

GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE

Motto: "Opinions are free, but not mandatory" I.L. Caragiale



Interview with Dr. Daniel S. Hamilton: "A reinvented transatlantic partnership will demand more, not less, of Europe."

Interview with His Excellency George Cristian MAIOR, the Romanian Ambassador to the USA: "One of the Most Important Aspects of the US-Romania Strategic Partnership is its Vitality."

The United Nations @75: A time for Solidarity, a Time for Action

Aegean angst: Greece and Turkey's dangerous Eastern Mediterranean game

Lebanon: Revolution, Clientelism, Confessionalism or the Difficult Road to Reform

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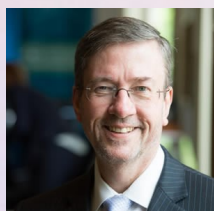
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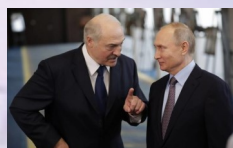
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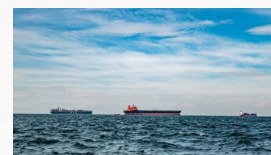


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EDITORIAL



The International Order that the New American Administration and the Euro-Atlantic Community Will Be Faced With

Constantin IACOBIȚĂ

During his intervention – via videoconference – at the final plenary session of the 17th annual meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club that took place on October 20-22, 2020 in Moscow, president Vladimir Putin drew attention on one key issue. The Russian leader stated that the era when the United States and Russia decided on the world's most important issues was in the past, while China and Germany were now heading for superpower status.

On the other side of the Atlantic, on October 20, 2020 the secretary of defence Mark Esper discussed – via videoconference as well – with the chairman of the Atlantic Council in Washington D.C. about the role allies and partners play in US national security. Mark Esper stressed that the number one priority of his mandate has been implementing the National Defence Strategy (NSS), which showed that “we are now in an era of great power competition, with our primary competitors being China and Russia” (the other two enduring threats mentioned by the NSS in 2018 include rogue countries such as North Korea and Iran, and Violent Extremist Organizations).

In order to prepare the Department of Defence for these challenges, said Mark Esper, the NSS set three main lines of effort and ten related targeted goals. Strengthening alliances and building partnerships, as well as reforming the Department where two of the main lines of effort, while focusing on China was one of the ten related targeted goals. The secretary of defence also revealed a brand-new Department of Defence Guidance for Development of Alliances and Partnerships. And, since in the Euro-Atlantic area we have NATO, all the above highlight the focus on countering China – in the region and globally (mainly the Chinese investments under the One Belt One Road Initiative targeting Asia, Europe, Africa and the Americas).

The USA's strategic focus on Asia in general and China in particular is not new, and the priority given to great power competition precedes the presidency of Donald Trump. And, along with the elements above, it announces the demise of the otherwise short era of unipolar international order following the fall of the Berlin wall.

The quick downfall of the post-Cold War international order is shown by a series of relevant events enabled by the America-first approach of Trump administration, an approach that had a negative effect on the USA and its allies' capacity to defuse crisis situations crucial for the stability and security of some regions and the world.

Therefore, the future US administration “stands to inherit” an international order where:

- The Middle East and Northern Africa benefit from a US presence in decline, and with smaller effects when it comes to stabilization. From a European perspective that means a more important role for an EU that is already divided (both domestically and internationally - with relevant lack of consensus on Libya, Belarus or Nagorno-Karabakh) and weakened (mainly because of Brexit).
- The Iran nuclear deal with world powers has been significantly weakened by the USA withdrawal from it in 2018. More recently (18th of October 2020) expired the UN arms embargo on Iran, and the US efforts to extend the ban were ineffective (only one country on the 15-member panel of the U.N. Security Council supported it). Washington has threatened with sanctions anyone doing arms trade with Iran, but countries such as China or Russia are expected not to be discouraged and conclude conventional arms deals with Iran, each of them aiming to gain more influence in the region.
- The US and China are in the middle of a trade war, and the US-EU negotiations on bilateral trade show no significant progress.
- And not in the least, the dialogue between US and Russia on the security and control of nuclear weapons knows no progress. The latest treaty on further reduction and limitation of the US and Russia's strategic nuclear stockpiles, *New START* (signed in 2010), is about to expire on February 2021, and the ongoing negotiations show that a one-year extension will be the best-case scenario. It is worth mentioning that Trump administration's intention was to include China in a new strategic nuclear arrangement, but the latter firmly rejected such a prospect.

TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONSHIP

Interview with Dr. Daniel S. Hamilton: "A reinvented transatlantic partnership will demand more, not less, of Europe."

This year's edition of the Munich Security Conference, the main international event in the month of February and the last one with such direct high level participation before the COVID-19 pandemic being fully acknowledged, was defining for the way Europeans and Americans see the world and the transatlantic relationship.

The way the stage was set (the conference focused on „Westlessness”), the American and European representation (Great Britain absent and Germany not represented by its chancellor) and the views exposed led to a couple of relevant conclusions. The most obvious would be the US focus on the great power competition, and its calls to the European allies to join it against China in exchange for American reassurances on the transatlantic bond. The second would be the lack - otherwise known - of European Union unity and cohesion (the only representative EU and European leader on the conference stage was Emmanuel Macron of France, who presented a vision of Europe and its place in the world that was more French than European) that could translate into an even weaker European voice on the international stage, especially after Great Britain leaving the Union.



Dr. Daniel S. Hamilton, the Austrian Marshall Plan Foundation Distinguished Fellow and Director of the Global Europe Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, offered an insight into the challenges facing the European Union and the transatlantic relationship, in the interview he gave to *Geostrategic Pulse* Magazine.

Geostrategic Pulse: The unfolding great power competition, currently accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, is set to change the nature of international relations in the coming period. In your view, what are the main challenges that the European Union will face in the light of the above?

Daniel S. Hamilton: The first is for EU member states to stand together rather than apart when it comes to ensuring their societies and economies are safe and healthy as COVID-19 continues its unprecedented ravages. The EU's recovery package and related multi-year budget agreement were positive signs, but they have yet to be supported by the European Parliament, and delays cost lives and money. It is still unknown how EU members will work together once a vaccine is developed and is ready for broad distribution.

The second priority is for the EU and its member states to ensure that they can ride the wave of technological changes that are sweeping the globe, rather than being overwhelmed by them. Europe must unleash innovation to ensure that European societies stay at the technological frontier, rather than try vainly to wall itself off from such developments.

The third priority is for the EU to hold together at a time when the European experiment, while still ground-breaking and attractive in many ways, has lost a good deal of its cohesive, transformative power. For more Europeans, "ever closer Union" is neither inevitable nor necessarily desirable, the "Europe of institutions" seems unprepared to tackle down-home challenges, and the slogan "more Europe" prompts more questions than answers. A European Union whose societies are once again defining and delineating themselves from each other is not one willing or able to integrate additional societies knocking on its door.

Being aware of Great Britain's military and economic power, as well as its internationally recognised influence, how do you think the

European Union, in this post-Brexit context, will be perceived - and dealt with - on the international stage by relevant actors like China, Russia, Iran, Turkey?

That depends entirely on whether the EU and the UK prove capable of creating new arrangements that harness their collective strengths, or allow bickering to dominate their relationship. Brexit will diminish the UK's role in Europe, its importance to the United States, and its role in the world. The EU will also feel the UK's loss. British firms have played a disproportionate role in areas such as defense, aviation/space, new technologies, education and services that are strategically important to the EU's ability to play a role beyond European shores and to remain globally competitive. The UK alone accounts for almost half of the EU's military transport aircraft and airborne early warning and control planes. The loss of the UK's command, control, intelligence, reconnaissance, diplomatic and power projection capabilities will render the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy less capable and the Union less able to combat terrorism and transnational crime. The UK's departure could weaken the resolve of remaining EU states on Russian sanctions. The loss of the City of London as the EU's global financial center will affect the availability and cost of financial services and capital. Brexit not just diminishes EU capacity; it is one more factor contributing to a Europe that could become even more fractured and anxious.

How do you see the transatlantic relationship in this environment? In what domains should Washington and Brussels work more together in order to restore trust for an enhanced cooperation?

If Donald Trump is re-elected he will continue to treat the EU as a foe, seek to play EU member states off against each other. He is likely to further hollow out the NATO Alliance. The agenda will not be about restoring trust, it will be about limiting the damage from certain divorce.

If Joe Biden is elected the US and the EU have an opportunity to build a true strategic partnership that can address the unparalleled damage wrought by the coronavirus, the fissures that have opened up within and between our societies, the assault on our principles and our institutions being waged by revisionist powers such as Russia and China, and challenges of global scale that no country, no

matter how mighty, can deal with effectively alone. Those include climate change, restoring a functioning trading system, dealing with conflicts across the broader Middle East, and other topics. On all of these issues, the EU should be America's partner of first resort. It is unclear whether the EU will be ready, however, should a U.S. President reaches out his hand in partnership with an EU that will be asked to do more, not less, as America's counterpart, not its counterweight.

How will NATO's agenda and priorities be influenced by the strategic rivalry between the three major powers – US, China and Russia?

While Beijing and Moscow still have some long-standing differences with each other, they are collaborating on a range of issues that raise security concerns for NATO. They have stepped up the frequency and scale of joint military exercises, including in the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas, and deepened their defense cooperation. They are each weaponizing to disrupt democratic societies. All key elements of NATO adaptation, as decided at the NATO Summits in Wales 2014, Warsaw 2016 and Brussels 2018 were based on two key premises that are now questionable: first, that Putin's Russia posed the only serious military threat to the territorial integrity of member states; and second, that Russia stood alone. No consideration was given to the question what it would mean if Russia were supported by a like-minded other great power, such as China, or how a Chinese-Russian entente could amplify Russia's own risk calculus when it came to challenging the Alliance.

NATO needs to differentiate more clearly between Russia and China. Trump did not do that and muddled the message. NATO should consider how Chinese-Russian entente may affect Russia's own risk calculus. It needs to be prepared for hybrid contingencies in which China is an active participant, for instance in Europe's digital critical infrastructures (i.e. command, control, communication, situation awareness, logistical and other systems). It needs to replace its outdated Strategic Concept with new guidance on how to deal with future challenges.

The EU integration of the Western Balkan states is seen as instrumental to stabilizing the region and set it on a path to prosperity. However, lingering problems such as the lack of closure to the Kosovo crisis, the East-West balancing of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina or the regional meddling by Russia or China

pose serious obstacles to this process. What should be EU approach to surpass these difficulties and accelerate the process, and how could the US support the Union's efforts?

The EU must re-commit actively to complete the unfinished business in the Western Balkans. They include clear pathways toward integration and support to help countries create the conditions by which that can be possible. The Brussels process regarding Serbia-Kosovo must be prioritized. The Dayton Accords in Bosnia and Herzegovina need to be updated so that the country can rid itself of entrenched kleptocracies and offer hope for its people. In all of these areas the United States must remain engaged, working in partnership with the EU and the people of the region.

The transatlantic relationship is subjected to a series of challenges in the current, extremely complex environment, and goes through a process of redefinition.

What can you tell us about the way Washington sees and approaches the transatlantic cooperation from the perspective of the current administration on NATO and the EU, and in the light of Europeans promoting the concept of strategic autonomy?

