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External actors and their autocratic influence in the European Neighbourhood: the cases of Russia and China

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Executive Summary

The REDEMOS Working Paper D6.2 investigates the role of Russia and China as external actors promoting autocratic influence in the European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood (EN). It offers a novel conceptual and empirical framework to understand how these authoritarian powers exert influence over six EN countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – through various strategies tailored to their respective regime types and strategic choices. While the European Union has long supported democratic reforms in the region, alternative and often illiberal models advanced by Russia and China have increasingly challenged this orientation, especially since the early 2010s.

The paper revitalises the theoretical debate on autocracy promotion by proposing an integrated framework based on the concept of Authoritarian Gravity Centres (AGCs). These are influential authoritarian states that project their governance models outward using a combination of material incentives, ideological narratives, and coercive means. The authors argue that autocracy promotion should be understood broadly as intentional influence aimed at weakening democratic institutions and empowering authoritarian actors, motivated by a mix of strategic, ideological, and regime-survival concerns. The paper identifies Russia and China as AGCs with both the capability and intent to shape governance norms beyond their borders. By combining the mechanisms of control, hard leverage, and subtle leverage, these actors adapt their strategies to support or undermine domestic political developments depending on whether the target regime is autocratic, hybrid, or democratic. This actor-centric approach contrasts with earlier, more static understandings of autocracy promotion.

The paper draws on both qualitative and quantitative methods, including longitudinal analysis of foreign policy documents, speeches of key political stakeholders, and empirical data on trade, energy dependence, and diaspora presence. The findings show that Russia employs a broader, more coercive toolkit – including military intervention and propaganda – while China relies primarily on economic incentives and soft power. The degree of linkage between the authoritarian actor and the target state emerges as a critical variable mediating the extent and nature of influence.

Empirically, the paper finds that autocratic consolidation is the dominant strategy in Belarus and Azerbaijan, while democratic delegitimation and autocratic empowerment characterise Russian and Chinese approaches to hybrid regimes such as Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia. Ukraine is a special case, where Russia has escalated from hybrid strategies to full-scale military aggression. China's growing economic and technological capacity increasingly positions it as a provider of alternative governance models, though its political influence in the region remains secondary to Russia's. The study also highlights a growing ideological self-confidence in both countries' foreign policy agendas, reflected in the promotion of 'sovereign democracy' and 'Chinese characteristics' as viable alternatives to liberal democracy.

The paper contributes to current research in three ways: it advances theoretical clarity by integrating multiple literatures on autocracy promotion; it adds empirical depth through a comparative analysis of both Russia and China; and it informs EU policy by identifying regime-specific vulnerabilities to external authoritarian influence. The study calls for a more differentiated and strategic response from democratic actors, particularly the EU, to counter the growing complexity of authoritarian promotion in its EN. Notably, the EU needs to adopt more nuanced, differentiated responses to authoritarian influence in the region, particularly in hybrid regimes where vulnerabilities are most pronounced. Understanding the varied strategies of autocracy promotion is crucial for reinforcing democratic resilience in the EN.

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Acknowledgements

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

AGC	Authoritarian Gravity Centre
Bcm	Billion cubic metres
BelAZ	Belarusian Automobile Plant
BOC	Belarusian Orthodox Church
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BTC	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan
BTE	Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum
CA	Closed Autocracy
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CIS FTA	CIS Free Trade Area
CPC	Communist Party of China
CSO	Civil society organisations
EA	Electoral Autocracy
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ED	Electoral Democracy
EDI	Electoral Democracy Index
EN	Eastern Neighborhood
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign direct investments
GD	Georgian Dream
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IO	International Organisation
LD	Liberal Democracy
LDI	Liberal Democracy Index
LIO	Liberal International Order
LLM	Large language model
MAZ	Minsk Automobile Plant
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
OCCRP	Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project
OCU	Orthodox Church of Ukraine
PAS	Action and Solidarity Party
PPC	Pan-Armenian Parents Committee
PSB	Promsviazbank
PSRM	Party of Socialists
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
RoW	Regimes of the World
RPA	Republican Party of Armenia
SBU	Security Service of Ukraine
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation
SD	Standard deviation
SM	Supplemental material
Tcm	Thousand cubic meters
TS	Target states
UOC-MP	Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate
UNM	United National Movement
UR	United Russia
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy

1. Introduction

The background for this analysis is the basic and in the recent decade increasingly tangible rivalry between the EU as norm entrepreneur and partner for the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) and other third actors, in particular Russia but also China. This Working Paper aims to critically examine the role of these two external actors in the eastern neighbourhood. For doing so, we expand our theoretical and empirical angle beyond the narrow and limited concept of alternative *norms* to a broader understanding of *influence*. Thus, this paper is guided by the question: If and how Russia and China attempt to spread or bolster alternative, that is non-democratic, institutions and processes, policies and practices, norms and principles?

The debate about the international dimension of autocracies and, in particular, the promotion of autocracies has been making little headway in recent years. And this despite the fact that the self-confident expansion of relevant autocratic powers – such as Russia and China – has intensified, on the one hand, in a long-standing openly aggressive manner and – in the case of Russia: with imperial aspirations –, and, on the other hand, in very sophisticated activities of manipulating information, propaganda and influencing public debates in other states. Moreover, although new approaches have emerged, such as 'sharp power' (Walker and Ludwig 2017, 2021; Walker 2018, Walker et al. 2020), at the same time new contributions of this kind have been insufficiently linked to the overall debate on autocracy promotion.

The main reason, however, that the state of research has hardly progressed is the so far unresolved controversy, if and to what extent autocrats actually have or can have ideological motives. A large part of the literature to date tends to claim that autocracies usually lack this motive. To do justice to the differentiation: It is not generally disputed that it is possible that autocrats want to spread the authoritarian form of rule in their environment; confirmed, for example, by the case of Hugo Chávez (see Corrales & Penfold-Becerra 2011, Kneuer 2021, Vanderhill 2013, Weyland 2017). When it came to Russia or China, however, the motives focused on maintaining one's own regime stability and/or geopolitical strategic interests rather than ideology (Bader 2010 for China; Way 2015 for Russia).

The other discrepancy in the literature is whether the activities of authoritarian actors should be interpreted as autocracy promotion or rather as democracy prevention. Democracy prevention or resistance is considered as deliberate efforts to avert democracy, thus efforts not explicitly geared towards strengthening autocracy as a regime type (von Soest 2015, Tansey 2016, Whitehead 2014), while other authors see a new tendency to promote authoritarian approaches also with the aim of influencing domestic affairs in the target state into an authoritarian direction, borrowing models of authoritarian institutional elements, procedures or practices, and encouraging authoritarian/illiberal values (Burnell 2010, Tansey 2016, Vanderhill 2013).

A further flaw in the debate relates to the fact that both possible strategies are mainly conceived as being directed at authoritarian target states. But as we can observe in more recent years, Russia for example is also targeting liberal democracies by supporting right-wing parties and groups (inter alia: RN in France, AfD in Germany, FPÖ in Austria, PVV in Netherlands), influencing and attempting to intervene in elections (USA) or using media and propaganda to sow false information that discredits democratic governments (for example through Russia Today). Therefore, we suggest applying a differentiated approach that is able to uncover the possible range of strategies used by authoritarian rulers to address states with different levels of democracy. The underlying assumption is that these rulers are well aware that a long-standing democracy with stable institutions, a functioning rule of law and a free media system must be targeted with different methods and instruments than a young and more vulnerable democracy whose institutions are not yet fully anchored.

In addition to these more theoretical and conceptual reasons, there is also empirical evidence that suggests a re-evaluation of the assessment of autocracy promotion by actors such as Russia and China. Interestingly, an ideological shift has taken place in both countries, which is (also) reflected in foreign policy: in Russia in connection with the strong protests over the 2012 elections and in China under Xi Jinping (for Russia inter alia Lewis 2022, Light 2015, Snigyr 2024, Snegovaya et al. 2023; for China: Drinhausen et al. 2023, Jo & Chen Weiss 2022, Ohlberg 2016).

This Working Paper aims to advance and revitalise the debate on autocracy promotion. It employs an integrated approach that aims to transcend the normativity trap and capture the external influence of autocracies in a differentiated manner. We broaden the existing conceptual approaches in two ways: Firstly, we assume that autocracy promotion does not present the only foreign policy goal but rather is one of a number of goals. This means, that efforts to promote anti-democratic and illiberal institutions, ideas or policies are not necessarily detached from geopolitical interests or security goals. They even might come interlinked. Focusing only on one side of the coin – interest *or* ideas – might make the observer miss the other. Thus, **we understand autocracy promotion in a broader sense as intentional influence of autocracies underpinned by a diverse range of motives and goals.**

Secondly, we hypothesise that different strategies of autocracy promotion are applied to countries with different regime types. Thus, there is not a "one fits all"-approach of autocracy promotion for the variety of regime types, be it liberal or electoral democracies or electoral and closed autocracies. Basing on the concept by Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2021), we assume that autocracies deploy different strategies depending on the regime state of the country: The strategy for already existing autocracies consists in strengthening the autocratic forces and also supporting them in the endeavor of preventing democratic forces to gain power. When addressing democracies, the strategy is to empower autocratic actors and groups, while at the same time delegitimising democratic institutions, practices, ideas and principles. In intermediate regimes such as electoral democracies and electoral autocracies a mix of both strategies can occur. Thus, **we present a more nuanced framework to capture authoritarian influence towards different regime types.**

Third, as the aim of this paper is the analysis of Russia's and China's influence, dwelling on the effects of these activities would go beyond its scope. In the existing studies on autocracy promotion, the central explanatory factor is identified in direct and actor-driven influences, although some authors refer to other factors such as linkage (as density of ties and cross-border flows). Kneuer & Demmelhuber integrate both perspectives by taking an actor-centred approach but ascribing a significance to linkage as an intervening variable. They assume that the degree of the effect of autocracy promotion can be conditioned by linkage: facilitated by more linkage or restricted by less linkage (Kneuer & Demmelhuber 2021: 43). We transfer this assumption to the dimension of strategy development and implementation of external activities and assume that linkage acts as an intervening variable, i.e., that **the design of strategy and its implementation may depend on the degree of linkage between Russia respectively China and the target country.**

We apply this novel integrated approach to analysing the two relevant external actors – Russia and China – and their role regarding the countries in the EN, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Our period of investigation comprises a large time span from 2010 to 2023 which allows us to get a more complete picture of potential shifts in foreign policy goals and dynamics of the efforts of authoritarian influence.

The analysis is based on a longitudinal study of foreign policy based on literature, important foreign policy documents complemented by references to central foreign policy speeches (see Appendix). Furthermore, we use quantitative data, particularly regarding trade volumes (IMF 2024), energy prices, the size of national diasporas (Rosstat 2013, 2021). For measuring and classifying political regimes in the EN we rely on data from Varieties of Democracy (Coppedge et al. 2024).

The results of the analysis corroborate our assumption that **autocracy promotion is a multi-faceted foreign policy approach that fans out in various different strategies which entails tools of different kinds**. In this vein, we find confirmed that both external actors Russia and China rely on different strategies depending of the regime type: **In already autocratic countries (Azerbaijan and Belarus) the strategy of autocratic consolidation dominates aiming at bolstering like-minded allies and securing the stability of their regime. In hybrid regimes (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) two strategies are prevalent: autocratic empowerment** of autocratic actors, parties and groups in the target country **and the delegitimation of democratic rule and principles.** In terms of the **tools**, both authoritarian gravity centres use a wider array of **hard and subtle leverage**, whereas **Russia also resorts to coercive and highly coercive measures of military**

intervention, invasion and war. Moreover, we also find what we qualify as **hybrid destabilisation**, a method where measures of autocracy promotion overlap with the intention of destabilising the country; that applies to Russia's activities towards Ukraine and Moldova.

This working paper makes three contributions to current research: First, it seeks to revive the debate on autocracy promotion with a new approach. Second, the empirical added value lies in the fact that our broader approach captures external influence of the two authoritarian centres of gravity, Russia and China. While most studies focus on one of these two players, we provide a comparative perspective on both. Finally, and regarding the policy level, this allows us to get a better and more fine-grained picture of the role of such authoritarian gravity centres in the region **giving clues to addressing these strategies in a more targeted way**. **The EU's response to the observed activities of AGCs as external third actors should result in a differentiated approach to countering** – especially – Russian and also Chinese actions of influence in various national settings. Thus, the fact that **democratic delegitimation and autocratic empowerment are dominant strategies in hybrid regimes informs us about which arenas the EU should focus this attention in this relatively large group of especially vulnerable countries.**

The remainder of this working paper is organised as follows: Section 2 sheds light on the role of Russia and China as drivers of the systemic conflict. Sections 3 and 4 take stock of the debate on autocracy promotion and outline the framework of Authoritarian Gravity Centres that we use for the analysis. Section 5 presents the research design, methodology, and data used. Section 6 dwells on the two case studies on Russian and Chinese influence in the Eastern Neighbourhood. We conclude by discussing the implications of the main findings.

2. The changed global situation and the new momentum for alternative models

After the democratic euphoria of the 1990s came to an end, the zeitgeist crystallised in the liberal script clearly shifted. A different narrative took hold, namely "that democracies are corrupt and worn out, that they lack energy, capacity, and self-confidence" (Diamond 2022, 186). Moreover, the global financial and debt crisis of Western democracies fuelled a broader debate on the crisis of democratic capitalism and the end of the Washington consensus while economically successful authoritarian leaders began to antagonise the democratic governance model and democratic norms and values. The "picture of democracy in retreat" (Carothers 2009, 3) created an opportunity structure for authoritarian-minded rulers for selling their own 'alternative models' in a self-assertive way. This refers especially to Russia and China, who seek to propagate alternative autocratic models.

