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RECONFIGURING EU DEMOCRACY
SUPPORT. TOWARDS A SUSTAINED
DEMOS IN THE EU'S EASTERN
NEIGHBOURHOOD

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Narratives of external norm contenders across the EU's eastern neighbourhood

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Executive Summary

This paper focuses on narratives of contested democracy by third-country actors — notably Russia and China — in the European Union’s (EU) eastern neighbourhood. It is important to understand the anti-democracy narratives of these two authoritarian powers as part of the broader geopolitical context of the EU’s democracy support efforts in the region. In this paper, narratives are understood as sets of meanings that organise events and experiences and make sense of them. The paper draws on six case studies conducted by researchers in each country, and these case studies include qualitative content analysis of some of the most popular digital media outlets in each country, as well as expert interviews. The timeframe focuses on the pivotal years of 2013-14 and 2021-22.

The paper outlines, in a comparative manner, the most popular narratives in the six countries. It identifies four dominant narratives across the EU’s eastern neighbourhood that originate from Russia — ‘decadent and declining West’, ‘historical unity with Russia’, ‘Russia provides security, the West stokes conflict’, and ‘Western-imposed democracy’ — and one broad narrative promoted by China, summed up as ‘China as a positive alternative’. It explores similarities and differences between the six country cases as well as between the narratives advanced by Russia and China. Finally, the paper also seeks to assess the receptiveness of local audiences to the narratives promoted by the two authoritarian powers and their relevance from the viewpoint of democratisation and EU democracy support.

In all, the Russian narratives pose a serious challenge to the EU’s efforts to promote democracy in the eastern neighbourhood countries by directly and indirectly contesting Western or European values and influence. However, the receptiveness of local audiences varies greatly, ranging from active efforts to counter the Russian narratives in Ukraine to active reproduction of the Kremlin’s messages in the Belarusian public discourse. The Chinese narratives do not have a significant presence in most eastern neighbourhood countries, but they do bring into question the Western model in a more subtle way. It is important for the EU, in cooperation with local partners, to further develop ways to respond to disinformation that undermines democratic values and practices. In addition to identifying the narratives promoted by Russia and China and putting into question possible false claims therein, it is necessary to strengthen the narratives of the EU and local democratic actors that highlight the benefits of democratisation and European integration for the local populations, i.e. the demos that is at the centre of democracy building achievements and failures.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
EaP	Eastern Partnership
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, or another diverse gender identity
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SSSG	State Security Service of Georgia
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WWII	Second World War

1 Introduction

Geopolitical competition between Russia and the EU over their shared neighbourhood started to develop in 2004 when the EU welcomed ten new member states, mostly from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and took a more active interest in its 'new eastern neighbours' (Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine) and the three South Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched in 2004, and the creation of a specific Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy under the framework of the ENP in 2009 intensified the EU's efforts to engage with the region.¹ Tensions between the EU and Russia were clearly exposed in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and initiated war in eastern Ukraine and deepened further in 2022 as a result of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The information space in the six eastern neighbourhood countries has been an important arena of this tightening competition, with both Russia and the EU putting forward their narratives about perceived realities in these countries, giving different meanings to events, and contextualising people's experiences. Russia has been particularly active in promoting its narratives, utilising its strong historical, social, cultural, and linguistic presence in the region. Russia's methods of shaping popular narratives and using disinformation in order to create confusion, undermine its adversaries, and legitimise its own objectives and activities have been broadly researched.²

While Russia has been a long-term challenge for the EU's democracy support efforts in the eastern neighbourhood, the role of China remains limited but has gradually increased. This paper focuses on narratives of contested democracy by third-country actors, notably the two major authoritarian contenders, Russia and China, in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. The meaning of democracy has been a significant element in the discursive competition between the EU and Russia, less so between the EU and China. It is noteworthy that the EU's launch of the ENP and its 'big bang' eastern enlargement were followed by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in late 2004. This was the most significant of the 'colour revolutions' that took place in the post-Soviet space in the 2000s and was portrayed by Russia as a Western-orchestrated anti-Russian event, contrary to the local and Western narratives which treated it as an instance of bottom-up protests expressing an aspiration for democracy.³ Questioning and delegitimising the Western model of democracy in general and mass protests or colour revolutions as a form of a bottom-up fight for democracy, in particular, has been a common theme in Russian as well as Chinese official narratives.⁴

¹ This paper uses footnotes instead of in-text citations that are common in the other REDEMOS Working Papers. Footnotes are more appropriate given the preponderance of media sources, many of which are in the local languages, with author names in different alphabets.

² Olga Bertelsen (ed.), *Russian Active Measures Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (ibidem Press, 2021); Yevhen Mahda, *Russia's hybrid aggression. Lessons for the world* (Kyiv: Kalamar, 2018).

³ Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese, *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics* (Taylor & Francis, London, 2010).

⁴ Evheny Finkel and Yitzhak M. Brudny, "Russia and the colour revolutions," *Democratization*, 19(1) (February 2012), 15–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2012.641297>; Kawashima Shin, "Perception of a "Color Revolution" in China under the Xi Jinping Regime and National Security Implications—Close interconnection between domestic politics and diplomacy—", *Asia-Pacific Review*, 30(3) (March 2024), 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2023.2311565>.

It is important to understand the anti-democracy narratives of these two authoritarian powers as part of the broader context of their geopolitical ambitions in the region. For China, countries in the EU's eastern neighbourhood have not been a priority,⁵ and hence it has not been particularly present in the information space of these countries, as this paper will show. For Russia, by contrast, maintaining a dominant position in the post-Soviet space has been a consistent priority since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁶ Since the 2000s, Russia itself has developed in an increasingly authoritarian direction,⁷ whereas the EU (and the US) has pursued democracy support as an important priority in their policies vis-à-vis the post-Soviet countries. As the value gap has widened, Russia has adopted an increasingly hostile view of Western democracy and democracy promotion.

Narratives are understood in this paper as sets of meanings that organise events and experiences and make sense of them. Through presenting and reproducing narratives, social actors structure experiences and shape perceived realities. Narratives are 'sense-making devices, through which events are not merely infused with meaning, but constructed and contested'⁸; they can make complex events comprehensible, normalise certain interpretations, and marginalise or exclude other alternatives. Competition between narratives that impose different and sometimes conflicting meanings on the same reality is a part of political struggle. Interpretations that become broadly shared as self-evident and true are important sources of political power. They can be means of empowerment and enlightenment or, on the contrary, vehicles of oppression, dissimulation, and lying.⁹ Narratives are embedded in a specific historical and social context, which means that it is essential for political actors to know that context in order to be able to put forward narratives that resonate among the target audiences.¹⁰

The narratives promoted by Russia and China in the EU's eastern neighbourhood can be understood as an expression of their broader strategic narratives, which they use as instruments to shape the international system and promote their vision of order. Through strategic narratives, states 'give determined meaning to past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives'.¹¹ Previous research on Russian strategic narratives has found that Russia identifies a clash of values as 'the primary dimension of the Russia-West

⁵ Julia Bader, *Policy Paper: The Role of China in Political Transition in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood* (forthcoming REDEMOS paper, 2024).

⁶ Igor Gretskey, *Policy Paper: Russia's Strategy Regarding the Eastern Partnership Region* (forthcoming REDEMOS paper, 2024).

⁷ Freedom House, "Freedom House. Country. Russia," Freedom House, accessed in October 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia>.

⁸ Yiannis Gabriel, "Narratives, stories, texts," in D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Osrick, & L. L. Putnam (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse* (London: Sage), 61-79. https://www.academia.edu/789851/Gabriel_Y_2004_Narratives_stories_texts_In_D_Grant_C_Hardy_C_Osrick_and_L_L_Putnam_Eds_The_Sage_Handbook_of_Organizational_Discourse_61_79_London_Sage.

⁹ Gabriel, "Narratives, stories, texts."

¹⁰ This understanding of narratives, with an emphasis on historical and social context, stems from discourse analysis. For a methodological discussion, see Bernhard Forchtner, "Introducing 'Narrative in Critical Discourse Studies,'" *Critical Discourse Studies*, 18(3) (January 2021), 304-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2020.1802765>.

¹¹ Alister Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, & L. Roselle, *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations* (Royal Holloway, 2012), 4. https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/147369822/Forging_the_World_Working_Paper_2012_Final.pdf.

confrontation' and portrays Western liberal democratic values as a threat to societies adhering to 'traditional values'.¹² There is thus a strong connection and to some extent overlap between anti-democratic, anti-EU, and anti-Western narratives spread by Russia in the EU's eastern neighbouring countries. Furthermore, similar narratives appear in EU member states, where they threaten to undermine democratic institutions and increase societal cleavages. This paper explores such narratives as an important factor that can hamper further democratisation in the EU's eastern neighbourhood countries as well as the EU's efforts to support it. Exposure and contestation of narratives originating in authoritarian countries can contribute to creating favourable conditions for democracy both in the EU and its eastern partner countries. Hence, it is necessary to study the narratives promoted by authoritarian powers that contest the EU's democratic model and democracy support in the eastern neighbourhood.

The paper draws on six case studies conducted by researchers either based in the target countries (Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova) or having relevant expertise (Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Ukraine). In so far as the methodology of this study is concerned, the case studies build on qualitative content analysis of some of the most popular digital media outlets in each country, including both state-affiliated and private, as well as government- and opposition-leaning outlets.¹³ The selected outlets represent the most widely followed media sources in each country, hence being the most relevant ones in terms of shaping public perceptions. In order to help identify the most relevant narratives that have their origins in Russia or China, the case studies also relied on semi-structured, anonymised expert interviews.¹⁴ In the framework of each case study, two to four expert interviews were conducted with researchers or media specialists with relevant experience in analysing Russian and/or Chinese narratives in the local context. The timeframe focused on the pivotal years of 2013-14 and 2021-22. These were the moments when tensions in the region were accumulating and contestation of narratives was fierce (a) in the context of Euromaidan (Revolution of Dignity) protests in Ukraine starting in late 2013, followed by (b) the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014, the (c) build-up of Russian military presence near Ukraine's borders in 2021, followed by (d) Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Although these pivotal events happened in Ukraine, they reverberated across the region.