If Donald Trump is re-elected, the U.S. voting public would have vindicated his view that Americans are suffering through many domestic economic and social ills because the United States has been too generous to the rest of the world, taking in immigrants and paying to defend ungrateful allies, and because the country's political elite had negotiated a series of flawed international deals that had harmed the U.S. economy and ordinary American workers. A second Trump administration is likely to double down on its agenda of economic nationalism and international burden-shedding.

Unfettered by a need to run for re-election, Trump is likely to be brazenly transactional in his approach to allies. Those who don't pay don't get protection. Uncertainty about the U.S. security guarantee would hollow out NATO.

Simply stated, the transatlantic partnership would come unhinged. Europe and the United States would be less safe, prosperous, and less able to deal with the enormous challenges they face.

Trump's antics have revealed how dependent Europe remains on the United States for its security. Unfortunately, "strategic autonomy" is a

buzzword that politicians like to show they are standing up for what they perceive to be European interests. It is an empty vessel, however, and can mean anything to anyone. It is not being used to advance a strategy, it is being used to distract from the fact that there is no strategy.

How do you see the implementation of this concept and what would be the chances and the timeframe to see an actual European army?

It all depends on the US election. If Biden is elected the term is likely to disappear in favor of a robust renewal of transatlantic partnership. If Trump is re-elected, the term "strategic autonomy" will gather steam, but to uncertain ends. Europe shows no appetite to build a "European army." The economic consequences of COVID will make it even more difficult to spend more on defense. Euro-optimists may believe that the European allies would quickly coalesce around a new EU framework for their common security. The more likely prospect is that individual European countries would scramble to secure bilateral security deals with Washington, and to look more warily at their neighbors. Without the U.S. as a rudder, NATO allies will head off in different directions. These divisions are likely to be exacerbated by Trump administration efforts to play EU member states off against each other to weaken the EU. These fissures would threaten to return the European continent to the very pattern of history that in the last century brought untold tragedy to Europe, America and the wider world.

Where do the countries on NATO's Eastern flank stand in this equation?

If NATO is hollowed out in a second Trump term, they will be the hardest hit. If Biden is elected they will be the prime beneficiaries of a renewed US commitment to its NATO commitments.

How do you see the US military involvement in Europe over the coming period? Can we talk about an enhanced US military presence in the Black Sea Region as well, in the light of Washington's recent decision to reduce the number of American troops deployed in Germany and to operate some redeployments on the European territory?

Trump's troop withdrawal announcement was made out of personal pique in his disputes with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. It has already

encountered significant opposition in the U.S. Congress. If it were to happen, it would take years and cost billions. There is good reason for the U.S. and its allies to review constantly the rationale for particular troop deployments, but any decision to move or remove troops should be done as part of a strategic force posture review, not as a result of a presidential tweet. There is a good case to be made that the Alliance needs to bolster its efforts in the Black Sea region.

US domestic politics has become quite polarised lately, sometimes even volatile, if we are to refer to President Trump's mandate. However, in Washington there is a significant bi-partisan consensus on a series of aspects related to foreign policy and European security. The presidential elections are traditionally accompanied by debates, forecasts and assessments of the possible major changes in the US foreign policy from one administration to another.

What do you think would be the lines of continuity in the US foreign policy that are relevant to European Union and to the transatlantic link, irrespective of who wins the presidential elections this year?

The United States has four enduring interests in Europe: a continent that is open, including to American goods, services and ideas; a continent that is not under the influence of any country or group of countries hostile to the United States; a continent that is able to take care of its own conflicts; and a partner that can work with the United States on a host of global challenges. These enduring interests have united presidents from both parties over many decades. They have inspired U.S. support for European integration. They motivate U.S. calls for more capable European defenses. They have animated U.S. determination to contain and counter Nazi and Soviet efforts to subdue the continent. And they inform U.S. efforts to build a global U.S.-EU partnership. Trump has short-changed all of these interests; Biden would protect them.

At the same time, what major changes in the US approach and policy on EU should we expect if the next administration in Washington, D.C. will be Democratic? Should we expect changes in the US relationship with relevant EU member states, such as Germany, or as far as the US policy on EU's energy reliance on Russia (Nord Stream 2)?

When he was Vice President, Joe Biden emphasized that "Europe is the cornerstone of our engagement with the world" and "our catalyst for global cooperation." Biden's first instinct will be to turn to Europe as America's indispensable partner of first resort when it comes to addressing international challenges. He is a passionate transatlanticist.

Nonetheless, if Biden is elected, perhaps the greatest danger to a vital transatlantic bond will be Europe's temptation to believe that the relationship can go back to "business as usual." That would be a mistake. The transatlantic alliance as we have known it is dead. A Biden Administration will not want to restore transatlantic partnership; it will want to reinvent it: to position each side of the Atlantic for a world of severe health, economic and climate challenges, more diffuse power, dizzying technological changes, greater insecurities, billions of new workers and consumers, and intensified global competition.

A reinvented transatlantic partnership will demand more, not less, of Europe. It will require Americans and Europeans to devise a new model of globalization, one geared less to market efficiencies than to enhancing societal resilience and well-being. Some international institutions, such as the WTO, will need to be recast. Others will need new authorities -- for instance the WHO, which needs to be able to gather and disseminate real-time information and investigate when states are being deceptive. Still others will need to be created -- for instance a global disease surveillance and rapid response system similar in concept to our global weather forecasting capabilities. New mechanisms could be devised to tackle climate change, the proliferation of agents of mass destruction and challenges emanating from the digital, biological and quantum computing revolutions. The old state-centric multilateralism will not do. A new multilateralism is needed -- more inclusive, more networked, more flexible, more agile.

A Biden Administration will expect far more from Europe than Europeans currently seem to appreciate. It will judge the value of transatlantic partnership largely in relation to Europe's willingness to assume greater leadership in addressing its own challenges and its ability to tackle together with the U.S. a host of problems far beyond European shores.

An immediate priority will be transatlantic efforts to build international coalitions to end the coronavirus and to create economic pathways out of

the recession. An early step might be a U.S.-EU agreement to lift all trade barriers on medical supplies and equipment. Another might be a Transatlantic Recovery Initiative that galvanizes U.S. and European efforts to generate jobs and growth, and to get the transatlantic economy back on track.

Biden is also likely to announce quickly that the United States is rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement. A reinvented transatlantic partnership will then need to quickly work out a joint approach to improving U.S. and EU climate commitments consistent with a goal of net zero carbon emissions by 2050 and a timetable to achieve that ambition.

Biden is likely to want to re-engage with European allies on stopping Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. A reinvented transatlantic coalition could offer to freeze future sanctions on Iran in return for an Iranian freeze on advances in its nuclear weapons program. It could begin talks with Iran on missiles, counter terrorism, human rights, and Tehran's destabilizing activities in neighboring countries such as Iraq.

Like Trump, Biden wants to end America's "forever wars" in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. A reinvented transatlantic partnership will mean building partnerships with actors who can bring some modicum of stability and hope to the peoples of the region. It will mean resetting the course of U.S. and European policy to the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly the Israel-Palestine struggle. This too, will require more of Europe.

Biden is likely to affirm the value of NATO and U.S. defense commitments, but he will want to define the Alliance in terms of the future and not the past. A new Strategic Concept for the Alliance, and a truly strategic U.S.-EU partnership, could be the hallmarks of transatlantic reinvention. Unlike Trump, Biden won't be Putin's chum. But he is likely to want to engage on arms control and other initiatives with Moscow that can lower risks and avoid accidents and miscalculations that could lead inadvertently to conflict. Europe needs to be prepared with ideas and contributions.

China will be an early test of a reinvented transatlantic partnership. There is a broad consensus in the United States – among Democrats and Republicans alike – that China's rise as a systemic rival must be addressed. The critical difference is that Trump sought to bludgeon allies into servilely following his confrontational course, whereas Biden is likely to seek to build a coalition together with Europe and other like-minded

democracies to address concerns about China, most of which Europeans share. The key will be to hammer out where the U.S. and Europe can engage with China as a partner, for instance on climate and energy issues, health, or anti-piracy; where they must address China as a competitor, for example with regard to Chinese cyber theft, Chinese assaults on intellectual property, forced technology transfers, poor implementation of its WTO obligations, and its state-subsidized overcapacity in steel and potentially autos, robotics and other sectors of the economy; and how to counter China's rise as a systemic rival – whether through its efforts to weaken or dilute international norms or to build alternative institutions shaped by illiberal principles.

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Interview with His Excellency George Cristian MAIOR, the Romanian Ambassador to the USA: "One of the Most Important Aspects of the US-Romania Strategic Partnership is its Vitality."

The Partnership between Romania and the US is both a major benchmark of the Romanian foreign policy and a firm commitment, which defines our options. The cooperation between Romania and the United States has been and will always be all the more valuable and mutually beneficial, as during the years of cooperation there have been many successful strategic accomplishments, in response to the new challenges to the allied security. The Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership for the 21st century, in 2011, has boosted the relations and is the main bilateral political document that enhances our common security and prosperity.

George Cristian MAIOR, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Romania to the United States offered an insight into the Strategic Partnership between Romania and the USA, in the light of 140 years of Romanian-American diplomatic relations, in the interview he



Source: Embassy of Romania to the United States of America

gave the *Geostrategic Pulse* Magazine.

Geostrategic Pulse: In a geopolitical context characterised by instability and by rising tensions that are visible including in the Black Sea region, preserving Romania's security and stability in the area represents a key area of diplomatic action for our country within the Strategic Partnership for the 21st century with

the USA. Developing, deepening and enhancing the Strategic Partnership with the USA based on the Joint Declaration between Romania and the United States of America, signed in Washington D.C. on the 13th of September 2011, represents a goal assumed by the authorities in Bucharest.

What is your opinion on the state of implementation of the Joint Declaration on the Strategic Partnership between Romania and the USA?

George Cristian MAIOR: The Partnership with the US, along with its NATO membership represents one of the three "strategic pillars" of Romania's foreign and security policy. We can say without hesitation that this partnership, that started in 2007, has reached today the peak of its evolution over the past twenty years. This is not just a diplomatic statement, but a reality that we can clearly witness.

In the past years, the bilateral political dialogue, that sets the outlook of the overall relationship and its direction of development, has been extraordinarily dynamic and consistent on all levels. It is emblematic that, in 2017, only months after the arrival of the new administration to the White House, the President of Romania was the first Central and Eastern European chief of state who had an official bilateral meeting with the US President. We can very well remember that during this meeting, the steadfast US commitment to the principle of collective defence of NATO member states was for the first time publicly underscored by President Trump.

In 2019, during another bilateral visit of the Romanian President to the White House, the two heads of state signed a Joint Statement underscoring the progress of the US-Romania Strategic Partnership on all levels. Therefore, we have two crucial benchmarks at the highest level, highlighting the results and the positive dynamic of our bilateral cooperation.

In addition to these, there have been hundreds of bilateral meetings at all levels: members of the two governments, delegations of the Parliament of Romania and the US Congress, senior officials and

experts. The Romanian-American Task Force for the implementation of the Joint Declaration has met on a regular basis, and the agenda has always been substantial.

All this intense and continuous dialogue is, of course, supported by the remarkable pace of progress in all areas of the bilateral relationship, whether we are referring to strengthening the military and security cooperation, traditionally the most advanced sector of the strategic partnership, or to increasing and diversifying the bilateral economic cooperation.

One of the most important aspects of the US-Romania Strategic Partnership is its vitality. We will never be able to draw a line and say that all our objectives have been achieved because new areas and opportunities of bilateral cooperation will always emerge. This proves the compatibility between the national interests and the strategic visions of our two countries, as well as the real and deep affinity between the Romanian and American peoples.