Additionally, liberal democracy experienced a pushback not least because of prominent actors such as the US and the EU. The credibility of US democracy promotion was severely damaged as a result of the US invasion of Iraq 2003. The expectation that the support of the democratisation in the Middle East and North Africa by the USA and Europe during the Arab Spring could repeat a similar success story to that after the collapse of the socialist bloc did not materialise. Later on, President Trump's administration has rattled and continues to do so on the very core of US democracy's institutional order while the EU has shown its open flank by neither preventing nor so far effectively countering the democratic erosion driven by the Orbán government in Hungary (2010-) and the PiS-government in Poland (2015-2023).

The normative foundations of the International Organisations (IOs) are not only challenged by anti-democratic and illiberal forces, but also by appeals of nationalism and the emergence of sovereignism as the claim for restoration of national control and reterritorialisation of power (Lake et al. 2021). By now, the international environment has returned to a state of systemic antagonism. Against this background, the Russian war against Ukraine has had and will continue to have a profound impact on the global order. Snyder contends that it "is about establishing principles for the twenty-first century" and "about the possibility of a

democratic future" (Snyder 2022). One effect of the ongoing war is to close ranks among democratic states, resulting in a strengthening of unity – including between the US and its allies – that was no longer present in this form before. At the same time, however, the antagonism between democratic and autocratic regimes has become more tangible.

This new antagonism of democratic versus autocratic states and of "Western" or "Global North" versus "Global South" reflects a position that has emerged and developed within the international community over a longer period of time but is now visible as if through a burning glass: the increasing questioning of the global order dominated by the liberal and democratic script. This has given rise to a frontal opposition countering the hegemonic idea of political liberalism as well as economic liberalism, and especially the international institutions of global governance and multilateralism (Lake et al. 2021). While multipolarity is not a new but rather a long-standing program propagated prominently by Putin since the 2000s, this approach has gained more appeal recently. This can be seen in the new attraction that the BRICS group exerts and can be measured by the considerable number of states interested in joining this group (ca. 40) and 19 that have decided to become members.

Though both Russia and China challenge the Liberal International Order (LIO) (Risse 2024; Börzel, Gerschewski and Zürn 2024; Börzel and Shaffer 2022; McFaul 2021; Stoner 2024), they do so from different positions of economic strength. While the GDP global share of Russia has generally declined from 4.92% in 1992 to 3.55% in 2024, China's GDP share has shown a steep upward trend, increasing fivefold from 3.97% in 1992 to a staggering 19.05% in 2024, exceeding the US (14.99%) and EU (14.41%) by a significant margin (IMF 2025). Russia's declining share, contrasting sharply with China's ascent as a global economic powerhouse, can be attributed to suboptimal economic choices and a heavy reliance on natural resources. In contrast, China's growth reflects its focus on industrialisation, export-led growth, and significant investments in technology and infrastructure. Given China's recent breakthroughs in large language models (LLM), the gap between Russia and China is expected to widen further in the coming years. What is more, the gaps in global economic footprint are also disconcerting for the US, but especially for EU stakeholders, with China exceeding both by a margin larger than Russia's global GDP share (see Figure 1).

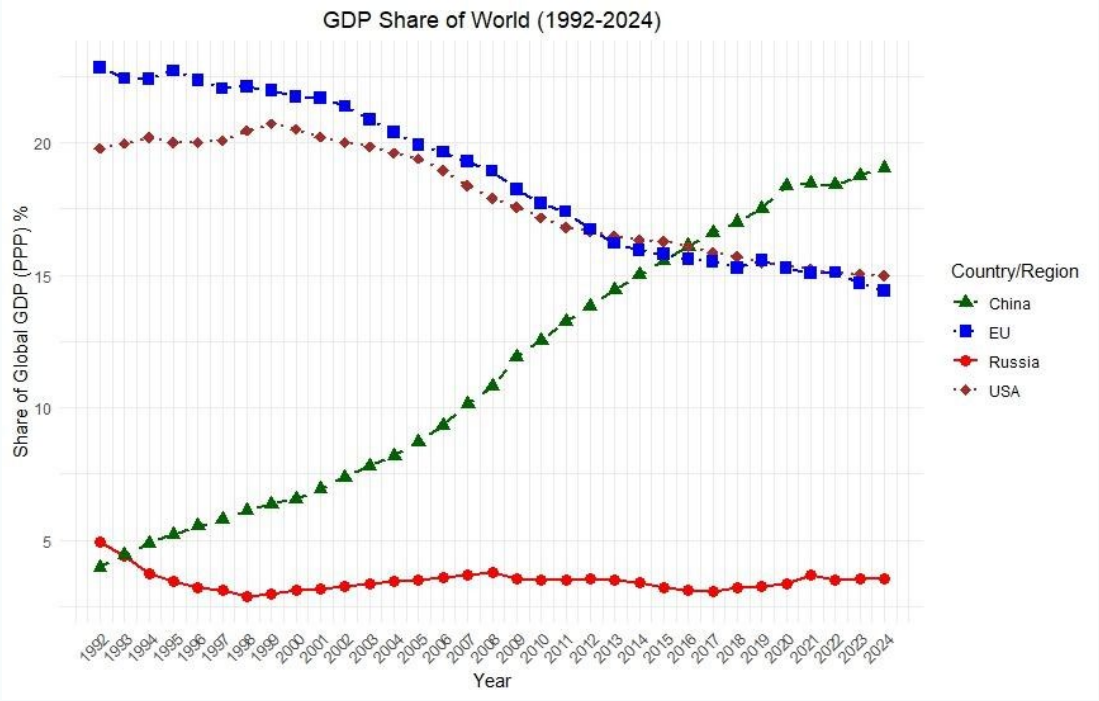


Figure 1: Russia and China's share of global GDP

Note: The figure illustrates the dynamics of GDP share of global economy for Russia, China, US and EU in the period 1992-2024.

Despite a significant gap in their economic potential, with the two evolving in opposite directions, Russia and China are aligned and reinforce each other on four critical aspects (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2018). First, both Moscow and Beijing believe that the current LIO is unjust, outdated, and needs to be radically transformed. Second, incumbent elites in both countries seek to redefine the rules of the new international order and reclaim special roles and status within it (Stoner 2024). This new order, they argue, should be based on principles of multipolarity and 'sovereign equality'. References to multipolarity and sovereignty resurface prominently in the speech acts of all key Russian stakeholders (Putin 2014a, b; Putin 2022a, b; Putin 2024; Lavrov 2024; Patrushev 2022; Volodin 2025). While defending sovereignty as a core element of the envisioned international order, Russia's actual practice of 'sovereign equality' is inconsistent, particularly in Ukraine, where it violates both the Westphalian and more liberal principles of sovereignty (Risse 2024; Börzel, Gerschewski, and Zürn 2024). Third, and relatedly, both Russian and Chinese elites share the view that their countries have a legitimate right *to take action* aimed at reshaping the international system and reclaiming dominant roles or poles of power in the new global order. This aspect becomes particularly salient in Moscow's foreign policy discourse post-2022, as attested in speech acts by President Putin, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov, and former Secretary of the Security Council Patrushev (Putin 2022a, b; Putin 2024; Lavrov 2024; Patrushev 2022). Forth, Russia and China are both advocating an illiberal and anti-Western set of ideas. Xi Jinping seeks to create a world safe for autocracy and dictatorship (Dukalskis 2021; Chen Weiss 2019) pushing for its form of governance as a viable alternative to liberal democracy (Chen Weiss 2022). And Putin tries 'to position himself as the leader of the illiberal, conservative world—a role he defines in opposition to U.S. liberal internationalism' (Mc Faul 2021).

In line with a long-standing tradition in behavioural sciences (Thaler 2015), originating from prospect-theoretic tenets (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), one would expect risk-averse behaviours in the case of international actors operating in the domain of (economic) gains (China) and, on the contrary, risk-seeking ones in the case of former hegemons experiencing decline (Russia) (McDermott 2001). In this context, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine can be seen as an example of risk-taking behaviour, aiming to return to a prior reference point where it held hegemonic power. While Russia has adopted a more assertive (McFaul & Spector 2010, 117) and risk-seeking foreign policy, it has little to offer as an economic model. In contrast, China is less risk-acceptant (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2018), but offers a compelling model of economic recovery, commercial expansion, and technological advancement under conditions of one-party rule (Ohlberg 2016). As the Chinese model is highly adaptable to current socioeconomic shifts, replacing industrial-era economic assets with data and information as the dominant economic commodity in the digital age (Harari 2017), it is poised to represent the dominant alternative model to the LIO, increasingly influencing the former Soviet space as well.

In this new systemic antagonism autocratic decision-makers have learned to frame their national policies as well as their foreign policy goals in a specific way. Non-democratic actors increasingly masqueraded democratic processes (elections) and speak the "language of democracy", even if reality reflected otherwise. In this respect, the term and concept of democracy are not rejected, but reinterpreted (see Putin's 'sovereign democracy' and 'strong state' or the idea of 'democracy with Chinese characteristics'). Moreover, the methods have also increasingly diversified, domestically as well as externally; hard power is combined with soft power and also with sharp power (Walker and Ludwig 2017, 2021), a strategy used particularly by Russia and China to "project their influence internationally, with the objectives of limiting free expression, spreading confusion, and distorting the political environment within democracies" (Walker 2018: 9). While autocrats strive for establishing and assuring geostrategic spheres of influence, they also aim to delegitimise the democratic political and social order in other states with the goal of destabilising them. The hijacking of national discourse spaces in order to sow one's own political-programmatic ideas and at the same time disseminate targeted disinformation is one aspect of this authoritarian "public diplomacy".

This directs attention to foreign policy strategies and activities that cover a broad array of strategies, methods and concrete activities (measures) which go beyond the more defensive approach of preventing democratisation at home and pursue the intention of influencing domestic processes abroad in their own sense. The goal is twofold: on the one hand, to discredit and weaken democratic institutions, processes and

norms and to disrupt the democratic public space by e.g. undermining democratic elections, and disseminating false propaganda about European values or fostering political polarisation (Benedyczak 2021). On the other hand, authoritarian forces (anti-democratic actors and parties, oligarchs) in the target states are empowered materially (e.g. by financial support of like-minded parties or movements) and immaterially (e.g. by public statements endorsing like-minded candidates and parties while discrediting other candidates and parties; rendering advise).

Moreover, in order to survive – also under the democratic imperative of the liberal script – autocrats have not only learned from each other, but also from democracies. Autocrats mimic democratic institutions, establishing pseudo-democratic institutions (Kendall-Taylor & Frantz 2015), they talk the talk of democracy by presenting legitimising narratives to their publics (Gerschewski 2013; Holbig 2015; Kneuer 2013, 2017; von Soest 2015). Moreover, autocrats use legalistic means producing laws (Corrales 2015; Scheppele 2018), not seldomly indicating that this is exactly what democracies do (Putin 2012). Thus, autocrats expand their menu of manipulation disguising repressive content by pseudo-democratic elements.

These described developments on the global and regional level have significant impact on EU democracy promotion and its effectiveness. In the recent decade this rivalry between the EU as a norm entrepreneur and partner for the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) and other third actors, in particular Russia but also China, has become increasingly tangible. And it is not farfetched to assume that this systemic antagonism will remain in the future. Hence, it is important to get a differentiated picture of Russia's and China's influence in the EN countries. What are the strategies and activities through which these authoritarian gravity centres try to influence the EN countries?

3. The theoretical debate on autocracy promotion: what are the limits and how to move forward

The literature on autocracy promotion emerging in the 2010s has rightly taken its cue from the development of theory and the empirical evidence of democracy promotion. There is undoubtedly agreement that democracies that engage in this area are guided by normative motives, which culminated not least in the fact that in the 1990s an important school of thought in IR and relevant political actors (Bill Clinton as an advocate of this doctrine or the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali) linked a further spread of democracy with a spread of peace and development.

However, it should not be overlooked that other motives beyond these strongly normative ones have been and are always present in democracy promotion; for example, the stabilisation of neighbouring regions, also in the sense of export markets. The EU's neighbourhood policy itself, conceived from the outset as a "ring of friends", can be understood in this context. In short, while the normative impetus was undoubtedly at the centre of democracy promotion, it was rarely the only one but rather went and continues to go hand in hand with other, more pragmatic or strategic objectives. Democracy promotion refers to a wide range of attempts to spread democracy abroad "for whatever reason", as Burnell puts it pointing to the fact that motives are mixed (Burnell 2010: 2). This is not to reduce the value of normative motives for democracy promotion actors, but rather as an indication of the - often explicit - link with other objectives (such as stability).

Even though it is generally acknowledged that autocracies do exert influence through foreign policy channels, a fundamental objection to the idea of autocracy promotion is that different to Western democracy promotion, autocracy promotion lacks this "crusading element" (Gunitsky 2019). Therefore, some scholars prefer to refer to 'democracy resistance', 'democracy prevention' or 'antidemocracy promotion' (Tansey 2016; von Soest 2015; Whitehead 2014). The question is whether autocratic regimes "embody, pursue, and propagate an attractive idea or mission that […] can count on international resonance" (Weyland, 2017: 1236) and advocate regime principles that deviate from liberal representative democracy or whether they display a defensive self-depiction, shamefully hiding their authoritarian core behind the formerly democratic

façade. Still other authors pointed out that influence exerted by authoritarian governments may also be due to strategic reasons (such as finding compliant allies and forging useful arrangements for economic relations, for example) or to other intentions guided by self-interest (assuring stability in the immediate neighbourhood) and less normative goals (Bader 2015).

In the line of a rationalist argumentation, there are two factors that account for autocratic external influence: authoritarian regional powers have an interest in being surrounded by other autocratic regimes because they gain from similar incentive systems in their regional proximity; authoritarian regional powers are only likely to respond to Western efforts at democracy promotion in third countries if they perceive challenges to their geostrategic interests in the region or to the survival of their regime (Risse & Babayan 2015). There are, however, strong indications that Russia and China in the last decade realigned their strategies and strengthened their methods of exerting influence (Ademer et al. 2016; Benedyczak 2021; Lankina et al. 2016; Oehlberg 2016; Drinhausen et al. 2023) dubbed as the "ideological turn" (Light 2015). This includes the strategy of generating an ideological offer – for domestic as well as for international audiences (see for Russia: Suvlov 2024; Komin 2024; Kolesnikov 2022; for China: Drinhausen et al. 2023).

