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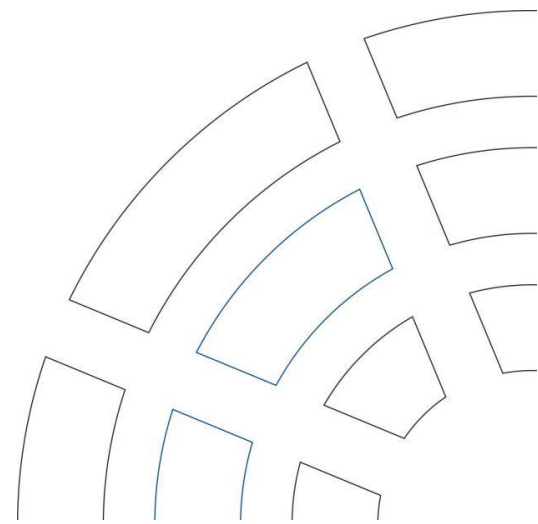
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NATO'S PARTNERS AT RISK

Preliminary Draft Report
Ana-Maria CATAUTA (Romania)
Rapporteur

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The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 shook the foundations of European security, prompting NATO to, inter alia, increase support to vulnerable partners, or 'partners at risk', namely Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova.

This preliminary draft report examines the security, geopolitical and internal challenges faced by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, focusing on post-2022 developments and the support provided by Allies and the EU. The preliminary draft report discusses the efforts of malign authoritarian actors, especially Russia, to destabilise these countries and derail their European and/or Euro-Atlantic integration. The Rapporteur notes that both NATO and the EU made bold strategic decisions to reenergise support and integration processes and urges all three partners to capitalise on this increased EU and NATO buy-in by accelerating reforms and promoting national reconciliation.

The preliminary report calls for robust support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's newly found reform momentum, together with countering dangerous secessionism, thus preventing security vacuums. Georgia faces continued Russian aggression, necessitating strengthened practical support and potential political upgrades, contingent on democratic progress and support for Ukraine. Moldova's defiance against Russian pressure and commitment to reform should be rewarded and supported. Reassuring these partners not only advances their aspirations but also strengthens the broader Euro-Atlantic community's resilience against authoritarian threats.

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I- INTRODUCTION

1. Russia's illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a seismic shock to the European security order, prompting the North Atlantic Alliance not only to urgently revisit its defence and deterrence posture, but also to redouble support to partners who find themselves at risk of becoming collateral damage. Preventing the spillover of the conflict is a vital interest of the Euro-Atlantic community. In this context, NATO has effectively established a new category of partners – originally referred to as 'vulnerable partners' and later as 'partners at risk' (the term continues to evolve). These partners are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova. There is no clear agreement if Ukraine also belongs in this category, but the case of Ukraine, a nation fighting for its sovereignty and freedom in a full-scale war, is so distinct that labelling it as a country 'at risk' would be a serious understatement.

2. This preliminary draft report will examine the security, geopolitical and internal challenges faced by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, focusing on post-2022 developments and the support provided by Allies and the EU. The report will discuss ways to enhance the practical and political support and to advance NATO and/or EU integration of these three partners. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly has a substantial track record of engaging with these countries, including, in 2023, holding a Rose-Roth Seminar in Sarajevo as well as in Stockholm – the latter dedicated specifically to NATO's partners at risk. It is also noteworthy that, at its meeting in Tallinn in March 2024, the Assembly's Standing Committee has recognised Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia as NATO PA Candidates which serves as an important political signal regarding their Euro-Atlantic paths.

II- BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

3. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) holds a special place among NATO partners: the Alliance's decision to intervene in 1995 to end the Bosnian war, which killed approximately 100,000 people and displaced millions in three years of brutal fighting, has markedly shaped NATO's post-Cold War identity. NATO and the EU, which took over the role of the country's key security guarantor, continue to demonstrate responsibility for peace and stability in BiH.

4. The country emerged in its modern form out of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords. This agreement brought a period of uninterrupted peace, but also left the country with a legacy of constitutional challenges for effective governance. The country's three constituent peoples – Bosniaks, Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs – share power via a rotating presidency, and the country itself is divided into two political entities – the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska.

5. During the last approximately 30 years, BiH has established itself as an open, parliamentary democracy and conducted reforms to advance the country's bid to join NATO and the EU. However, the deep ethnic divisions have not been overcome and continue to define the country's politics, impede progress and obstruct the functioning of state institutions. Emblematically, the Federation and the Republika Srpska even observe different Independence Days. BiH periodically undergoes political crises, often caused by the Republika Srpska's defiance and secessionist rhetoric. The international community representatives, including the Office of High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, have been using their leverages to help resolve these crises, but with limited success.

6. With a population of just over three million people, BiH has 13 parliaments, five presidents, and around 150 ministries (Domènech, 2023). However, these institutions are fragile and ineffective, unable to implement needed reforms or create a viable economy. The country's economic model is

unbalanced: the private sector is weak, while the public sector is bloated and permeated with corruption and cronyism. The lack of economic opportunities is driving many Bosnians, especially the youth, to emigrate. BiH has reportedly lost one quarter of its population over the last three decades, while a third of the country's remaining youth expressed a strong desire to emigrate. The Bosnia and Herzegovinian diaspora is so large that its remittances now account for almost 10% of GDP. The departure of younger generations has a real and significant impact as essential services, from policing to the health sector to the military, as they struggle for personnel (NATO PA, 2023).