Based on a content analysis of media sources as well as expert interviews, the case studies identified narratives that were promoted by Russian and Chinese actors, as well as their local proxies, and traced local narratives that overlap with the ones promoted by authoritarian powers. As a starting point for the case studies, a list of themes and narratives was identified based on earlier research.¹⁵ Researchers conducting the case studies were

¹² Olena Snigyr, "Russian Strategic Narratives, 2022-2023," *Orbis*, 68(1) (2024): 15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2023.11.002>.

¹³ For the full list of digital media, see Annex 1.

¹⁴ For the full list of expert interviews conducted, see Annex 2.

¹⁵ In brief, the main pre-defined narratives were: 'fraternal people, or single people'; 'Russia's legitimate security interests'; 'decaying, hypocritical West/Europe'; 'Europe as an American puppet'; 'persecution of the Russian Orthodox

asked to look for these pre-defined narratives but also to include in their reports other possible themes that emerged from their analysis. The line between externally and internally produced narratives was often blurred especially when it comes to narratives promoted by Russia. Some local actors may share the values and worldviews promoted by authoritarian powers and willingly reproduce their narratives, whereas others may be motivated by sheer economic benefits that they gain by spreading certain externally originating messages. Expert interviews were particularly helpful in shedding light on the mechanisms of Russian and Chinese influence in the local information space and corroborating the findings of content analysis.

This paper provides a synthesis and analysis of the case study findings. It outlines, in a comparative manner, the most popular narratives in the six countries by presenting, first, the four dominant narratives across the eastern neighbourhood that originate from Russia and then, the main narrative promoted by China. It explores similarities and differences between the six country cases as well as between the narratives advanced by Russia and China. Finally, the paper also seeks to assess the receptiveness of local audiences to the narratives promoted by the two authoritarian powers and their relevance from the viewpoint of democratisation and EU democracy support.

2 Main Russian narratives across the region

2.1. Decadent and declining West

The decline and decadence of Europe — and more broadly, the West — is a narrative that Russia has been promoting for years at home and abroad. Variations of this narrative were present in all six country cases.

Belarusian media was most evidently reproducing the Russian narrative of the ‘collective West’, portraying it as ‘politically, economically, and socially bankrupt’.¹⁶ It presented forecasts of the ‘inevitable collapse’ of the US dollar, NATO, and the EU, and even the breakup of the US.¹⁷ In **Azerbaijan**, the narrative of a weakening and failing West that was losing its international position was, likewise, well represented.

Church’; ‘infringement of the Russian-speaking minority’; ‘common history with Russia’; ‘offering economic opportunities or real benefits (unlike the EU/West)’; and ‘China pursuing common destiny for mankind’.

¹⁶ BELTA, “Щекин: умение защитить суверенитет и обезопасить жизнь граждан - высшая цель государства [Shchekin: the ability to protect sovereignty and secure the lives of citizens is the highest goal of the state],” *BELTA*, 11 October 2021. <https://www.belta.by/society/view/schekin-umenie-zaschitit-suverenitet-i-obezopasit-zhizn-grazhdan-vyssshaja-tsel-gosudarstva-463793-2021> .

¹⁷ BELTA, “Лоуренс Уилкерсон предположил, что НАТО распадется примерно через год из-за Украины [Lawrence Wilkerson has suggested that NATO will disintegrate in about a year because of Ukraine],” *BELTA*, 23 July 2023. <https://www.belta.by/world/view/v-ssha-predpolozhili-kogda-iz-za-ukrainy-raspadetsja-nato-578349-2023/>; *SB.by*, “Американский инвестор допустил крах ЕС как политического союза [A US investor has allowed the collapse of the EU as a political union],” *SB.by*, 18 May 2023. <https://www.sb.by/articles/amerikanskiy-investor-dopustil-krakh-es-kak-politicheskogo-soyuza.html>; Aleksandr Kolesnichenko, “Схватка титанов. Когда может вспыхнуть конфликт США с Россией и Китаем [Схватка титанов. Когда может вспыхнуть конфликт США с Россией и Китаем],” *Argumenty i fakty v Belarusi*, 15 April 2014. https://aif.by/social/shvatka_titanov_kogda_mozhet_vspyhnut_konflikt_ssha_s_rossiyey_i_kitaem.

In all cases, the moral decay of the West was a concurrent theme. In Belarus, a strong narrative about the need to defend traditional values could be identified. An interesting nuance in the description of the ‘hypocritical’ and ‘inhumane’ nature of the West was presented in Belarusian news that provided false information about the harsh treatment of refugees from African and Middle Eastern countries by Polish authorities.¹⁸ In contrast, it was emphasised that the Belarusian authorities ‘provide [refugees] with warm clothing, food, as well as medical and other necessary assistance’.¹⁹

Moldova witnessed a distinct narrative about Russia as a leader of the conservative world that is opposing an immoral and decadent West. The West was, meanwhile, accused of hypocrisy, and its liberal values and institutions were presented in a negative light. Religious values had an important place in this narrative, with Russia being presented as the saviour of traditional Christianity. It was also claimed that the US, NATO, and Europe were waging war against Russia in Ukraine because they were fighting traditional conservative values defended by Russia. In **Ukraine**, the claim that the West was attacking both Russia and Ukraine for their adherence to traditional, conservative values was also identified already in 2013 and repeated during the full-scale war. The narrative of the decaying West that has a negative, harmful influence on other nations was also present in **Georgia** and **Armenia**.

The issue of LGBTQ+ rights and the European approach to equality was a potent component of anti-Western narratives in **Georgia**, **Moldova**, and **Armenia**. In Moldova, the Orthodox Church took a fiercely critical position regarding the anti-discrimination legislation, required by the EU as a precondition for concluding the Association Agreement, as early as 2012. According to a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church, such laws could result in ‘moral and demographic deterioration’, whereas:

¹⁸ Róbert Gönczi, “Disinformation as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare at the Polish-Belarusian Border,” *Warsaw Institute*, 28 September 2023. <https://warsawinstitute.org/disinformation-as-a-tool-of-hybrid-warfare-at-the-polish-belarusian-border/>; for specific cases, see: EuvsDisinfo, “DISINFO: Fake news about the Belarusian border crisis is part of the Western hybrid war. Disinformation case details,” EuvsDisinfo, accessed in October 2024. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/fake-news-about-the-belarusian-border-crisis-is-part-of-the-western-hybrid-war/>; and Catalina Marchant de Abreu, Truth or Fake, “Belarusian KGB used fake profiles to incite Poland-Belarus migrant crisis,” *France 24*, 2 December 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/truth-or-fake/20211202-belarusian-kgb-used-fake-profiles-to-incite-poland-belarus-migrant-crisis>; Most recently, Sb.by published a story about a Bangladeshi national whose dead body was found near the border with Poland. The Belarusian media didn’t say it directly but implied that the Polish border guard killed him on Polish territory: Sb.by, “ГПК: на границе с Польшей обнаружен труп беженца [GPK: dead body of a refugee found on the border with Poland],” *Sb.by*, 23 October 2024. <https://www.sb.by/articles/gpk-na-granitse-s-polshey-obnaruzhen-trup-bezhentsya.html>; The Polish MoD refuted those allegations and qualified them as Belarusian disinformation: Polska Agencja Prasowa, “Reżim Łukaszenki znów dezinformuje w sprawie zgonów na granicy [Lukashenko regime misinforms again over border deaths],” *Polska Agencja Prasowa*, 25 October 2024. <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/rezim-lukaszenki-znow-dezinformuje-w-sprawie-zgonow-na-granicy>.

¹⁹ Sputnik.by, “Забор не поможет Польше защититься от мигрантов – Гайдукевич [Fence will not help Poland to protect itself from migrants - Gajdukiewicz],” *Sputnik.by*, 15 August 2023. <https://sputnik.by/20230815/zabor-ne-pomozhet-polshe-zaschititsya-ot-migrantov-gaydukevich-1078546112.html>; Sputnik.by, “Мигрант скончался после издевательств польских пограничников [Fence will not help Poland to protect itself from migrants - Gajdukiewicz],” *Sputnik.by*, 5 August 2023. <https://sputnik.by/20230805/migrant-skonchalsya-posle-izdevatelstv-polskikh-pogranichnikov-1078223996.html>.

'The Russian Church assumes that the development of the modern Moldovan state should not lead to denial of its spiritual roots. The future of the country should be based on the traditions that the people of Moldova have followed for centuries'.²⁰

In Moldova, almost 80% of all Orthodox parishes belong to the Orthodox Church that is affiliated with the Russian Patriarchy, while almost 14% are governed by the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchy. The two Christian denominations display opposing views toward the political future of Moldova, yet both churches were highly critical of the anti-discrimination law.

In the **Georgian** media, the 'pervert West' was directly accused of imposing 'deviant values' (such as homosexuality) while simultaneously vilifying and undermining the nation's traditional religious beliefs.²¹ Conversely, the Kremlin was portrayed as the protector of shared values and Orthodox identity. Moreover, it was argued that Georgia, if it were to abandon its traditional identity, would not be able to find a common language with Abkhazians and Ossetians in occupied regions:

'Those people who are going to do this, including foreign ambassadors who put pressure on our state, are blamed for interfering in the affairs of our country and conduct direct provocations against the Georgian state...If we establish norms of extreme sexual perversion of Sodomite sin in Georgia, we can say goodbye to reunification because Ossetians and Abkhazia will be never willing to unite with us...the rules for us were set not by George Soros and other goblins'.²²

²⁰ Mircea Ticudean, "Gloves Come Off In Moldova's Church-State Battle," *RFERL*, 3 July 2013. <https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova-orthodox-church-eu/25035131.html>. See also: Orthodixy Cognate Page, "Moscow Patriarchate calls on Moldova not to pass law recognizing homosexuality as normal," Orthodixy Cognate Page, 14 March 2012. <https://ocpsociety.org/news/moscow-patriarchate-calls-on-moldova-not-to-pass-law-recognizing-homosexuality-as-normal/>.