The Strategic Partnership with the US has been and continues to be directly connected to Romania's democratic transformation, to the consolidation of our transatlantic identity, to ensuring security and creating a significant geopolitical profile for our country in a region subjected to multiple influences and challenges.

In the past years, the Romanian Embassy in Washington, D.C. has played an active part and committed itself to increasing the cooperation between the two countries on all the dimensions of the Strategic Partnership. It has succeeded every time to create the proper environment for the development and intensification of mutually beneficial joint strategic actions.

This is why an insight into the contribution, especially during your mandate, to the success of the Strategic Partnership would be highly appreciated and relevant, in the light of 140 years of Romanian-American diplomatic relations.

The first remark I would like to make in the context of our conversation on the activity of the diplomatic mission in Washington, D.C. refers to the importance of team work - within the embassy, where I have the privilege to coordinate a team of highly skilled professionals, as well as in cooperation with the other Romanian institutions responsible for achieving the foreign policy objectives. Behind each successful meeting usually lie months of intense work.

The contribution of the embassy to the expansion and consolidation of the Strategic Partnership with the US is best reflected by results. I have already mentioned the high level meetings and the positive dynamic of the bilateral political dialogue. As far as the military and security fields are concerned, we have ensured a close consultation and coordination with the US administration, both bilaterally and with regard to supporting the NATO agenda that represents Romania's fundamental security interests (adoption of deterrence and defence measures for the entire Eastern flank, in response to Russia's aggressive behaviour; focusing the Alliance on the southern side of the Eastern flank, especially in the Black Sea region; taking measures to support the strengthening of the defence capabilities of our Eastern partners – the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia; efforts on countering hybrid warfare; establishing a stronger role for NATO in energy and cyber security). We have supported the steps to implement the commitments on enhanced US military presence in Romania and we have ensured a continuous communication with regard to the Romanian-US participation in the development of NATO's missile defence system, through the defence capabilities fielded at Deveselu Military Base.

On a regional level, our dialogue agenda with the American authorities focuses on matters of Eastern European security. We are actively promoting Romania in Washington, as a Central-European ally that plays a key part in projecting regional security, with strong capabilities to support the energy security in the area, and with a clear transatlantic identity anchored in democratic values.

The dialogue and cooperation with the American side aims at covering the entire security spectrum, including energy and cyber security, highly relevant at this point to Romania's and our allies' fundamental interests.

During the past years, the economic dimension of the partnership has known an unprecedented dynamic, as trade volume and investments increased and the fields of cooperation expanded. Romania joined the US in organising major events, such as the Trade Winds 2017, the Department of Commerce's largest trade promotion mission, where Bucharest served as the hub for the entire region, or the Regional Business Forum of the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Bucharest, in 2018.

Of course, trade and economic diplomacy does not take place only in Washington, D.C. We have established and cultivated partnerships with

economic promotion authorities in various US states and cities, especially where there is a high degree of compatibility between the Romanian offer and local demand. Every trip in the US, as an ambassador included an outreach to the local business communities, and presentations of Romania's economic priorities and attractive investment opportunities.

In addition to the official diplomatic activities, I have actively ensured, according to the specifics of the local environment, the constant and consistent promotion of Romania's strategic profile and image in relevant non-governmental environments – prestigious think-tanks, universities, as well as economic or professional organizations.

An important focus of the embassy's agenda is the relationship with the Romanian community, as well as the promotion and protection of the interests of all members of this community. Ever since I began my mission I have considered the Romanian-American community our closest and most valuable partner in promoting Romania's interests in the United States. The embassy coordinates the activity of 18 honorary consuls of Romania to the US, and we have provided direct support for the establishment and opening of another Romanian Consulate General in Miami, in 2018.

Promoting Romanian national culture and values in the social, professional and public environments in the USA is a constant investment of ideas, efforts and embassy resources. As a relevant example, in 2017 we have organised (in Washington, D.C.) the biggest Romanian Film Festival in the United States, in partnership with the US National Art Gallery and the American Film Institute.

In the context of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, the year 2020 marked new ways to strengthen the Strategic Partnership through the aid our two countries have given each other, including by facilitating the transport of medical supplies to Romania, repatriations, exchange of experience and support by deploying a medical team from the Romanian Ministry of Defence to the State of Alabama.

From a personal point of view, and with relevance for the relations between the two countries, what are the main challenges of your mandate as the Romanian Ambassador to the USA?

I believe the main "challenge" lies in the complexity and the enormous potential of the bilateral relationship. Exploiting this potential requires a lot of work, maintaining a constant

dialogue on all levels with our US partners and, not least, having a very good cooperation with the other relevant institutions in Romania.

The activity in Washington, D.C. also means adjusting to a reality sometimes different from what is perceived as a "traditional" diplomatic environment. The *modus operandi* of our US partners is very exact and efficient. Meetings for the sake of formality are extremely rare. Conversations are pragmatic, practical and very open, as they should be between close partners.

Romania should keep on strengthening its status as a trustworthy partner to the USA, take an active and substantial part in consolidating Euro-Atlantic ties, and be a smart and coherent partner in the dialogue with the American decision-makers. Enhancing the political-military and security cooperation, including to strengthen cyber-security, and deepening the economic Partnership are some of Romania's strategic directions.

What are, in your opinion, the prospects and challenges that these objectives face?

As the results and the current dynamic of cooperation show, the prospects of the Strategic Partnership are very good, especially in the political-military and economic areas. I would even highlight the fact that now, more than ever, the two areas are interconnected, whether we talk about the cooperation with the US to strengthen European energy security, about developing and protecting the strategic infrastructure or about cyber security. The Joint Statement adopted in 2019 by the two Presidents is a good example of the above, as is the fact that, in the context of the same high level visit, the governments of Romania and the US signed a Memorandum of Understanding on 5G technologies.

A very good example of cooperation between the US and Romania in a regional context is the Three Seas Initiative, which has a strategic dimension for Central and Eastern Europe. By focusing on key areas such as energy, transport and digitalization, the Three Seas Initiative covers important sectors to our national security, even if those projects are not of a purely military nature, but bring major benefits to the economic development and the welfare of our citizens.

The major challenges mainly pertain to the global geostrategic and economic context. Whether we are referring to the deterioration of security on NATO's Eastern flank caused by Russia's aggressive actions, or to the impact of the COVID-19

pandemic, these challenges are tackled by Romania and the US together, as partners and allies.

US domestic politics has become much polarised lately, sometimes even volatile, if we are to refer to President Trump's mandate. However, in Washington there is a significant bi-partisan consensus on a series of aspects related to foreign policy and European security. The presidential elections are traditionally accompanied by debates, forecasts and assessments of the possible major changes in the US foreign policy from one administration to another.

•What do you think would be the lines of continuity in the US foreign policy that are relevant to our country, irrespective of who wins the presidential elections this year?

At the same time, what can you tell us about the views on security and defence of the two US presidential candidates?

The Strategic Partnership enjoys broad and consistent bi-partisan support in the US, a support that mirrors Romania's diplomatic efforts, as well as the compatibility between the interests of the two countries and the positive results of their cooperation.

I am convinced that, based on the fruitful dialogue we have with all relevant US political actors, the positive dynamic of our bilateral relationship will continue irrespective of the political colour of the next US administration.

Russia's annexation of Crimea, the complex situation in Ukraine, the frozen conflicts in the extended Black Sea region, the tensions between countries that have major interests in the area, they all make us look with even more concern at the regional security environment.

•How does the USA perceive the continuous Russian development offensive military capabilities in Romania's proximity (the Crimean Peninsula)?

•Can the development process of the Romanian Armed Forces, to which the USA has a significant contribution, lead to a more aggressive Russian attitude?

•Under these circumstances and given the fact that key segments of the Romanian borders also represent the Eastern frontier of NATO and EU, do you believe that extra measures should be taken besides the present commitments, to enhance our security and stability?

Could Washington's decisions to reduce the

number of US troops deployed in Germany and to operate some redeployments on the European territory, including in our region, be part of a set of enhanced American security approaches and commitments to countries on the Eastern flank in general, and our country in particular?

The US and Romania share, as NATO Allies, common concerns regarding the developments in the extended Black Sea region. Russia's illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 caused a major paradigm shift, that is the North Atlantic Alliance adapting to the new geopolitical and geostrategic reality on the Eastern flank, as well as making the Americans more aware of the necessity to come with a proper response based on deterrence and defence while leaving room for dialogue.

The continuous escalation of the Russian threat in the region through the significant militarisation of the Crimean Peninsula, and its use by Moscow as a force projection element to other regions (the Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean) – is constantly monitored by decision makers in Washington.

The subject of regional security has always been on the US-Romania dialogue agenda, both bilaterally and within NATO. As a result of this common concern, the USA and Romania have supported the strengthening of NATO's defence and deterrence measures on the Eastern flank. At the same time, the two countries support the consolidation of the Alliance's capabilities by providing the necessary resources and modernising the armed forces of the member states.

This modernisation process is natural, and, in Romania's case it makes sure its armed forces meet all the necessary requirements, including those that come associated with NATO membership, as well as those pertaining to the security environment it operates in. We cannot say that NATO – a defensive alliance – or any of its members, has ever issued threats against Russia.

The reconfiguration of the US posture in Europe is still under inter-institutional analysis and decision. One may notice, however, the US interest - expressed as such by some American senior officials - towards strengthening NATO's Eastern flank, an approach that meets the US and NATO's strategic requirements.

The transatlantic link is subjected to a series of challenges in the current, extremely complex environment.

•What can you tell us about the way Washington sees and approaches the

transatlantic cooperation from the perspective of the current administration on NATO and the EU, and in the light of Europeans promoting the concept of strategic autonomy?

Where do the countries from NATO's Eastern flank stand in this equation?

The fundamental strategic role of the transatlantic cooperation is well understood and assumed both in the US and in Europe. As far as collective security and defence are concerned, strengthening European capabilities represents a positive step that can also contribute to more balanced burden sharing within NATO. It is crucial, however, that the development of EU capabilities is done under the logic of complementarity and cooperation with NATO, thus contributing to strengthening the transatlantic link.

The countries on the Eastern flank can and must play a substantial part in this consolidation process of European defence in a transatlantic context. The process of adapting to the new security threats

maintaining the Alliance's forward presence in the firstly implies strengthening this flank, by region, hosting NATO structures, increasing the number of joint exercises and training etc. This is actually one of the main issues on the agenda of dialogue and cooperation between the US and Romania, and a very good example of the added value of the bilateral Strategic Partnership for the entire region.

Since we have mentioned the regional context, we need to highlight Romanian, US and other partners' joint efforts to enhance NATO cooperation among the countries on the Eastern flank. The Bucharest 9 (B9) format has been launched for this purpose by Romania and Poland, with support from the USA, which has actively participated as an observer in the B9 meetings. The B9 format had a real contribution to the adoption of firm NATO commitments to strengthening the Eastern flank.



The visit of the minister of Foreign Affairs to the US (source: www.mae.ro)

INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

The United Nations @75: a Time for Solidarity, a Time for Action.