7. The integration into NATO and the EU continues to stand as the most potent catalyst for fostering positive change in BiH. NATO's IFOR and SFOR missions helped maintain peace in the country until 2004, when it handed over security responsibilities to the EU's operation Althea.¹ Since 2004, NATO operates headquarters in Sarajevo to assist BiH with defence reforms and support EUFOR. BiH has been NATO's official partner since 2006. The country has created unified armed forces – at regimental and higher levels – and began acting as a security provider, contributing to NATO missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. BiH armed forces are rated as among the most trusted institutions in the country. NATO provided emergency assistance during the devastating floods in 2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

8. In 2010, Sarajevo was invited to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP) to help BiH advance its stated goal to become a NATO member. However, unlike with Ukraine and Georgia, where the Allied position is that these two countries will become members of NATO, there is no such commitment vis-à-vis BiH. Allies emphasise that participation in the MAP does not prejudice any decision on future membership. Since NATO's Open Door policy is exclusively demand-driven, Allies have to take into account that Republika Srpska, representing 49% of BiH territory, opposes NATO membership. Banja Luka has sabotaged the attempt to register military facilities on its territory as state property – the precondition for activating the MAP. In 2018, Allies made a strategic decision of dropping the precondition and inviting BiH to submit its Annual National Programme, the key element of the MAP process. However, Bosnian Serb representatives continued to obstruct the process by delaying the submission of an ANP, until a compromise was reached and BiH submitted what it termed the "Reform Programme". In 2021, BiH created a Commission for Cooperation with NATO to coordinate the implementation of activities under the Reform Programme. The EU integration process has also been stalled for several years since the country's formal membership application in 2016, due to Banja Luka's criticism of allegedly non-inclusive mechanisms to coordinate the activities of various BiH institutions in pursuit of EU membership.

9. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has dramatically altered the security situation in Europe and galvanised Sarajevo's collaboration with Euro-Atlantic organisations. BiH politicians succeeded in forming a new government unusually quickly after the October 2022 general elections. Sarajevo embarked on a series of reforms, including adopting a strategy on organised crime, action plans to combat money laundering and terrorism financing, improving migration management as well as drafting laws on judiciary integrity and freedom of information. Sarajevo significantly improved its alignment with EU foreign policy (European Commission, 2023a).

¹ The EUFOR-Althea operates under the "Berlin Plus" arrangement with NATO whereby the EU makes use of NATO's collective assets and capabilities, including command arrangements – namely, the operation is conducted with the NATO Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) acting as the EU Operational HQ.

BiH also took steps to diversify its energy sector (currently 100% of its gas imports come from Russia) by endorsing the construction of a new interconnector with Croatia.²

10. At the NATO PA Rose-Roth seminar in Sarajevo in November 2023, Borjana Kristo, Chairwoman of the Council of Ministers, underscored a growing will to find consensus and compromise when it comes to important reforms, while Elmedin Konakovic, Minister of Foreign Affairs, stressed the Council of Minister's ability to take much-needed decisions quickly. International community representatives largely share these assessments: the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt, noted that willingness for reforms unseen in previous years now prevails (NATO PA, 2023). In March 2024, President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, noted that BiH achieved more progress "in just over a year than in a whole decade" (European Commission, 2024). On defence-related issues, BiH successfully certified a light infantry battalion group to NATO combat readiness standards – the largest unit ever certified under the PfP mechanism.

11. For their part, NATO and the EU have demonstrated heightened interest in supporting BiH in the new security environment and have significantly rewarded Sarajevo's progress. NATO has offered additional support measures, most notably inviting BiH to join NATO's unique Defence Capacity Building (DCB) programme and endorsing a DCB package for BiH in February 2023. The package includes Allies' support in areas such as crisis management, cyber defence, aero-medical evacuation and managing the consequences of incidents involving chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) substances (NATO, 2024). The Alliance has also notably stepped up political dialogue with BiH, including the participation of BiH's Defence Minister in the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid, the visit of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to Sarajevo in November 2023 and the visit of the North Atlantic Council to BiH in February 2024. Furthermore, the Alliance sent a strong signal reaffirming its determination to act if peace and security in BiH were threatened.

12. The EU has made truly historic decisions in recent years and months to accelerate BiH's European integration. In December 2022, BiH was officially granted a candidate status; in November 2023 the European Commission recommended opening accession negotiations with BiH, and in March 2024 the EU Council endorsed the opening of these negotiations – with a caveat that Sarajevo still needs to implement "all relevant steps" to get the process going. The EU is BiH's largest trade partner and the largest provider of financial assistance, while total EU foreign direct investment in the country has amounted to €5.3 billion in 2022. In 2023, the EU dedicated €70 million to help BiH's vulnerable families and SMEs facing the rising energy prices (European Commission, 2023b). In March 2022, the EU assigned more than 500 additional troops to the EUFOR-Althea. The UN Security Council has renewed the operation's annual mandate in November 2023 – a step greatly welcomed by NATO. Russia chooses not to veto the renewal of the EUFOR mandate: possibly because Moscow fears that EUFOR's withdrawal might be replaced by a much more robust US-led NATO redeployment to the country (Karčić, 2022). NATO also applauds the EU's increased engagement with BiH, regarding the reforms carried out in the context of BiH EU integration as benefiting BiH's overall resilience and its prowess as a sovereign state.

13. It must be stressed, however, that the recent breakthroughs and upgrades in BiH-NATO and BiH-EU relations are not purely merit-based. To a considerable degree, these upgrades reflect the

² The decision on the new interconnector has been coloured by ethnic politics as the Federation entity's Bosniak and Croat politicians disagree if the project should be implemented from Bosniak-majority Sarajevo or Croat-majority town of Mostar. Gas represents a small share in the country's energy mix, dominated by hydropower and coal, but its relevance is expected to increase due to the gradual transition away from coal in the process of achieving climate neutrality in 2050.