²¹ Georgian Idea - qartuliidea.ge (@ქართული იდეა), "მთელი კავკასია ჩვენ გვაკვირდება! განსაკუთრებით ჩვენი ოსი და აფხაზი ძმები... საქართველო ისტორიულად იყო კავკასიის გული - გეოპოლიტიკური ხიდის და გეოკულტურული ცენტრის ფუნქციის მატარებელი.... [The whole Caucasus is watching us! Especially our Ossetian and Abkhazian brothers...Georgia has historically been the heart of the Caucasus - a geopolitical bridge and a geocultural centre....]," Facebook, 6 July 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/qartuliidea/posts/pfbid02wipyBEhzh8ViS9dQsWxyRjdg9cuoK4JGdaFWWtEPCGDerAwEhsQPpMsRtKQtwruBl>.

²² Rustavi 2, "'ჩვენ ვართ აქ იმისთვის, რომ არ დავუშვათ სიბილწის და სიბინძურის საჯარო ზეიმი საქართველოში,"-ლევან ვასაზე "თბილისი პრაიდზე" საუბრობს ["We are here to prevent the public celebration of filth and filth in Georgia," Levan Vasaze told Tbilisi Pride.]," Rustavi 2, 14 June 2019. <https://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/135976>; See also: 'In addition to spiritual and moral degeneracy, such a head-to-head attack directly affects the prospect of restoring our territorial integrity, because both Ossetians and Abkhazians are people with a pronounced Caucasian mentality, and they will never want to live together in a space where adultery, polygamy and gay festivals will be legalized!!!, at Georgian Idea - qartuliidea.ge (@ქართული იდეა), "მთელი კავკასია ჩვენ გვაკვირდება! განსაკუთრებით ჩვენი ოსი და აფხაზი ძმები... საქართველო ისტორიულად იყო კავკასიის გული - გეოპოლიტიკური ხიდის და გეოკულტურული ცენტრის ფუნქციის მატარებელი.... [The whole Caucasus is watching us! Especially our Ossetian and Abkhazian brothers...Georgia has historically been the heart of the Caucasus - a geopolitical bridge and a geocultural centre....]," Facebook, 6 July 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/qartuliidea/posts/pfbid02wipyBEhzh8ViS9dQsWxyRjdg9cuoK4JGdaFWWtEPCGDerAwEhsQPpMsRtKQtwruBl>.

In addition, Georgian media paid attention to the identity crisis in the Western world, speculating on divisions within Western societies and suggesting that the Hungarian leader, Viktor Orbán, championed a viable alternative to the decaying liberal order. Georgian Dream, the ruling party since 2012, was attempting to capitalise on the anti-liberal discourse and mobilise public opinion around the topic of ‘protecting the families’, spun in a homophobic context. The initiation of legislation on the restriction of the so-called ‘gay propaganda’ by the ruling party was perceived as a step to test homophobia as a campaign pillar ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections; it was also assessed as ‘the political manipulation of LGBTI-phobia in the run-up to elections’ by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović.²³

An **Armenian** expert summed up local attitudes as follows: ‘In recent years, the extreme importance and priority given to the LGBTQ community in the EU created a certain gap between the Armenian society and European values, negatively affecting the attitude towards the EU to a certain extent’.²⁴

2.2. Historical unity with Russia

A narrative closely related to the one about the decadent West was the ‘historical unity’ between the neighbourhood countries and Russia. The most profoundly articulated version of this narrative was found in **Ukraine**; consistent since 2013, it displayed ideas also covered in the infamous 2021 article by President Putin in which he theorised about the ‘common destiny’ of Russians and Ukrainians.²⁵ The two nations were represented as a single people of the ‘Slavic-Orthodox civilisation’ with ‘a spiritual capital’ in Kyiv that also encompassed Belarus under the ‘triune Slavic people’.²⁶ According to this narrative, Western orientation was a ‘false historical direction’ that was ‘imposed on Ukraine’ and a harmful ‘strategic mistake’ that ‘will always hamper the healthy development of Ukrainian statehood’. This narrative was aligned with defending the true Christian faith against neoliberalism and hostile Western civilisation where Ukraine was a ‘neo-colony’.²⁷ Ukraine’s independence and agency were consistently denied, while unity with Russia was portrayed as a natural identity rooted in history.

This narrative was, however, systemically brought into question in Ukraine since 2013 and mostly contained to the Russian (but not Ukrainian) language segment of the media. The

²³ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, “Georgia: political manipulation and harassment of LGBTI people and human rights defenders have no place in a democratic society,” Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, 27 March 2023. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/georgia-political-manipulation-and-harassment-of-lgbti-people-and-human-rights-defenders-have-no-place-in-a-democratic-society>.

²⁴ Armenia, expert interview no. 1.

²⁵ Igor Gretskiy, “Russia’s War in Ukraine: Russia’s Propaganda War,” ICDS Brief Russia’s War in Ukraine Series No. 9 (August 2022). https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2022/08/ICDS_Brief_Russia%C2%B4s_War_in_Ukraine_No9_Igor_Gretskiy_August_2022-edit.pdf

²⁶ Ukraine, expert interview no. 1.

²⁷ Petro Ivanishin, “Свято еротичного долара [A celebration of the erotic dollar],” *Ukrainska Pravda*, 14 February 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/02/14/6983485/>. This narrative spiked in 2018-19, when the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was being established.

Ukrainian media exposed the Moscow Patriarchate as a major source of such narratives, with examples such as ‘Mazepa is a Judas and traitor’; that there is no ‘Ukrainian culture’ at all; that ‘we are all Russian people’; and that any division of ‘us’ comes ‘from the devil’ serving as evidence.²⁸ A 2021 piece by then Defence Minister Alexey Reznikov scrutinised the claims that President Putin made in the aforementioned 2021 article, finding ‘mistakes’, ‘fears’, and signs of ‘bankruptcy’ of Moscow’s imperial thinking of today.²⁹ Ukrainian counternarratives criticising Russian imperialism and colonialism and stressing the separate identity and agency of the Ukrainian nation became stronger, especially after the full-scale invasion of 2022.

In **Belarus**, by contrast, the notion of a ‘single people’ was undisputed and frequently evoked in state-controlled media as well as by President Alyxandr Lukashenka. In **Moldova**, which fell outside the ‘triune Slavic people’, the emphasis was shifted onto the common Soviet history and the historic role of Russia as a protector of Moldovan statehood that was under threat, mostly from Romania. Russia also presented itself as a supranational ethnos that united the different national identities in the country. Meanwhile, the pro-Kremlin media portrayed Moldova as an ‘exclusive zone of Russian influence’ and blamed pro-EU forces for denying Russia’s generous offer to deliver inexpensive gas to the population. They also blamed Moldovan politicians for supporting Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression.

Domestic contestation of narratives about the Second World War (WWII), referred to as the ‘Great Patriotic War’ in the Russian rhetorical tradition, was very strong, with pro-Russian Moldovan politicians continuing to celebrate the victory and heroism of the Red Army as a Moldovan victory, too. In contrast, pro-European politicians widely rejected the Soviet/Russian narratives by arguing that WWII was a tragedy for all of its victims and adopting Europe Day rather than continuing to celebrate Victory Day on 9 May.³⁰ Pro-Russian narratives exploited nostalgia among parts of the population for the ‘golden era of the USSR’ and presented the presumptive stability of the Soviet regime as preferable to freedom that came together with bitter market uncertainties.

In **Georgia**, there was no emphasis on common history with Russia, although the Russian narrative about Russia and Ukraine as a ‘single nation’ with long historical roots was represented in the Georgian media. Some references to common history were noted in connection to the importance of shared Christian tradition, with the war in Ukraine presented

²⁸ Ekaterina Shchetkina, “Патриарх Кирилл и евроинтеграция: атака или выжидание? [Patriarch Kirill and European integration: attack or waiting?],” *ZN,UA*, 4 October 2013. <https://zn.ua/internal/patriarh-kirill-i-evrointegraciya-ataka-ili-vyzhidanie-.html>.

²⁹ Alexey Reznikov, “Разбирая статью Путина: О банкротстве и страхах империи [Parsing Putin's article: On the bankruptcy and fears of empire],” *ZN,UA*, 13 July 2021. <https://zn.ua/international/o-bankrotstve-i-strakhakh-imperii-.html>.

³⁰ Dmitriy Ofitserov-Belskiy, “«Войны памяти»: Румыния навязывает Молдове альтернативную историю Второй мировой [‘Memory Wars’: Romania imposes an alternative history of the Second World War on Moldova],” *Eurasia Expert*, 6 May 2023. <https://eurasia.expert/kak-rumyniya-navyazyvaet-moldove-svoyu-kartinu-istorii-vtoroy>.

as a religious crusade: ‘This is practically a war with Orthodoxy, in which Russia is the Third Rome, and that is why our place is on the side of co-religionist Russia’.³¹

In **Armenia**, the narrative about a common history and common cultural heritage with Russia was broadly articulated in the media and public perception. The concept of such shared historical heritage put an emphasis on the Great Patriotic War, which Russia was nurturing. However, in 2013-14, when Armenia was actively trying to avoid becoming a part of the unfolding confrontation between Russia and Europe/West, it aimed to couple historically strong ties to Russia with developing closer relations with the EU in parallel. The relevance of the ‘common history’ narrative seems to have declined, as overall attitudes of Armenians towards Russia have sharply deteriorated as a result of the Second Karabakh War of 2020, during which Russia failed to protect Armenia and practically broke the countries’ long-standing alliance.³²

Building on the history of the Great Patriotic War, the habitude of Russian propaganda to label pro-Western actors in post-Soviet countries as ‘fascists’ and ‘Nazis’ was also represented throughout the region. The **Ukrainian** media exposed that both in Russia and abroad, the Kremlin constantly promoted the narrative of ‘Nazis in Ukraine’, which was especially well absorbed by Russians, who for the most part longed for Russia as a ‘great power’.³³

Azerbaijan was the only case among the six countries where the narratives of common history and pro-Western actors as ‘Nazis’ or ‘fascists’ did not appear. The interviewed experts referred to a deeply ingrained negative perception of Russia as an imperial power and colonising force in Azerbaijan. The latter view is, of course, represented in the other countries in the region as well but competes with more positive narratives about common history and traditions.

