination with criminals (both organised crime groups and petty criminals). The UNM promised a US-style “zero tolerance” law and order policy when it was in office, contributing to a rise in the number of people in prison to 24,000. Now, this number has fallen to between 6,000 and 7,000. Georgian Dream also uses criminals to “temporarily” confiscate opposition voters’ identity documents, to prevent them from voting. This has [contributed](#) to a [decline](#) in the police’s public approval rating from 67 per cent in 2011 to 43 per cent in December 2019, reversing some of the progress achieved by the radical transparency and accountability reforms of the Saakashvili era.

Ethnic minority groups – Armenians in the southern region of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Azerbaijanis in the eastern region of Kvemo Kartli – tend to live in relatively undeveloped areas. And some of their members, particularly the elderly, do not speak Georgian. Accordingly, they are more dependent than other citizens on patronage networks and state media outlets. As coronavirus measures have made it difficult to transport agricultural produce to cities, rural communities have become more dependent on state purchases. Georgian Dream even persuaded some Chechens in Pankisi Gorge to vote for it last time, despite the security forces’ controversial killing of a young local in January 2018.

Georgia has [performed](#) relatively well in the coronavirus crisis to date, recording only five deaths per million people (compared to 305 per million in neighbouring Armenia). However, the government has attempted to use the crisis for political gain. Four of the country’s five leading epidemiologists – who, understandably, are popular – have appeared at Georgian Dream campaign events. The party often recruits doctors and other influential professionals into its influence networks.

As Georgians who live abroad are historically more likely to support European Georgia or the UNM than Georgian Dream, the government has made it more difficult for them to return home to vote. When the EU opened its borders, Georgia did not follow suit. The government also reduced the number of flights between Georgia and the EU, even though large numbers of Georgians working in social care there have lost their jobs due to the virus. An estimated 70,000

Georgians, or 4 per cent of voters, want to return home, but those who do so are subject to two weeks in quarantine at a location chosen by the government.

The prospect that there will be fewer observers in the upcoming election than in previous ones – as seems likely – has raised fears that the government will appoint its own. There are few voting stations for Georgians abroad, particularly in southern Europe. And the government is not working hard to expand them. Voting abroad has become more difficult, and electoral records less accurate, since 2012.

The government has long used the Georgian Orthodox Church to mobilise voters, and as a source of propaganda. At Easter, when other virus measures were extremely strict (for example, no more than two people were allowed in a single car, and they could not sit next to each other), the government permitted the Church to hold communion, at which all parishioners sip from the same spoon. And a new law has distributed more land to the church.

Most of Russia's support for Georgian Dream is indirect. The Alliance of Patriots, Gordadze argues, “was created by Georgian Dream because they didn't want to be attacked as a pro-Russian party. So, they created a really pro-Russian party”.^[5] The Alliance of Patriots receives more funding than any party aside from Georgian Dream, along with support from state media outlets and the security services. In August 2020, a big scandal erupted when the party was found to have received money directly from Russian “curators” in occupied Abkhazia. The government **did nothing** in response. Meanwhile, nationalist and pro-Russian networks overlap online and among NGOs, often making use of the same fake news. These groups, particularly the Alliance of Patriots, regularly condemn the opposition for its purported dependence on the West.

Threats to the Moldovan election this time around

Like Georgia, Moldova **does not engage** in mass fraud. “The fraud is at the margins”, argues Vadim Pistrinciuc, a former MP with significant experience in Moldovan politics.^[6] Dodon is constrained by the possibility of post-election protests, albeit not ones on the scale of those in Belarus: a “few thousand protesters make a difference” in a relatively small country such as Moldova. Dodon, Pistrinciuc believes, “is learning that fraud should be well-hidden, somewhere

between the legal and the illegal – in the grey zone”.[7] This is especially true because the social mood is volatile due to the coronavirus crisis and mounting economic problems.

The biggest threat to fair elections in Moldova is that the government will once again bus in voters from Transnistria, as it did in 2019. These voters were [acclimatised](#) to an overwhelmingly pro-Russian and pro-Socialist media environment, and there is [video evidence](#) that most of them received side payments. The number of people the government bussed in could have been higher than the estimated 37,000: in 2019 both Plahotniuc and the Socialist Party ran buses, but the former used loyal police officers to stop some of his rival’s buses. As the Socialist Party is the only player this time around, it could bus in as many as 70,000 voters[8] – perhaps as a surprise move to win a close second round. This would constitute 4 per cent of the electorate, or roughly the number of votes that separated the contenders in the 2016 presidential election (67,488).

Like their Georgian counterparts, Moldovans living abroad are relatively likely to vote for the opposition. In the special constituency for voters in Europe in the 2019 parliamentary election, Sandu won 81 per cent of the vote. The 10 per cent of the electorate who live abroad could easily decide a close contest.[9] Pistrinciuc contends that, while the government is not legally restricting the vote from abroad, it is also “not working proactively to increase the number of polling stations”.[10] With its decision on how many polling stations to operate due before the end of September, the government is using the coronavirus as an excuse for passivity.