Dr. Ion I. Jinga

**Motto: “Together, we need to listen.
And together, we need to act”.**

**UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres,
22 January 2020**

In January 2020, the United Nations decided to launch a process of global consultations on the world opinion, to mark the Organization's 75th anniversary. The project involved over one million people from all UN Member States, and its findings were released on the 21st of September in a report called *“The future we want, the United Nations we need”*. These findings indicate that the immediate priority of the majority of respondents from around the world is improved access to healthcare, safe water and education. The next main priority is greater international solidarity for tackling poverty, inequality and boosting employment. Other major priorities are mitigating the impact of climate change, respect for human rights, settling conflicts, promoting peace and reducing corruption. 87% of those surveyed believe that international cooperation is vital for dealing with these challenges, and 74% see the UN as essential in addressing them.

Born in 1945 out of the ashes of the Second World War, the United Nations Organization was created – in the words of Dag Hammarskjöld, its second Secretary-General – *“not to lead the mankind to heaven but to save humanity from hell”*.



UN Headquarters in New York

Indeed, in 75 years of existence, the UN saved millions of lives by mitigating wars and conflicts, and by working to eradicate extreme poverty and treatable diseases. It provided millions of children with education, promoted freedom, assisted new nations that emerged from decolonization, created the international peacekeeping architecture and established key policies and programs for sustainable development. Major progress has also been made in the recognition of universal human rights, and the UN Charter remains the cornerstone of international law.

But the challenges that mankind faces today seem to question the UN relevance in the future: proliferation of armed conflicts, terrorism, poverty, rising hunger and deep inequality, worldwide contagion with Covid-19 - which brought about the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression -, a warming planet, growing number of refugees and climate emergency with huge biodiversity losses - we have already degraded 2/3 of the planet's land and ocean surface, one million species are at risk of extinction, the coral reefs who support life in the oceans are close to dying out and every year the additional deforestation area is equivalent to the size of Denmark. The response to these challenges will define the role of the United Nations in the 21st century.

Addressing the UN General Assembly on the 22nd of September 2020, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres noted that: *“Those who built the United Nations 75 years ago had lived through a pandemic, a global depression, genocide and world war... Today we face our 1945 moment”*. At the beginning of the year, he had identified *“four horsemen that endanger our common future: first, the highest global geo-strategic tensions in years; second, an existential climate crisis; third, deep and growing global mistrust; and fourth, the dark side of the digital world”*. Now, the UNSG mentioned *“a fifth horseman who was lurking in the shadow: the Covid-19 pandemic, who has galloped across the globe”*.

Every year, the new session of the UN General Assembly starts with the High-Level Week, which traditionally gathers at the UNHQ the highest

number of political leaders ever seen in the same place, at the same time: heads of state, prime-ministers, foreign ministers, representatives of NGOs, academia and business – all together around 12,000 people. But Covid-19 hit during the 75th anniversary of the UN and reduced the High-Level Week (22-29 September) to virtual meetings, with ambassadors wearing masks and keeping social distance while listening to video speeches and introducing their leaders' pre-recorded messages.

Although a hard time for celebration, this may actually be a turning point for renewed multilateralism and the strengthening of support for the role of the United Nations. The UN remains the only global international organization, and the strongest argument in favor of its relevance is the growth of its membership: from 51 founding states, in 1945, to 193 member countries today. Equally significant is the competition between member states for outstanding positions in UN bodies: for instance, candidates for non-permanent seats in the Security Council have already been announced for elections until 2047, and for the position of President of the General Assembly, until 2077.



The explanation for this undiminished interest in the UN lies in the trust that states have in the principles and values promoted by the Organization. UN membership offers prestige, legitimacy, recognition, and international status. A wise use of the UN stage in promoting national interests can multiply the influence of a country above the level of its geographical size, economic or military strength.

The United Nations has saved millions of lives

from war, famine and pandemics, and its history corresponds to 75 years of outstanding progress for mankind. When it was founded, in 1945, the goal was to avoid another global war and its apocalyptic consequences. The organization that Eleanor Roosevelt called “*our greatest hope for future peace*” has helped achieve that goal. The indispensable role of the UN has been evident throughout the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially for the world’s most vulnerable populations.

But this history was not filled only with success stories. Shortcomings also appeared, and the Organization was accused several times of insufficient involvement, or even failure, in resolving conflicts or humanitarian crises. Such instances have fueled the false perception of diminishing UN relevance, and some claim a “*fatigue*” within UN responses. However, after five years as ambassador of Romania to the United Nations, I know that the Organization has only the leverage and resources that Member States make available to it, and it cannot do more than Member States allow it to do.

Yes, the UN is no longer the only player in town, but it remains the fundamental bedrock of multilateralism and international cooperation, and there is still no substitute for the legitimacy that the United Nations can offer and the unifying platform it gives to the international community in tackling common threats that no country, no matter how powerful, could address by itself. The current Covid-19 pandemic is one such example.

Because today we face such threats, there is no other way but to continue to make the UN a tool to combat pandemics, conflicts, injustice, hunger and climate change. Not only our world is interconnected, our common challenges are as well, and they can be addressed only through multilateralism. Quoting again Secretary-General Antonio Guterres: “*It is high time to recognize a simple truth: solidarity is self-interest*”.

As His Holiness Pope Francis wrote on Twitter on 25 September 2020: “*The pandemic has shown us that we cannot live without one another. The United Nations was established to bring nations together, to be a bridge between people. Let us make good use of this institution in order to build together the future we all desire*”.

Note: The opinions expressed in this article do not bind the official position of the author.

Remembering History: Romanian Armed Forces Day

Dr. Ion I. Jinga

I have always been fascinated by history because I believe that if we know the past, then we can better understand the present and master the future. For a diplomat, understanding history is a key prerequisite for any professional judgement.

76 years ago, on 25 October 1944, the Romanian Army liberated the town of Carei in the North-West of the country. This was the final step in the complete liberation of North-West Transylvania from the foreign occupation imposed on Romania through the outrageous Vienna Diktat in 1940, arbitrated by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

In the autumn of 1940, Romania was completely isolated on the international arena. Its main allies in the inter-war period were France, the United Kingdom and the United States, but in June 1940 France capitulated, Britain was under siege and the United States would not get involved in the Second World War in Europe until 11 December 1941, following Germany's and Italy's declarations of war. On 26-27 June 1940, the Romanian government had also been forced to accept Soviet ultimatums which resulted in Moscow taking over Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, two historical Romanian provinces which had rejoined the Kingdom of Romania after the First World War by the free will of their inhabitants, in application of the principle of self-determination proclaimed and promoted by US President Woodrow Wilson.

In Budapest, Regent Miklós Horthy, who had established close relations with Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, saw the opportunity and asked his "friends" to pressure on Romania into giving up Transylvania. The alliance with Nazi Germany had already made possible Hungary's gaining of Southern Czechoslovakia in 1938 and Subcarpathia in 1939.

Foreign Ministers Joachim von Ribbentrop of Germany and Galeazzo Ciano of Italy met on 30 August 1940 at the Belvedere Palace in Vienna and simply produced a map detailing what the settlement was to be: North-West Transylvania, a land of 43,492 km² with a population of 2.4 million, was given to Hungary.

According to Romanian census of 1930, the population in North-West Transylvania was 2,393,300: Romanians - 1,176,900 (50%);

Hungarians - 912,500 (38%); Germans - 68,300; Jewish - 138,800 (one year after the Vienna Diktat, the Jewish population was only 47,400); other ethnic groups - 96,800. These figures are entirely confirmed by the Hungarian historian Árpád E. Varga, who studied the population patterns in Transylvania: *"The census conducted in 1930 met international statistical requirements in every respect. In order to establish nationality, the compilers devised a complex criterion system, unique at the time, which covered citizenship, nationality, native language and religion"*.

The Daily Telegraph's correspondent in the Balkans wrote on 8 October 1940 in an article entitled *Hungary wants more. Vienna Diktat was not a settlement at all: "When the time comes for peace-making, a country like Hungary, therefore, will have a natural tendency to cash in as much as possible on the grounds that "if the Axis wins, we keep what we have; if the Axis is defeated or weakened, then the more we have, the less we are likely to lose in proportion"'*.

In order to retake Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, on 22 June 1941 Romania entered the war against the Soviet Union. On 23 August 1944, King Michael led a successful coup, with support from the Army, and removed the government of Marshall Ion Antonescu. According to Western historians, the coup shortened WW2 by about six months, saving hundreds of thousands of lives.

Romania then deployed its military capabilities on the Allied side. The Romanian Army liberated North-West Transylvania and contributed significantly to the liberation of Hungary, Yugoslavia, Austria and Czechoslovakia, from August 1944 until the end of WW2 in Europe. Of the 538,500 Romanian soldiers who fought against the Axis in 1944 - 1945, some 167,000 were killed, wounded or missing, a contribution ranking Romania fourth behind the USSR, United States and Great Britain in the victory against fascism. 25 October therefore became the Romanian Armed Forces' Day.

In 1940 Romania was isolated and surrounded by enemies. The greatest Romanian historian of all times, Nicolae Iorga, once said that Romanians are *"a nation abandoned at the crossroad of storms that blow here forever and ever and will always blow in these places of tempting abundance and of*

armies' passage. Suitable for the highest civilization and forced to fight so many times for our land. Every other nation would have scattered in the world. We remained. With the sword in hand, guarding all the horizons, and when the steel of sword broke for a moment, only to be reborn again out of the blue, we opposed to brutality the thin weapon of our intelligence. And behold, we are still at home".

In the current international context, history may once again help understand the present. Today we are no longer a nation isolated at the *crossroad of storms*. Romania is a member of the European Union and NATO, and has a Strategic Partnership and an ever closer friendship with the United States of America. Today, Romania is a security provider in the region and its Armed Forces operate at the

highest NATO professional standards, protecting our European democratic community of values. It is widely recognized that Romania has strengthened the Alliance immeasurably since it joined in 2004.

The proximity to the Eastern border of the Euro-Atlantic space makes my country both a gate-guardian and a strategic opener of roads. Romania is now repositioned on the world chessboard in accordance with both its geo-strategic location and its system of values.

Therefore, while celebrating the Romanian Armed Forces' Day and paying a tribute of respect and gratitude to all those who gave their lives for the Country, we are prepared to master our future.

Note: *Opinions expressed in this article do not bind the official position of the author.*



CRISIS AND CONFLICT ZONES

Russia's Regime-Change Experiment in Belarus Runs into Difficulties

Vladimir SOCOR

Part One



Lukashenko and Putin (Source: TASS)

The Kremlin is conducting a regime-change operation in Belarus, the first-ever Russian operation of this type in its “near abroad.” Belarus’s presidential election campaign from May to August and the election’s aftermath have provided the launching pad for this operation. It is premised on the political objective to replace the disobedient President Alyaksandr Lukashenko with a weaker regime, more amenable to Russian interests in the political, economic and military domains.

Lukashenko had strongly and skilfully resisted integration with Russia in these domains for many years. He finally exasperated the Kremlin through his uncompromising stand on Belarusian sovereignty. Lukashenko’s government basically adheres to the terms of a 20-year-old grand bargain with Moscow: explicitly renouncing Belarus’s integration with the West in return for Russian economic subsidies and respect for Belarus’s state sovereignty. Lukashenko has based this resistance on impregnable political power in the country, the governing class’s ever-deepening stake in sovereign statehood, the population’s interest in preserving the advantages of the Belarusian social state, and an increasingly creative multi-vector foreign policy (the latter was never intended to presage integration with the West).