To sum up, the narratives of the ‘decadent West’ and ‘historical unity with Russia’ tried to present the ‘Western model’ as unsuitable, unnatural, and harmful for the eastern neighbourhood countries. While not contesting democracy per se, these narratives portrayed liberal values in an extremely negative light and thereby indirectly questioned the

³¹ Georgia and World, “ქალბატონო პრეზიდენტო, არ დაივიწყოთ თქვენი „არა და არასოდეს [Madam President, don't forget your "no" and problem],” Georgia and World, 4 July 2022, <https://bit.ly/3ap8FKx>.

³² International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia, May 21* (IRI, 2021), https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/armenia_ppt_final.pdf; International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia, June 2022* (IRI, 2022), <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-armenia-june-2022/>; International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia, January-March 2023* (IRI, 2023), <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-armenia-january-march-2023/>; International Republican Institute, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia, December 2023* (IRI, 2024), <https://www.iri.org/resources/public-opinion-survey-residents-of-armenia-december-2023/>; International Republican Institute, *IRI Armenia Poll: Increasing Negative Views of Russia, Strong Support for Nagorno-Karabakh Refugee Response, March 17* (IRI, 2024). <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-armenia-poll-increasing-negative-views-of-russia>.

³³ Vitaliy Ohienko, “Является ли Путин новым Гитлером, и кто тогда россияне? [Is Putin the new Hitler, and who are the Russians then?]” *ZN,UA*, 17 April 2022. <https://zn.ua/SOCIUM/javljaetsja-li-putin-novym-hitlerom-i-kto-tohda-rossijane.html>.

democratic model, since it is an integral part of the ‘Western’ liberal path of development. The underlying aim of such narratives was, therefore, to discredit the ‘Western’ model and make it less attractive.

2.3. Russia provides security, the West stokes conflict

The next strong narrative found in all six countries – notwithstanding some national variations –

was the promotion of Russia as a guarantor of security as opposed to the ‘West’, which was allegedly stoking tensions and conflicts. Furthermore, Russia’s responsibility for conflicts in the region was denied or obscured and the blame was put on other actors, both local and Western. While not directly addressing democracy, the security-related narratives constitute an important framework for democracy support – if the EU and, more broadly, the West are perceived to undermine security in the region, their democracy promotion activities are unlikely to be welcome.

The narratives presented in **Belarusian** media were largely identical to the ones promoted by the Russian state propaganda. In the Belarusian media space, the entire Western world was painted as a ‘pyramid of evil’ with Washington at the top,³⁴ allegedly manipulating the governments of the EU member states and Ukraine, which, in turn, exploited their people to achieve Washington's goal of destroying the sovereignty of Russia and Belarus. Russia's war against Ukraine was justified by Kremlin narratives. In them, Ukraine was consistently described as torn apart, depopulated, and controlled by the West, as well as brought to desperation by ‘clowns and drug addicts’, as the Russian propaganda labelled President Volodymyr Zelensky and his team.³⁵ In this vein, *Sputnik.by* and *Argumenty I fakty v Belarusi* regularly emphasised that Ukraine's dire situation was brought about by the ‘West-provoked’ Euromaidan, while Russia, by annexing Crimea and parts of eastern and southern Ukraine, simply fulfilled its humanitarian mission.³⁶ The invasion, too, was allegedly provoked by US policies, and Russia was forced to take military action against Ukraine to prevent NATO

³⁴ Andrei Savinykh, “Прощай, Америка, прощай навсегда [Goodbye America, goodbye forever.],” *BELTA*, 8 April 2022. <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/kommentarij-proschaj-amerika-proschaj-navsegda-494963-2022>

³⁵ Polina Konoga, “Украина трещит по швам: Зеленским недовольны в регионах [Ukraine is cracking at the seams: Zelensky dissatisfied in the regions],” *SB.by*, 6 August 2022. <https://www.sb.by/articles/ukraina-treshchit-po-shvam.html>; Yurii Bakerenko, “Марков спрогнозировал, как может развиваться ситуация вокруг Украины [Markov predicted how the situation around Ukraine may develop],” *SB.by*, 2 April 2024. <https://www.sb.by/articles/markov-sprognoziroval-kak-mozhet-razvivatsya-situatsiya-vokrug-ukrainy.html>; Platon Besedin, “Майдан по-белорусски: свои методички [Maidan in Belarusian: their methodologies],” *Sputnik.by*, 28 March 2017. <https://sputnik.by/20170328/majdan-po-belorusski-svoi-metodichki-1028043439.html>

³⁶ Andrei Grozov, “Проект “Украина” стал катализатором к расколу мирового сообщества [The Ukraine project has become a catalyst for the division of the world community],” *Sputnik.by*, 22 February 2022. <https://sputnik.by/20240222/grozov-proekt-ukraina-stal-katalizatorom-k-raskolu-mirovogo-soobschestva-1083872137.html>; Boris Gryzlov, “В купели общей истории [In the font of common history],” *Sputnik.by*, 21 November 2023. <https://sputnik.by/20231121/v-kupeli-obschey-istorii-boris-gryzlov--o-posledstviyakh-evromaydana-na-ukraine-1081310105.html>; Sputnik.by, “Пантелеев: Майдан – путь от “сакральной жертвы” к гражданской войне [Panteleyev: Maidan - the path from ‘sacral sacrifice’ to civil war],” *Sputnik.by*, 22 February 2022. <https://sputnik.by/20240222/panteleev-maydan--put-ot-sakralnoy-zhertvy-k-grazhdanskoy-voyne-1083855090.html>

expansion.³⁷ Russia's actions were also legitimised as a 'liberating war against the financial and ideological dominance of the liberal West'.³⁸ As often mentioned by pundits in Belarusian and Russian media, the West was fighting Russia 'with the hands of Ukrainians'.³⁹ Sometimes, such narratives justified the invasion by endorsing the territorial claims for the eastern regions of Ukraine — a territory that, unlike Ukraine's western parts, presumably 'does not differ from the southern regions of Russia'.⁴⁰ According to some experts, Belarusian propaganda evolved over time to adopt a more nuanced approach in conveying its messages, favouring implicit meanings and metaphors over the direct utilisation of militaristic rhetoric.⁴¹

In the case of **Ukraine**, in 2013-14, one could find the narrative according to which the West was blamed for provoking conflict and starting a 'civil war', while Russia was allegedly defending its 'legitimate security interests' and protecting the Russian-speaking population. In 2021, hints at an emergent Russian invasion started to appear in the Ukrainian media, while there was still much confusion and uncertainty about its prospects. One of the Russia-favouring narratives in this context claimed that the West would abandon Ukraine. Another speculation put forward was that the US would negotiate an agreement with Russia over Ukraine. Both of these points were in line with Russia's interests. The Ukrainian media exposed Russia's information warfare and identified the narrative about 'no alternative but to cooperate with Moscow' as one of the primary messages directed at the Ukrainian audiences.⁴² By 2022, the Ukrainian media had already become proactive in exposing and debunking Russian messages related to the war.

³⁷ Yurii Bakerenko, "Марков спрогнозировал, как может развиваться ситуация вокруг Украины [Markov predicted how the situation around Ukraine may develop]," *SB.by*, 2 April 2024 . <https://www.sb.by/articles/markov-sprognoziroval-kak-mozhet-razvivatsya-situatsiya-vokrug-ukrainy.html>; Sputnik.by, "Наемников в плен никогда не беру: откровения бойца из Донбасса [I never take mercenaries prisoner: revelations of a fighter from Donbass]," *Sputnik.by*, 24 October 2023. <https://sputnik.by/20231024/naemnikov-v-plen-nikогда-ne-beru-otkroveniya-boytsa-iz-donbassa-1080532756.html>; Gryzlov, "In the font of common history."

³⁸ Andrei Savinykh, "Прощай, Америка, прощай навсегда [Goodbye America, goodbye forever.]," *BELTA*, 8 April 2022. <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/kommentarij-proschaj-amerika-proschaj-navsegda-494963-2022> .

³⁹ Sputnik.by, "Гайда: Украина ценна для США только тем, что она воюет против России [Gaida: Ukraine is valuable to the U.S. only because it is fighting against Russia]," *Sputnik.by*, 22 November 2023. <https://sputnik.by/20231122/gayda-ukraina-tsenna-dlya-ssha-tolko-tem-chto-ona-voynet-protiv-rossii-1081331688.html>; Sputnik.by, "Захарова: спустя 10 лет после "евромайдана" Украина стала нищей страной [Zakharova: 10 years after 'Euromaidan' Ukraine has become a poor country]," *Sputnik.by*, 20 November 2023. <https://sputnik.by/20231120/zakharova-spustya-10-let-posle-evromaydana-ukraina-stala-nischey-stranoy-1081282386.html>.

⁴⁰ BELTA, "Дать возможность самоопределения. Куликов о возможных вариантах будущего Украины [To give an opportunity for self-determination. Kulikov on possible options for Ukraine's future]," *BELTA*, 19 February 2024 . <https://www.belta.by/society/view/dat-vozmozhnost-samoopredelenija-kulikov-o-vozmozhnyh-variantah-budushego-ukrainy-616206-2024/>; Andrei Sidorchik, "Входит-выходит, или Две Украины в одном флаконе [In and out, or Two Ukrainias in one bottle]," *Argumenty i fakty v Belarusi*, 25 November 2013. https://aif.by/social/nazlobydnya/andrey_sidorchik_vhodit_vyhodit_ili_dve_ukrainy_v_odnom_flakone.

⁴¹ Pavliuk Vukovskii, "Милитаристская риторика отчасти перешла на эзопов язык. Отчет о прокремлёвских нарративах в белорусских медиа за 2023 год [Militarist rhetoric has partly switched to Aesopian language. Report on Pro-Kremlin Narratives in Belarusian Media for 2023]," *Media_IQ*, 8 January 2024 . <https://mediaiq.info/militaristskaya-ritorika-otchasti-pereshla-na-ezopov-yazyk-otchet-o-prokremljovskih-narrativah-v-belarusskih-media-za-2023-god>.

⁴² ZN,UA, "10 цікавих фактів з Білої книги Служби зовнішньої розвідки України [10 interesting facts from the White Paper of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine]," *ZN,UA*, 25 January 2021.

