



# RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

## Implications for Democracy and Democracy Assistance in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova

Virtual Round Table, 22 March 2022

### Context

Armenia, Georgia and Moldova continue to strengthen their democratic systems. Achievements, albeit with many challenges, include improvements to the conduct of elections, increasing the transparency and accountability of government institutions, and maintaining an open civic space for citizens and media to openly debate, question, or challenge their governments.

Just days after the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and following Ukraine's urgent application for membership of the European Union, Georgia and Moldova also sent in their applications and have since submitted answers to the European Commission's questionnaires. These declarations, once again, commit these countries and their incumbent governments to build liberal democratic systems—where human rights and the rule of law are sacrosanct and where state power is constrained by democratic checks and controls. These developments, even if the accession may entail a long road ahead, signal a resolution of all three countries to further invest in deepening their democratic systems of government. If there is a positive fall out to be found from this devastating war, this could be it.

What other effects can be anticipated on these fledgling democracies? Could the war and its fall out on the region's economies unravel social and political instabilities? Against this backdrop, will the political elites and the public, witnessing Russia's attack on Ukraine, find the resolve to continue building pluralistic, democratic systems? Or will the governments, using the argument of war at their doorstep, increasingly resort to majoritarian or even authoritarian methods of governance? Will they focus on the fight against corruption and oligarchic influence (a large majority of local oligarchs are connected with Russia) or will the economic pressures result in moving away from this vital agenda? Will the state of emergency and a prevailing sense of crisis allow for conditions to build independent judicial bodies and a strong rule of law? Will civic groups and watchdogs find it harder to fight for independent media and their ability to check government actions?

International IDEA hosted a virtual Round Table, inviting three prominent democracy and rights advocates from Armenia, Georgia and Moldova to share their reflections and recommendations on what may lie ahead and what efforts domestic and international actors could undertake in support of democratic deepening in the region.

This Round Table Report summarises the contributions made by these country experts.

The Round Table aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the current and likely future effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on democracy in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova and on how national and international democracy assistance providers could revise their actions in response to these threats.

### Country speakers/contributors

**Igor Botan**, Executive Director of the Association for Participatory Democracy (ADEPT), Moldova

**Lousineh Hakobyan**, founding member and President of the Europe in Law Foundation, Armenia

**Tinatin Khidasheli**, Chairperson at CIVIC IDEA, Georgia

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## THE OUTLOOK FROM MOLDOVA

Russia's war against Ukraine is causing uncertainty about the future of democratic reforms in Moldova. The war and its accompanying propaganda have widened existing geopolitical cleavages within Moldovan society. Pro-Russia and pro-Europe sentiments continue to harden and worsen already elevated levels of political polarization. Sharing his concerns about the ongoing situation, Mr Botan feared that the ultimate agenda of pro-Russian political actors in the country, looking to capitalize on the ongoing crisis, is to change the democratic paradigm. Some observers fear a scenario where the war in neighbouring Ukraine and the large influx of migrants into Moldova will destabilize the political situation and instigate a crisis leading to a new election. Russia's control over the breakaway republic of Transnistria and Moldova's dependence on imports of Russian energy are the main levers that Russia is expected to continue to use in order **to increase pressure on the Moldovan Government**. Mr Botan echoes other experts and pro-reform politicians that Russia could resort to reigniting hostilities in Transnistria, and stage an intervention to undermine its territorial integrity.

How is Moldova's democratic system of government withstanding these pressures? Mr Botan's concerns focus on the following:

- A lack of genuine public participation in the decision-making process: A non-participatory political culture remains the central challenge for democracy. Governance institutions formed to serve democratic principles of participation and representation lack engagement with the public. As a consequence, disengaged citizens often decide on their voting choices based on party promises for cheaper material resources such as gas, fuel and food. This explains the past successes of populist anti-liberal political parties. Despite these challenges, the ruling party, the Party of Action and Solidarity, remains consolidated and continues to command a majority in parliament and the presidency. The parliament is in its first year, and the

president is serving her second year in office. The ruling party has been concentrating on justice and anti-corruption systems—two of the most significant and long-standing problems affecting Moldovan society. Despite a lacking cooperation on these reform issues from the parliamentary opposition, the government should be able to continue to pursue these reforms with resolve, given its ongoing control of the presidency and its majority in parliament.