As mentioned above, one reason that the debate about the international dimension of autocracies and, in particular, the promotion of autocracies has been making little headway in recent years, is what can be called the normativity trap. The question if autocracies can indeed be ascribed normative motives for their attempts to influence target states, remained controversial and unresolved. At the same time, however, the empirical evidence is calling for analytical tools to capture and assess the activities that autocratic external actor do actually exert. If democracy promotion can be considered a field with overlapping motives and objectives, then no theoretically higher demands should be placed on autocracy promotion. Or to put it another way: just as democracy promotion is rarely the only foreign policy goal of a government, it is unlikely that autocracy promotion presents the only foreign policy goal. To move the debate forward, we therefore suggest to understanding autocracy promotion in a broader sense as intentional influence of autocracies "for whatever reason", that is, underpinned by a diverse range of motives and goals, whereby one motive necessarily is to influence domestic affairs in the target state in an authoritarian direction.

Moreover, it has to be taken into consideration that the approach of autocratic actors is a moving target: from defensive resistance against democracy promotion activities in their countries in the 2000s (Carothers 2006, Gershman & Allen 2006) they shifted to an open antagonisation of democracy promotion offering alternative models offensively and in a much more self-assertive way, and thus to export their authoritarian practices, policies and ideas to neighbouring countries (Kneuer & Demmelhuber 2016). This shift in self-assertiveness on the side of autocrats went along with an increasing democratic pessimism and a backlash of democracy promotion (Carothers 2006, 2009).

In this respect, the lack of an ideological component does not necessarily mean that there is no ambition to defend and disseminate a certain governance model. As Gunitsky (2019, 6) rightly observes, "even if democracy no longer faces an ideological rival like fascism or communism, it may be facing an emerging organisational rival in the form of the one-party state". In this sense, the one-party state represents an alternative form of governance in which basic democratic principles such as separation of powers, control of the executive, independence of judiciary and drawing on the concept of Dahl (1971) – contestation and participation – are not present as a single party maintains either a legal monopoly on power or a de facto dominance via the suppression and co-option of other parties. Hence, there are elections, but they are flawed and manipulated; there are institutions albeit packed with party cronies and loyal followers, and there is a public space in which the state and the party secures its hegemony in framing their narratives and missions. Thus, the influence of autocratic actors also includes providing the playbooks for elections fraud, media capture and censorship, disinformation etc.

This Working Paper aims to advance and revitalise the debate on autocracy promotion with an integrated approach that leads out of the normativity trap. We claim that a broader understanding of autocracy promotion as intentional influence of autocracies underpinned by a diverse range of motives and goals can advance the analysis of the real-world activities that authoritarian external actors deploy.

4. Authoritarian gravity centres as push factors for autocratic influence

Under which conditions does an autocratic leader engage in autocracy promotion? The concept of Authoritarian Gravity Centres (AGCs) provides an approach that captures the willingness and ability of authoritarian countries to influence their regional neighbourhood in its geopolitical proximity. AGCs are countries displaying both a strong pull factor (providing an attractive model for others to adopt authoritarian elements) and a strong push factor leveraging promotion of their own elements of authoritarian governance (Kneuer & Demmelhuber 2016, 2021a). AGCs are defined by the following criteria (Kneuer & Demmelhuber 2016, 2021a, 37-38):

(1) The potential AGC has been a (moderate) autocracy for a period of at least five years.
(2) There is a strong will on behalf of the AGC to be the dominant player vis-à-vis its geopolitical proximity. This is mirrored by the capacities (material and immaterial) deriving from geographic size, economic power, resource wealth, military power, or by taking a protagonist position in nurturing ideological discourses.
(3) A at least moderate degree of linkage, understood as density of ties and cross-border flows, exists between an AGC and its target states (TS).

Kneuer & Demmelhuber (2021b) conceptualise AGCs in two different appearances – on one side as unintentionally projecting and producing diffusion effects and on the other side as actively striving to export autocratic governance. This paper concentrates here on the latter.

While the concept of autocracy promotion and also the concept of AGC relies on an actor-centred approach, it also clear that there exist specific (structural) facilitating conditions for the export or diffusion of autocracy that on the one side encompasses geographical proximity, but on the other side goes beyond simple contiguity: structural similarity or equivalence of the centre and the adopting country, networks and intense interaction therein, and a basic (common) perception of the suitability and success of the new ideas and innovations (Kneuer & Demmelhuber 2021b).

Moreover, beyond the bilateral linkage, AGCs can either seek multilateral regional cooperation or make use of existing linkages and interaction schemes that may generate spillover effects on countries in geopolitical proximity. Therefore, AGCs not only manage their strategies and activities on a bilateral level, they also try to use regional institutions or organisations for legitimation and for an authoritarian claim that may transcend the regional level (Kneuer & Demmelhuber 2021b; Kneuer et al. 2019). AGCs aim at establishing regional cooperation schemes (or make use of already existing patterns) in order to garner external regime legitimacy, regime support and to improve the region's standing and clout internationally. These schemes may be informal or institutionalised. They include ideas, structures, processes, or best-practice models in specific policy fields (e.g. the security apparatus).

Mechanisms of autocratic influence

Regarding the mechanisms of autocracy promotion, we follow the typology that Kneuer & Demmelhuber (2016, 2021b) suggest breaking down the far too complex notion of "promotion" in three degrees of active influence that differ in the intensity of intervention: control, hard leverage and subtle leverage.

Control represents the maximum level of influence based on (military) coercion. It can appear as an imposition of a certain regime type, mainly by military intervention or defeat. Military occupation following defeat opens up the possibility of installing political structures or procedures that can guarantee high influence on the character of the regime.

While the influence is still purposive and planned, ***hard leverage*** differs from control in the method (offer), the instrument (material incentive) and the degree of influence (less intensive, although coercive). We define ***subtle leverage*** as a sub-mechanism that can rely on immaterial and non-coercive instruments like strategic calculations or on normative persuasion.

Overall, while the forms of influence can take military, economic, financial, ideational, and other ways, the different mechanisms can be divided along their method, their instruments and their degree of coerciveness/force of coercion. In this sense, control is the strongest coercive form, hard leverage takes a middle position, and the path of subtle leverage to exert influence employs the least intense coercive measures.

Table 1: Mechanisms of autocracy promotion: methods, instruments and degree of coercion

	Method	**Instruments**	**Degree of coercion**
Control	Military, coercive	Intervention, defeat	Comprehensive
Hard leverage	Carrot-and-stick offer	Material incentive	Pressure without direct coercion
Subtle leverage	Strategic calculation, normative suasion	Rhetoric, oral support/disapproval	Non-coercive, voluntary

Source: Kneuer & Demmelhuber (2021b, 41).

Leverage is an actor-centred mechanism in which the external actor has leverage, which can be stronger or weaker as shown in Table 1. This leverage fundamentally implies an asymmetry between the external actor and the target state. However, Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2020) assume that the effect of this lever can be influenced by an intervening variable, namely linkage. We define linkage based on Levitsky and Way (2010) as the density of ties (political, economic, social and organisational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods, services, people and information) between powerful international actors and a given TS. Thus, the AGC concept integrates both perspectives by taking an actor-centred approach but ascribing a significance to linkage as an intervening variable. They assume that the degree of the effect of autocracy promotion can be conditioned by linkage: facilitated by more linkage or restricted by less linkage (Kneuer & Demmelhuber 2021: 43). Hence, the above described mechanisms - control, hard and subtle leverage - translate into actor-driven influence being mediated by the extent of linkage between an AGC and a given TS (see Figure 2).

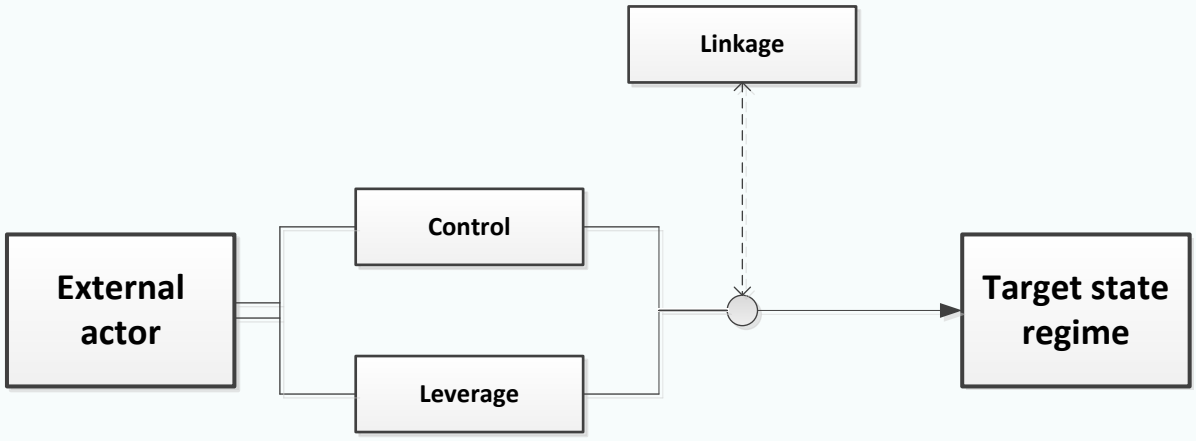


Figure 2: Autocracy promotion: control, leverage and linkage

Notes: The figure illustrates the analytic model reflecting the interaction between control, leverage and linkage. The solid line represents the actor-driven influence, the dotted line the intervening variable linkage.

Strategies of autocratic influence

Another important step to advance the study of autocracy promotion is to better address the fact that authoritarian influence is not only directed to autocracies but to any other regime type. In this vein, we claim that there is not a "one fits all"-approach of autocracy promotion for the variety of regime types, be it liberal or electoral democracies or electoral and closed autocracies. We hypothesise that different strategies of autocracy promotion are applied to countries with different regime types. Basing on the concept by Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2021), we assume that autocracies deploy different strategies adapting to differing objectives that might derive from the situation in the target country. In this sense, we consider the type of the political regime in the TS, however, as necessary, but not as sufficient one. Thus, we do not preclude that AGS also react to agency in the TS or powerful structural conditions. Beyond intention and motives, it is necessary to identify strategies of autocracy promotion. Here we suggest a conceptualisation, which links autocracy promotion to either *supporting* or *obstructing* action, as well as to different regime categories.

With respect to ***supporting* action**, if the autocracy promoter targets illiberal oppositional forces in a *still democratic country*, the strategy is the *empowerment of those like-minded forces*. The intention here is to support morally, but also financially potential future leaders and parties to come to power so that they can implement a regime transformation towards autocratisation. This can materialise in supporting like-minded parties and movements financially or symbolically, supporting candidates for presidential elections, give public recommendations for them or discredit the opposition candidates, visits in the context of electoral campaigns/elections in the target state or invitations of the like-minded candidates to the Kremlin or Beijing, but also in material support (money flows) for determined parties or candidates.

If the autocracy promoter targets *an already autocratic country*, the intention is the *consolidation of the existing autocratic rule*. This can occur by military and intelligence assistance but also by providing the necessary financial means for strategies that bolster output performance (economic stability, social policy etc.) and co-optation via patronage networks. Or providing financial assistance for media capture (e.g. financial resources to buy private media outlets) or providing toolkit for undermining democratic institutions (e.g. rule of law) and media freedom. In this case, it is less required that the autocracy promoter strengthens or advises in terms of institutional elements; he rather provides resources and thus secures and expands the room of manoeuvre of the autocratic government in order to help to maintain their power (Kneuer 2022).

If the external actor targets an *intermediate regime* (electoral democracy, electoral autocracy), the strategy is mixed consisting of *both empowering and pushing towards adopting authoritarian elements* – be they institutional, policy-oriented, administrative techniques etc. (Kneuer 2022).

In the menu of ***obstructing action***, if the autocracy promoter targets a *closed autocratic regime*, the expected strategy would be *democracy prevention*, which consists of measures aiming at impeding democratic movements like an uprising or an attempt at liberalisation such as providing means for suppressing democratic groups or protests;), providing toolkits for the repression of NGOs etc. However, if the autocracy promoter targets a democratic polity, we expect that the former will seek to use actions aiming at *democratic delegitimation* such as intervention in elections, discrediting democratic candidates, attacking "Western" democratic rights and principles such as media freedom, rule of law, pluralism*,* ridiculing or disparaging democratic procedures*,* disseminating false information or attributions about democratic countries, their leaders etc. (Zelenskyy as a Nazi, all Ukrainians as fascist etc.)*,* providing ideological narratives such as harmony (China), Chinese socialism, traditional family values etc.

Finally, when the target state is defined by both autocratic and democratic characteristics (*intermediate regimes*), it is expected that the autocracy promoter will instrumentalise a mixed strategy of democracy prevention and delegitimation. Hence, this conceptualisation results in a 2-by-3 typology, as illustrated in Figure 3.