It could also use the pandemic as a pretext for introducing stricter border controls before the election. The government could impose restrictions on citizens returning to Moldova while there is still a large number of new cases – or even postpone the vote altogether.

Moldovan media outlets lean heavily towards the governing party. Five TV channels are still controlled by Plahotniuc, and two by his oligarch ally Ilan Șor, the man widely blamed for the notorious theft of \$1 billion from Moldovan banks in 2014. Șor also cross-subsidises Plahotniuc’s media channels. These channels are relatively neutral for now, but this is only because Plahotniuc and Șor are

negotiating with the Socialists for immunity and continued political influence. The Socialist Party controls three TV channels, its proxies are partners in the main local channel that rebroadcasts Russian TV, and it also dominates official state TV.

The governing party has directly copied the Kremlin's online tactics to develop a complex ecosystem of trolls and fake news outlets. It uses anonymous attack sites and Facebook accounts to push fake news and impersonate and harass the opposition. Such accounts often [work](#) in tandem with legitimate ones to flood the online debate. Fake news in the 2016 election included attacks on the unmarried Sandu's sexuality and a story about her concluding a secret agreement with German Chancellor Angela Merkel to admit 30,000 Syrian refugees to Moldova. In the 2020 campaign, the main trope of such fabrications is that Sandu intends to sell Moldovan land to foreigners. This combines with the now-standard Russian-backed formula of attacking purported external governance by high-profile foreigners such as George Soros – and of accusing local reformers and NGOs of being their puppets. For example, one recent story is [headlined](#) “The Soros network established its own party in Moldova for M. Sandu – PAS [the Party of Action and Solidarity]”.

In Moldova, as in Georgia, parties sometimes buy votes with cash. A more widespread, sophisticated, and pernicious technique is the “social groceries” system pioneered by Şor in his home city of Orhei. There, he replicated a system created by political technologists who worked for Leonid Chernovetsky, mayor of Kyiv from 2006 to 2012. Chernovetsky was notorious for handing out *grechka* (buckwheat) – free goods at elections – and for overseeing *sitky* (networks or grids) that acted as local vote-framing pyramid schemes. In Moldova, such schemes are also called *grechka*, or *macaroni* or *tushonka* (preserved meat). They centre on stores that sell such cheap goods, but require users to register. Those behind the schemes use the data the stores collect to distribute special offers – and to make contact with them at election time. *Sitky* use special buses to transport voters to polling stations. The distribution of goods takes place through shops, buses, or local mayors just before elections. As in Georgia, the ruling party has established a network of local “brigadiers”, who run the networks and build up long-term relationships, providing special offers on birthdays and public holidays rather than just administering one-off bribes. Şor also attempts to boost his public image by

running a charity, Miron Şor.

In another parallel with Georgia, the ruling party targets the elderly and the economically vulnerable. And it also focuses on ethnic minority groups, especially the Gagauz in southern Moldova, and Ukrainians and Russians in villages in the north.

The government uses public funds to target the same networks. It will make special coronavirus payments of €35 per person in September and October – not in spring, when the virus was at its peak. And it has already made such payments to medical workers. All of them are marked as being “on the initiative of the president”, who tries to claim credit for all public works. The popularity of the Socialist government is declining due to the virus and the ensuing economic crisis, which have hit Moldova harder than Georgia. Nonetheless, the “Şor method” tends to have a greater impact on vulnerable citizens than the rest of the population.

Russia’s support is a much more obvious factor in Moldova than in Georgia. Dodon frequently travels to Moscow. Russian media outlets and the Moldovan version of the Russian First channel – 47 per cent of which is owned by a Socialist Party proxy – closely align with Socialist Party propaganda. The Orthodox Church in Moldova (formally known as the Metropolis of Chişinău and All Moldova) is part of the Russian parent church, and is much bigger than the rival Metropolis of Bessarabia, centred on Romania. The Orthodox Church in Moldova is extremely conservative and echoes the Socialist Party’s anti-European narrative on external governance. And Dodon has been [filmed](#) admitting that his party received \$700,000 per month from Gazprom and then Russian deputy prime minister Dmitry Kozak. Russia has dispatched sociologists to work with Dodon on creating opinion polls and handling voter data, and is pressing the Transnistrian authorities to back him.

Political technology also plays a role in Moldova. While Sandu had a relatively clear run at Dodon in 2016, the Socialist Party is now promoting other candidates to split the opposition vote. Centre-right candidates other than Sandu receive a lot of air time on media outlets controlled by the Socialist Party.

Policy recommendations: Georgia

The EU should closely monitor the implementation of Georgia’s March 2020

agreement, as well as its parallel statement on the abuse of judicial power. Saakashvili's return to Georgia would almost certainly result in his arrest, and renewed controversy over judicial impartiality.