Euro-Atlantic community's concern about the stability of this vulnerable country in a deteriorated security environment. One must be clear-eyed that BiH's progress on its reform agenda remains very limited. The European Commission notes that the country's economic reform programme is of poor quality and does not address the major structural economic challenges it faces. BiH made limited or no progress in the areas of competitiveness and inclusive growth or in aligning its legal framework with the EU acquis on the internal market (European Commission, 2023a).

14. The most acute problem, however, is the defiance of Republika Srpska under its leader Milorad Dodik. In November 2023, High Representative Schmidt told NATO Parliamentarians that Republika Srpska's politicians have not abandoned their secessionist policies, but rather had intensified them in recent months. It is extremely disconcerting that Banja Luka has moved from using secessionist rhetoric to acting on it. In its Annual Threat Assessment, the US Intelligence Community noted that "Dodik is taking provocative steps to neutralize international oversight in Bosnia and secure de facto secession for his Republika Srpska", warning that this "could prompt leaders of the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) population to bolster their own capacity to protect their interests and possibly lead to violent conflicts that could overwhelm peacekeeping forces" (Office of Director of National Intelligence, 2024).

15. Dodik refuses to recognise the authority of High Representative Schmidt, who took office in August 2021, claiming that he was appointed without the approval the UN Security Council (due to Russian objections), ignoring the fact that UNSC endorsement is not required for the appointment of High Representatives. The Republika Srpska's parliament also adopted a series of controversial laws undermining the coherence of BiH legal system. It is also threatening to adopt a new election law that would collide with state-level election legislation, paving the way for separate local elections later in 2024 only for Republika Srpska. This would be a very dangerous secessionist step and could lead to new ethnic violence (Latal, 2024).

16. In April 2023, Dodik announced that Banja Luka will suspend all cooperation activities with NATO, including withdrawing participation in the Commission for Cooperation with NATO. The US embassy to BiH responded by stating that Dodik does not have the authority to unilaterally suspend the 2005 Law on Defense, a law that authorises Republika Srpska's cooperation with NATO (Security Council Report, 2023). The submission of 2023 Reform Programme has been stalled. It must be noted that while BiH as a sovereign state chooses whether or not to seek NATO membership, it – including its entities – has committed to cooperating with NATO, and Allies expect that this commitment will be honoured.

17. Republika Srpska's internal policies also harm BiH's overall attempts to meet Euro-Atlantic democracy standards: it reintroduced criminal penalties for defamation, which affects freedom of expression and media freedom, and intends to pass a Russian-style "foreign agents" legislation policy (European Commission, 2023a).

18. It is particularly disconcerting that Republika Srpska serves as an important entry point for Russia's political influence in the Western Balkan region at large (Wouter, Niels, Baptiste, 2023). Dodik cultivates close contacts with Moscow, regularly meeting with Putin, including after Russia's illegal and brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Banja Luka seeks to maintain and even expand energy dependence on Russia by constructing a new gas pipeline to Serbia (Higgins, 2024). Russia continues to spread its narratives and stoke anti-Western sentiments in BiH and the broader region, especially through Serbian-language RT Balkan and Sputnik. Republika Srpska is also reportedly engaging in security co-operation with Moscow, including in police training, which raises concerns about the militarisation of its police force (Wouter, Niels, Baptiste, 2023).

19. China is also making inroads into BiH, mainly through its Belt and Road Initiative. The exact scale of its opaque investments is difficult to gauge, but it is known that China is involved in strategic infrastructure projects such as a new highway from the Croatian border to central BiH as well as new

coal-fired power plants. In telecommunications, Huawei was picked as the main supplier for federal government-run BH Telecom as well as for the Republika Srpska's M:Tel. Republika Srpska is forging particularly close ties with China, including signing infrastructure construction projects, securing financial loans and establishing partnerships between their ruling parties. Dodik frames these ties as demonstrating to the West "that Republika Srpska has an alternative and cannot be blackmailed" (Kremic, 2023).

20. In sum, BiH is facing the most significant challenges to its territorial integrity in decades. Fortunately, it also has the unprecedented support and attention of the EU and NATO Allies. The country's political leaders must make full use of new NATO and EU support initiatives and demonstrate the political will to make the significant remaining reforms to obtain the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of a majority of its people.

III- GEORGIA

21. Georgia is NATO's long-standing strategic partner and the pro-Western democratic community's outpost in the South Caucasus. Its post-independence era has been eventful, involving wars in Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and a pro-democracy uprising in 2003 (the 'Rose Revolution'). In 2012-2013, the country navigated through its first – and to date only – democratic transition of power via elections. While in the 1990s Georgia joined the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), for the last two decades it has consistently pursued a pro-Western foreign policy, identifying membership of NATO and the EU as its strategic goals. The public support for these strategic objectives has been remarkably high and steady over the years. According to one November 2023 opinion poll, two thirds of Georgians support NATO membership, while almost 80% are in favour of joining the EU (NDI, 2023). In 2008, the NATO Summit in Bucharest declared that Georgia would become a member of NATO, while the EU has officially recognised Georgia as a candidate country in December 2023. Georgia's sovereign right to choose its alliances is not recognised by Russia, which occupies 20% of Georgian territory and conducts hybrid activities to derail the country's EU and NATO integration.