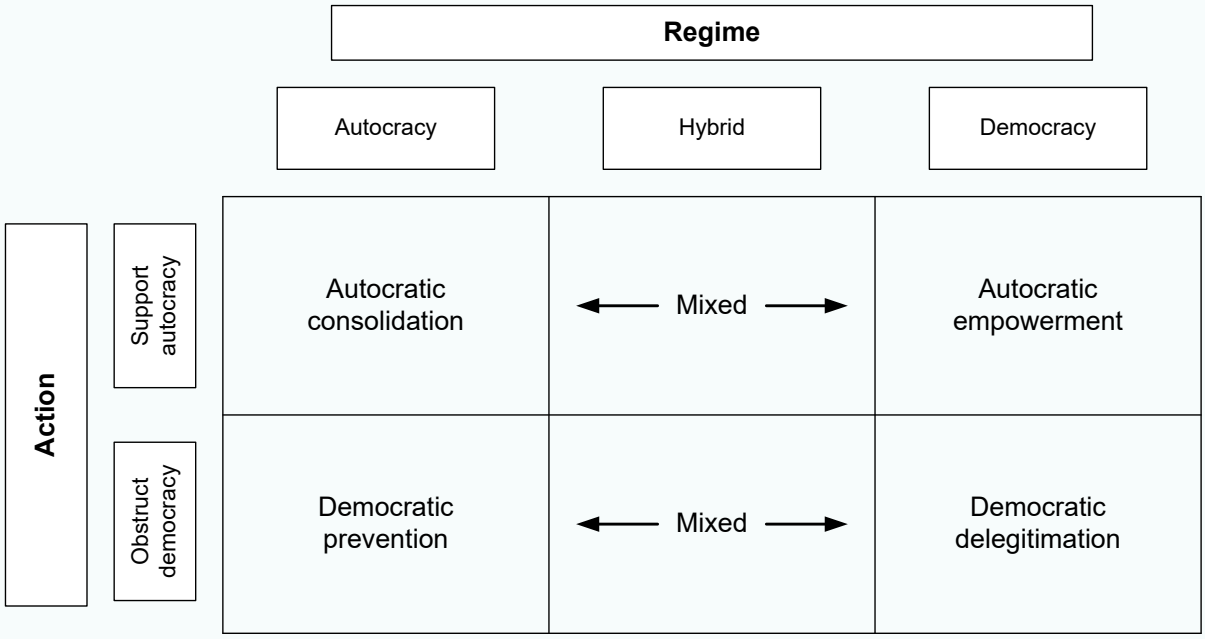


Figure 3: Strategies of autocratic influence

Notes: The figure illustrates the expected strategies based on external actors' supporting and obstructing actions, as well as regime categories in target settings.

To summarise, we expect that the strategies and activities of AGCs targeting already authoritarian regimes will aim to strengthen their consolidation (supportive) and to prevent any movement towards democracy in an already authoritarian regime (obstructive). We expect that strategies and activities of AGCs targeting democratic regimes will aim to empower like-minded authoritarian forces in a democratic country (supportive) and to delegitimise democratic institutions, norms, and procedures (obstructive). We expect that strategies and activities of AGCs targeting electoral democracies and autocracies will use a mix of supportive and obstructive measures.

5. Research design

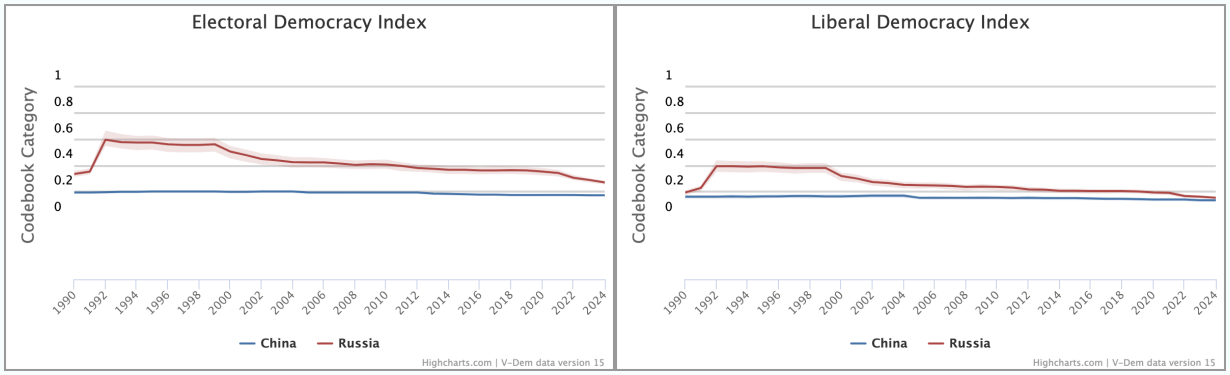
Russia and China as Authoritarian Gravity Centres

This paper employs two case studies, examining Russia's and China's actions in influencing countries in the region of interest from 2010 to 2023: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. For greater analytical leverage, we also draw on evidence outside this period. Specifically, we are interested in uncovering the strategies employed by the Russian and Chinese governments to influence target countries by empowering authoritarian elites or groups, pushing the adoption of authoritarian elements, or strengthening already existing autocrats.

For our analysis we follow the concept of AGC as exposed in the previous section. To qualify as an AGC a country has to be a (moderate) autocracy for a period of at least five years, exhibit a strong will to be the dominant player vis-à-vis its geopolitical proximity (mirrored by the capacities - material and immaterial - deriving from geographic size, economic power, resource wealth, military power, or by taking a protagonist position in nurturing ideological discourses) and have at least a moderate degree of linkage, understood as density of ties and cross-border flows, exists between an AGC and its target states (TS).

The first criterion clearly is fulfilled as both countries – China, and even more so than Russia, are long-standing autocracies. The V-Dem indices (see Figure 4) reflect that China have been a long-standing closed autocracy and Russia, since 1991, never crossed the threshold towards democracy.

Figure 4: State of democracy in Russia and China (Electoral and Liberal Democracy Index; V-Dem 2025)



In regard to the second criterion, both countries dispose of the capacity as well as the strong and visible will to influence their regional proximity (see also section 2.). In the case of China, the question is how far this can be extended to the post-Soviet space. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) certainly created a new context for Chinese interest not only for Central Asia but also the next concentric circle of Southern Caucasus and other Eastern European countries. Belarus and Moldova entered quite early in the BRI in 2013, the other countries followed between 2015 and 2017. Since the Russian invasion in Ukraine, however, the Chinese interest has increased significantly, expanding its clout and securing a pivotal role in the development of the "Middle Corridor" (Popkhadze 2025). While accounting for the role of Russia and China as actors of autocratic influence, we acknowledge the different stakes that Russia and China attach to their presence in the region, with the former viewing it as crucial for its great power status, therefore adopting a more flexible and differentiated approach to external influence. Regarding the linkage, we depart from the premise that, given a peculiar historical legacy, Russian leverage and linkage are more far-reaching and complex than Chinese leverage and linkage. Russia uses a combination of security-based and economic leverage, stemming from its potential to project power through security support, military bases, and its salient role in conflict resolution, as well as from economic dependencies through trade access, energy supply, and preferential loans. In contrast, Chinese leverage is more limited and generally exercised through economic means such as preferential trade access and loans granted under favourable financial conditions. Likewise, political, economic, social, and cultural linkages between Russia and its neighbours are also more far-reaching, encompassing institutionalised political interaction, trade exchanges, FDI outflows, the presence of notable Russian minorities in the post-Soviet space, and the presence of sizable national diasporas in Russia. Here again, the linkage with China is more limited and maintained through political interaction, bilateral trade exchanges, and FDI outflows. We expect that these different constellations in terms of regional stakes and linkages might be reflected especially in the deployed tools of autocratic influence.

Empirical strategy

The study employs qualitative data and complements this with broad references to foreign policy documents and speeches (see Appendix). When selecting key political stakeholders, we focus on decision-makers and influential figures who play a central role in framing the strategic discourse and perceptions both within the target states and globally. In the Russian case, the key political stakeholders include President Putin, Speaker of the Duma Volodin, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov, former Secretary of the Security Council Patrushev, the Director of the Information and Press Department of the MFA Zakharova, and the ideologue Alexander Dugin. In the Chinese case, these individuals include President Xi, Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, and respective ambassadors of the PRC to the EN target states.

Where applicable, the analysis also incorporates quantitative data, particularly regarding energy prices, bilateral trade volumes (IMF 2024), the size of national diasporas in Russia (Rosstat 2013, 2021), and regime estimates in the EN region based on V-Dem (2024).

Since the AGC framework predicts autocratic consolidation and democracy prevention in autocratic contexts, autocratic empowerment and democratic delegitimation in democratic settings, and mixed strategies in hybrid contexts, we need a reliable approach to regime classification. To identify it, we rely on two existing classifications of political regimes: Regimes of the World (RoW) (Lührmann et al. 2018) and Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2024). We also perform two additional classifications based on the method suggested by Riedl et al. (2024) with both LDI and EDI data (Coppedge et al. 2024). Since we do not have liberal democracies or full democracies in our sample, we find the use of EDI data unproblematic for this regime classification exercise. However, as the method of Riedl et al. (2024) allows us to distinguish cases located on the autocratic or democratic segments of the autocracy-democracy continuum, we use the statistical parameter of standard deviation (SD) to discriminate between closed autocracies (CA) and electoral autocracies (EA) (Buscaneanu and Kneuer 2024). We expect for electoral autocratic regimes to be situated in the region of one SD below the global mean, computed based on Riedl et al. (2024) with LDI or EDI data. While we agree that the use of SD for this purpose is not ideal, the multi-party criterion used by RoW is too lenient to meaningfully discriminate between CA and EA. In our region of interest, Azerbaijan and Belarus have formal provisions in place regarding multi-party elections. However, the multi-party character of elections in these countries represents a 'Potemkin village', since competing candidates, especially in presidential races, run at the request of the incumbent candidate to ensure the formal provision of multi-party – yet meaningless – contests.

Having four alternative classifications of political regimes in the EN region, we compute the correlation matrix to assess the reliability of alternative classifications (see Table 2).

Table 2: Correlation matrix of regime classifications

RoW	Riedl et al. (LDI)	Riedl et al. (EDI)	EIU
1.0000000	0.8499660	0.8880306	0.6554270
0.8499660	1.0000000	0.9040239	0.8375807
0.8880306	0.9040239	1.0000000	0.7725285
0.6554270	0.8375807	0.7725285	1.0000000

The correlation matrix above indicates that, unlike the EIU classification, RoW and those based on Riedl et al. (2024) with both LDI and EDI data correlate highly with one another. The highest pairwise correlation is between RoW and that based on Riedl et al. (2024) with EDI data. However, calculating the mean correlation for each alternative, the regime classification based on Riedl et al. (2024) with LDI data emerges with the highest coefficient (0.8978926), suggesting high reliability in our empirical sample which is why we employ this regime classification.

This results in the following assignment of regime types: **closed autocracy to Azerbaijan and Belarus, and hybrid regimes (either electoral autocracies or electoral democracies) to Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.** Throughout 2010-2023, **Azerbaijan and Belarus** displayed consistent closed autocratic qualities, indicating low standards on free and fair elections, as well as the absence of legislative and judicial checks on the executive power. **Armenia** transitioned from an electoral autocracy to an electoral democracy in 2018, in the wake of the Velvet Revolution that brought the steepest improvement in democratic quality in the EN region. **Georgia** also shifted from electoral autocracy to electoral democracy in 2013, though regime

development post-2022 points to an opposite direction, especially with respect to governmental control over and repression of civil society organisations (CSOs), freedom of discussion, and the (narrowing) space for political perspectives in the major print and broadcast media. **Moldova** has been classified as an electoral democracy since 2010, with a downturn in 2013-2017, and a notable recovery in democratic quality in 2019-2022. **Ukraine** remained an electoral autocracy throughout the period, indicating persistent challenges in ensuring substantive democratic growth under conditions of Russian hybrid attacks since 2014 and full-scale military aggression since 2022.

6. Analysing the autocratic influence of Russia and China as external actors in the Eastern Neighbourhood

Russia

Foreign policy strategy

Russia's strategic interests in the post-Soviet region, as reflected in its foreign policy concepts from 2000 to 2023, presuppose maintaining influence over former Soviet states and ensuring regional stability and region building. The documents consistently highlight the importance of what in the Kremlin's language is referred to as '*blizhnee zarubezhie*' (near abroad), particularly Belarus and Ukraine as 'priority' partners (MID 2000, 2008, 2013, 2016, 2023). Foreign policy concepts underline Russia's shared historical and cultural ties with CIS states, framing the leadership role of the former as a protector of these bonds.

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, foreign policy concepts emphasise the paramount importance of preserving the rights of Russian compatriots living abroad, particularly in relation to language, culture, and education (MID 2016, 2023). The goal of defending the rights of Russian compatriots living abroad is based on a nationalist ideological discourse, as reflected in the works of conservative Russian intellectuals such as Ilyin, Berdyaev, Leontiev, Dugin, Prokhanov, etc. (Snyder 2018; Florea 2022), who underscore the messianic duty of Russia to act as a protective and civilising force (Snegovaya et al. 2023).

The more recent foreign policy discourse revisits the notion of '*Russkiy Mir*' (Russian World), which is *at-territorial*, transcending Russia's physical borders and denoting a civilisation distinct from the Western one (Zevelev 2016). Although, the notion reflects a broader *at-territorial* vision, it is linked to defined territorial representations, such as '*Novorossia*' (New Russia) that refers to a region in the Black Sea basin that was part of the Russian Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries and encompassed much of present-day south-eastern Ukraine. With the advantage of hindsight, it is now apparent that Russian foreign policy discourse has instrumentalised *at-territorial* notions to justify palpable *territorial* conquests in Ukraine. In the article 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', President Putin argued that Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people,' historically and culturally united by a shared heritage dating back to Kievan Rus (Putin 2021). He asserts that Ukraine's modern identity has been artificially shaped by external forces, particularly Western influence, and claims that the separation of Ukraine from Russia is unnatural.

Along with a more assertive posture, Russian foreign policy discourse metamorphised over time with respect to values. Whereas the earlier foreign policy concepts stress the commitment to 'universal democratic /…/ principles' (MID 2008), the most recent documents position Russia as a defender of traditional moral and spiritual values, contrasting these with what it sees as the imposition of Western neoliberal ideologies (MID 2016, 2023). The 2023 concept, approved after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, explicitly criticises 'pseudo-humanistic or other neo-liberal ideological views,' which it claims undermine traditional values and threaten Russia's cultural and moral foundations (MID 2023). Moreover, it explicitly articulates as a foreign policy goal the promotion of 'traditional Russian moral and spiritual values' and preservation of 'cultural and historical heritage of the multi-ethnic people of the Russian Federation' (MID 2023).