All European bodies engaged in election observation should plan for the practical difficulties involved. As parties sometimes attempt to manipulate the result before polling day, European election observers should engage with their local counterparts to identify which “informal practices” they should look out for. And they should provide these local observers with help and an audience – rather than just focusing on complaints from opposition parties.

It is very important for the European observation mission to be large enough to look beyond the main cities, given that most vote-buying happens in poor and remote areas. And it should work to ensure that ethnic minority groups receive election information in their own languages.

The mission should keep a close eye on the Central Election Commission. Since 2013, the commission has been headed by Tamar Zhvania, who has received unexplained salary increases. And the commission seems to have a record of favouring Georgian Dream. In 2016 it initially appeared unlikely that Georgian Dream proxy party the Alliance of Patriots would reach the 5 per cent threshold for representation. But its share of the vote slowly went up, to exactly 5.01 per cent.

Media monitoring will be especially important for the observation mission. Both the government and the opposition have used fake news, trolls, and propaganda channels to disseminate disinformation – mostly in the Georgian language – and ensure it enters the mainstream.

The EU should help Georgians in the EU cast their vote. In Greece, this is only possible at the embassy in Athens and the consulate in Thessaloniki; in France, only in Paris; and, in Italy, only in Rome – despite the fact that most Georgians in the country live in the north. The EU could provide assistance in this to Georgians living in cities such as Milan, Naples, Marseille, and Strasbourg, partly by establishing facilities that allow for safe social distancing. The bloc has a moral obligation to offer them help, particularly as it introduced visa-free travel to the Schengen Area for Georgians in 2017.

Policy recommendations: Moldova

The EU should discourage election fraud in Moldova partly by issuing a pre-election joint statement that it will not accept the results of a compromised vote. In parallel, EU member states should open more polling stations for Moldovans in their territory and declare their support for Moldova's democratic process (which would reduce the chance that the government in Chişinău will accuse these countries of obstructing the election). As with the Georgian vote, the establishment of large, open polling spaces will be necessary for social distancing.

The EU should view voting from Transnistria as an election abuse issue, not as a welcome step in conflict resolution. The standard line from the Venice Commission is that voters in occupied territories should not be allowed to exercise their right to vote, despite being citizens – because the central government cannot guarantee a level playing field for all candidates. Accordingly, the EU should work to prevent Moldovan parties from bussing in voters from Transnistria. At the very least, the bloc should announce that it expects the Moldovan police to uphold the law by asking voters for identity documents – as is within their power – and the Central Election Commission to do so by dispatching its own buses to collection points on the small areas of the left bank of the Dniester (which is controlled by Chişinău).

The EU should immediately begin planning an election observation mission in Moldova. If necessary, this should involve contingencies in which observers enter quarantine at home upon their return from the country. A small European Parliament observer mission provides a better model for this than a larger-scale one in the style of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. The mission should arrive in Moldova as soon as possible – weeks rather than days before the election – to ensure proper monitoring of all informal practices.

The EU should also help fund an exit poll in Moldova. This is because the ruling party appears to have used the Russian-backed IMAS-Chișinău, which dominates the national polling industry, to promote its favoured candidates and legitimise fraudulent results.

The EU should also provide more support to local Moldovan NGOs that counter propaganda and fake news. These organisations have improved their methodology from rebuttals to short videos, without receiving too much in the way of extra funding. But extra funding would help.

A moderate amount of EU attention and leverage will go a long way in Georgia and Moldova. It will also affect the general climate throughout the region, particularly if the situation in Belarus deteriorates. Anti-reform forces in Ukraine are growing stronger, sensing opportunity and impunity. A political transition in Belarus, or the opposite, will also call into question the current shape of the Eastern Partnership. The EU should ensure that it supports clean elections in the two Eastern Partnership countries in which democratic forces still contest votes, and in the grey areas between deteriorating democracy and potential autocracy.

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Andrew Wilson is a professor of Ukrainian studies at UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies. A new edition of his book *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* will be published next year, covering recent events.

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[1] ECFR interview with Thorniké Gordadze, 4 September 2020.

[2] ECFR interview with Thorniké Gordadze, 4 September 2020.

[3] ECFR interview with Thorniké Gordadze, 4 September 2020.

[4] ECFR interview with Thorniké Gordadze, 4 September 2020.

- [5] ECFR interview with Thorniké Gordadze, 4 September 2020.
- [6] ECFR interview with Vadim Pistrinciuc, 4 September 2020.
- [7] ECFR interview with Vadim Pistrinciuc, 4 September 2020.
- [8] ECFR interview with Valeriu Paşa, 7 September 2020.
- [9] ECFR interview with Valeriu Paşa, 7 September 2020.
- [10] ECFR interview with Vadim Pistrinciuc, 4 September 2020.

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