22. Since making its pro-Western strategic choice, Georgia has made remarkable progress, including virtually eradicating corruption in its police force, cultivating a vibrant civil society and ensuring steady economic growth – its gross national income per capita increased from around USD 3,000 in 2010 to USD 5,000 in 2022 (constant 2015 USD), while poverty was reduced by half during that period (World Bank, 2023). The EU and NATO both supported and rewarded this progress. Since 2016, the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, is in effect, facilitating trade, investment and other exchanges. Since 2017, Georgian citizens enjoy visa-free travel to the Schengen Area.

23. NATO has been engaging with Georgia's leadership since 1992, but the co-operation has reached a new level since the Bucharest Summit. NATO condemned in strongest terms Russian aggression in 2008 and consistently supported Georgia's territorial integrity. In 2008, the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) was established to facilitate political and practical cooperation to help Georgia achieve its goal of membership of NATO and to consult on regional security issues of common concern. Also since 2008, Georgia submits its Annual National Programme (ANP), identifying reform objectives, while NATO, based on ANP, provides focused and comprehensive advice, including through its Liaison office in Tbilisi. In 2014, following further deterioration of the regional security situation due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, NATO further upgraded its relations with Tbilisi by endorsing the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP), a cooperative security initiative to help Allies strengthen Georgia's defence capacity, increase the interoperability of Georgia and NATO forces and prepare defence institutions for eventual NATO membership. The SNGP is NATO's largest Defence and Related Security Capacity Building (DCB) package.

In 2015, the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC) was established in Georgia, designed to foster interoperability and interactions between Georgian and Allied military personnel in accordance with the norms and standards of NATO. For its part, Georgia has been a major security provider, particularly in Afghanistan where Georgia was the top non-NATO troop contributor to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and provided invaluable assistance to the evacuation process following the fall of Kabul in August 2021. Since 2014, Georgia is NATO's Enhanced Opportunity Partner, allowing it to benefit from enhanced access to interoperability programmes, exercises and sharing of information to help sustain its contributions to NATO-led operations and missions. Through its engagement with the NATO Response Force (NRF), Georgia further strengthens its interoperability with NATO forces, demonstrating its commitment to security cooperation.

24. Nevertheless, while several Central and Eastern European countries joined both NATO and the EU in the last two decades, Georgia was not among them. Russia has no formal veto power, but it continues to obstruct Georgia's integration process and violate its territorial integrity. This Assembly has stated repeatedly that Russia's opposition and hostility should not play a role in Allied decision-making on the Open Door policy. In the past, Allied leaders have demonstrated strategic wisdom and accepted new members even if their territorial issues were not settled – for instance, when West Germany was invited to join in 1955.

25. However, to ensure the strong support of all NATO members, it is imperative for a candidate country to meet all membership criteria, including solid democratic credentials. As noted, the tradition of democratic transition of power has not yet formed in Georgia. The country's politics are characterised by a bitter confrontation between the Georgian Dream (GD) party, in power since 2012, and the United National Movement (UNM), which ruled between the Rose revolution and 2012. When in power, both were accused by their opponents of the use of administrative and judicial resources, including imprisonment, to divide and destroy the opposition. The former president and UNM leader Mikheil Saakashvili is currently in prison, with the images of his frail physical condition sending shockwaves across the international community. The polarisation often plays out in the parliament, where the opposition complains about being excluded from the legislative process, while the ruling party condemns the on-and-off boycotts by parts of the opposition, notably the UNM. This binary choice between GD and UNM is clearly insufficient for the Georgian people – according to the polls, the vast majority of Georgians say they are not represented by any political party (NDI, 2023). The European Commission notes that “the media environment is largely pluralistic, but also highly polarised and working in a hostile environment”, while “the intersection of business and political interests continued to hamper media independence” (European Commission, 2023c).

26. Georgia's rating in the Freedom House's Freedom in the World rating has deteriorated from 64 in 2017 to 58 in 2024 (Freedom House, 2023). In recent years, NATO representatives have publicly and privately expressed concern regarding what they see as the slowdown in the implementation of key reforms, including in the field of judiciary, electoral system, media freedoms and other fundamental freedoms (Civil.ge, 2023).

27. More recently, in April 2024, the ruling party announced it would re-introduce, under a different name, a controversial law on “transparency of foreign influence”. When it was first submitted in 2023, the opposition parties, civil society organisations and Euro-Atlantic partners widely criticised the legislation, sparking massive protests in Tbilisi, forcing the parliament to “unconditionally” withdraw the bill. The decision to re-table the bill caused a massive international and domestic outcry. More than 400 Georgian civil society organisations, along with the President of the country and the opposition, have condemned the initiative as harmful to Georgia's EU integration and its democratic future (Civil.ge, 2024a). The EU Ambassador to Georgia, Paweł Herczyński, warned that the potential adoption of the bill would make it “very difficult for the European Commission to make a positive assessment” (Civil.ge, 2024b). The US Assistant Secretary of State, Jim O'Brien, noted that

this legislative initiative “risk[s] moving Georgia away from Europe” (Civil.ge, 2024c). The NATO Secretary General stressed that the initiative “contradict[s] the whole effort of strengthening the democratic institutions in Georgia” and urged Tbilisi to “work on reforms to move closer to NATO and to move closer to the European Union” (NATO, 2024b).