Those sources of regime strength help explain its resilience *vis-à-vis* the protest movement as well as

vis-à-vis Russia. Only the rapprochement with the West has been wholly derailed by the unvarnished rigging of the August 9 presidential election, the unjustifiably harsh repression of post-election protests, and Lukashenko’s theatrical anti-Western rhetoric to appease Moscow. This has isolated him and his government from the West, playing in favor of Russia’s undertaking for regime change in Belarus (see EDM, September 10).

Planned ahead of the presidential election in Belarus, the Russian undertaking is designed as a soft variety of regime change. As such, it envisages easing out Lukashenko, securing or compelling his cooperation over a transitional period as part of a constitutional settlement that would turn Belarus into a parliamentary republic. Moscow aims to arbitrate this process and seize the key levers of influence over Belarus through controlled political parties and state property takeovers, preparatory to a “deeper integration” of Belarus with Russia.

As a collateral benefit, that kind of constitutional reform could be presented as Russia’s constructive contribution to peaceful stabilization and even a democratic opening in its neighborhood. This argument could then serve to support, or at least test, a new “reset” in the West’s relations with Russia.

Moscow had initially decided to use Belarus’s presidential election as an opportunity to undermine Lukashenko through the candidacies of Viktor Babarika, Valery Tsepkalo, and Siarhei Tsikhanouski (replaced by spouse Sviatlana Tsikhanouska). They could not be expected to win the presidential election in August but could have complicated Lukashenko’s situation in the election’s aftermath, launched political parties or movements, split Belarus’s ruling establishment, pressed for system pluralization and power-sharing, and set a regime-change process in motion from the post-election period onward. Coupled with drastic cuts in Russian economic subsidies to Belarus, this kind of controlled destabilization could have turned Lukashenko into a lame duck, and made room for successors more amenable to Russian interests (see EDM, September 16).

That advanced planning, however, was thrown off course (at least temporarily) by two factors: First, the magnitude of post-election protests in Belarus,

far exceeding anything that Minsk, Moscow or the West could anticipate. And second, the resilience of Belarus's governmental apparatus, holding out (thus far) confidently in a two-front struggle - against domestic protests and against Russia's demands on Lukashenka to initiate his own abdication.

The Kremlin and the Belarusian protesters (or at least the political figures speaking for the protesters) share the common goals of removing Lukashenka from power and turning Belarus into a parliamentary republic. However, they differ starkly over the process of implementing such changes.

Politicians speaking on the protesters' behalf deem Lukashenka illegitimate and call for an undelayed transfer of power to the opposition; they would then proceed with changing the constitution and preparing new presidential and parliamentary elections. This implies that the opposition would itself organize the constitutional reform and transition process (see EDM, September 30).

The Kremlin, however, treats Lukashenka as the legitimately re-elected president. It wants him to cooperate with the constitutional reform that would lead to new presidential and parliamentary elections in a parliamentary republic, within a transition period of one to maximum two years. Moscow needs Lukashenka's visible cooperation (even if unwilling) with this process in order to preserve the formalities of Belarus's sovereignty, constitutional continuity, and Russian non-interference in the country's affairs.

Moscow, furthermore, needs the transitional period in order to peel off and coopt elements from Belarus's governmental *nomenklatura*, security apparatus and top management of state industry (with the takeover of key assets undoubtedly in mind). And, as long as protest activities continue in Belarus, the Kremlin needs Lukashenka's loyal security apparatus to deal with the street rallies and keep the situation (broadly if not fully) under control. All this plays in favor of Lukashenka's government. It is gaining time, while Moscow finds it necessary to slow down the pace of political change in Belarus and consider prolonging the transitional period. Lukashenka is gaining some political counter-leverage vis-à-vis Moscow. Conversely, Moscow might consider a degree of instability in Belarus as useful in order to regain the leverage it enjoyed over Lukashenka in an earlier phase of the protest movement.

Part Two



Russian FM Sergei Lavrov and Belarusian FM Uladzimir Makei (Source: BelTA)

For now, the Belarusian authorities are holding out confidently against regime change on both fronts: against the domestic opposition and against Russia's initial regime-change project. The latter could be seen lurking behind the thwarted presidential candidacies of Valery Tsepkalo, Viktor Babarika and Siarhei Tsikhanouski. Those candidacies were designed not to win the August election but to launch opposition movements against President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rule after the election, coupled with drastic cuts in Russian economic subsidies to Belarus. The election's rigging and subsequent mass protests, however, compelled all sides to shift gears (see Part One in EDM, October 7).

Moscow unveiled its next (or revised) regime-change scenario publicly on September 2 through its foreign affairs minister, Sergei Lavrov. He told his visiting Belarusian counterpart, Uladzimir Makei that Lukashenka should engage in a national dialogue on constitutional reforms that would dismantle the presidential system of government, redistribute state powers to ensure their dispersal, and mandate new presidential and parliamentary elections on this basis. Moscow envisaged a transitional period of 1-1.5 years for these changes to be introduced and Lukashenka to step down (Mid.ru, Mfa.gov.by, September 2; Facebook.com/belarusmfa, September 4).

The Kremlin claimed at that point and at each subsequent step that the constitutional reform initiative originated with Lukashenka himself, not Russia. This claim is accurate only in the most general sense that Lukashenka had proposed, well ahead of the presidential election, to amend the constitution in the sense of de-personalizing power. Moscow, however, envisaged at that point turning

Belarus into a dysfunctional parliamentary republic open to Russian manipulation. Moscow had already vetted a proposal tending in that direction that Minsk formally presented to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) (TASS, August 17).

Two weeks after the Lavrov-Makei meeting, Russian President Vladimir Putin repeated the same message about constitutional reform to Lukashenka at their meeting in Sochi. By that time, however, Belarusian authorities were becoming confident that they could weather the storm of protests. Lukashenka declined to mention the constitutional reform in his public remarks at the Sochi meeting, and generally held his own against Putin there (see EDM, September 16). Meanwhile the Belarusian authorities are preparing their own concept of constitutional reform and the format of a national debate in that regard.

The authorities have managed to reduce and roll back the protests through systematic repression, but also by capitalizing on state cohesion and resilience, (repression alone would not have sufficed). While the protests are still far from defused and the authorities under Western attack, the authorities are able to convert their precarious situation into defensive leverage vis-à-vis Russia. On that basis they can and do convincingly ask Moscow to provide political and economic support for Belarus under the incumbent authorities. As long as protests continue, and the economy deteriorates, Moscow would not risk adding to instability by pressing for its concept of constitutional reform (euphemism for regime change), nor for a definite transitional period (euphemism for Lukashenka's departure). Instead of starting a countdown on these authorities, Moscow is now helping to stabilize and tide them over through the crisis period.

Recent telephone calls between Lukashenka and Putin (the former invariably initiating the calls) no longer mention Belarusian national dialogue, constitutional reform or transitional period in the official readouts on either side. They also avoid controversial matters of the "integration" of Belarus with Russia. Instead, the readouts underscore bilateral cooperation, trade, joint anti-coronavirus measures, and rebuffing "external interference" in their respective internal affairs (TASS, BELTA, October 2, 7).

The traditional Russia-Belarus investment forum - an annual event - went ahead on September 25-29 as pre-scheduled, despite concerns that it might be

canceled. Contracts amounting to \$700 million were signed. Minsk traditionally maintains direct economic relations with Russia's federal entities. Those oblast-level governors are an important political constituency for Lukashenka in Russia. Addressing the Minsk investment forum by video, President Putin accentuated the need to stabilize Belarus's economy at this time (BELTA, September 29).

For the time being, at least, Moscow refrains from inserting itself into Belarus's constitutional reform process. On October 3, the Belarusian parliament appealed to citizens and public organizations to send in suggestions about changes to the constitution and reforming the political system (BELTA, October 3). Suggestions collected by October 25 are to be forwarded for debate to a specially convened forum, presumably an All-People Belarusian Congress, as one form of the "national dialogue" (see above). Such a procedure will be liable for criticism as top-down authoritarian, and lacking the benefit of Western advice. Yet nothing else can realistically be expected at this stage. From the standpoint of Russia-Belarus relations, however, what counts at this point is Belarus regaining sovereignty over its constitutional process.

The Kremlin is apparently holding its initial regime-change project for Belarus in abeyance at the moment. The reprieve may well be a temporary one, evidently dictated by internal and international circumstances unforeseen by all sides and escaping all sides' control.

NB. The article was first published in Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume: 17 Issue: 140 (part one) and Volume: 17 Issue: 141 (part two).

Interview with Anna Borshchevskaya, senior fellow at The Washington Institute: **"Belarus is less free than even Russia, because of Lukashenka"**

Alyaksandr Lukashenka has been ruling Belarus with an iron hand since 1994. His dictatorial leadership, frequent violations of human rights in Belarus and repeated election rigging by Lukashenka's regime pushed an increasingly desperate population over the edge. The last electoral fraud by Lukashenka's regime - the August 9 presidential elections - triggered mass protests largely labelled as a "colour revolution".

Anna Borshchevskaya, senior fellow at the Washington Institute, shared from her insight on the unfolding crisis in Belarus in the interview offered to the *Geostrategic Pulse* Magazine.

Geostrategic Pulse: To what extent can we talk about a "colour revolution" in Belarus, taking into account Moscow's profound dissatisfaction with Lukashenka over his known opposition to deeper integration of his country with Russia and the Russian attempt to discipline the rebellious leader in the context of the August presidential elections?

Anna Borshchevskaya: The situation in Belarus is not the same as in Ukraine, and perhaps not even the same as in Armenia, though I would say it's probably still closer to what happened in Armenia than in Ukraine. In Ukraine, protestors brought EU flags to Maidan for example, the protest was about the country's leadership taking Ukraine away from the path of European integration. In Armenia protestors were fed up with government corruption, and in Belarus the people are protesting against government tyranny. Belarus is less free than even Russia because of Lukashenka.

What is true of all color revolutions—and this relates to Belarus, is that these were popular protests by people who wanted a change in their governance for one reason or another. It is well known of course that Putin was frustrated with Lukashenka's resistance to integration with Russia, but regardless no one seems to have expected that the people would rise in protest to such an extent. This shows how fed up Belarusians have been with Lukashenka, that tyranny and repression is ultimately never stable.

What are Russia's interests in Belarus and the region? Does Vladimir Putin prefer Belarus to be vulnerable, destabilized, and devoid of credibility internationally?

Putin wants Belarus to be integrated into Russia, be dependent on Russia; it doesn't matter who governs it, he wants Belarus with or without Lukashenka. This is an extension of the traditional Kremlin approach to the region of outright integrating countries into the Russian empire, or keeping countries on the periphery weak and destabilized. The Kremlin feels secure when others around it are insecure.

What is your assessment of the international reaction to the crisis in Belarus? Do you find opportune new international sanctions on Belarus?

It has been limited. To be sure there was verbal condemnation, but especially in the beginning as the smaller countries, such as the Baltic states, who appear to have done the most for the Belarusian people. To be sure there is also discussion of sanctions, but the response should have been more resolute and focused on imposing real costs on Russia.

How strong is Belarus' dependency on the Russian Federation? How deep has Russia penetrated the political regime in Minsk?

Belarus is one of Russia's closest CSTO military allies and Moscow has strong connections in Minsk; Belarus is very dependent on Russia economically, including especially as a source of energy; Moscow uses energy subsidies as a political tool of control and dependence. Furthermore, almost half of Belarusian goods are exported to Russia, Russia is Belarus' main import partner, and in addition holds almost half of the country's national debt, so it is Belarus' main creditor. But with a different government, Belarus could pursue a path of closer cooperation and integration with Europe, and this would be the Kremlin's nightmare scenario.