In **Moldova**, the media resources controlled by the Russian state interpreted the annexation of Crimea in 2014 not as an illegal but a legitimate step. Likewise, in 2022, the so-called ‘special [military] operation’ (as opposed to ‘war’) conducted against Ukraine was presented as a legitimate response to the Western aggression in all media controlled by the Russian state. Russia’s messaging towards Moldova was overtly threatening and should be seen as part of its active efforts to destabilise the Moldovan state.⁴³ In particular, Moldova was warned by Russia, in strong terms, not to convey any kind of assistance to Ukraine that could help the latter to defend itself against Russian aggression. Western support to Ukraine and Moldova, in the meantime, was presented as an anti-Russian plot leading to the war – although Russia’s actions in Ukraine were still not called a war. Moscow warned Chişinău not to follow the Ukrainian “model” or to bring up the issue of “Russian peacekeepers” present in Transnistria to which Russia is highly sensitive.⁴⁴ Pro-Russian outlets were spreading fear of an imminent attack on Moldova and airing specific details regarding plans and justifications for attacking the country. There was a confusing flow of allegations that Ukraine would launch an offensive in Transnistria or that Chişinău and Kyiv had conspired to militarily occupy the separatist region,⁴⁵ or that Romania and the US were pushing Chişinău into a conflict. Additionally, Russia reacted angrily when the UK and some other states announced they might help Moldova modernise its army and offer military supplies.⁴⁶

The need to defend the Russian language was also frequently evoked as a justification for Russia’s intervention in Ukraine, and restrictions on the use of the Russian language in Moldova were portrayed as both a threat and a potential cause of escalation. Such messages were shared and promoted by local pro-Russian actors, in particular leaders of the Gagauz region⁴⁷ who were actively recruited by Moscow. As soon as the full-scale war broke out in Ukraine, leaders of the Gagauzian region rallied in support of Russia, called for the creation of self-defence units, and held ‘Patriotic Congresses’ with the stated goal of defending the Russian language from discrimination.

Turning to the South Caucasus, Russia has played a historical role as a mediator and security provider in the Karabakh conflict. Up to the second Karabakh War in 2020, **Armenian** security had heavily relied on the alliance with Russia. In 2012-13, when Armenia came close to signing an Association Agreement with the EU but then withdrew from it, the

<https://zn.ua/ukr/UKRAINE/10-tsikavikh-faktiv-z-biloji-knihi-zovnishnoji-rozvidki-ukrajini.html>.

⁴³ Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, *The Threat from Russia’s Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022–24* (RUSI, February 2024). <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/threat-russias-unconventional-warfare-beyond-ukraine-2022-24>.

⁴⁴ Vedomosti, “Песков призвал Кишинев быть осторожнее в вопросе о миротворцах в Приднестровье [Peskov urged Chisinau to be more cautious on the issue of peacekeepers in Transnistria],” *Vedomosti*, 20 February 2023. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2023/02/20/963631-peskov-prizval-kishinev-bit-ostorozhnee>.

⁴⁵ EuvsDisinfo, “DISINFO: The West and Kyiv may start provocations against Transnistria [Peskov urged Chisinau to be more cautious on the issue of peacekeepers in Transnistria],” *EuvsDisinfo*, 27 February 2023. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-west-and-kyiv-may-start-provocations-against-transnistria>.

⁴⁶ NSN, “Трасс: НАТО обсуждает поставки вооружений Молдавии [Trass: NATO discusses arms supplies to Moldova],” NSN, 21 May 2022. <https://nsn.fm/policy/trass-nato-obsuzhdaet-postavki-vooruzhenii-moldavii>.

⁴⁷ RIA Novosti, “В Гагаузии заявили о дискриминации жителей Молдавии, говорящих на русском [Gagauzia said that Moldovan residents who speak Russian are discriminated against],” *RIA Novosti* via Mail.ru, 26 October 2023. <https://news.mail.ru/politics/58378613/>.

importance of Russia as an exclusive ally and provider of military security was highlighted in the Armenian public debate. The Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) was portrayed as a key platform to guarantee the security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the organisation's member states. However, following Azerbaijan's offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020, Armenia appealed to Russia and the CSTO but received practically no help. The credibility of Moscow's promises and security guarantees collapsed, and new anti-Russian narratives emerged. Russia's inaction regarding the Karabakh war created frustration and triggered public discussions and even demonstrations calling for Armenia's withdrawal from the CSTO, or at least freezing the country's membership in the alliance. Public attitudes towards Russia, therefore, changed from overwhelmingly positive to largely negative, with Russia starting to be seen as a threat to the security and political stability of the country instead.⁴⁸

Azerbaijan has stayed outside Russia-led organisations, except for the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and tried to minimise its dependence on Russian security assurances even after 2020. However, Russian narratives about regional security were echoed in Azerbaijan's public debate. There were two main security-centred Russian narratives found in the news by the state-owned news agency *Azertac.az* (as well as claimed by experts) in Azerbaijan: one related to Ukraine and the other one to Azerbaijan and Armenia. First, the United States was blamed for pushing Russia to invade Ukraine, whereas Russia's imperial ambitions were overlooked. Russia was presented as willing to project stability and negotiate, while the Ukrainian leadership was accused of impeding negotiations. Second, it was claimed that the EU and the US did not want peace in the Caucasus region and that their goals contradicted the interests of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to one of the local experts, this message was amplified when the EU and the US attempted to facilitate peace processes between Azerbaijan and Armenia.⁴⁹

The security context in **Georgia** has been very different, as the country was invaded by Russia in 2008, with parts of Georgian territory still occupied. Yet, a comparison of public discourses in the early 2010s and early 2020s shows a significant change in security-related narratives. In the earlier period, Russia was presented as a clear threat to Georgia. In recent years, by contrast, this perception has been replaced with official narratives that avoided interpretations that might irritate Russia and, to some extent, even adopted some Russian talking points. There were two strong security-related narratives: the first one speculated that the war in Ukraine would spread to Georgia, and the second one threatened with loss of territorial integrity. The claims about attempts to 'drag Georgia into the war' were predominantly directed against the US, the EU, NATO, and Ukraine, while messages about the encroachments on territorial integrity were linked to neighbouring Türkiye and its alleged ambition to restore the Ottoman Empire.

The attempts of the ruling party and its supporters to instrumentalise the traumas of war, on the one hand, intended to consolidate public support and reinforce the idea that, unlike the previous government, only the current one was able to ensure peace and stability. On the

⁴⁸ See footnote 32.

⁴⁹ Azerbaijan, expert interview no. 2.

other hand, in certain instances, in response to the critical assessment regarding democratic backsliding in the country, the ruling party aimed to shift the responsibility towards the West itself. For instance, in 2022 when the European Commission did not recommend granting EU candidate status to Georgia, both the ruling party⁵⁰ and pro-Kremlin actors⁵¹ were quick to direct the blame toward the EU and the West, arguing that the reason behind this decision was the Georgian government's refusal to open a second front against Russia.

Fear-mongering narratives wielded considerable sway over public opinion. In total, 39% of respondents were concerned either with the opening of a second front in Georgia (22%) or Russian attacks (17%) against the country.⁵² According to an interviewed expert, the number of people who supported the idea of Georgia being part of the Russian empire was much smaller than that of those people who were afraid of Russia.⁵³ This assertion finds support in recent polls.⁵⁴ However, the same opinion polls also show a decrease in the number of people who say Georgia should pursue an exclusively pro-Western foreign policy.⁵⁵

Despite the manipulative rhetoric on certain issues, the declared foreign policy of the incumbent leading party — i.e., Euro-Atlantic integration — remained the same. At the same time, pro-Kremlin actors continued to seek the revision of the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation by amplifying narratives suggesting that continued adherence to the Western orientation may potentially lead Georgia to share the same fate as Ukraine. Scepticism towards NATO was exacerbated by the pro-Kremlin Conservative Movement and Alliance of Patriots political parties, who asserted that the ongoing war in Ukraine demonstrated NATO's diminished efficacy as a security guarantor, thereby advocating the revision of Georgia's constitutional norm of Euro-Atlantic aspiration. At the same time, these two main pro-Kremlin parties had different visions of Georgia's relationship with Moscow. The Conservative Movement favoured a military alliance with Russia, whereas the Alliance of Patriots preferred political neutrality. Both political parties advocated resolving the issue of the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Samachablo (South Ossetia) through direct, one-on-one dialogue with Russia, thereby legitimising it as a mediator between the Georgians and Abkhazians/Ossetians, rather than a conflict party.

To deflect the attention from the ongoing Russian occupation towards the historical precedents, the pro-Kremlin actors utilised the tactics of diversion and distraction by

⁵⁰ Irakli Garibashvili, "It turns out that Georgia should be punished because there is no war in Georgia today?" *Alt-Info, Alternative Vision*, 22 June 2022. <https://www.myvideo.ge/v/4124017>.

⁵¹ Konstantine Morgoshia, "Of course, they wouldn't give us the candidate status, because they asked us to open a second front and hold these immoral marches," *Alt-Info, Alternative Vision*, 22 June 2022, <https://www.myvideo.ge/v/4124143>.

⁵² Information Integrity Coalition, *Information Integrity Program: Audience Research Results* (CRRC Georgia. May 2023), 33. <https://infointegrity.ge/en/information-integrity-program-audience-research-results>.

⁵³ Georgia, expert interview no. 1.

⁵⁴ Only 3% of respondents believe that pursuing a pro-Russian orientation would ensure the national security of Georgia, while every second Georgian perceives EU (29%) and NATO (20%) membership to be best for Georgia's national security. See: NDI, CRRC, *Taking Georgians' pulse. Findings from October-November 2023 face to face survey* (December 2023),

82. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_GGF%20poll_October_2023_Eng_VF.pdf

⁵⁵ NDI, CRRC, *Taking Georgians' pulse*, 79.

reinforcing the message that ‘if Russia is an occupier, so is Türkiye’. According to a new narrative that emerged during the war in Ukraine, Türkiye’s influence in the region would be bolstered in the event of Russia's defeat.⁵⁶ This new narrative reinforced the message that portrayed Russia as the sole deterrent against the perceived ‘Turkish threat’ in the region.

2.4. Western-imposed democracy

In several countries studied, the West was presented as imposing its own ideological model, which is detrimental, unsuitable, and unnatural for the eastern neighbourhood. Furthermore, Western influence was claimed to be a threat to sovereignty. Colour revolutions were described as externally manipulated events that served the Western agenda. Even if democracy was often not mentioned in the context of colour revolutions, such narratives undermine the credibility and desirability of Western, including the EU’s, democracy support.