28. The Russian illegitimate full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has prompted a reappraisal of Georgia-NATO and Georgia-EU relations. The Georgian government has chosen a low-profile stance vis-à-vis the war: Georgia voted for the UN resolutions condemning Russia, provided humanitarian aid and accepted Ukrainian refugees, but refrained from demonstrating extensive support to Ukraine, particularly in terms of military support, which Tbilisi fears could provoke Russia. Tbilisi chose not to join international sanctions against Russia. Moreover, Georgia increased its economic exchanges with Russia and accepted Moscow’s decision to lift the ban on direct flights to and from Georgia. The relations between Kyiv and Tbilisi remain strained, and the position of the Ukrainian ambassador to Georgia remains vacant. David Arakhamia, leader of the ruling “Servant of the People” faction in the Ukrainian *Verkhovna Rada*, announced that Ukrainian-Georgian relations would “normalise” if Tbilisi would release Mikheil Saakashvili (who is a Ukrainian citizen) from prison and return him to Ukraine, suspend direct flights with Russia and prevent the use of Georgia as a platform for circumvention of Russian sanctions (Civil.ge, 2024d). The opposition as well as President Salome Zourabichvili has been considerably more vocal in criticising Russia and expressing solidarity with Ukraine.

29. Observers are also witnessing a significant rapprochement between Georgia and China. In July-August 2023, Tbilisi and Beijing announced their relations amount to a “strategic partnership”, committing to deepen their political, economic and cultural ties. In 2023, China has become Georgia’s fourth-largest trading partner. China is interested in investing in Georgian national infrastructure, including the deep-sea port in Anaklia and a new international airport in Tbilisi, as part of China’s strategic objective to develop the Middle Corridor transit route. In addition to closer economic relations, the “strategic partnership” also strengthened “coordination and collaboration in regional and international affairs”. In 2024, Beijing announced a 30-day visa-free travel regime for Georgian citizens. Tbilisi’s rapid and comprehensive alignment with Beijing can affect the pace of the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration, given that NATO views China as a systemic challenge to its security interests and its values.

30. At the same time, Georgia is taking important steps in developing energy interconnectivity with the EU. The Black Sea electric cable between Romania, Georgia and Azerbaijan will connect both sides of the Black Sea and run further towards the Caspian Sea region. This project is an opportunity for Georgia to become an energy hub, thus boosting its resilience. The President of the EU Commission noted that “the Black Sea electric cable is a new transmission route full of opportunities”, adding that “this project could bring Georgia, a country with a European destiny, great benefits as well” (European Commission, 2022).

31. In the wake of Russia’s full-scale war, NATO decided to reassure Georgia by stepping up both political dialogue and practical support. Crucially, NATO further enhanced the SNGP, aiming to facilitate the transition of NATO standards and improve Georgia’s situational awareness. Particular progress was achieved in areas such as crisis management, cyber security and military engineering. The SNGP was complemented by two new initiatives: one on CBRN defence and the other on training facilities. Within the SNGP framework, Allies are making frequently under-reported, but important contributions in less traditional areas: for instance, through the Polish-led initiative to enhance Georgia’s military police capacity and capabilities by training and equipping five NATO-interoperable Georgian military police platoons (NATO, 2023b). In 2023, the participation of a boarding team from the Georgian Coast Guard in NATO’s Sea Guardian operation was the first time a partner nation was invited to do so, making it a milestone in NATO-Georgia practical cooperation (Civil.ge, 2023).

32. In terms of political dialogue, recent exchanges include the visit of NATO's Military Committee to Georgia in November 2023, and the visit of the speaker of the Georgian parliament to Brussels in December 2023. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited Tbilisi in March 2024, where he reaffirmed that NATO stands by the Bucharest Summit decision that Georgia will become a NATO member. At the same time, it was symptomatic that, in Tbilisi, the Secretary General focused extensively on the need to continue supporting Ukraine (NATO, 2024c).

33. Despite the ostensible intensity of NATO-Georgian practical and political exchanges in recent years, progress on Georgia's NATO membership track has been lacking. While in the past Georgia and Ukraine were often paired in NATO statements, the issue of Ukraine's NATO membership is now much higher on the Alliance's agenda. Observers argue that Tbilisi itself has toned down the urgency for Georgia to join NATO (Avdaliani, 2023). In June, then Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stressed the need to "tell the truth to our society and ourselves" and cautioned against creating "unnecessary expectations" from the Vilnius Summit (Kucera, 2023). Georgia was represented at the Summit by its Foreign Minister, while Ukraine was represented by President Zelenskyy. The Vilnius Summit has further de-coupled Ukraine from Georgia by creating the NATO-Ukraine Council and dropping the requirement for Ukraine to obtain MAP to join the Alliance. In Vilnius, Allies reiterated the 2008 Bucharest Summit commitment to Georgia, but kept the requirement to receive a MAP before it can become a member. It is also notable that the paragraph dedicated to Georgia did not include a sentence from previous NATO Summit communiqués stating that "Georgia's relationship with the Alliance contains all the practical tools to prepare for eventual membership".

34. The upcoming Washington Summit is an opportunity to re-establish the momentum of the NATO-Georgia political relationship. For instance, the Allies could consider streamlining Georgia's NATO integration process by withdrawing the requirement to obtain a MAP or even creating the NATO-Georgia Council. It is also advisable to explore the possibility for Georgia to attend the Washington Summit at the level of head of government. However, to mobilise the Allied support for the upgrade of NATO-Georgia partnership, Tbilisi should use the remaining time before the Summit to accelerate the implementation of reforms and demonstrate greater solidarity with Ukraine.