Since the 'ideological turn' in 2012, triggered by the Bolotnaya Square protests against fraudulent parliamentary elections in 2011 (Makarychev 2016; Zygar 2024), Russian foreign policy discourse evolved

from references to disparate ideologemes to a relatively coherent ideological core (Snegovaya et al. 2023; Snegovaya and McGlynn 2025; Blackburn 2024). The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the launch of the war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 have further punctuated and augmented Russian ideological framing. It has gradually evolved to represent an eclectic doctrinal stock, that draws on multiple – sometimes contradictory – repertoires (Laruelle 2025; Florea 2022; Snegovaya et al. 2023). According to Suslov (2024), Putin's regime ideology contains three main ontological dimensions revolving around: antiliberal conservatism, implying an immutable spiritual lineage since the Christianisation of Kyivan Rus; right-wing communitarianism, presupposing the immanency of Russian identity; and organic identitarian populism, implying encompassing belonging to the 'Russian world', pan-Slavism, etc. (Florea 2022). Laruelle (2025) deconstructs Putin's ideology into five 'layers,' including worldviews, and strategic narratives. Referring to worldviews, she observes that Russian incumbent elites and ideologues juxtapose Russia against the liberal West (Lavrov 2024; Dugin 2014, 2024), reclaim the status of a unique great power to Russia, and view the state as the embodiment of the Russian nation. Among core strategic narratives, Laruelle observes that Russia is framed as a 'civilisation-state,' 'katechon,'[1] defender of traditional values, leading anti-colonial force, and anti-fascist power.

This observation is confirmed by a closer look to President Putin's speech acts since 2012, which synthesise references to multiple themes—such as historical memory going back to Kyivan Rus, long-lasting Western Russophobia, Russia as a victim of Nazism, collective heroism of the Soviet people in the 'Great Patriotic War,' Western colonialism, NATO expansion, multipolarity, sovereignty, etc.—that have distinct etymological roots (Putin 2014a, 2014b; Putin 2022a, 2022b; Putin 2024). Putin's tone has become openly more hostile and confrontational since 2014, especially towards Ukraine and the US. With the war of aggression against Ukraine, Putin increasingly invokes religious claims, reflecting the religious and spiritual unity of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. The rise of the religious theme is also present in Dugin's rhetoric, which places Russia at the centre of the struggle against modernity and postmodernity, calling for a return to traditional values and emphasising idiosyncratic religious, family, and cultural identities (Dugin 2014). If anything, ideological (re)construction post-2012 relies on selectively drawing ideologemes from the imperial and Soviet eras to appeal to broad segments of both internal and external audiences. Overall, Putin's (re)interpretation of history and his historicist leaning represents one of the most distinctive trademarks of war rhetoric[2].

Although the 'ideological turn' under Putin has partly an intrinsic quality, reflective of identity construction in imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russia, it also importantly has a functionalist underpinning. Externally, it has to appeal to like-minded regimes, which contest the liberal international order and are expected to acquiesce to Russian forceful action in Ukraine. Russian stakeholders make explicit calls for the unity of BRICS countries, Iran, North Korea and former colonies in Africa against Western dominance and for the promotion of a multipolar world order (Lavrov 2024; Patrushev 2024). Internally, it is meant to ensure rally around the flag effects, leading to high internal cohesion in the face of a common existential threat: the democratic West, which – it is claimed – cynically uses Ukraine to destroy Russia (Patrushev 2022; Dugin 2024). However, first and foremost, the 'ideological turn' is meant to serve Russian incumbent elites' pragmatic interests in sustaining high internal legitimacy, which translates into stable political authority, elevated social status, and high economic privileges (Shevtsova 2015; Feifer 2016; Benner 2017). Putin learned from prior annexation of Crimea, when his approval rate hit a record high 89% (Plokhy 2017), that his rule can remain unchecked as long as new territories are brought 'home.' Ultimately, the survival of his regime remains Putin's foremost concern. To that end, he is expected to employ a variety of tools – including eclectic ideological framing – to maintain power and influence.

Russian strategies of influence in the EN varied across political regimes in target states, and also across time within a given national setting, depending on whether incumbent elites chose to align with Moscow's strategic interests. Strategies of influence are generally country-specific, tailored to peculiar national contexts and executed by task forces responsible for a given target state, but also include disinformation campaigns that suggest a certain coordination at the regional level.

[1] A force that in the Biblical tradition is viewed as protecting the world from the kingdom of the Antichrist.

[2] We would like to thank Anna Skiba for suggesting this point.

In countries characterised by autocratic rule, such as Belarus and Azerbaijan, Russian actions ranged from full-fledged to symbolic autocratic support, which helped these regimes bolster their internal legitimacy while deflecting democratising pressure from the US and the EU (Levitsky and Way 2010; Way 2015). In contexts with hybrid political regimes, where competing pro-EU/Western or pro-Russian elites ruled – such as Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – Russia employed mixed strategies, including autocratic support, autocratic empowerment, democratic delegitimation, hybrid and full-blown military attacks. In such settings, Moscow has managed at times to (mis)use the relative competitive electoral environments to sway election results in favour of pro-Russian contestants. However, Russian strategies of influence have often had 'boomerang effects' (Buscaneanu 2017), compelling domestic elites to distance themselves from Russian-led regional integration initiatives and instead pursue integration with the EU. Countries most frequently targeted by Russian coercive measures have tended to follow this course of action. We turn to Russian strategies of influence in the EN region in the next two sub-sections.

Actions of influence in autocratic settings

Autocratic support under complex strategic conditions in Azerbaijan

If Russian support to the incumbent regime in Belarus is complex, multi-faceted and systematic (more below), then its support to the similarly authoritarian Azerbaijan is less far-reaching and at times symbolic. Complex strategic ramifications involving Armenia, Russia, Turkey and, more recently, the full-scaled invasion of Ukraine are responsible for this less encompassing support. The perceived Russian security backing of Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh since the early 1990s has made Baku reluctant to join Russian-led regional organisations, including the EAEU. At the same time, given its authoritarian-leaning regime, Baku lacks the ambition to integrate with the EU either. Unlike the similarly authoritarian Belarus, Azerbaijan has access to abundant energy resources, which have been used by the Aliyev dynasty to legitimise and sustain its autocratic rule through distribution, co-optation, repression and fending off external democratisation pressure (Buscaneanu 2017). At the same time, access to abundant energy resources, along with the operational Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipelines for energy exports to Turkey and Europe, makes Azerbaijan the only country in the EN region largely immune to Russian energy leverage.

Although Azerbaijan is a member of CIS from its onset and has engaged in rhetorical action of promoting integration within CIS, in practice, it proved rather resistant to integration. Descriptive empirical data confirm this resistance. Throughout 1991-2024, Baku has ratified only 27% of multilateral documents approved within the CIS (compared to 86.5% by Belarus, 78.4% by Armenia, 51.4% by Moldova, and 43.2% by Ukraine before 2018) and completed only 28.9% of domestic procedures (compared to 91.8% by Belarus, 62.6% by Armenia, 37.1% by Moldova, and 26% by Ukraine) resulting from these documents (CIS Executive Committee 2024a, 2024b). If anything, the rhetorical support for deeper integration into the Russian-led CIS is not backed by empirical evidence of actual integration.

Also, unlike Armenia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, Azerbaijan abstained from joining the multilateral CIS Free Trade Area (CIS FTA), which was introduced in 2012, and continues to have its bilateral trade with Russia regulated through a loose FTA signed in the early 1990s. Consequently, Azerbaijan maintained a rather low trade rate with Russia, starting at 18.51% in 1994 and declining to 10.68% in 2022 (see Figure 5), reflecting Azerbaijan's increasing reliance on its own energy resources, positioning Baku as a trade competitor to Moscow, for whom energy exports also represent the main commodity. However, following the rise in energy-based exports to meet European demand since July 2022, Azerbaijan began importing large quantities of Russian oil for domestic consumption, which adds to bilateral trade volume with Moscow in the post-war context (Hosaka 2025). In terms of FDI, although Azerbaijan has received Russian investments in the oil industry, their share is significantly lower than that of Western sources such as British Petroleum (UK) and ExxonMobil (US).

The reluctance to deeper integration with Russia notwithstanding, authoritarian-leaning incumbent elites in Azerbaijan and Russia did engage in mutual support. For instance, since 2011, when the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs started to publish its own reports on human rights situation in selected countries, it moots concerns over human rights irregularities in Azerbaijan, Belarus and other friendly states (Lutsevych 2016). Russia has also provided military equipment and training to the Azeri army (Nichol 2014), used also as an instrument of indirect pressure against Yerevan, forcing the latter's U-turn on regional integration in favour of the Russian-led EAEU.

The presidents Ilham Aliyev and Vladimir Putin also met regularly, emphasising the role of their states as 'strategic partner[s]' in multiple domains, such as security, energy, trade, environmental protection, etc. (Nichol 2014). Unlike other presidents in the EN region, Aliyev Jr. maintained a friendly personal relationship with Putin, aided, among other things, by opaque business interests of their close associates (de Waal 2024). Some observers attribute this friendly attitude to Putin's respect for his father, Heydar Aliyev, who served as a KGB general before becoming a member of the Soviet Politburo and president of Azerbaijan from 1993 to 2003 (Hosaka 2025). Recurrent remarks made by Putin as part of bilateral meetings with Ilham Aliyev concern acknowledging the personal contribution of the latter to improved trade relations, though trade statistics reveal an opposite downward trend since 1994 (see Figure 5), and to the study of Russian language in Azerbaijan. In 2015, Putin awarded the 'Pushkin' Medal to the daughter of Ilham Aliyev, Leyla Aliyeva, for her 'role in promoting the Russian language and culture abroad' (Abdullayeva 2015). The study of the Russian language has also improved in the field of tertiary education, with several Russian universities opening branches in Azerbaijan and the Russian government increasing the number of scholarships for Azeri citizens (Shiriyev 2020).

Despite friendly personal relationships and 'smiles and hugs,' the Azeri leadership consistently sought to distance itself from Russian-led regional integration initiatives in the post-Soviet space and aimed to limit Russia's role in regional politics (Kucera 2024). Baku also proved less inclined towards significant Russian media presence, seeking to maintain control during the most recent conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh. For instance, in 2022-2023, the Azeri authorities restricted access to the *RIA Novosti* website and *EurAsia Daily* for spreading 'provocative statements' (Laputska and Yeliseyeu eds. 2024). Overall, Azeri public trust in Russian media remained limited before and plunged even further after 2022. While *Sputnik Azerbaijan* (Russian-language version) had about 900,000 visitors in 2021, it had only 314,000 visitors in 2023, with only 13% accessing the website from Azerbaijan (Laputska and Yeliseyeu eds. 2024). This significant drop in visitors was partly due to an incident that led to the resignation of several Azeri editors from *Sputnik Azerbaijan* and the refusal of the central authorities in Azerbaijan to extend the work permits of its editor-in-chief and producer after a statement by the Russian Defence Ministry read that Baku was responsible for breaking the ceasefire agreement in Nagorno-Karabakh.

A similar limited Russian influence is said to be exerted on Azeri NGOs, which, according to leaked reports from Russian intelligence, are under tight political control by the central government in Baku, and do not participate in promoting Russian strategic interests (Dossier Center 2020c). However, several Russian-funded NGOs, such as the Eurasian Club and the Slavic-Turkic Union, have been able to engage in anti-Western disinformation and promote Russian narratives in the public discourse. Despite this, they appear to carefully navigate their actions to avoid antagonising the central government in Baku (Shiriyev 2020).

However, the most critical support that Russia offered to Azerbaijan since 1991 was enshrined in a 43-point declaration, signed by Putin and Aliyev in Moscow two days before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. According to Goble (2022), the document granted Azerbaijan a free hand in Nagorno-Karabakh, recognised Azerbaijan as Russia's most reliable partner in the South Caucasus and gave Baku the leeway to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy. In exchange, Moscow sought to ensure Azerbaijan's (and Turkey's) neutrality in the upcoming war with Ukraine and to secure a transport corridor from Iran, with the aim of circumventing the anticipated Western-imposed sanctions. It also sought to undermine the democratically committed Pashinyan government in Armenia, perceived as distancing itself from Russia's strategic agenda (more below). Without Moscow's interference, fully occupied by the war effort in Ukraine, Azerbaijan managed, after three decades, to regain control over Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023. This

strategic victory, along with Baku's acquiescence to ensure a north-south transport corridor dearly needed by Moscow, has paradigm-defining effects, lowering Russia's leverage over Azerbaijan for the first time since 1991. If anything, in pursuing strategic objectives in Ukraine, Russia lost critical leverage over Azerbaijan, whose incumbent elites, under Aliyev Jr., have skilfully used the war context to regain control over Nagorno-Karabakh, thereby boosting the legitimacy of their autocratic regime in the years to come.

Autocratic consolidation and democratic prevention in Belarus

Belarus represents an autocratic regime, established and ruled by President Alexander Lukashenko since the second half of the 1990s, having gained his own profile dubbed as Europe's last dictator (see also Kneuer 2024). Since then, his relationship with Russia has been marked by a certain ambivalence. On one hand, Lukashenko has sought to maintain an independent position and distance from Russia, reflected in his patriotic narrative of independence. On the other hand, he has also aimed to extract economic benefits and secure Russian support to sustain his autocratic regime. Regarding Russian external influence, we find a broad array of measures of hard leverage (economic and military) as well as subtle leverage.

However, despite some ambivalence, Belarus and Russia have consistently been top priorities on each other's foreign policy agendas. This is evidenced by Belarus' consent to participate in the CSTO since 1994, and sign two crucial agreements with far-reaching consequences: the Treaty on the Union State in 1999, and the Treaty establishing the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2014. Belarus' membership in the CSTO served the need of Lukashenko's regime to enhance its domestic legitimacy and international status, and provided what Gawrich and Nasibov (2024) call 'protective integration.' At the same time, the Treaty on the Union State laid the groundwork for the deepest form of political interaction between the two states in the post-Soviet region (Union State of Belarus and Russia 1999). More recently, the close connection between the governments has been reinforced through a formal agreement between pro-regime forces, Belaya Rus and United Russia (UR), signed in 2022 (Belta 2022d). At the signing of the agreement, the chairman of Belaya Rus, Gennady Davydko, emphasised the importance of strengthening sovereignty in the face of 'enormous political and sanctions pressure from the collective West' and expressed confidence that the cooperation agreement would 'serve as the foundation for coordinated work.'