In the **Belarusian** media, Russia's war against Ukraine was presented as a ‘liberating war against the financial and ideological dominance of the liberal West’.⁵⁷ Ukraine was described as an antithesis to real sovereignty and an example of the detrimental implementation of Western democracy templates in the post-Soviet area.⁵⁸

In **Georgia**, negative narratives about Western democracy were strong in recent years. Democratic institutions were portrayed as a threat, but there was also a narrative of ‘sovereign democracy’, borrowing the Russian concept that claims there is a version of democracy to be pursued that is different from the Western model.⁵⁹ As noted above, the EU’s critical assessment of democracy in Georgia was claimed to be based on Western security interests, notably the alleged wish of the West to open a second front of the Ukraine war in Georgia, and not on actual concerns about democracy. This was in line with the Kremlin's position that sees any external questioning of a country's democracy as interference in its sovereign affairs. Accusations that inquiring into Georgia’s internal democratic challenges equalled interference in sovereign affairs of the country were directed against the US, the EU, and the ‘collective West’ in response to their criticism of the government’s behaviour and failure to deliver on the commitments that the country had taken in the process of integration into Western institutions. The ruling party and pro-Kremlin actors voiced similar messages by claiming that calls to improve judicial independence equalled interference in domestic affairs and demonstrated the desire of foreign countries to control an independent branch of power.

Both pro-Kremlin and pro-government actors perceived local independent actors (NGOs, Ombudsman’s office, media, etc.) as a threat to the country, claiming that they: a) were

⁵⁶ Zurab Makharadze, Conservative Movement, “During this tragedy that is unfolding in Ukraine, a new world order is being born here,” *Alt-Info, Alternative Vision*, 1 March 2022. https://www.myvideo.ge/?video_id=4102545.

⁵⁷ Andrei Savinykh, “Прощай, Америка, прощай навсегда [Goodbye America, goodbye forever],” *BELTA*, 8 April 2022. <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/kommentarij-proschaj-amerika-proschaj-navsegda-494963-2022>.

⁵⁸ Platon Besedin, “Майдан по-белорусски: свои методички [Maidan in Belarusian: their methodologies],” *Sputnik.by*, 28 March 2017. <https://sputnik.by/20170328/majdan-po-belorusski-svoi-metodichki-1028043439.html>.

⁵⁹ Maria Lipman, “Putin’s Sovereign Democracy,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 15 2006. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2006/07/15/putin-s-sovereign-democracy-pub-18540>.

agents of foreign powers; b) sought a change of the government through a revolution; c) drag Georgia into the war; and d) fought the church and the Orthodoxy. Western aid, particularly from the US, was presented to be solely weaponised for the benefit of local Western agents and for the purpose of fighting local identity and the church. These narratives suggested that Western funding was not intended to support the development of the country or its people but rather to serve the interests of foreign powers. The circulation of these narratives fuelled suspicion and mistrust among the population towards Western involvement in the region. Moreover, the hostile language on Western-funded NGOs was followed by a criminal investigation by the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG) against civil society activists who were accused of preparing a coup with the financial support of the US.⁶⁰ The speaker of the parliament echoed the SSSG's actions by reinforcing the narrative that 'American people's money is being used to foment a revolution, to train people in staging unrest and acts of violence'.⁶¹

Fears of a staged revolution were mostly associated with the US but also linked to the process of granting EU candidate status to Georgia, the notion of the so-called 'collective West', as well as to American-Hungarian businessman and philanthropist George Soros and Western-funded NGOs.

In the **Ukrainian** media, negative or sceptical narratives about democracy were strongly represented in 2013-14, but not in recent years. In 2013, the campaign by Russia and pro-Russian forces to divert Ukraine from the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement included the claim that Ukraine would surrender its sovereignty to the EU. Integration into the EU was argued to be an encroachment on state sovereignty and interference in domestic affairs, as well as detrimental to the Ukrainian economy. Pro-European actors were claimed to follow the orders of their external patrons. In some sources, the West and Russia were commonly portrayed as two evils of equal force, where the West/EU earned a better reputation by being more cunning, whilst Russia was brutally straightforward.⁶² These narratives were further used to justify the need for a 'third path-vector of development': maintaining cooperation with both unions, the EU and the Eurasian Union, but freezing any integration processes for as long as Ukraine was too weak to make independent strategic decisions.⁶³ Albeit a collection of anti-EU talking points, being equally critical of Moscow allowed for the

⁶⁰ Mary Lawlor, "The presentation of the video as evidence of a conspiracy strongly indicates a deliberate attempt by the SSSG to criminalise the human rights defenders," United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, 7 November 2023 https://georgia.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/Statement_Eng.pdf.

⁶¹ George Lomsadze, "Georgia claims US contributes funds to coup preparations," *Eurasianet*, October 3 2023. <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-claims-us-contributes-funds-to-coup-preparations>.

⁶² Maksym Kolomis, "Рубікон неминучий [The rubicon is inevitable]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 16 January 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/01/16/6981248/>; Velariy Stepanenko, "Європа vs Азія: qui prodest? [Europe vs Asia: qui prodest?]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 4 March 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/03/4/6984794/>; Adriy Myseliuk, "Усі прапори в гості до нас [All flags are welcome to visit us]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 12 September 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/09/12/6997817/>.

⁶³ Serhii Datsiuk, "Екстремальні сценарії розколів [Extreme schism scenarios]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 18 February 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2013/02/18/6983699/>.

appearance of balance and neutrality and was a key feature of the means of penetration of the Russian narratives.⁶⁴

Yet, one has to remember that the primary goal pursued by Russia here was to prevent Ukraine's EU integration. Therefore, at that time, it could afford to abstain from aggressively promoting Kyiv's alliance with Moscow — a task for the next stage in that campaign. Weary of the Russian information crusade, Ukrainian media noted that its chief agents of influence — oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk's Ukrainian Choice and the Communist Party — stopped actively pushing the 'hard' Russian economic anti-Association Agreement narratives by the end of the summer of 2013, potentially suspecting that then President Viktor Yanukovich had already made the decision.⁶⁵ With Euromaidan in full swing in December 2013 and Russia not yet knowing how to react, the campaign resumed.

Democracy was argued to be a 'marginalised' foreign value for which public demand was 'minuscule', and the West was portrayed as hypocritical and accused of abusing Ukraine either as a leverage and tool against Russia or a raw material base.⁶⁶ Sometimes, an explanation of why Ukraine could not be a democracy used the most primitive and trite stereotypes: 'uncultured', 'backwards', 'infantile', with 'slave genes', and of 'peripheral' and 'paternalistic mindset'.⁶⁷ Although the anti-democracy narrative prescribed a strongman authoritarian regime, it stopped short of praising Putin-led Russia as a role model.⁶⁸ Distancing from the Western liberal model of democracy was articulated by the then government partially as a backlash against the West's 'arrogant teacher-student treatment'.⁶⁹ It was even claimed that Western democracies were no longer democracies but dictatorships or tyrannies as they were governed by rabid minorities that discriminated against the majority; further, it was suggested that Ukraine's traumatic past should help it steer clear from such another enslavement.⁷⁰ The narrative of the 'decline' of Europe and democracy was also merged with calls for a 'third path' for Ukraine to avoid following the

⁶⁴ Kost Bondarenko, "Інтеграційна Одіссея України: поміж Сциллою та Харибдою [Ukraine's Integration Odyssey: Between Scylla and Charybdis]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 25 March 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/03/25/6986369/>.

⁶⁵ Borys Bakhteyev, "Кого попереджає "Український вибір"? [Whom does Ukrainian Choice warn?]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 13 December 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/12/13/7006781/>.

⁶⁶ Borys Bepalyi, "Демократія на лаві запасних [Democracy on the bench]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 23 January 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/01/23/6981834/>; Oleskii Bobrovnikov, "Ми всі - "новіє рускіє [We are all 'new Russians]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 29 March 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2013/03/29/6986747/>.

⁶⁷ Larysa Denysenko, "Позиція та гопозиція [Position and opposition]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 11 March 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/03/11/6985247/>; Interestingly enough, there is also the opposite of transliterating Ukrainian into Russian for satirical purposes: i.e., initially sarcastic Russian cultural tropes, in the Russian language. See, Roman Kravets, "Окраїна [Okrajina]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 28 March 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/03/28/6986609/>.

⁶⁸ Stanislav Fedorchuk, "Молоток як конкурентна перевага політичного режиму [The hammer as a competitive advantage of a political regime]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 15 February 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/02/15/6983527/>.

⁶⁹ *Ukrainska Pravda*, "Кожара: Ми голодні, а тому хочемо і сало, і борщ [Kozhara: We are hungry, so we want both bacon and borscht]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 25 January 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2013/01/25/6982254/>.

⁷⁰ Yurii Oliinyk, "Повернення до прямої демократії [Return to direct democracy]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 15 February 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/02/15/6983531/>; Mykhailo Dubinianskyi, "Право на привілей [The right to privilege]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 1 November 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2013/11/1/7001223/>.

illiberal and undemocratic path of Russia.⁷¹ Furthermore, it was argued that democracy is the same or just as bad as authoritarianism/dictatorship. The Russian narrative about colour revolutions as masterminded by the West was also represented especially in the pro-Russian media platform *strana.ua*, which was blocked in 2021.

During the Euromaidan, government-controlled media presented the protests as harmful to the country's future and outlined a range of speculative prognoses: from a civil war to takeover by a radical and populist government, to a failed state.⁷² Further ill-thought-through resistance, as well as irresponsible behaviour by the opposition-minded elites, was contrasted with a compromise with the regime to save the country.⁷³

In **Moldova**, a common narrative could be identified that the Western-oriented political leadership had betrayed its people and only cared about pleasing the West. The Russian narratives did not leave space for the notion of Moldova as a sovereign country; the remaining options, therefore, were to be part of the Russian-led integration projects or European integration, with the former presented as the only beneficial and natural choice for the country. However, some of the Russian narratives proved to be weak and ephemeral. The Russian claim that Moldova would benefit economically from Russia-led projects and could not manage on its own, i.e. without Russia, faded away when Moldovan authorities decided to reorient to the European energy market and find new paths towards energy resilience. The historical narratives on common fate with Russia were undermined by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and, consequently, missile debris and drones falling on Moldova's territory.