35. NATO-Georgia relations can greatly benefit from recent breakthroughs on Georgia's path towards the EU membership. When the Russian full-scale war on Ukraine broke out, the EU took strategic steps to reassure the EU's and NATO's shared partners. However, in June 2022, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, but not to Georgia. Instead, Brussels prepared a list of twelve reform areas where Georgia needs to demonstrate progress to achieve the candidate status. These areas included "de-oligarchisation", reducing political polarisation and enhancing the independence of the judicial system. In November 2023, the Commission recognised Georgia's efforts in many of these areas. The parliament rushed through a series of relevant legislation "with overall limited consultations, nor thorough analysis", while government action "led to limited progress in some reforms and some progress in others" (European Commission, 2023d). Improvements were made in the judicial and anti-corruption reforms, including the establishment of the Anti-corruption Bureau. Polarisation remains an issue, including the standoff between the President and the ruling majority, leading to the attempt to impeach the former. However, the Commission noted several examples of cross-party cooperation and votes (European Commission, 2023d). Despite this mixed record on implementing reforms, the EU did grant Georgia candidate status "on the understanding that the relevant steps are taken". This decision was wholeheartedly welcomed by the Georgian government and society. It must be noted that the decision on opening accession negotiations with Georgia has yet to be taken, and Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova are ahead in this regard.

36. Georgia finds itself at an important and historic inflection point. Domestically, it must reaffirm its democratic credentials by ensuring that the parliamentary and presidential elections in October 2024 are free and fair. Internationally, it must capitalise on the momentum in its pursuit of NATO and

EU membership, while fending off the ominous behaviour of Russia in the Black Sea and the occupied Georgian territories. In recent months, following Ukraine's successful campaign against the Russian navy in Crimea and elsewhere in the Black Sea, the strategic importance of Abkhazia has increased for Russia. Moscow continues to encroach on the remnants of the autonomy of the Abkhazian de facto leadership and is reportedly considering establishing a naval base in the Abkhazian coastal town of Ochamchire. This move would be a gross violation of international law and a serious escalation of the security landscape in the eastern part of the Black Sea. Russia is also reportedly making arrangements to suppress any discontent in Abkhazia by proposing a "police co-operation agreement" with Russia (Civil.ge, 2024e). Allies must remain vigilant and support Georgia in this difficult period. For its part, Tbilisi should redouble its efforts to address concerns and shortcomings identified by its NATO and EU partners.

IV- THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

37. The Republic of Moldova (henceforth Moldova) is one of Europe's most vulnerable countries, struggling to heal the wounds of the decades-long Soviet rule and to find its place in the European security and economic order. However, despite its economic fragility and the presence of a frozen conflict on its territory, Moldova rarely made the headlines in Western media or caused broader security concerns. The Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine, including speculations that the Russian forces could be aiming to capture Ukraine's Black Sea coast and access Moldova's pro-Russian breakaway region of Transnistria, reenergised the Euro-Atlantic community's engagement with Moldova. The current level of rapprochement between Moldova and the West is unprecedented – Moldova has reaffirmed its sovereign choice of European integration and is currently led by the most pro-European government in years, led by the Western-educated President Maia Sandu.

38. Since becoming independent in 1991, Moldova has been in search of its geopolitical identity, alternating between pro-European and pro-Russian tendencies, while overall gravitating towards European integration. To its credit, despite the frozen conflict and deep economic problems, Moldova always maintained a parliamentary democratic system of government and, while going through several deep political crises, developed a tradition of peaceful transfer of power through elections. Following a period of the reformed Communist Party rule, Moldova shifted towards pro-European governance in 2009, becoming a poster child of the EU's Eastern Partnership mechanism. In the mid-2010s, Moldova's pro-European course experienced a severe setback when USD 1 billion, about 12.5% of the country's annual GDP, vanished from three Moldovan banks, hitting the economy and undercutting trust of international partners. In 2016, the country elected a pro-Russian candidate, Igor Dodon, as President.³ However, by 2019 pro-European forces had bounced back and won the 2020 presidential and 2021 parliamentary elections convincingly. The presidential elections in late 2024 will test the endurance of Moldova's European trajectory.

39. While Moldova's pro-European pivot is by no means a foregone conclusion, surveys show a consistent support of Moldovans for EU membership: according to the IRI poll in 2023, some 62% are in favour and 35% against. The country is planning a referendum on the matter later in 2024. At the same time, the clear majority prefers to keep Moldova's traditional – and constitutional – neutrality: 64% favour neutrality. In a hypothetical referendum on NATO membership, 30% would

³ Moldova's constitutional system is semi-parliamentary, and the President's role is limited if she/he does not have the support of a parliamentary majority.

vote in favour and 46% against. Only 15% believe Russia could serve as Moldova's security guarantor (IRI, 2023).

40. Against this background, Chisinau identifies its strategic objectives as becoming a member of the EU by 2030, while cultivating comprehensive co-operation with NATO. President Sandu noted, however, that there is an ongoing discussion in the country if Moldova should revisit its neutrality policy, through a democratic process, and become a "part of a larger alliance" (Lynch, 2023). In July 2023, then Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu supported Ukraine's NATO membership bid, referring to it as "a factor that will continue to aid in keeping the Republic of Moldova stable" (RFE/RL's Romanian Service, 2023). Allies reiterated in the Vilnius Summit Communiqué that they "fully respect Moldova's constitutional neutrality" and "Moldova's right to decide its own future and foreign policy course free from outside interference". Allies also reiterated their support of Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as its European integration effort.