- The ability of a variety of local actors to misuse the open information space and manipulate public opinion: Russia has a substantial influence on Moldova's information space through online media and television outlets. Illiberal actors looking to undo Moldova's democratic gains are increasingly using disinformation campaigns aimed at setting the public against the current government and its democratic allies in the West. A network of media holdings, bloggers, influential representatives of the Orthodox Church and other actors are using their influence to sow confusion among the public about the reasons for or the nature of Russia's actions in Ukraine and therefore reinforce the efforts of Russian state propaganda. These disinformation methods and channels are not new. In this new context, however, propaganda messages are amplifying fears about price hikes as well as the budgetary and economic pressures associated with increased demands caused by refugee flows; these methods are being used to increase public anxiety and anti-Ukrainian sentiments. Moldova's Audio-Visual Council and the National Security Agency have responded by levying fines on television stations and blocking websites engaged in disinformation, which has caused protests on the part of pro-Russian opposition parties.
- These unfavourable conditions risk intensifying Moldova's already high levels of outward migration/depopulation. About one-third of Moldovans have Romanian citizenship. Over the past 30 years, [about one-third of citizens have left the country](#), and [one in three 20–24-year-olds would like to leave](#). Highly skilled, educated individuals make up a large part of those emigrating, depriving Moldova's democracy of vital human capital.

### Action points for domestic democratic deepening

- Public and private entities in the media should prioritise actions to counter disinformation and build effective societal defences against it;
- The government should continue to pursue reforms in the public administration, judicial and anti-corruption fields, in order to consolidate the country's democratic progress and pursue the goal of integration into the European Union.

### External support for democracy-building

Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its other neighbours illustrates that the aims of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy, launched two decades ago—to create an area of security, stability and prosperity between the European Union and Russia based on the principles of democracy and rule of law—will not be feasible in the new realities that lie ahead in the region. Instead, Mr Botan calls on the European Union to consider a new policy. For instance, a revised policy akin to the EU–Balkan Stabilisation and Association Process, built to foster democratic institutions and processes, with clear

prospects of membership, would provide a robust compass and a needed anchor for democratic development and consolidation in Moldova and other countries in the region.

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## THE OUTLOOK FROM GEORGIA

Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Georgia's Government has found itself at odds with a large part of its citizenry. Witnessing prolonged public rallies and protest actions aimed at the current government, Ms Khidasheli noted that the government's restrained rhetoric against Russia has antagonized a large part of its population, leading to public outcry. This has coincided with the relaunching—and opening of offices across the country—of a pro-Russian conservative party, which openly advocates anti-liberal and pro-Russian policies and claims that it is not in opposition to the government. The Government has joined the international community in condemning Russia's war against Ukraine and has supported international resolutions at the UN and the Council of Europe in this regard. However, the Government has declared a no-sanctions policy towards Russia, seeking to avoid any retribution against Georgia given Russia's ongoing occupation of a significant part of Georgian territory.

Tensions rose further between the executive branch and the president when Georgia's president criticized the government's position towards Russia and offered her support for Ukraine, including by visiting Brussels and Paris to express solidarity with Ukraine. In response, the government requested that the Constitutional Court clarify whether the president had the prerogative to undertake such visits without the government's knowledge.

Echoing others in the civil society, Ms Khidasheli maintained that this episode is worsening a deep, pre-existing political crisis between the ruling party on the one hand and the main opposition parties and the civil society on the other over the course of reforms in democratic governance. This division, which has centred on the conditions for a proportional electoral system, free and fair elections, the integrity of campaign finance, the protection of the democratic process from oligarchic influence and the independence of the judiciary, dates back several years but has now reached its most intensive phase. In 2021 the crisis was mediated by the European Union and the United States, most notably through the personal mediation effort of Charles Michel, President of the European Council, in early 2021. The process was only partially successful, as the leading opposition party declined to sign the agreement (the so-called Charles Michel agreement), brokered as part of the mediation, and the crisis continued. While some minor reforms took place as a result of this process, particularly limited reform of the election law, others stalled, most notably the constitutional change of the electoral system, judicial reform and the rebalancing of majority–opposition relations in parliament. The crisis reached its apex when the ruling party left the agreement in the summer of 2021, citing

the fact that the opposition had failed to participate in the crisis talks, therefore rendering the agreement meaningless.

Ms Khidasheli ascribed the application for EU-membership to strong pressure from street protests and civil society rather than the government's immediate intentions, as others in the civil society have already [noted](#).

This episode has reinforced a [longer-standing concern](#) among leading civil society groups that the incumbent government lacks openness, and that it has failed to act in line with its stated commitments. Georgia's EU membership aspirations, which its recent membership application formalized, can only be materialized when important governance reforms, long requested by the EU itself, are implemented in full.

#### **Action points for domestic democratic deepening**

- The ruling party and political actors from across the political spectrum should do their utmost to implement the agreed reform plans in the framework of the so-called Charles Michel Agreement.
- All key political actors should pursue the adoption of a strategic communication plan related to national security issues, underpinned by consensus among all political parties.
- Political actors should support the president's initiative for [national unity](#) and make joint efforts towards integration into the European Union.