Could Lukashenka's recent meeting with Putin and the subsequently announced Russian loan to Belarus be interpreted as a step towards deeper

integration under the aegis of a Russia-Belarus "Union State"?

This is a signal that Putin clearly wants to control Belarus; it is also a sign that a military intervention is last resort, he would prefer to use other means, not only because it would be costlier, but also most likely not very popular domestically. For years now it has been clear that the Russian people are tired of military interventions.

Do you see a horizon for radical changes that would lead to the transition to democracy in Belarus? What could and should the West do to support the civil society in Belarus?

It's hard to tell, but the West should be doing more to support the democratic aspirations of Belarusians, and it should make clear to Russia that it will impose real costs on Russia, beyond only sanctions, if it tries to integrate Belarus into the Russian Federation. Halting the construction of NordStream2 would be one such clear message.

THE MEDITERANEAN SEA

Aegean angst: Greece and Turkey's dangerous Eastern Mediterranean game

Eva J. KOULOURIOTIS



[Photo: Getty]

From fierce post-World War One fighting in the 1920s to the Cyprus dispute that erupted in the 1970s, the Aegean Sea has always been a source of contention between Greece and Turkey.

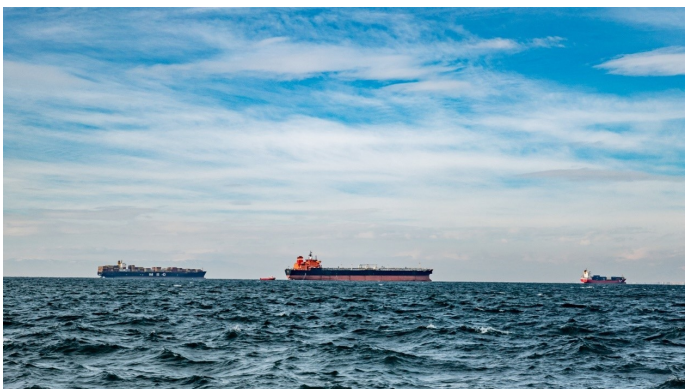
Today, it has once again returned to the top of international headlines, with demagogic speeches in both Athens and Ankara reviving a long-standing conflict between both countries. However, grafted on to this historical rivalry is a much more complicated set of energy and geopolitical concerns, with the battleground in the Eastern Mediterranean extending far beyond the borders of both countries.

The spark for recent tensions was the signing of a memorandum between Turkey and the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya in December 2019, which consisted of two axes. The first was the redrawing of maritime borders between Ankara and Libya, which the Greek government considered a threat.

The second, and boldest, part of the pact was an understanding on security and military cooperation which allowed Turkey to militarily intervene in the country's war to support the GNA, bringing with it a set of hostilities from France, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt.

As a result, Athens looked for a way to prevent Turkey from expanding its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, with the Greek prime minister's visit to Paris earlier this year marking a distinct turning point in Greek foreign policy.

The meeting between French President Emmanuel Macron and Greek PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis crystallised new political and military relations between Paris and Athens, which the French president called a "framework of strategic defence".



[Photo: Getty]

The French side promised to support Athens' position against Ankara regarding the maritime border issue and the Cyprus dispute, and Athens, in return, agreed to coordinate its foreign and military policy in cooperation with Paris.

Two days after the meeting, Paris dispatched

warships to Greek shores to demonstrate the French government's support of a European ally against Turkey, marking the first escalation by Athens against Ankara.

It was, however, actually a French escalation with a Greek face, and was a key reason for escalating regional tensions that have culminated in today's extreme rhetoric on both sides.

Geopolitical standpoints

In the current conflict, each side is trying to impose its point of view beyond the realms of international law, or in some cases by building new international relations. The Greek side relies on two elements.

Firstly, it uses its EU membership to put economic pressure on Ankara. Athens is also taking advantage of its stance during the migrant border crisis with Turkey, the so-called 'Evros crisis', when Greece presented itself as a shield for Europe against immigrants and refugees, demanding that the EU imposes economic sanctions on Ankara, whose economy is already suffering.

The second element of Athens' posturing is as a front for Ankara's common enemies. The Greek government today presents itself as a bulwark against the Turkish administration and a conduit for those who want to send messages of pressure and threats against it.

On the other hand, Turkey understands the EU's economic need for the Turkish market. In recent years, Turkey, far from discussing its EU membership, which is essentially brain dead, has managed to build high-level bilateral relations with EU countries like Italy, Spain, Malta and others.



[Photo: Getty]

These relations constitute protection for Ankara in any Greek movement within the EU. Ankara knows that the Greek side is not keen on going to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which is

unlikely to adopt the full Greek vision for its share in the Eastern Mediterranean.

But while Politicians from both countries are calculating their stances based on the manoeuvre room available to them, the big player in Washington could well have the last word.

In the White House, ambiguity still prevails about the actual US position on tensions between Ankara and Athens, with a cordial relationship developing in recent months between President Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdogan as interests have aligned over Libya, Syria and international terrorism.

However, the upcoming presidential election and Trump's personal need for international support from countries such as the UAE and Israel could be a reason for the White House to lean towards Athens's stance against Ankara. Washington's decision earlier this month to lift the partial arms embargo on the Republic of Cyprus could be interpreted as a step along this path.

Conflict limits

The Turkish government is not interested in any kind of escalation, especially with Greece. Ankara needs to end the Libyan conflict as soon as possible and reap its military victories at the negotiating table. This is its top priority in the current moment.

Meanwhile, the new discovery of a Black Sea gas field by Turkish ships has boosted the confidence of the Turkish administration, which was translated diplomatically into Ankara's approval for all German ceasefire initiatives in Libya as well as sitting at the negotiating table with Athens, following the initiative of NATO's Secretary General, to prevent any military conflict between the two neighbours.



[Foto: Getty]

As for Greece, the choice of Athens publicly and secretly is escalation, which can be analysed around

three elements. The first is that current economic conditions in the country due to Covid-19 are leading to a deep recession, with a second quarter economic contraction of 15.2 percent.

The government wants to shift the attention of the Greek public by warming the waters of the Aegean Sea. The second aspect is that of making partisan gains using hate speech and escalating tensions with Ankara, presenting them as victories to increase support for the ruling right-wing party and boost its chances in the next elections.

Finally, Athens believes that the support provided by Ankara's enemies could increase possible concessions by Turkey in future negotiations, and the possibility of the Democrats arriving in the White House will favour Athens' fate.

Some may see the NATO - brokered military talks

on Thursday as a start to breaking the ice and reducing tensions. However, the current reality of the Eastern Mediterranean scene is no longer a Greek-Turkish conflict. Rather, it is a conflict between the interests of a rising regional country, Turkey, and countries that see this rise as dangerous for their own influence and plans in the region.

In this respect, the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean is now linked to the future of the Libyan war. Actions on both sides of the Aegean Sea are akin to dancing on the cliff-edge and any miscalculation or overconfidence could lead the region into a bloody war in which there is no winner.

Athens must put its interests and the security of its people above French promises, and Turkey must not fall into the traps of militarism and escalation.

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THE WESTERN BALKANS

As Serbia strengthens ties with West, Russia seeks to destabilise

Jelena MILIĆ



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Throughout history, Serbian-Russian relations have never been simple or necessarily friendly. In the last few years they have become even more complex. This trend coincides with intensified efforts by the current administration in Belgrade to try and re-establish a better partnership with the United States – as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić stated in his letter to US President Donald Trump on the occasion of the Independence Day celebrations this year. Many relevant Serbian officials and public figures hope that relations can reach a level of strategic partnership, which has been repeatedly emphasised during a number of biannual high level conferences, including the Belgrade NATO Week.

Belgrade has claimed that it finds more understanding for these efforts in the Trump Administration than with previous administrations. Unfortunately, one cannot shake the notion that the same goes for the European Union, as improving relations with the US is perceived as a zero-sum game rather than a win-win scenario for all parties.

These renewed efforts are not just Vučić's attempt to manipulate the West, as some baselessly and tendentiously suggest, but rather are concrete, constructive steps that illustrate Serbia's goal of moving towards the West and is genuine, despite huge obstacles. Some of these steps are laid out in the recent article titled "The right stuff", published by the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA).

According to the CEPA article: "Serbia has the most significant contingent of Western Balkan troops in multinational EU and UN-led operations and has institutionalised co-operation with the European Defence Agency."

The article goes on to point out that "in 2018 Serbia and NATO jointly organized the Consequence Management field exercise, which included 2,000 participants from 40 countries. Serbia has begun the implementation of the second cycle of the Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO and has held more exercises in 2019 with NATO countries than with Russia. Its State Partnership Program with the Ohio National Guard is one of the best in Europe." It notes Vučić's public backing of the November 2019 Bosnia-Herzegovina agreement to form a new government and adopt a reform programme for the armed forces in co-operation with NATO.

CEPA continues to point out that "Despite Kremlin pressure, Belgrade refuses to grant diplomatic status to the so-called Serbian-Russian Humanitarian Centre in Niš, an instrument of Russian soft power." In a clear attempt to obstruct this progress, the Serbian government seized a local airport in Niš and put it under its jurisdiction, after the Centre moved its premises there.

There is no doubt that interest in enhancing overall relations with the US is partly due to Belgrade's expectations that the United States will demonstrate more understanding concerning the negotiations with Pristina. Recent relevant public opinion poll called "This is Us", designed by Centre for Euro-Atlantic Studies, has shown that Serbian public opinion strongly supports this course, something that is intentionally or unwittingly often overlooked when commenting on the situation in Serbia. According to the research, 65 per cent of citizens support the strengthening of co-operation between Serbia and the United States in the fields of security, defence and economy. Another 14 per cent are undecided, which means that they can also be convinced if presented with good arguments.

Despite the existence of the multitude of NGOs financed by the political West, a myriad of micro opposition, allegedly democratic, movements, as

well as prominent government-linked western portals (e.g. Voice of America, RFE/RL, DW, BBC) and local anti-government apparently pro-democratic media portals, that one would expect to be key sources of such news and trends, the citizens of Serbia see the current administration in Belgrade and the media close to it as the main sources and promoters of this orientation.

It is indisputable that the Kremlin has also observed this trend, which it might find unfavourable, but very real. Until a few years ago, the presence of various forms of Russian influence increased in the country, either through illegitimate means (that included a broad campaign based on fabricated history and false narratives about traditionally good relations) or as malignant influence. This was conditioned by energy dependence and the fact that Russia, like China, has its own opinion when it comes to the status of Kosovo due to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 – under which the NATO-led mission in Kosovo (KFOR) operates, whether Belgrade likes it or not.

Serbia is the only country in the Western Balkans that passed majority ownership over the gas and oil industry to Russian hands, during the previous administration. This situation has provided Moscow room to build an unusually large private security sector (de facto under the control of another state) which has an impact on the protection of critical infrastructure in the Republic of Serbia. Moscow is very skilfully exploiting this, using the traumas of the NATO bombing to excite years-long disinformation campaign it conducts via the local *Sputnik* outlet, met with practically zero opposition, in order to articulate its interests, which are ever more evidently not in the interest of Serbia. The current Serbian administration has little opportunity to change this situation all at once, at least while the issue of Kosovo's status remains open, which is obviously Moscow's intention.