41. Under Sandu, Moldova remains committed to neutrality (which is stated in the Constitution), while adopting a clearly pro-Western and pro-Ukrainian stance. During her meeting with President Macron in Paris in March 2024, President Sandu noted that "There is nothing more urgent and more important for our continent today than to help Ukraine resist and win this war" (Kauffmann and Mandraud, 2024). The country hosts more than 100,000 Ukrainian refugees. In November 2023, Moldova also joined the EU sanctions regime against Russia. In retaliation, Moscow has stepped up its destabilising activities against Moldova, including by spreading disinformation, using energy leverages and mobilising pro-Russian political actors with ties to Russian intelligence services (Smith, 2024), (RFE/RL's Romanian Service, 2024). In turn, the Moldovan government took decisive actions to limit the Russian malign influence, including dissolving Shor (the Russian proxy political party), reducing dependence on Russian gas imports and banning Russian propaganda channels. In December 2023, Moldova adopted a new defence strategy, which identified Russia as a threat. The document noted that "the Russian Federation in the near future will not abandon its hostile actions against Moldova", adding that the country "must therefore learn to live in conditions of a protracted, high-intensity hybrid war" (Reuters, 2023). It must be noted that Sandu remains the most popular politician in the country and that an increasing number of Moldovans believe the country is heading in the right direction (IRI, 2023).

42. NATO and the EU have been providing vital support to Moldova and buoying its reform agenda. The partnership between NATO and Moldova dates back to 1994, and was evolving through mechanisms such as the Partnership for Peace and Individual Partnership Action Plan. Co-operation has focused primarily on supporting defence and security sector reform and improving military interoperability. The partnership was stepped up in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea. Moldova was one of the three partner countries offered to benefit from NATO's new DCB Initiative aiming to strengthen Moldova's resilience and defence capacity through a tailored package of assistance. In 2017, NATO, at the request from the Moldovan government, opened a Liaison Office in Chisinau.

43. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 poses daunting security challenges to Moldova, including reported cases of Russian attack drones landing on its territory. To support Moldova, Allies agreed, in February 2023, on an enhanced DCB package which addresses additional requirements identified by Moldova. This new package aims to improve Moldova's resilience and defence capacity through several initiatives. This includes strategic planning, Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) corps development, standardisation of training and logistics, ammunition stockpile management, strategic communications and development of the Moldovan Carabinieri, among others (NATO, 2023a). One practical example of the practical NATO-Moldova co-operation was holding "Exercise Coherent Resilience" in Chisinau in March 2024, where NATO and Moldovan experts tested ways to deepen collaboration between Moldovan energy operators and cyber defenders in case of non-conventional attacks (NATO, 2024c). Moldova also contributed to NATO-led missions, including in Kosovo. Political dialogue has stepped up considerably, including the meeting of President Sandu

with the NATO Secretary-General during the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022, and regular visits of Moldovan Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and other senior officials to NATO Headquarters in 2023-2024. NATO Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană visited Chisinau in September 2023.

44. Moldova is also working to establish closer security co-operation with individual Allies, especially with Romania, with whom it shares close historic, linguistic (Moldova's official language is Romanian) and people-to-people bonds. Many Moldovans, including in the government service, hold Romanian citizenship. Bucharest is the leading advocate of Moldova's EU integration. Romania continues to support the interconnectivity between the Republic of Moldova and the European Union, especially in the field of electricity and transport, as an important step towards the European integration of the Republic of Moldova. In March 2024, Moldova also concluded a security co-operation agreement with France, which will include the establishment of a French defence mission in Moldova.

45. The EU's support is particularly crucial as for the majority of Moldovans, the questions of economic development and poverty reduction are by far the most salient (IRI, 2023). A country of 2.5 million people, Moldova is among the least wealthy countries in Europe. Despite achieving an average GDP growth of 2.6% over the past decade, Moldova continues to face persistent hurdles such as fiscal deficits, high unemployment, corruption and red tape (World Bank, 2023). Over a million Moldovan citizens live abroad, and labour remittances account for at least 15% of GDP (CRS, 2024). Since 2016, the Moldova-EU Association Agreement (AA) is in place, and the EU became Moldova's largest economic partner.

46. In the wake of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU moved quickly to reassure Moldova. In April 2023, it established a Partnership Mission in the Republic of Moldova to provide advice at strategic level and identify the needs for capacity building in order to contribute to the strengthening of Moldova's crisis management structures and to enhance its resilience to hybrid threats (EEAS, 2023). In terms of practical support, the most notable initiative was the announcement, in June 2023, of a Support Package for the Republic of Moldova with five priorities (including trade, fighting disinformation and energy security) aimed at addressing the impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and bringing Moldova closer to the European Union. The EU member states and Norway have also provided emergency assistance helping Moldova manage migration flows from Ukraine. The EU's off-budget European Peace Facility was also used to support the Republic of Moldova's Armed Forces (European Commission, 2023e).

47. While the country submitted its formal application for EU membership in March 2022, by June the EU had already granted it a candidate status. In November 2023, the European Commission reported Chisinau's tangible progress in relevant reform areas, including the judiciary, good governance, human rights protection, public procurement and de-oligarchisation. Moldova was encouraged to increase efforts to prosecute cases of high-level corruption, protect journalists against intimidation and continue improving the business environment, among others (European Commission, 2023f). In December 2023, the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Moldova.

48. A major challenge on Moldova's path towards European integration is the unresolved status of Transnistria, a strip of Moldovan territory on the eastern side of the Dniester River. It is home to less than half a million people of Moldovan, Russian and Ukrainian ethnic origin. When Moldova became independent, the locally stationed Russian army intervened to support Transnistrian secessionism and enforced a frozen conflict which is now in its fourth decade. Over the years, the unrecognised entity has developed its own institutions and established a certain modus vivendi with Chisinau, based on mutual economic dependencies. Internationally mediated settlement talks in the so-called "5+2 format", involving Chisinau and Tiraspol (the entity's de facto capital), the OSCE, Russia and Ukraine, with the US and the EU as observers, have failed to promote a resolution of the

conflict. Transnistria is heavily dependent on Moscow's political and economic support and Moscow retains some 1,500 Russian troops in the region. Russia continues to ignore its international commitment, made in 1999, to withdraw troops from and ammunition depots from Moldova and respect its territorial integrity. Internally, Transnistria is permeated with corruption and cronyism, while its political system is oppressive and intertwined with oligarchs' business interests.