#### **Support for democracy-building**

Despite the serious work that Georgia and other countries have ahead of them in order to qualify for EU membership, and in spite of the current government's lukewarm investment in democracy in recent years, the European Union now has an opportunity to galvanize support for a more determined course of reforms if it communicates clearly that it is prepared to accept new members in the future. Ambiguity, such as that seen in the latest Versailles declaration, noted Ms Khidasheli, signals ambivalence on the part of the EU, which hurts the objectives of advancing democracy and reinforces public scepticism— that regardless of democratic achievements, membership in the EU will not be feasible. Clarity in this regard may not replace the long and complex road that all concerned countries aspiring for membership face, but it is important that they be given a clear picture of their eventual membership once they satisfy the relevant criteria. Clarity and determination on the part of the EU make the voices of democracy advocates stronger and thus render efforts to consolidate democracy more effective. Such clarity would make it easier to keep the incumbent and future governments on track for the implementation of necessary democratic governance reforms.

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## THE OUTLOOK FROM ARMENIA

Since its Velvet Revolution, Armenia has made remarkable democratic progress, particularly in improving the conduct of elections in 2018 and 2021. Breaking with the previous pattern, these elections were administered in a competitive environment, providing citizens with a wide range of choices. Ms Hakobyan agreed with existing views among the civil society on the remaining [milestone of the electoral reform](#)—the stable majority clause, which in the past had cemented single-party rule, have not been addressed. The EU has played a defining role in supporting important reforms to the rule of law and public administration. There has been slower progress in reforming the police, the bar and the constitution as well as in combating corruption.

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**Countering disinformation will be key in securing Armenia's democracy.**

Ms Hakobyan noted that unfortunately the radical parliamentary opposition has worked to slow down the key democracy and rule-of-law reforms. Comprised of leaders of former ruling elites, these actors are seen as maintaining close ties with Russia. Several of them have been prosecuted, which has posed a threat to their political salience and radicalized them further. To demonstrate their allegiance to Russia, they consistently advocate an anti-European orientation and advance a vision of Armenia fully integrated into the Eurasian Economic Union. Since 2018, members of the former government have mounted a powerful campaign aimed at undermining the most critical directions of governance reforms, such as combating corruption and ensuring the independence of judicial bodies. At the centre of their campaign is the objective to demonise civic groups that advocate for democratic reforms. [They are seen to use disinformation to influence the public and to withdraw the support the government needs for these reforms.](#) Countering this disinformation will be key in securing Armenia's democracy.

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**By asserting a more active role in managing and resolving this conflict, the EU would provide a more credible alternative to Russia's influence in Armenia.**

The war with Azerbaijan and the resulting human and territorial losses have had a formidable effect on Armenia and on its internal democratic prospects. The conflict remains the most critical vulnerability for the country and its democratic development. The effects of the recent war have made the country even more dependent on Russia, by both increasing Russia's contingent in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh and reinforcing its role as the main conflict mediator and enforcer of peace in the region. But the war has also, unfortunately, damaged the public's perceptions of the West, which it saw as remaining neutral as the war was raging. As a result, Ms Hakobyan feared, Russia is currently perceived, though not admired, as the only power guaranteeing the existence of the Armenian people in Nagorno-Karabakh. This makes the case for a strong democracy-driven agenda underpinned by Armenia's European orientation, more difficult to uphold and promote. By asserting a more active role in managing and resolving this conflict, the EU would provide a more credible alternative to Russia's influence in Armenia.

The unprecedented unity with which Ukrainian political actors of diverse positions are responding to Russia's aggression is remarkable. According to Ms Hakobyan, the current situation presents unique momentum for liberal, pro-democracy political actors to learn from Ukraine and build a broader coalition

for pursuing robust reform plans and for responding to external threats with unity.

#### **Action points for domestic democratic deepening**

- Armenia's complex security needs and its relations with strategic security providers should not jeopardize its commitments and ability to pursue liberal democratic reforms that will guarantee a competitive political and electoral system.
- Despite the difficult security situation, the ruling party in coalition with other democratic actors and civil society should intensify the implementation of democratic reform agenda it has committed to, in particular in the justice, anti-corruption, government accountability and other areas.

#### **Support for democracy-building**

Armenia and the EU have agreed on an ambitious set of commitments with the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, a framework for the two sides to work together in a wide range of areas, including strengthening democracy, the rule of law and human rights; creating more jobs and business opportunities; improving public safety; ensuring a cleaner environment; and providing better education and opportunities for research. The EU should continue to support this agenda and provide technical and financial support for Armenia to meet these commitments. However, it will be easier to wean Armenia off Russian security guarantees vis-à-vis Azerbaijan if the EU combines its democracy support efforts with a greater emphasis on assisting Armenia in managing its security risks.

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The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

### What we do

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity building on reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

### Where we work

Our headquarters are located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

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*Design and layout:* International IDEA

*DOI:* <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2022.31>

*ISBN:* 978-91-7671-549-9 (PDF)



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