Russia played a significant role in *consolidating Lukashenko's regime*, as the regime's output legitimacy and stability were bolstered by Russia's heavy subsidies to the Belarusian economy, including providing access to energy resources at below-market prices. These subsidises helped sustain key Belarusian industries and generate considerable economic benefit which Lukaschneko could 'sell' to his favour domestically. At the same time, Belarus' high dependency on Russia's support gave Putin a high degree of leverage which he indeed used. On several occasions, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Putin linked further support to deeper political and economic integration or to military cooperation (Polglase-Korostelev 2020, Banasik 2022).

Russia also has consistently granted Belarus preferential market access, supporting key Belarusian industries such as food production and vehicle manufacturing. Belarus remains Russia's most economically dependent neighbour, with trade consistently exceeding 50%, reaching a peak of 61.96% in 2022 (see Figure 5). Russian conglomerates have made substantial foreign direct investments (FDI) in energy and manufacturing, playing a critical role in the economic survival of major enterprises, such as the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ) and the Belarusian Automobile Plant (BelAZ). Overall, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated that Russia spent $106 billion on Belarus between 2005 and 2015 (Barysheva 2021). In the absence of more recent data, it is reasonable to expect that a similar amount has been invested in the Belarusian economy from 2016 onward.

However, access to subsidised energy, preferential trade agreements, and cheap loans has been contingent on Minsk's alignment with Russia's strategic preferences. Whenever Belarus appeared reluctant to comply with Moscow's political and economic integration plans, the Russian leadership employed coercive tactics. For instance, when Belarus sought to improve relations with the EU in 2014, the Russian Duma adopted a

law reducing export duties on crude oil from 59% to 30% by 2017, with plans to eliminate them altogether by 2024. According to Vygon Consulting, this policy would have significantly reduced the profits of Belarusian entities involved in oil-based product resale (Polglase-Korostelev 2020). When Belarus sought concessions, these were conditioned on deeper integration within bilateral and multilateral frameworks, such as the Union State, and the Russian-led EAEU.

A highly decisive Russian influence materialised during and after the 2020 presidential elections, marking a critical juncture for the Belarusian regime. The reactions of the Russian government to the massive popular protests and enduring demonstrations can clearly be qualified as *democracy prevention*. Based on experiences with the Colour Revolutions and Euromaidan protests, the greatest danger and most pressing concern in the eyes of Russian incumbent elites was regime destabilisation by the unpredictable and widespread impact of such movements that strive for democracy. Russian stakeholders denounced the protests, framing them as externally orchestrated attempts to destabilise Belarus. Reportedly, Russian media professionals from the state-owned *Russia Today* replaced Belarusian journalists who resigned in protest against the regime's crackdown (Rácz 2020). Additionally, Russian news channels disseminated narratives justifying the regime's repressive actions, reinforcing Lukashenko's legitimacy in the eyes of domestic and international audiences. Manaev et al. (2021) found that by September 2020, Russian news coverage portraying the pro-Western opposition in Belarus negatively had increased by 73%. The Russian official view on the protests directly contradicted the EU's position, which condemned the electoral irregularities and the violent suppression of dissent (Council of the EU 2020).

Furthermore, Moscow bolstered Lukashenko's regime survival by providing riot control equipment, intelligence, and know-how to help Belarusian security forces suppress the revolt. At the peak of the protests, Lukashenko was reportedly protected by a special Russian unit, while a contingent of Russia's National Guard, stationing near the Belarusian border, was ready to intervene into Belarus's domestic affairs, albeit and supposedly with the consent of Lukaschenko (Rácz 2020). Putin openly warned the protesters in August 2020 and indicated that he ordered a reserve of law enforcement personnel which 'will not be used unless the situation gets out of control' (New York Times 2020). In December 2020, the Belarusian Interior Ministry and the Russian National Guard formalised a cooperation agreement, under which the latter pledged to assist Belarusian OMON units in case of public unrest. Moreover, during a meeting in Sochi in September 2020, Putin offered Lukashenko a $1.5 billion aid package to stabilise the Belarusian economy. Belarus and Russia also exchanged intelligence, as seen in the notorious case of Roman Protasevich's arrest, the co-founder of the opposition outlet *Nexta*, after his Ryanair flight to Vilnius was forcibly diverted to Minsk in May 2021. Public endorsements, the framing of protests as Western-led destabilisation efforts, intelligence and security assistance, and continuous economic support have been crucial in enabling Lukashenko's grip on power after 2020.

In the context of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, Russia has used Belarus as a military launchpad and deployed tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus in 2023 and stationing military personnel to protect these capabilities. This deployment, the first of its kind since the Cold War, underscores the strategic value of Belarus and its central role in Russian foreign policy goals. However, it also renders Minsk highly submissive to Russian strategic leverage, which could be used to gain full control over Belarus in the future. At the same time, in the treaty signed in 2024, Russia provides security guarantees to Belarus and, amid tensions with the West, places it under its nuclear umbrella as part of the revised version of the most recent nuclear doctrine (Kremlin 2024).

Since 2022, Belarus has shown near-total alignment with Moscow's dominant narratives that delegitimise the democratic West and Ukraine. The 'collective West' is portrayed as immoral, decadent, and hypocritical, allegedly forcing Russia into self-defence against Western aggression. The state-funded *Belarus 1 TV* echoed Russian claims that 'Nazi ideology has become state policy' in Ukraine and that it is part of a broader 'Western genocidal campaign against historical memory' (Laputska and Yeliseyeu eds. 2024). The Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) has also joined the debate, emphasising the moral bankruptcy of the West and the superiority of the Christian-Orthodox faith and values. The BOC, as an exarchate uniting all Russian Orthodox eparchies in Belarus, is fully subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and governed by its statute. Veniamin,

appointed as Patriarchal Exarch by the Holy Synod of the ROC in August 2020 during the protests against electoral fraud in the 2020 presidential race, is known for his loyalty to Lukashenko's regime and as a proponent of the unification of Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia into a single state (Zerkalo 2022).

Social media has amplified the synchronisation with Moscow's core narratives. A study monitoring the 20 largest Belarusian groups on *Odnoklassniki*, with a combined following of approximately 200,000 accounts, found that content within these groups closely followed Russian military propaganda, making it virtually indistinguishable from material posted by Russian users (Laputska and Yeliseyeu eds. 2024). Beyond *Odnoklassniki*, hundreds of Belarusian *TikTok* accounts have been used to spread anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian disinformation, contrasting with content glorifying Russia's historical heritage, World War II victory, and the Soviet past (Laputska and Yeliseyeu eds. 2024). This synchronisation of Belarus's and Russia's information spaces has been reinforced by the approval of the Concept of Information Security of the Union State by the Supreme State Council of the Union State in February 2023. Similarly, in April 2024, Belarus codified 'Nazi ideology' as a major security challenge in its National Security Concept, aligning it with Moscow's list of perceived threats.

Actions of influence in hybrid settings

Autocratic consolidation and democratic delegitimation in Armenia

Armenia has traditionally been the second most willing country in the EN, after Belarus, to align with Russian strategic interests. However, unlike autocratic Belarus, Armenia's political regime displayed hybrid qualities, oscillating between electoral autocracy in 2010-2017, and electoral democracy in 2018-2023. In this context, it is worth considering how Russian strategies adapted during the more authoritarian phase under President Sargsyan and later, during the democratic trajectory under the premiership of Nikol Pashinyan. The measures Russia employs towards Armenia encompass both hard leverage (economic and military) and subtle leverage.

Armenia's willingness to consent to Russian strategic preferences has been constrained by its limited options in a fragile strategic environment, characterised by its territorial dispute with Baku over Nagorno-Karabakh and longstanding tensions with Ankara (Çakmak and Özşahin 2023). Given these constraints, Armenia consented to join the CSTO in 1994 and to host the 102nd Russian military base in Gyumri, which houses approximately 5,000 soldiers until 2044. These decisions subjected Yerevan to significant Russian leverage, which became decisive in 2013 (more below). Simultaneously, Armenia pursued a dynamic integration process within the CIS, as evidenced by its high rate of ratifications of CIS documents and its completion of domestic procedures arising from these multilateral agreements.

As long as Armenia adhered to Russian strategic preferences, Moscow reciprocated with substantial support, which helped sustain the incumbent regime under the Republic Party of Armenia (RPA). Even before Armenia's 2013 U-turn on regional integration in favour of the EAEU, Yerevan benefited from preferential gas imports at below-market prices ($189/tcm) (see Figure 4), favourable trade access to the Russian market, and unrestricted access to the Russian job market. Armenia also saw significant Russian FDI in the energy, telecommunications, and banking sectors, often facilitated through debt-for-asset arrangements (Pardo Sierra 2011). A notable example of this was the involvement of Rosatom in the ownership structure of the Medzamor nuclear power plant as part of a debt repayment deal. Similarly, Russian companies acquired dominant stakes in Armenia's energy infrastructure and railway network (Sasse 2013). This comprehensive Russian support contributed, albeit partially, to the output legitimacy of the autocratic-leaning incumbent regime, as reflected in the comfortable legislative majorities secured by the RPA from 2003 to 2017, and the four consecutive presidential victories by RPA representatives Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan in the 1998, 2003, 2008, and 2013 elections.

Following his victory in the 2013 presidential race, Sargsyan paid his first official visit to Moscow, where he met with President Putin. In the meeting, widely covered by both Armenian and Russian press, Putin

congratulated Sargsyan on his victory, calling it 'a proof of the confidence of the nation' (Associated Press 2013). In addition to these high-level meetings between key political figures, the ruling parties in Armenia and Russia—the RPA and UR —maintained a close dialogue since 2008. The agreement was signed on the occasion of chairman of Russian State Duma Boris Gryzlov's official visit to Armenia and sought to create a formal framework for better coordination between parties. Since then, members of RPA and UR participate reciprocally at each party's congresses, exchange views on bilateral relations, and express support in elections.

In 2013, as Armenia was finalising its negotiations on the EU Association Agreement and preparing to initial it at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, Moscow applied security leverage combined with economic incentives, including a substantial price discount on Russian gas. As a result, Armenia was forced to reverse its course on regional integration and instead join the EAEU. Before the U-turn, Russian-language media outlets disseminated misleading claims that a pro-EU course would lead to the legalisation of same-sex marriage, gay parades, and even 'incest and paedophilia' (Roberts and Ziemer 2018). In addition, the Pan-Armenian Parents Committee (PPC), akin to the Russian All-Russian Parent Resistance movement, joined the debate, accusing the West of undermining traditional and family values in Armenia.

By formally agreeing to sign the Treaty establishing the EAEU, Armenia received a $200 million loan for military modernisation in 2015 (Roberts and Ziemer 2018), an immediate gas price discount from $189/tcm to $165/tcm, and improved trade access to the Russian market (Buscaneanu and Li 2024). The positive dynamics of bilateral trade between Armenia and Russia post-2015 highlight this enhanced trade access. Armenia, alongside Belarus, saw a significant increase in its share of bilateral trade with Russia from 2015 onward (see Figure 5).

Apart from the security and material support provided to the authoritarian-leaning incumbent elite, Russia's actions of influence aiming at *democratic prevention* are also notable. For instance, the Russian ambassador to Armenia, Ivan Volynkin, expressed concerns with Western-funded NGOs as representing a threat to bilateral relations. Similar claims have been formulated by the prominent Russia-funded media outlet *Sputnik Armenia*, accusing local NGOs of organising the anti-governmental protests in July 2016 (Sputnik Armenia 2016). Although Putin did not take an open stance in the 2017 parliamentary elections in favour of his ally Sargsyan, Russian-funded media was active in countering the protests and anti-government groups. This was also reinforced through social media. For example, automated tweets of Russian origin on Twitter disseminated messages such as 'American money to fund post-electoral protests in Armenia' and 'NGOs will be trying to disturb the elections in Armenia,' suggesting a Western-inspired conspiracy against the ruling party (Roberts and Ziemer 2018). Nonetheless, the autocratic-leaning regime under the RPA could not succeed in translating the Russian incentives provided since 2014-2015 into enhanced public support, and crumbled as a result of the 2018 Velvet Revolution.

The revolutionary movement brought Nikol Pashinyan and his My Step Alliance, including the Civil Contract party, to the forefront of Armenian politics. In two years, from 2017 to 2019, Armenia experienced a steep increase in democratic quality, particularly in the domain of free and fair elections from a point estimate of 0.20 in 2016 to 0.92 in 2019 on the V-Dem LDI (Coppedge et al. 2024). This steep progress in democratic quality was unprecedented in the whole EN region. This raises the question of whether Moscow responded to this regime transformation, and if so, how its strategies of external influence changed.

Empirical evidence suggests that Moscow reacted with suspicion to the new democratically committed Armenian ruling elite, which was also perceived as distancing from Russia's strategic agenda (Çakmak and Özşahin 2023). As a result, the dominant strategy of influence gradually shifted towards democratic delegitimation. The first signs of attempts to *delegitimise the new democratic-leaning regime* in Yerevan became evident in 2020. However, unlike Georgia in 2010-2012, Moldova in 2010-2018 and 2021-2024, and Ukraine in 2014-2024, where Russia employed state-sponsored instruments for democratic delegitimation and destabilisation (more below), in the case of Armenia this role was attributed to proxy agents. For instance, Russian media outlets, such as *news.ru*, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, *Gazeta.ru*, and *Rosbalt*, known for their subordination to state interests, published articles speculating that Nikol Pashinyan's grandfather

was a Nazi collaborator (news.ru 2020; Moskovskii Komsomolets 2020). These articles have been published in a concerted way on the same day (May 15th, 2020) in reaction to Nikol Pashinyan's absence, justified formally by the outbreak of COVID-19, at the 75th anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany, celebrated in Moscow on May 9th, 2020.