49. The Russian full-scale war against Ukraine has heightened the tensions between Chisinau and Tiraspol. While Chisinau embraced European integration and supports Ukraine, Transnistria subscribes to the Russian narrative about the war. Chisinau's policies aligning with the EU internal market rules as well as sanctions against Russia prompted an outcry in Transnistria due to the impact of these policies on local business schemes. In February 2024, the Transnistrian "congress of deputies of all levels" appealed to Moscow asking for the implementation of diplomatic measures to protect Transnistria. While the appeal caused concern internationally, Chisinau dismissed it as an empty propaganda event. Indeed, Moscow largely ignored the appeal, and Chisinau continues to make "small steps for the economic reintegration of the country", as President Sandu put it (The Guardian, 2024). One such step is requiring Transnistrian drivers to either get Moldovan licence plates, or a neutral replacement (Solovyov, 2024). Chisinau remains committed to resolving the Transnistrian issue through peaceful means. In the current security environment, Moscow lacks the ability to intervene in Transnistria. Since the Transnistrian section of the Moldova-Ukraine border has been closed since the start of the war, Tiraspol depends on Chisinau for all its external exchanges. While Transnistria has some leverages of its own, its room for manoeuvre has shrunk considerably, potentially creating opportunities to resolve the decades-long frozen conflict peacefully.

50. In its efforts to destabilise Moldova, Moscow is also fuelling separatism in the autonomous entity of Gagauzia, in the south of Moldova. A Turkic-speaking Christian Orthodox-faith Gagauz ethnic minority in Moldova comprises of about 120,000 people. Many of them are leaning towards Russia and do not support Moldova's pro-Western policies. Gagauzia's vehemently pro-Russian governor Evghenia Gutul met with Putin in Russia in March 2024 to complain about Chisinau's policies and was allegedly promised Moscow's support (Jack, 2024). However, the Gagauzian autonomy is too isolated and dysfunctional to meaningfully challenge Moldova's European vector. Chisinau, for its part, should redouble efforts to address the entity's grievances, some of which are legitimate, that have been neglected for years. The EU support to this effort is essential (Deen and Zweers, 2022).

V- CONCLUDING REMARKS

51. Throughout their more than three decades of independence, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova faced serious internal and external challenges. While they made notable progress developing their economies and consolidating democratic institutions, they have yet to reach their strategic goal of becoming fully fledged members of NATO and/or the EU. The new, far more volatile European security landscape ushered in by the Russian full-scale war in Ukraine has both increased the risks for these countries and given new impetus to their Euro-Atlantic integration. NATO and the EU have demonstrated leadership and resolve to reassure partners at risk and to accelerate their integration process.

52. While NATO's partners at risk face different sets of challenges, there are certain common traits and observations applicable to all three. First, all three partners should be clear-eyed that the incentives and support they received from the Euro-Atlantic community are a strategic choice rather than recognition of progress on reforms: the three partners still have to deliver on many aspects of their reform agenda. Second, given the ideological nature of the Euro-Atlantic community's rivalry with Russia, China and other authoritarian actors, the level of support for the three partners correlates significantly with their ability to demonstrate commitment to democratic values and their

solidarity with Ukraine. Third, NATO should continue exploring ways for more effective political and practical engagement, such as organising regular meetings with political leaders of the three countries, including at NATO Summits; directing more support through NATO's International Secretariat using common funding (therefore making the support more predictable than via voluntary national contributions); and establishing the Centre for Democratic Resilience at NATO HQ inter alia to assist the partners at risk with tackling threats to their democratic institutions.

53. Bosnia and Herzegovina's newly found resolve to conduct reforms must be fully supported and encouraged. BiH's unified armed forces consistently rank as one of the most trusted institutions in the country, and continued focus on them should remain an imperative. The Allies should help constructive actors in the country push back against the secessionist rhetoric and actions, which have reached dangerous levels. The Allies must reiterate their support to BiH territorial integrity and make it clear that they would not be idle if there was a threat of a security vacuum in the country. It is crucial to help BiH meet the 30th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Accords in 2025 as a peaceful, self-confident country with promising prospects for the future.

54. Allies must strengthen practical support to Georgia, as Russia continues to encroach on it, accelerating the absorption of the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and the South Ossetia/Tskhinvali region. Allies should also consider upgrading the political track of NATO-Georgia relations, for instance, withdrawing the requirement to obtain a MAP or even creating the NATO-Georgia Council. However, this should be contingent on Tbilisi's progress in addressing concerns about its democratic backsliding. The plans to adopt a law "On Transparency of Foreign Influence" are deeply troubling: they risk undermining Georgia's democratic credentials and its relations with its Euro-Atlantic partners. The upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections will be an important test for Georgia. Tbilisi should also demonstrate greater solidarity with Ukraine and calibrate engagement with NATO's strategic rivals Russia and China.

55. The Republic of Moldova under the current leadership is demonstrating a remarkable commitment to European values and defiance against the Russian intimidation. It is also implementing the most ambitious reform agenda in its independent history. Moldova should continue to be rewarded and encouraged – not only for its own sake, but also to demonstrate that the Euro-Atlantic community is there to support any European nation that chooses to embrace democracy and stand up to authoritarian actors.

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