The case of **Armenia** was quite different. In 2013, Armenia was trying to find a way to develop tighter relations with the EU while maintaining Russia as the closest ally; yet, when Armenia's EU path was practically blocked by Moscow, Armenia adjusted to this reality. The EU and European model were still referred to in positive terms in most of the public discourse. Due to the Velvet Revolution in Armenia and after the early parliamentary elections in October 2018, 'Europeanisation' became a priority in Armenia's foreign policy, although it did not replace friendly relations and strategic partnership with Russia as a top priority.⁷⁴ The strengthening of democracy and human rights was, too, promoted as a

⁷¹ Anton Avksent'ev, "Кризис жанра "политических мифотворцев"[Crisis of the genre of 'political mythmakers]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 21 February 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/02/21/6984004/>.

⁷² Volodymyr Dubrovskiy, "Точка біфуркації [Bifurcation point]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 1 December 2013. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/12/1/7003965/>; Nadiya Ivanova, "Ціна реформ [The cost of reforms]," *Ukrainska Pravda*, 5 February 2014. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/columns/2014/02/5/7012828/>.

⁷³ Oleksandr Savchenko, "Економіка після Євромайдану [The economy after Euromaidan]," *Ekonomichna Pravda*, 11 February 2014. <https://www.epravda.com.ua/publications/2014/02/11/419354/>; *Ukrainska Pravda*, "Провокація дурості [Provocation of fools]," *Ukrainska Pravda Life*, 2 December 2013. <https://life.pravda.com.ua/columns/2013/12/2/143888/>.

⁷⁴ Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Speech at Rally Dedicated to 100 Days in Office," The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 17 August 2018. <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2018/08/17/Nikol-Pashinyan-100-day-rally/>; Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, "Nikol Pashinyan, Vladimir Putin discuss wide range of issues of Armenian-Russian relations," The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, 1 October 2019. <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2019/10/01/Nikol-Pashinyan-met-with-Vladimir-Putin/>.

positive agenda, with the exception of LGBTQ+ rights which did not resonate well in society. The EU's support for democracy was seen as welcome.

In the case of **Azerbaijan**, the Russian narrative of Western-imposed democracy was not among the dominant narratives, but the interviewed experts emphasised the country's reluctance to align politically with the West and its lack of desire to cooperate in causes related to human rights, democracy, freedom, fair elections, and combatting corruption. Therefore, only economic cooperation with the West was prioritised by the Azerbaijani state.

3 China as a positive alternative

Out of the six eastern neighbourhood countries, Chinese narratives were most visible in the **Georgian** media space, thereby reflecting the development of close ties between the two countries in recent years. The Chinese embassy, and especially the ambassador, enjoyed frequent media attention, whereas several Georgian outlets were covering the Chinese positions in favourable terms.⁷⁵ Numerous Georgian politicians, analysts, and journalists engaged in spreading China's desired narratives domestically. Moreover, the Georgian government never publicly criticised or questioned the Chinese narratives.

The relationship culminated with the Strategic Partnership Document, signed between Tbilisi and Beijing in July 2023, which can be characterised as very supportive of Chinese positions. The Georgian government expressed the belief that 'Chinese modernisation offers a new option for mankind to achieve modernisation'. Other Beijing-supportive talking points included the desire to 'jointly uphold true multilateralism' and 'promote the establishment of a new type of international relations', as well as the Chinese Communist Party's declared intent to 'promote the building of a community with a shared future for mankind'. Moreover, Georgia, together with China, expressed readiness to 'exchange experience in governance'. Georgia's ruling party representatives unanimously praised the Georgia-China strategic partnership while dismissing critics' concerns.⁷⁶

There was a big emphasis on economic benefits related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Middle Corridor, investment prospects, and Georgia's declared aim to become a logistics and transport hub in Eurasia. Another concurring theme was criticism targeted at the West and the presentation of China as a preferable model and partner. For example, according to the Chinese Ambassador to Georgia, Zhou Qian, 'Opposition to new and old imperialism and colonialism corresponds to the common interests of China and many developing countries, including Georgia, and the countries of the Global South'.⁷⁷ In another interview, the Chinese Ambassador attacked the United States and Europe by stating that 'China

⁷⁵ Georgian Times, News Day, Media Centre Mtavari (MCM), Rezonansi, Sinomedia, TV 24, TV Obiektivi, and Geocohub.

⁷⁶ GFSIS Rondeli Foundation, "China's Activities in the South Caucasus Issue 99, 24.7.2023 – 6.8.2023 2023," *GFSIS Rondeli Foundation*, 11 August 2023. <https://gfsis.org/chinas-activities-in-the-south-caucasus-issue-99-24-7-2023-6-8-2023>; GFSIS Rondeli Foundation, "China's Activities in the South Caucasus Issue 109, 18.12.2023 – 7.1.2024 2024," *GFSIS Rondeli Foundation*, 12 January 2024, <https://gfsis.org/en/chinas-activities-in-the-south-caucasus-issue-109-18-12-2023-7-1-2024-2/>.

⁷⁷ GFSIS Rondeli Foundation. "China's Activities in the South Caucasus Issue 107, 20.11.2023 – 3.12.2023 2023," *GFSIS Rondeli Foundation*, 8 December 2023. <https://gfsis.org/en/chinas-activities-in-the-south-caucasus-issue-107-20-11-2023-3-12-2023-2/>.

provided more than 200 000 vaccines to Georgia during the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, the United States and European countries banned the export of vaccines'.⁷⁸ The Ambassador also claimed that China-style 'socialist modernisation' rejected the 'modernisation of Western countries, which was based on foreign expansion, exploitation of colonies, and slave trade'.⁷⁹ China was ready to share 'the big experience accumulated in terms of state governance and modernisation with Georgia'.⁸⁰

In the other five eastern neighbourhood countries, Chinese narratives were not significant or were even hard to find in the local media space, although all the countries made some efforts to enhance their relations with Beijing and were interested in seeking potential economic benefits.

Belarus appeared as the most receptive vis-à-vis China's narratives in comparison to the other eastern neighbourhood countries. Belarusian state media portrayed the world as moving towards being divided into spheres of influence between China and the US, with Russia and Belarus gravitating towards Beijing.⁸¹ Overall, China was depicted as a highly technologically developed and rapidly enriching state with global ambitions, which would soon surpass the US on the international stage. Belarusian media acknowledged the huge disparity in economic potential between China and Belarus but emphasised mutual interest in military and political cooperation.⁸² According to local experts, China had a positive image in Belarusian society — more positive than Russia.⁸³

⁷⁸ Agenda, "Chinese Gov't "committed" to assisting Georgia in improving social, economic growth – Ambassador," *Agenda*, 27 November 2023. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/4608#gsc.tab=0>. However, at first, Georgia received AstraZeneca and then Pfizer vaccines through Covax, and only after that, it received the Chinese Sinopharm.

⁷⁹ Embassy of People's Republic of China, "驻格鲁吉亚大使周谦主持召开党的二十大精神宣介研讨会 [Ambassador to Georgia Zhou Qian Hosts Seminar to Promote the Spirit of the 20th Party Congress]," Embassy of People's Republic of China in Georgia, 18 November 2022. http://ge.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/xwdt/202211/t20221118_10977817.htm.

⁸⁰ Interpressnews, "საქართველოში ჩინეთის ელჩმა ჯოუ ციენმა "ჩინეთის კომუნისტური პარტიის" მე-20 ყრილობის შედეგებზე ისაუბრა [Chinese Ambassador to Georgia Chou Qian spoke about the results of the 20th Congress of the "Communist Party of China"]," *Interpressnews*, 18 November 2022. <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/735025-sakartveloshi-chinetis-elchma-chou-cienma-chinetis-komunisturi-partiis-me-20-qrilobis-shedegebze-isaubra>.

⁸¹ BELTA, "Не получится. Школьников о том, смогут ли договориться США и Китай [It won't. Schoolchildren on whether the U.S. and China can reach a deal]," *BELTA*, 2 September 2023. <https://www.belta.by/society/view/ne-poluchitsja-shkolnikov-o-tom-smogut-li-dogovoritsja-ssha-i-kitaj-585904-2023/>.

⁸² BELTA, "Беларусь рассчитывает на прямые китайские инвестиции в совместные проекты – Мясникович [Belarus counts on direct Chinese investments in joint projects - Myasnikovich]," *BELTA*, 4 May 2018. <https://www.belta.by/economics/view/belarus-rasschityvaet-na-prjamye-kitajskie-investitsii-v-sovmestnye-proekty-mjasnikovich-301381-2018/>; Nikolai Levchuk, "Китайская оттепель: развенчание культа однополярного мира на XX съезде [The Chinese thaw: debunking the cult of the unipolar world at the 20th Congress]," *Sputnik.by*, 21 October 2022. <https://sputnik.by/20221021/kitayskaya-ottepel-razvenchanie-kulta-odnopolyarnogo-mira-na-xx-sezde-1068223870.html>; Sputnik.by, "Хренин: Беларусь и Китай вышли на беспрецедентный уровень сотрудничества [Khrenin: Belarus and China have reached an unprecedented level of co-operation]," *Sputnik.by*, 16 August 2023. <https://sputnik.by/20230816/belarus-i-kitay-vyshli-na-bespretsedentno-vysokiy-uroven-sotrudnichestva--khrenin-1078572604.html>.

⁸³ Belarus, expert interview no. 1.