Proxy agents also include various Russia-sponsored NGOs. One prominent example is the Russian-Armenian Lazarevsky Club, established in 2018 at the initiative of Duma's deputy Konstantin Zatulin. The club systematically portrayed Pashinyan in its publications using derogatory terms such as 'dictator,' 'ideal traitor,' and 'the globalists' project' (Gegamyan 2020). The club also views Pashinyan's electoral victory as an expression of the broader phenomenon brought about by colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine (Lazarevsky Club 2020). The proxy nature of the club is confirmed in a report by the Dossier Center, which reveals its connection to former intelligence general Vladimir Chernov, as well as to the then head of the Presidential Directorate for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (the Culture Directorate). The leaked correspondence between General Chernov and his subordinates, as cited by the Dossier Center, refers to Pashinyan as the appointee of the Soros Foundation, responsible in the eyes of Moscow for fermenting democratic revolutions in the post-Soviet space (Dossier Center 2020c).

Following the strategic loss of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russian officials openly expressed views aimed at undermining the authority of the central government in Yerevan. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov directly accused Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan of being responsible for the loss, suggesting that it was a serious mistake to 'flirt' with the West instead of working with Moscow for peace (Faulconbridge 2023). In October 2023, *Channel One* aired a tele-show, in which accusations, previously made primarily by proxy agents, were echoed during prime time on the most influential state-funded TV channel in Russia. All participating commentators unanimously blamed Pashinyan for the strategic defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh, emphasising his incompetence and accusing his entourage of 'anti-Russian' actions, such as the visit of his wife, Anna Hakobyan, to war-torn Kyiv (Laputska and Yeliseyeu eds. 2024). While the evidence remains inconclusive, preliminary findings suggest that Moscow did not remain insensitive to the democratic gains brought about by the Velvet Revolution. Actions of democratic delegitimation post-2018 have been taken first by proxy agents and then amplified later by official Russian stakeholders. With Armenia's recently 'frozen' membership in the CSTO (RFE/RL 2024), it is becoming increasingly likely that Russia may resort to hybrid destabilisation tactics, utilising its various instruments of both hard and subtle leverage.

Democratic delegitimation, and autocratic empowerment in Georgia

Russian actions of influence in Georgia between 2010 and 2023 are characterised by two key political episodes: the rule of the pro-Western United National Movement (UNM) party from 2004 to 2012, and the rule of the Georgian Dream (GD) coalition, which rose to power after the 2012 legislative elections. As Georgia's political regimes across and within these periods are characterised by hybrid qualities, Russia shifted the repertoire of its tools of influence depending on the extent to which Georgian incumbent elites consented tacitly or explicitly to Moscow's strategic agenda. Regarding the deployed measures, we find a broad array ranging from coercion and control (exemplified by the military action in 2008) to hard and subtle leverage.

As the new administration under President Saakashvili pivoted towards the West in 2004, Russia engaged in sustained actions aiming at *democratic delegitimation and hybrid attack*. Invoking dubious health-related concerns, Moscow instrumentalised its asymmetric economic leverage and imposed bans on Georgian wine and mineral water imports. Following a spy incident in September 2006, when four Russian military officers were arrested on charges of espionage, Russia escalated by imposing a full-scale blockade on transport routes and money transfers, disrupting free trade between Georgia and Russia. The spy incident highlighted the deep mistrust between the two countries and set the stage for future disputes, ultimately culminating in the brazen Russian incursion into Georgian territory in August 2008.

The fallout from this blitz military campaign was disruptive for the bilateral rapports between the two sides. On the one hand, Tbilisi cut off diplomatic relations with Moscow, and withdrew from the CIS, which became effective in 2009. However, even before withdrawal, Georgia showed reluctance to integrate into the CIS structures, with low rates of ratifications of CIS documents and completion of domestic procedures resulting from these multilateral agreements (CIS Executive Committee 2024a; CIS Executive Committee 2024b). On the other hand, Russia recognised the two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent (de Waal 2024), and bolstered its military presence in the region. Currently, Russia maintains the 7th military base in Abkhazia (Rogozinska and Olech 2020) and 4th military base in South Ossetia. Before 2008, Russia's military presence in the region served primarily a political role, acting largely as a political bargaining chip (Hedenskog and Larsson 2007). However, the blitz incursion into Georgian territory illustrates how Russia's passive military presence can be rapidly turned into an active one. While undermining the legitimacy of pro-Western elites with the costly defeat in the August war, Russia took actions to prop up autocratic regimes in Georgian breakaway regions. The Russian-sponsored CIS-EMO sent missions to observe legislative elections in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, concluding that elections in these regions adhered to 'all' or 'most' international standards (Buscaneanu 2017).

At the same time, Moscow continued to keep in place trade restrictions on Georgian wine and mineral water and to enforce strict customs regulations that affected shipments of textiles and apparel products. Russia also upheld a restrictive visa policy that impeded free travel from Georgia to Russia.

With a severe blow to its internal legitimacy, inflicted partly by the consequences of the military loss against the Russian army, the UNM failed to win the 2012 legislative campaign. With the new incumbent elites under the Georgian Dream coalition, which proved more willing to balance European and Russian interests post-2012 (Genté 2022), Russia has gradually shifted to a strategy of *autocratic empowerment*.

One of the first signs of this shift in strategy was the decision of Moscow to lift some trade restrictions in 2013. Whereas bilateral trade declined sharply after the 2008 war, it has started to recover since 2013, reaching 12.53% in 2022 (see Figure 5). This recovery is in sharp contrast with the downward dynamics of the Russian trade with Moldova and Ukraine post-2013. Whereas the GD coalition also continued to pursue a course of association with the EU, it is somewhat surprising that Russian leadership choose to abstain from applying trade levers against Georgia, as it did in the case of Moldova and Ukraine in 2013-2014. This contrasting approach to Georgia is explained by tight connections existing allegedly between the leadership of the GD coalition, especially the tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili, and high-ranking Russian officials (Genté 2022). Moscow has also showed restraint and allowed representatives of the Georgian diaspora to transfer large volumes of remittances to their home country. Kapanadze (2014) documents that out of the total amount of $1.47 billion in remittances transferred to Georgia in 2013, $801 million (54.49%) came from Russia. Furthermore, Moscow introduced visa issuance facilitations in 2015 (MID 2015).

Similar to the decline in bilateral trade after 2008, Russian FDI in Georgia also decreased post-2008. However, the most recent data suggests that Russian investors may have turned to offshore channels to route investments in the last years (Dzebisashvili et al. 2020). This increase in Russian investments could not take place in the absence of Georgian authorities' consent, which is also manifest in their willingness to accommodate Russian interests and help Moscow circumvent Western sanctions in the post-2022 environment (Genté 2022; Fukuyama and Evgenidze 2023). Moscow reciprocated with the abolition of the visa regime for Georgian nationals and suspension of the ban on direct flights in 2023, signalling supportive action towards the incumbent GD party. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov openly praised Georgian authorities for not joining sanctions against Russia and for 'resisting pressure from the West' (Fukuyama and Evgenidze 2023).

Apart from supporting action on trade, remittances, investments and travel, the Dossier Center investigations suggest that Moscow has also sought *to empower conservative forces*, such as the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots party (Dossier Center 2020a, 2020b). According to the Dossier Center, the party attracted over $8 million from Russian sources ahead of the 2020 legislative elections and had its campaign instructed by the Moscow-based POLITSECRETS firm. The Democratic Movement-United Georgia, led by the ex-speaker

of the parliament Nino Burjanadze, is also suspected of closely allying with Russian interests (Clem et al. 2023).

Similar to actions of influence in the realm of ideas in other national contexts, the Georgian information space was also 'weaponised' by Russian disinformation, fake news, and outright propaganda. However, in contrast to Moldova and Ukraine (more below), where disinformation campaigns target the incumbent pro-Western elites, in Georgia such actions are aimed at undermining the authority and attractiveness of the EU and NATO (Civil.ge 2020). The EU is framed as morally rotten, and willing to open a 'second front' in Georgia. Traces of Russian involvement in delegitimising the EU have been noticed as part of a concerted campaign on *Facebook, Instagram, Telegram* and *TikTok* with various accounts being created and managed from abroad, including Russia (Laputska and Yeliseyeu eds. 2024). Also, unlike Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine, where democratically inclined ruling elites do not engage in spreading anti-Western disinformation in the post-2022 context, the incumbent regime in Georgia echoes themes promoted by Russia. For instance, experts argue that the 'foreign agents' law, which entered into force in 2024, was adopted to intimidate dissenting voices and entrench the power of the ruling elite, emulating a similar law adopted in 2012 and expanded in 2022 in Russia (de Waal 2024; Gogolashvili 2024). In 2024, the GD faction in the parliament also initiated a legislative package, which imposed a ban on same-sex marriages, the adoption of children by non-heterosexuals, gender reassignment surgeries, 'LGBT propaganda' in national education system and the media, etc. (Laputska and Yeliseyeu eds. 2024). The incumbent GD party also instrumentalised openly the fear-inducing narrative of the 'second front' in Georgia as one of its defining messages in the most recent 2024 legislative campaign (de Waal 2024).

Democratic delegitimation and hybrid destabilisation in Moldova

Throughout 2010-2023, Moldova and its generally competitive incumbent executives have been primarily subjected to *delegitimation and destabilisation* actions by Russia. Simultaneously, Russia has also sought to *empower pro-Russian parties and groups*, thereby attempting to influence Moldova's electoral processes. After a brief hiatus of mutually constructive relations at the beginning of 2010s, Moscow employed delegitimation tactics in the lead-up to the EaP summit in November 2013. Seeking to force Chișinău to reconsider its plans for association with the EU, Rospotrebnadzor imposed a ban on wine imports based on questionable technical grounds in August 2013. This was the second large-scale embargo on wine imports from Moldova, after imposing a similar ban in 2006, in retaliation to President Voronin's refusal to sign the Kozak Memorandum and his reorientation of Moldova towards European integration (Buscaneanu 2017). The second ban was partially lifted in 2015 for individual wine companies from the autonomous region of Gagauzia, which is predominantly populated by the Russian-speaking Gagauz minority that voted in favour of integration with Russia at an illegal referendum, held in 2014 and funded by private Russian business interests (Interfax 2015; Lutsevych 2016; Hill 2024).

However, as Russia sought to exercise its trade leverage, successive incumbent governments opted for the diversification and reorientation of bilateral trade away from Moscow, which led to diminished trade relations. As confirmed by trade patterns in Figure 5, Moldova's trade with Russia plummeted significantly from 49.03% in 1994 to 8.41% in 2022. The unintended consequence of coercive measures imposed by Rospotrebnadzor in 2006 and 2013 was the modernisation of Moldova's wine industry and the shift of its products from the Russian to the EU market. By 2017, in about a decade since Moldova was first hit with a wine export embargo, Romania overtook Russia as the main export destination for Moldovan wines (Harper 2018). Similarly, Moldova experienced a clear decline in Russian FDI, with Gazprom remaining still to hold a dominant share in Moldovagaz, the main operator on the internal energy market.

At the same time, Russia continued to undermine central authorities and support the secessionist regime in Transnistria, where Moscow maintains stationing military troops (≈ 1,500 soldiers) and, nominally, 'peacekeeping forces' in line with the 1992 ceasefire agreement (Rogozinska and Olech 2020). Opposing central government's effort to ensure unified territorial control, assumed to be a necessary condition for democratic development (Rustow 1970), Moscow has often forced Chișinău to reorient its attention from

political reform to stateness issues, border management and security (Buscaneanu 2017). However, siding with and providing political and economic backing to Transnistria has had 'boomerang effects' for Moscow. Most incumbent parties and coalitions in Chișinău have avoided joining the Russian-led CSTO, sought to keep distance from the Russian-led regional integration initiatives, such as the EAEU, and opted, on the contrary, for European integration (Buscaneanu and Li 2024).

As Moldova transitioned from a period of 'state capture' in 2016-2018 to more open politics during the short-lived coalition between the pro-EU ACUM bloc and the pro-Russian Party of Socialists (PSRM) in the second half of 2019, Moscow showed restraint in using delegitimation actions. With the departure of the pro-EU ACUM bloc from the government and the establishment of Chicu cabinet with the support of a circumstantial coalition built around the pro-Russian PSRM, evidence of supporting action can be noted. For instance, in the context of the COVID-19, Russia sent humanitarian aid to Moldova in May 2020, including medical supplies and equipment, to assist the pro-Russian PSRM-backed government to manage the pandemic crisis.

PSRM, known for its loyalty and subordination to Russian state interests (Dossier Center 2020d), has a formal cooperation agreement with the ruling UR party since 2017. However, even before 2017, PSRM and its leader, Igor Dodon, benefited from extensive Russian support, including financial and electoral assistance. For instance, an investigation by RISE Moldova revealed that a Russian-linked offshore company, registered in the Bahamas, has funnelled about €1,5 million for the support of PSRM between 2013-2016 (Sanduța 2016). Moreover, Russian media support was critical for the victory of Igor Dodon in the 2016 presidential race. In a rare occasion offered only to a few like-minded candidates, Dodon had the chance to meet the Russian president Putin between the first round of the presidential election and the runoff. The meeting was widely aired by the main Russian TV channels, including *Channel One* (*Pervyi Kanal*), which – broadcasted by *Primul în Moldova* – had a large following in Moldova. Shortly after elections, Putin congratulated Igor Dodon on his victory, and stressed that 'the election results show that voters give broad support to Mr Dodon's platform of bringing socioeconomic stability to the country and pursuing balanced foreign policy goals' (Kremlin 2016). On the other hand, Russian media outlets portrayed the democratically committed contestant and leader of PAS, Maia Sandu, as a servant of American and EU interests. In what was a clear case of democratic prevention attempt, Russian media reported that, in the event of her victory, the EU would force Moldova to host about 30,000 Syrian refugees. This claim was widely shared by local media and bloggers associated with PSRM, as well as by media outlets controlled by the informal leader of the ruling coalition, the tycoon Vladimir Plahotniuc. Interestingly, a similar false claim about Syrian refugees also flooded the Georgian information space in 2017 (Clem et al. 2023), suggesting that distinct Russian task forces responsible for specific target states coordinate their actions at the regional level.