Recent arrangements regarding the import of weapons from Russia are partly a consequence of Moscow's pressure on Belgrade. Lately, Belgrade has been trying to diversify its arms imports with risky purchases from China, that can be damaging even if they represent substitutes for the Russian weapons. However, Vučić has not excluded the possibility of procuring fighter jets from the US, along the already finalised purchase of French *Mistral* systems.

Prime Minister Ana Brnabić announced in September that Serbia is preparing to buy a

significant amount of defensive military equipment from Israel, at the same time reminding of the continuous strengthening of Serbian-Israeli relations. This is yet another example of Serbian foreign policy orientation leaning towards the political West – once again unjustly passed unnoticed among western policy-makers and commentators.

Serbia also joined the declaration on the presidential elections in Belarus that the European Union adopted on August 11th, which stated that the citizens of Belarus “showed a desire for democratic change” during the election campaign, but that “the elections were neither free nor fair”.

Importantly, over the last several years Serbia has managed to significantly reduce some of the damaging Russian influence – not only in Serbia but in the entire Western Balkans region. For years the Kremlin's destabilising influence and hybrid operations were articulated through its strong ties with the political representatives of Serbs in Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and then Macedonia. Sergei Zheleznyak, a former high-ranking official from Putin's United Russia and a member of Duma, was in charge of contacts with all the above-mentioned party structures. Among other things, he advocated for the creation of a community of military-neutral states in the region at a time when it was already clear that Macedonia would join NATO and when Montenegro was already a member of the Alliance. Fortunately, the plan failed, partly due to Serbia's current leadership and Vučić's efforts to replace these parties' ties with Russia with stronger ones with official Belgrade.

In the midst of tough but decisive meetings in Washington with delegations of the US government and Pristina, Vučić met with Milorad Dodik – the longstanding leader of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska entity and currently a member of its triparty presidency (who is also close to Vladimir Putin). Despite Dodik's outrageous attempt to equalise the status of Republika Srpska to that of Kosovo, Vučić and Serbia did not succumb.

The positioning of Belgrade as a natural centre for articulation of the legitimate issues of cultural and other guaranteed rights of Serbs living across the region, therefore, should not be seen as a new project of “Greater Serbia nationalist hegemony”, or as Vucic's political war against the region, as many, again, baselessly but intentionally suggest. Instead, it is rather a bulwark to prevent Russia's

destabilising influence, as the results of the recent elections in Montenegro confirm.

Several parties of the new winning coalition in Montenegro have ties with Belgrade and the co-operation takes place through legitimate channels. Belgrade supports local NGOs in Montenegro that address the very same issues relevant for Serbians and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro that have been openly supported by the parties of the winning coalition, that is already recognised and accepted by EU officials.

The key issue has been flawed legislation on the legal status of religious communities, which clearly discriminates against the Serbian Orthodox Church. Instead of condemning this illiberal practice, which goes against trends of modern democracies, similar to re-emerging trends in Kosovo where Serbian cultural and religious heritage is threatened in a variety of ways, many western policy makers and pundits turn a blind eye. After months of very peaceful massive protests against the flawed legislation, confronted by an arrogant manner in which the former authorities were justifying it using historical fallacies, the legitimate discontent resulted in the election defeat of the ruling party.

The new victorious coalition in Montenegro has pledged to strengthen the rule of law for all, including the Serbian Orthodox faithful, and to revoke the controversial law. This will surely significantly contribute to the calming of the atmosphere and to reducing Russian influence in this sensitive time. The coalition has also pledged to uphold all of Montenegro's international obligations (i.e. commitments to NATO membership and recognition of Kosovo). It is questionable how the situation would have unfolded if Moscow had remained the main sponsor of these political structures and if Vučić had not gradually shifted the paradigm.

Moscow's ongoing actions against the current administration in Belgrade, taking place either behind its back or directly and overtly, which certainly do not encounter an "open door" policy, are, most worryingly. They are executed through the security system and by pro-Kremlin-minded and deeply compromised trade unions of military and police. During the last violent riots in Serbia, their leaders, with close ties to many extreme-right Russian organisations and activists, who also attended and supported rallies, once again continued their long-lasting collusion with small opposition parties' leaders and who boycotted the last elections with no valid reason. One of their

standard rallying cries is that any deal between Belgrade and Pristina would be a "betrayal" and that, if this happens, the security forces should "take matters into their own hands". It is worrying that western influential analysts who are allegedly experts on Balkans falsely claim otherwise, despite numerous evidence from open sources and statements.

As mentioned, the riots were organised by openly pro-Kremlin structures gathered around Mladjan Djordjevic, a man with strong ties with Moscow, and one of the key financiers of the allegedly pro-democratic opposition in Serbia. Among other things, he visited the occupied Crimea, although the Serbian administration supports full territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Prior to the violent protests in the fall of 2019, it was revealed that an active member of the Russian intelligence community was bribing a member of the Serbian Army. Neither the Kremlin nor Belgrade could repudiate this espionage affair. The Russian Embassy in Belgrade and the Russian foreign ministry unsuccessfully tried to intimidate analytical organisations and exert direct pressure on the media of another sovereign state to deny all the irrefutable evidence of pro-Kremlin traces in the violent demonstrations in Serbia. The riots were fortunately short-lived because they were not a reflection of "deep divisions and dissatisfaction with the current government" as falsely claimed, but rather an attempt to forcibly oppose the election results, which gave additional legitimacy to the current administration and to stop its course of strengthening relations with the US. During the winter of 2019-2020 this attempt was preceded by Moscow's effort, little noticed in the West, to send Yevgeny Primakov, the new director of state agency Rossotrudnichestvo, to convince Vučić to form a transitional government with the aforementioned pro-Kremlin opposition structures. This of course was rejected.

In view of all the above, it is obvious that Belgrade is not playing the card of accusing Moscow just to flatter the West, either in general or regarding Kosovo negotiations in particular, as it is groundlessly claimed ever more frequently and even intentionally, especially now as the very important meetings in Washington and Brussels, where Belgrade and Pristina are trying to normalise relations. Instead, Belgrade is facing a very real threat from Moscow to which it cannot adequately respond on its own at the moment.

In the period of intense efforts by the current US

administration, together with the EU's aim to reach a comprehensive multidimensional compromise between Belgrade and Pristina, and which would keep Belgrade more firmly anchored in the political West, it can be expected that Russia's destabilising pressure on Serbia will only escalate. The United States can play a key role in reducing Russian influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans, which on their own do not have adequate mechanisms to do so.

This can be achieved by intensifying strategic co-operation with other great powers, continued strengthening of defence and security co-operation with Serbia, as well as through already expressed support of the various US agencies and steps on the

ground for the establishment of regional mini Schengen zone that would facilitate movement of people, goods, services and capital and other economic and infrastructure projects, that the EU seems to be on-board with, but also through support for the tailor-made agreement between Belgrade and Pristina. This would certainly be in the interest of Serbia, the entire Western Balkans, the US, but also the EU.

NB. The article was first published in *New Eastern Europe* on September 3, 2020.

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MIDDLE EAST

Lebanon: Revolution, Clientelism, Confessionalism or the Difficult Road to Reform

Ambassador Professor Dumitru CHICAN

The national identity of Lebanon was created after World War I, when in 1918, the famous British-French agreements – named after their engineers, the Englishman, Mike Sykes and the Frenchman, Francis-Georges Picot – divided the Middle East between France and Great Britain, following the principle *divide et impera*.

On the 17th of October 2019, the Lebanese public space was reduced to a state of turmoil and turbulence, where tear gas, truncheons and repressive measures taken in such cases proved completely futile. It was preceded by fiery protests, caused by a long series of popular grievances regarding low living standards, with all the ethical, economic, social and institutional issues they entail. The final straw and the spark that ignited the “New Cedar Revolution” was in fact a simple austerity measure taken by the Government led by the Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who imposed an extra six USD monthly charge on the use of WhatsApp messenger. The measure per se was not harsher than other previous one imposed by the authorities, however its impact – following months of social discontent – was significant as it mobilised over two million protesters out of six million Lebanese. They suddenly decided to oppose a system accused of endemic corruption, inertia and incompetence. From claims pertaining to grey areas and daily economic and social deficiencies – attributed to the Lebanese system and gerontocracy, which ever

since Lebanon gained its independence steered the destiny of Lebanon and that of its people arbitrarily and not always efficiently – the movements added more claims to their list of grievances, which became more radical, due to the fact that the system refused to dialogue, and asked for “all”, who ever since 1943 exclusively ruled the country, “to leave”. “The people wish for all to leave” (*kullu*, “when we say all, we mean those who have turned Lebanon into what it is today”).



The resignation of the government led by Saad Hariri was nothing but a reiteration, expressed through a merely declarative narrative. For the first time after the civil war, the Lebanese, almost all represented by the younger generation, cast aside their social-economic claims, only to demand “a new-look for Lebanon”, which translates into wavering the Lebanese confessional system inherited from the French mandate following World War I. The generation demanded a “Lebanon for all

Lebanese”, free from a colonial structure imposed from the outside, as well as a Lebanon free of confessionalism and truly belonging to its citizens.

The Lebanese Confessionalism Between Identity Affirmation and Its Opposite

The national identity of Lebanon was created after World War I, when in 1918, the famous British-French agreements – named after their engineers, the Englishman, Mike Sykes and the Frenchman, Francis-Georges Picot – divided the Middle East between France and Great Britain, following the principle of *divide et impera*. The authorities of the French mandate ordered the division of the former Syrian vilayet in five “statelets”, whose frontiers were established according to the territorial configuration of the denominations. Besides the *sancak* Alexandretta (Iskenderun district in today’s Turkish province of Hatay), which was donated as a reward to the post Ottoman Turkish republic, Syria was divided in the following “statelets”: Great Lebanon, Aleppo, Damascus, the Alawite State, and the “Jabal Druze” state, inhabited by the Druze confessional community. The constitution of “Greater Lebanon”, drafted by the authorities of the French mandate, in 1926, introduces confessionalism as a basic functioning principle and form of governance, which will be adopted once more, following the Lebanese independence, in 1943. It would be adopted as the “National Pact” – basically an unwritten constitution – agreed upon by the religious majorities, which thus share political power. According to this agreement, the president of the country must be Maronite Christian, the prime minister must be Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Parliament must be a Shiite Muslim. This form of sharing of the main state powers between the components of the complicated Lebanese confessional mosaic becomes the ultimate reference system of the political and economic life. The system took root to such an extent that the political system answers to religion at a community level, without whose guidance and approval (if not exclusivity), the state institutions in their diversity cannot function properly or perhaps at all. Constitutionally speaking, the Lebanese confessional community landscape is dominated by Christianity and Islam, in coexistence with marginal religious communities, such as:

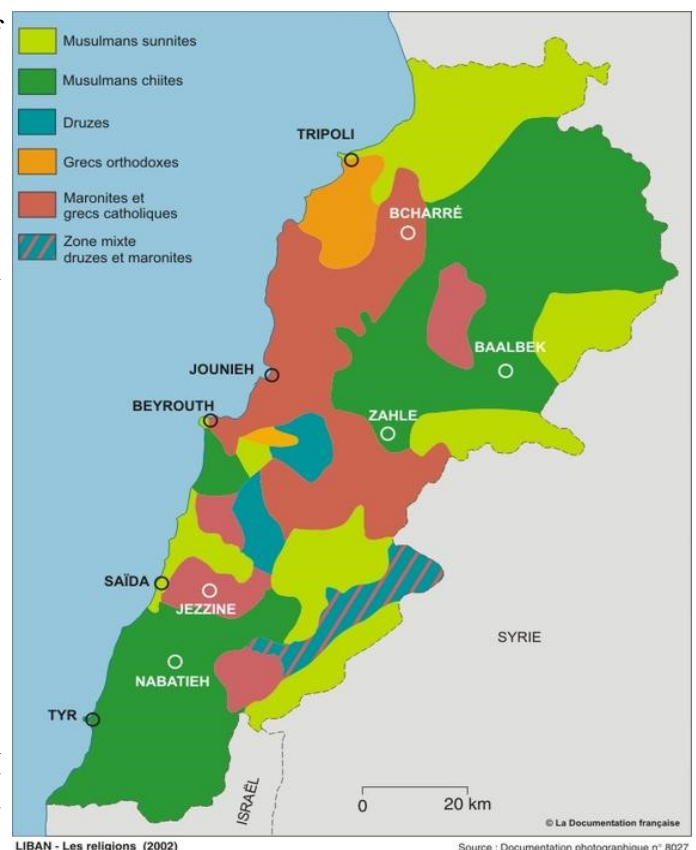
I. Christians - 45% somewhat smaller in numbers than the Muslims. The following active religious communities are recognized within this category:

1. Maronite (Catholics)
2. Greek-Orthodox
3. Greek-Catholics
4. Catholic Armenians
5. Orthodox Armenians (apostolic)
6. Syriac (Catholics)
7. Jacobin (orthodox Syriac)
8. Chaldean (Catholics)
9. Nestorian (autocephalous church)
10. Coptic (orthodox)

II. Islam - 54%, structured as follows:

1. Sunnis, almost 27%
2. Shiites, 27 %
3. Druze (heterodox Muslims)
4. Alawites, Twelver Shia
5. Ismailites (Shiites)

III. Others: Baha'i Faith, Mormons, Buddhists, Jews (under 5.000 believers).



The Main Lebanese Confessions – Territorial Distribution

In Lebanon’s modern history, the confessional system has played a decisive part in the domestic national development as well as in the smooth

function of the economic and social structure, a reality that made Lebanon known for a longer period as “Switzerland of the Middle East”. It is also true that the Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990 on one hand marked the beginning of domestic regression caused by foreign interference, and on the other, led to the confessional system becoming more politicized, to more isolation, religious distancing, and the use of religious identities – in order to involve religion in the political system, develop invasive cronyism and safeguard political, economic and social privileges that, in their turn, generate mass and institutional corruption, and last but not least, the separation of the elites and decision makers from the real problems and “malfunctions” of the national structure in all its key sectors. Far from bringing a positive change, the Lebanese civil war strengthened the alliance between clans and interest groups, and the arguments related to the religious identity became, more and more aggressively, tools to monopolise religion itself, as well as the main sectors of public, economic and financial life generating profit out of sight of the public legislation.

Revolution and Communitarism – A Difficult Cohabitation

Plagued by one of the most corrosive political, economic, social and institutional crisis in its entire history, Lebanon presents itself, three years from the start of the public protests, as a state increasingly threatened by bankruptcy and by the complete collapse of its social contract. Here is where many analysts see the country in danger of returning to civil war, if it does not come out of its current state any time soon.

The buildup of social tensions was brutally amplified by the terrible explosions that took place on the 4th of August in the port of Beirut. They caused 200 deaths and 6000 injured, destroyed or paralyzed half of the capital and led to the radicalization of a civil society to which uprooting the political, religious governing system incapable of generating a tangible national agreement and irrevocably damaged by corruption outpaced economic claims and daily shortcomings. Hence, the civil society focused on the viral slogan *Irhal kullu* – “Let all leave”, including the president of the republic and all the members of the ancient regime, as well the leaders of clans and groups.

However, despite this fragile situation the spirit of the political and religious community, the obstinate

attachment to maintaining the sectarian privileges and the non-combat state of the parliamentary opposition, keep on ardently encouraging Lebanon’s road to collapse.

On the other hand, the “New Cedar Revolution” carries with it the germs of its own disintegration and fragility. It is enough to mention, in this respect, the fact that beyond the apparent cohesion in the public space, the “Lebanese Spring” is profoundly affected by the deeply rooted atavistic mentality. Beyond the radical discourse of “solidarity”, this mentality makes the protests dominated by political, religious, and provincial identities, and by a “cult of the leader” - be them of the clan, or a political or religious group - seen as the source, patron, infallible symbol and guarantor of the national and individual good. Thus, the Lebanese revolution is rather a conjecture of wills that actually reason according to the toll of the bells or to the callings of the muezzins, but also to the cultural and mercantile affinities with various non-Lebanese players, either from the region or from outside it. This identity affinity with politics and religion, just like those known as Al-Mula’ala – social clientele in contact with foreign countries, such as Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, France, the USA etc. – take advantage of these leverages to promote their own pawns on the Lebanese chessboard, against the pawns of the other sides. Ultimately we are referring to the same dichotomy that has always separated the Lebanese vis-a-vis the community identity of the sides.

Will the Phoenix Rise Anew from the Ashes?

Almost a month after the explosion in the Port of Beirut and the resignation of the “government on duty” led by Hassan Diab resigned, the Lebanese community elites are fervently negotiating to get Lebanon out of the crisis, starting with assigning a new prime minister, who would lead a reform cabinet. It is not an easy endeavour, to the extent that these steps are meant to lead to the sudden capitulation of the religious and political stipendiary sectarianism. From this point of view, the bone of contention is the lack of consensus over an alternative. In the more or less public conclaves, the opinions vary as follows (three scenarios):

1) Maintaining the (improved) Constitution in 1926, which is the basis of the Lebanese confessional system.

2) Redrafting (under no clear terms, for the time being) the National Pact from 1943.

3) Implementing, as a reference point, the National Reconciliation Accord, commonly known as the *Taif Agreement*, signed on the 22nd of October 1989 in the above mentioned city, in Saudi Arabia. It was meant to end the civil war and restore Lebanese normalcy, including by limiting the privileges of political blocs and religious groups profiting from stipends and quotas (*Muhasasa*), through which they control the Lebanese politics and the economic, financial and services sectors.

Another complicated Gordian knot is the place and role of the pro-Iranian political-military group Hezbollah, an issue whose solution is a precondition for the reconstruction and development aid that the Western community and the international financial institutions are willing to provide to a “reformed and restructured Lebanon”.

In the beginning of August, the deputy of the US secretary of state Mike Pompeo visited Beirut to consult with the Lebanese side, and the French president Emmanuel Macron returned to the Lebanese capital, mainly to exert persuasive pressure over the Lebanese decision-makers caught themselves between popular protests that show no sign of stopping any time soon, and external pressure.

The drama of the Lebanese must not be compared to those who have been through great catastrophes such as Tsunamis, atomic bombings or the disaster that ruined Pompeii. What happened and what is still happening in Lebanon is the result of the doings and attitudes of the Lebanese. They are those who, with the support of the international community should rise the Phoenix anew from its ashes, by mending their country and rebuilding it, so that the old cedar country becomes, once more and forever, a “Lebanon for all Lebanese”.

NOTES

- On the 31st of August, with 90 votes out of 120, the Lebanese Parliament approved the investiture of the Sunni diplomat and professor Mustafa Adib as the prime minister assigned to form the new Lebanese Government. The appointment of the new head of the Lebanese government was also endorsed by the Shiite parties Hezbollah and Amal, by Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (led by his son-in-law, Gebran Bassil), by the Future Movement (led by the former prime minister Saad Hariri), as well as by the former prime ministers Hassan Diab, Fouad Siniora, Najib Miqati and Talal Salman. A former ambassador to Germany, and a professor, just like his predecessor, Mustafa Adib is

facing the need to deal with at least four major issues – reconstruction, after the damages caused by the explosion that took place on the 4th of August, finalising the ongoing investigations regarding the tragedy that took place in the Port of Beirut, economic reform, and the reform of the system. Lebanese analysts believe that without the solid support of the political parties, electoral blocs and religious leaders, that is the entire system that needs to be reformed, Mustafa Adib will not have an easy task.



- Just a few hours after the appointment of the new prime minister, the French president Emmanuel Macron arrived to Beirut in his second visit in less than a month. The French leader gave Lebanon 90 days to implement its first reform measures, otherwise it would face severe international penalties. Emmanuel Macron also offered to host an aid conference in mid-October to help Lebanon.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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He is the Director of the Atlantic Basin Initiative, a network of African, European, South, Central and North American Eminent Persons, research institutes and private sector leaders that explores the changing dynamics among the four continents of the Atlantic Basin with regard to energy, economic growth and human development, values and security. He is a leading member of the Jean Monnet Network on Atlantic Studies and a member of the advisory board of the Atlantic Dialogues, sponsored by the OCP Center in Morocco.



George Cristian Maior has been accredited as the extraordinary and plenipotentiary Ambassador of Romania to the United States of America on 29 June 2015, officially starting his mandate on 17 September 2015, after presenting his accreditation letters. George Cristian Maior started his diplomatic career in 1992, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania, at the Treaties Department and the Strategic Affairs Department. Between 1997 and 1999 he was the Charge d'Affaires a.i. at the Romanian Embassy in the Republic of Ireland. In 2004 he received the diplomatic rank of Ambassador.



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Ambassador Professor Dumitru CHICAN graduated from the Faculty of Foreign Languages - University of Bucharest and majored in Arabic. He has a post-graduate degree in Arabic from the University of Cairo - Egypt. He was an Arabic interpreter, diplomat and an advisor on the Middle East. He is an associate professor, a published author in this field, the founder of the Arab-Romanian Friendship League, a regional expert for the Geostrategic Pulse magazine as well as an editor for the Romanian press agency "RADOR" (Radio Orient/Radio Observer).

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“GEOSTRATEGIC PULSE” - founded in 2007
Bilingual Publication of Geopolitical Analysis, edited by
INGEPO Consulting - Bucharest
www.pulsulgeostrategic.ro; Tel: +4-031 1011934
J40/4984/2019, CUI RO19298677

Editor-in-Chief:
Constantin IACOBIȚĂ

Assistant Editor: Pompilia VLĂDESCU
Assistant Editor & Editing: Ciprian RĂDULESCU



ISSN: 1844-167X

Cover: Self Editing

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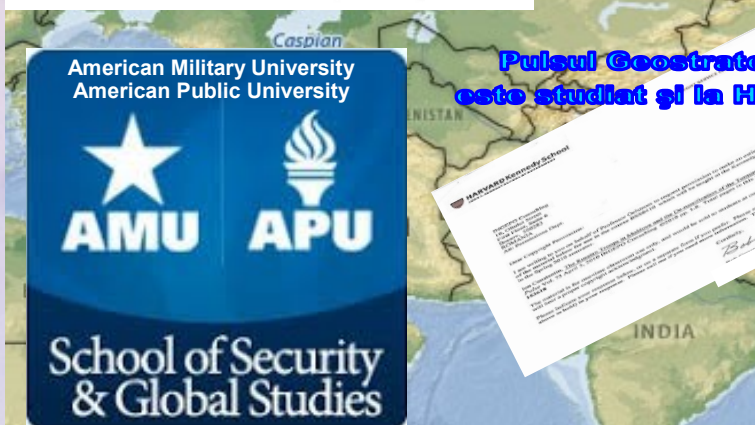
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