In the case of **Moldova**, Chinese narratives were barely visible, but it was noted in expert interviews that Beijing stressed mutually beneficial cooperation and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity in its communication vis à vis Moldova. It also promoted the Chinese model of step-by-step reforms and collective leadership. In an effort to disseminate an attractive image of the communist model with Chinese characteristics, Beijing cultivated ties, particularly, with left-wing political parties of Moldova.⁸⁴ At the same time, China was presenting itself as more pragmatic than other global actors in its bilateral relations with Moldova. An instance of more negative coverage followed the statement by Lu Shaye, the Chinese Ambassador to France, claiming that ‘all states that were parts of the USSR, including Moldova, do not have a real statute, according to the international law, since there is no international agreement to confirm this’. This suggested that post-Soviet states lacked full-fledged sovereignty and prompted Moldovan authorities to request official explanations from Beijing. In response to a diplomatic inquiry for clarifications, Beijing reiterated that ‘China respects the sovereign statute of all states that emerged after the USSR’s disintegration and stands for mutual respect and equality in developing bilateral relations of cooperation and friendship’ yet blamed the international media for distorting the original statement.⁸⁵

In **Armenia**, experts highlighted the Chinese narrative about democracies having different formats and manifestations in different countries, which further suggested that it was not up to the United States alone to decide which country should qualify as a democracy. In the expert’s opinion, China, meanwhile, positioned itself as an alternative to the West in terms of practical cooperation and economic ties; it did not impose its rules, unlike the West, and did not present a geopolitical dilemma, as both Russia and the EU did.⁸⁶

4 Cross-country comparison and conclusions: the importance of domestic conditions and geopolitical context

A comparison of the Russian narratives across the six eastern neighbourhood countries not only shows similarities in the region but also reveals some important differences that reflect peculiar domestic and geopolitical conditions, as well as the specifics of each country’s bilateral relations with Russia. The similarities are summed up in the four narratives outlined above: ‘decadent and declining West’; ‘historical unity with Russia’; ‘Russia provides security, the West stokes conflict’; and ‘Western-imposed democracy’. Notably, the Russian narratives did not question democracy directly but rather painted a tarnished, negative image of the Western model and undermined the policies of various Western actors,

⁸⁴ Moldova, expert interview no. 3.

⁸⁵ George Costiță, “Moldova cere explicații Beijingului după declarația despre suveranitatea fostelor republici sovietice. Răspunsul Chinei [Moldova demands explanations from Beijing after declaration on the sovereignty of former Soviet republics. China’s response],” *Europa Liberă România*, 24 April 2023. <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/moldova-china-suveranitate-urss/32376816.html>.

⁸⁶ Armenia, expert interview no. 4.

including the EU. Another common feature was that Russia mostly projected a highly confrontational approach towards the West.

In the case of **Belarus**, there was extensive repetition of Russian narratives in government-controlled media. This is to be expected, considering the very close relationship between the two countries, where Belarus has ceded much of its sovereignty to Russia. The Russian narratives were not contested in popular media.

By contrast, the strongest tensions and Russian pressure was evident in **Moldova**. Parts of the population appeared very receptive to the Russian narratives, while Russia sought to divert the country from the European orientation pursued by the current leadership and used disinformation as a tool of influence. Moldovan experts noted that Moldova's ties with the EU had been tolerated by the Kremlin before 2014, but in recent years, Chişinău's relations with Moscow hit the lowest point ever.⁸⁷ In particular, Russia stood behind massive protests in Chişinău demanding the resignation of the pro-EU government and calling for Moldova to join the Russia-led Eurasian integration projects instead. Furthermore, high-level Russian officials accused Moldova of following Ukraine's 'Russophobic' policies. Using left-wing political groups to plea for an alternative to EU integration,⁸⁸ Russia invested serious resources to maintain a clientele that depends on its political preferences. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its messages spread in Moldova became more threatening, stoking fears that the war in Ukraine would spread to Moldova if the country pursued a European orientation.

In the case of **Ukraine**, Russia was also investing heavily in anti-Western narratives, but the appeal of those among the population was more limited even before 2014 and reduced significantly after the full-scale invasion. The more violent Russia became towards Ukraine, the less it was able to rely on soft power, including the ability to shape local narratives. Ukrainians became increasingly aware of Russian disinformation and developed ways to counter it, including through an outright ban of pro-Russian outlets and proactive debunking of Russian narratives. The Ukrainian nation became much more united in its efforts to counter Russian interference, be it in the military or informational domain.

In **Georgia**, the presence of Russia in public debate went through a process opposite to the one in Ukraine: during the studied period, Russian narratives became more widespread and influential. Like in the case of Moldova, in recent years, the Russian messages included threats that war would spread from Ukraine to Georgia. However, while the Moldovan leadership rejected and countered the Russian narratives, in Georgia, they were increasingly adopted and echoed by the government. At the same time, domestic contestation became fiercer. Hence, Georgia was another case of divided domestic public opinion towards Russia, but quite a different one in comparison to Moldova.

Armenia constitutes a special case, having previously pursued a very deep and friendly relationship with Russia, which changed abruptly after the second Karabakh War of 2020.

⁸⁷ Moldova, expert interview no. 1.

⁸⁸ Moldova, expert interview no. 2.

Until 2020, Armenia's strong dependence on Russia for its security used to determine the continuation of close ties and a generally positive attitude towards Moscow. Overall, narratives spread by Russia in eastern neighbourhood countries were broadly reflected in the Armenian public discourse. However, our research found no particular efforts by Russia to spread tailored narratives in Armenia. This can be explained by the fact that there was no need for Russia to make such an effort to increase its influence in Armenia prior to 2020. After that, however, the public discourse has become more critical of Russia and the narratives promoted by Moscow.

Finally, in the case of **Azerbaijan**, Russian narratives had the most limited significance. According to local experts, the Azerbaijani government controlled the public discourse and repeated those Russian narratives that were in line with its own interests. The narratives critical towards the West were helpful for the government in its attempts to limit Western influence. However, the presentation of Russian narratives was selective, and public attitudes were not particularly receptive to them. Overall, the experts thought that the Azerbaijani government likely adjusted Russian narratives to balance Russian interests while maintaining their own interests and the support of public opinion.⁸⁹

Comparing the narratives originating from Russia and China, it is unsurprising that Chinese narratives were much less visible than the Russian ones in all six eastern neighbourhood countries. They were also of a different nature: while the Russian narratives were highly confrontational vis-à-vis the West and often intimidating towards the target countries, the Chinese ones mostly had a more positive or neutral tone, although they did contain anti-Western messages. China was, likewise, softer in targeting the West than Russia and focused on advertising its own model of development as an attractive alternative to the Western one. It stressed being pragmatic and oriented toward economic benefits and thus different from the West that promoted or imposed its ideas and values. While Russia crafted specifically targeted narratives or different versions of the same broader narratives, China had similar messages towards all six countries, fitting under the broad narrative of 'China as a positive alternative'. Obviously, China has not invested much attention or resources into the region and lacks the historical, social, cultural, and linguistic ties which Russia can capitalise on. Georgia stands out as the only eastern neighbourhood country where Chinese presence has become significant in the media space, which is explained by the rapid development of closer bilateral relations between the two countries in recent years.

To conclude, the Russian narratives pose a serious challenge to the EU's efforts to promote democracy in the eastern neighbourhood countries by directly and indirectly contesting Western and European values and influence. However, the receptiveness of local audiences varies greatly, ranging from active efforts to counter the Russian narratives in Ukraine to active reproduction of the Kremlin's messages in the Belarusian public discourse. The Chinese narratives do not have a significant presence in most eastern neighbourhood countries, but they do bring into question the Western model in a more subtle way. Further research is required to better understand the influence of the narratives promoted by

⁸⁹ Azerbaijan, expert interview no. 3.

authoritarian powers, the mechanisms of how they spread and reach the target audience, and the reasons for and limits of their popularity.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on policies to counter the narratives of authoritarian powers and ways to protect democratic societies against their impact. Suffice it to note that it is important for the EU, in cooperation with local partners, to further develop ways to respond to disinformation that undermines democratic values and practices in the eastern neighbourhood countries and beyond. The EU can build on the work it has done in recent years to recognise and address the increase of so-called Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI).⁹⁰ In addition to identifying the narratives promoted by Russia and China and putting into question possible false claims therein, it is necessary to strengthen the narratives of the EU and democratic actors in the eastern neighbourhood that highlight the benefits of democratisation and European integration for the local populations, i.e. the demos that is at the centre of democracy-building achievements and failures.

⁹⁰ Strategic Communications, “Tackling Disinformation, Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference,” European Union External Action, 27 May 2024. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tackling-disinformation-foreign-information-manipulation-interference_en.

Annexes

Annex 1. List of Digital Resources

Country	Digital media
Armenia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 168.am • Aravot • Armeniasputnik • Armenpress • Azatutyun (RFERL Armenia) • Civilnet.am • Hetq • JAMnews • Tert.am
Azerbaijan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Azertac.az • Azadlıq Radiosu • Mikroskop Media • Qafqazinfo.az
Belarus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argumenty i fakty v Belarusi • BELTA • SB.by • Sputnik.by
Georgia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agenda • Alt-Info • Geoecohub • Georgia and World • Georgian Times • Interpressnews • News Day • Media Centre Mtavari (MCM) • Obieqtivi • Rezonansi • Rustavi 2 • Sinomedia • TV 24
Moldova	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actualitati.md • Esp.md • Evrazia Expert • Nistru.md • Noi.md • NSN.fm • OMG.md
Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strana • Ukrainska Pravda • Ekonomichna Pravda • UNIAN • ZN,UA

Annex 2. List of Expert Interviews.

Country	Expert Interview	Date
Armenia	Expert Interview No. 1	13 February 2024

	Expert Interview No. 2	13 February 2024
	Expert Interview No. 3	20 February 2024
	Expert Interview No. 4	29 February 2024
Azerbaijan	Expert Interview No. 1	4 February
	Expert Interview No. 2	8 February
	Expert Interview No. 3	13 February
Belarus	Expert Interview No. 1	3 December 2023
	Expert Interview No. 2	19 December 2023
Georgia	Expert Interview No. 1	12 February 2024
	Expert Interview No. 2	13 February 2024
	Expert Interview No. 3	14 February 2024
	Expert Interview No. 4	14 February 2024
	Expert Interview No. 5	15 February 2024
	Expert Interview No. 6	16 February 2024
	Expert Interview No. 7	16 February 2024
	Expert Interview No. 8	25 February 2024
Moldova	Expert Interview No. 1	12 October 2023
	Expert Interview No. 2	26 October 2023
	Expert Interview No. 3	30 November 2023
Ukraine	Expert Interview No. 1	13 October 2023
	Expert Interview No. 2	16 October 2023

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