Pro-Russian parties, such as the PSRM and Party of Communists, have also drawn significant electoral support from the Russian-speaking minorities and Moldovan diaspora residing in Russia. Given its significant informational influence over Russian-speaking minorities and Moldovan diaspora, Moscow has managed to (mis)use the relative competitive electoral environment in Moldova to sway key elections in favour of pro-Russian forces, such as the 2016, and 2019 contests. Though recent data shows a significant decline of Moldovan diaspora, until 2014 it was relatively large and sent significant remittances (≈$600 million/year) on which many Moldovan families depended.

Following the 2021 snap legislative elections, won decisively by the pro-EU Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), Moscow returned to delegitimation and destabilisation actions. Given PAS's commitment to European integration, rewarded with the launch of EU accession negotiations in 2023, Moscow launched an unprecedented hybrid effort aimed at *destabilising the incumbent democratic regime and empowering pro-Russian forces*. This effort became manifest during the presidential campaign and EU accession referendum held at the end of 2024. According to a detailed report by the Moldovan security service, Russia facilitated a multi-million-dollar operation against the pro-EU presidential candidate Maia Sandu and the EU option in the referendum (SIS 2024; Rotari 2024). The report informs that the internationally sanctioned Promsviazbank (PSB) transferred only in September-October 2024 about $39 million to over 130,000 Moldovan citizens (8.5% of active voters) to cast their votes against the EU option in the referendum and in favour of several pro-Russian presidential contenders. To put this amount in perspective, it shall be observed that the overall

annual USAID budget for Moldova in 2024 totalled $87.2 million (US Department of State 2024), that is double the amount spent in only *two months* by Russian agents to corrupt Moldovan voters. This large-scale hybrid operation, involving subversive actions, sabotage, anti-governmental protests, vote buying, and disinformation, was confirmed by two investigations conducted under cover by the independent newspaper *Ziarul de Gardă* (Zaharescu 2024). The report of Moldovan intelligence service and *Ziarul de Gardă*'s investigations reveal that the operation was coordinated from Moscow, through the Kremlin-affiliated 'EVRAZIA' NGO, but executed on the ground by representatives of the 'Victory' bloc controlled by the fugitive oligarch Ilan Șor, sentenced for 15 years in prison for the mega-bank fraud committed in 2014. The local network included a central executive office in Chișinău, 119 territorial cells, 1,900 primary cells, and 'activists,' who were instructed and paid to recruit as many as possible 'sympathisers.' Three call-centres from Moscow and *Telegram* chatbots were used for coordination, communication, and registration of about 33,000 'activists' and 84,000 'sympathisers,' as well as for informational support about meetings, protests, and incoming payments (SIS 2024). The payment methods included the distribution of cash, 'Mir' cards, fintech apps, such as TRUSTEE, and crypto currencies, which points to a highly advanced technical and logistic support provided by proxy agents in the service of the Russian state. The Moldovan intelligence service has also identified 160 *Telegram* channels, 90 *TikTok* accounts, 70 groups on *Facebook* and 43 *Vkontakte* bots that have been used to disseminate pro-Russian narratives. A prominent narrative distributed widely through social media drew on the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's claim that the West intends to create a 'second Ukraine' in Moldova (Hill 2024).

The network was revealed during the election campaign but remained active until election day, with non-trivial consequences for the final vote count. Had it not been for the vote of the Moldovan diaspora residing in Western Europe and North America, the presidential candidate supported by the pro-Russian PSRM, Alexandr Stoianoglo, would have won the race, and the EU option in the referendum would have been defeated. Given the narrow victory with the support of the diaspora in the West, Dmitry Peskov, the spokesman for the Russian president, questioned the legitimacy of Maia Sandu's election, claiming that 'the elections were neither democratic nor fair' (Kommersant 2024). While investigations by Moldovan law enforcement agencies into cases of vote buying and electoral irregularities are still ongoing, existing evidence suggests that the network is regrouping and preparing to derail the outcome of the 2025 legislative election in favour of pro-Russian forces. While some European stakeholders commend pro-EU presidential contender Maia Sandu for her victory under conditions of unprecedented Russian interference (EEAS 2024), it remains to be seen whether her victory is not a Pyrrhic one, especially considering that Russian agents are prepared to invest millions more to undermine the election results, while USAID assistance critical for democracy support in Moldova was cut off by the new Trump administration.

Russian actions of influence are also present in the terrain of religious ideas. The transmission belt is the Moldovan Metropolitanate, which operates under the jurisdiction of the ROC and oversees the largest number of Christian Orthodox parishes in Moldova. At times, including the most recent presidential contest in 2024, representatives of the Moldovan Metropolitanate made open calls and collected signatures in favour of pro-Russian candidates (SIS 2024). They also echo statements meant to undermine the appeal of the EU by portraying it as inimical to the Orthodox faith, and 'traditional values.' However, since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the influence of the Moldovan Metropolitanate is in a slight decline with about 200 parishes leaving it and joining the alternative Bessarabian Metropolitanate, which operates under the autocephalous Romanian Orthodox Church (Apostu 2024).

A similar declining influence can also be noted for the pro-Russian media with 12 media outlets, including the highly influential *Primul în Moldova* (*Pervyi Kanal*), *RTR Moldova*, and *NTV Moldova*, being suspended for reasons of national security in the context of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Nonetheless, Russian media influence remains significant but shifts from traditional TV to social media platforms such as *Telegram*, *TikTok*, and *Facebook*, which, as shown above, are being increasingly used to flood disinformation and advance Russian strategic interests.

Autocratic consolidation, democratic prevention, hybrid and full-blown military attack in Ukraine

Russia has employed the widest panoply of actions of influence in Ukraine. The Orange Revolution of 2004-2005 became a trauma for the Russian leadership and had a decisive influence on the strategy of preventing democracy that Russia applied in the following decades and in other contexts. The lesson for Moscow was to no longer allow protests by the democratic opposition and to nip them in the bud, not least to prevent the emergence of democratic and pro-Western governments. The Maidan protests and Moscow's reaction to them must undoubtedly be seen in this context.

The Treaty of Friendship signed between Ukraine and Russia in 1997 foresees a strategic partnership between the parties, recognises each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and stipulates that both parties would refrain from using force against each other (UN 1997). Moreover, foreign policy concepts adopted by Russia from 2000 to 2023 identify Ukraine, along with Belarus, as a 'priority' partner, highlighting the centrality of Ukraine to Russian foreign policy goals (MID 2000, 2008, 2013, 2016, 2023). Therefore, Russian leadership has shown a keen interest in Ukraine's internal developments, particularly after the Orange Revolution in 2004-2005, which forced Moscow to redefine its strategy of influence in its 'near abroad.' Following a period of democratic delegitimation in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, Russia turned to a stick-and-carrot approach in 2010-2013, hybrid attacks in 2014-2021, and full-blown assault since 2022. Thus, we observe highly coercive and control measures, hard and subtle leverage.

In 2010-2013, Russian actions of influence oscillated in line with the balancing act between European and Russian interests of Yanukovych's administration. To begin with, Yanukovych assumed office as president of Ukraine in 2010 with critical Russian support. On the eve of the elections, Konstantin Zatulin, the deputy of the ruling UR party, endorsed Yanukovych's campaign, stating: 'We believe that the Party of Regions mainly represents Russian-speaking voters in Ukraine who live in the east, south and central regions. These are all people who are sympathetic to Russia and want to see the development of Russian-Ukrainian relations' (Kuzio 2010). At the same time, a variety of Russian media outlets, including popular TV channels (*Pervyy Kanal, Rossiya 1, NTV,* and *TNT*), radio stations (*Radio Russia* and *Vesti FM*), and newspapers (*Komsomolskaya Pravda, Izvestia, Argumenty i Fakty,* and *Vedomosti*), played a key role in disseminating Yanukovych's campaign messages and mobilising the large Russian minority, which accounted for 17.3% of the total population, in southeastern Ukraine, a region traditionally regarded as a stronghold of pro-Russian candidates and parties. Additionally, an extensive network of parishes overseen by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) supported Yanukovych and his electoral platform.

Given the strong Russian informational impact, restrictive 'innovations' introduced in Russia also found their way into Ukrainian legislation. For instance, the Yanukovych administration introduced amendments that prohibited the formation of electoral blocs ahead of the 2012 legislative campaign (Buscaneanu 2017). These amendments mirrored a similar ban on electoral blocs implemented in Russia prior to the 2007 parliamentary elections. This example of a restrictive 'innovation,' designed to maintain an uneven playing field in favour of Yanukovych's rule, would have been less probable without a strong Russian informational presence in Ukraine.

Though it has provided critical support to Yanukovych in 2010 and the Party of Regions in the 2012 legislative contests, Moscow switched to delegitimation tactics in the lead-up to the 2013 EaP Vilnius Summit, where the AA with the EU was expected to be signed. The EaP was seen as a tool to force Ukraine 'to develop relations with the EU without Russia, and instead of relations with Russia' (Johansson-Nogués and Şimanschi 2023). Hence, Russia imposed restrictions on Ukrainian exports and kept one of the highest prices in the region for Russian gas ($485/tcm), which added to an exorbitant bill of $12.5 billion for 25.8 billion cubic metres (bcm) paid by Ukraine in 2013. At the same time, disinformation campaigns by '*Ukrains'kyy Vybir*' (Ukrainian Choice), funded by the pro-Russian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, warned that association with the EU will undermine traditional family values (Lutsevych 2016; Shevtsova 2020).

Against the backdrop of restricted exports, rising energy prices, and a combination of threats and promises aimed at narrow oligarchic interests, the Second Azarov Cabinet suspended the association process with the

EU in November 2013, a decision that ultimately led to the Euromaidan protests. The reaction of Moscow was swift and reverted to *bolstering Yanukovych's autocratic-leaning regime* and *pursuing the prevention of democratic protest*. President Putin met Yanukovych in Moscow in December 2013 and offered a substantial price discount to $268.5/tcm for Russian gas and the promise of a $15 billion loan package. In addition, as protests were under way, Russia has provided riot control equipment, and sent special forces to help the incumbent government suppress protests in Kiev (Wilson 2014). However, Dmitri Medvedev, Russian prime minister at the time, indicated that Moscow will abstain from disbursing the first tranche of promised financial aid unless central government in Kiev ensure 'stability' (Buscaneanu 2017). Sergei Glazyev, President Putin's advisor, also called openly for the use of force to squash the Maidan 'terrorists' (Felgenhauer 2014). In addition, the Russian press emphasised that Yanukovych was too weak in his response to protesters. Although it is difficult to establish a direct causal link between the Russian press's claims and one of the fiercest crackdowns on Maidan protesters, the crackdown did follow those claims in chronological sequence. Moreover, as observed by Buscaneanu (2017), 'the vivid example of successful repression of opposition dissent in Russia after the 2012 presidential elections, closely watched on Russian TV channels by autocrats across the post-Soviet space, led Yanukovych to believe at some point during the confrontation that he might succeed in thwarting opposition protests if he responded in a harsher manner.' This was a severe miscalculation.

In response to the Revolution of Dignity's outcome, which reaffirmed Ukraine's course toward European integration, Russia employed complex hybrid attacks that involved territorial annexation of Crimea, insurgency in Luhansk and Donetsk *oblasti* (Wilson 2014), rolling back the gas price concessions agreed in December 2013, and leveraging various trade impediments. If before 2014, the Sevastopol naval base served as a political bargaining chip (Hedenskog and Larsson 2007), the swift annexation of Crimea in 2014 indicates how passive military presence can be turned into an active one with costly territorial, and material consequences. Recall that before being used to annex Crimea in 2014, the lease of the Russian Black Sea fleet was prolonged by Yanukovych only four years ago in 2010 in exchange for a promised gas price discount (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015; Wilson, 2014), which did not materialise before December 2013 (see Figure 4), and for an annual lease fee of US$90 million, which became obsolete after annexation (Buscaneanu 2021).

Russia also instrumentalised a combination of informational influence and social linkages, particularly through its media presence and influence on ethnic Russians, to exert political pressure. Representatives of the Russian minority, often with a criminal past, have been recruited, mobilised, paid and provided various incentives to support the insurgency in Eastern Ukraine, a phenomenon which indicates how unoffensive, at first glance, informational and social ties could be harnessed to back Russian strategic interests. Brubaker (1994) has anticipated two decades ago that Russians residing in concentrated communities within the successor states, including Ukraine, are likely to attempt to redefine certain regions, where they make up a local majority or plurality, as 'their own' territories. Moreover, a covert network of agents of influence, including ministers, members of *Verkhovna Rada*, representatives of various state agencies, including the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), political parties, local authorities, businesses, mass media, and civil society, have been mobilised to support the insurgency. Moscow also sought, through its CIS-EMO proxy agent, to bolster the legitimacy of the illegal elections held in 2014 in the occupied territories of Luhansk and Donetsk *oblasti*, characterising them as 'democracy under fire' (Lutsevych 2016).

At the same time, Russia engaged in a systematic campaign aiming at *delegitimation of the democratically elected President Poroshenko* and the *Verkhovna Rada*. This campaign included orchestrating widespread disinformation efforts aimed at portraying the revolution as a coup d'état, depicting Poroshenko as a puppet of the West, and labelling the new incumbent elite as corrupt and ineffective. Russian trolls and bots spread fake news and exaggerated claims about the precarious economic situation and the extent of civil discontent. Russian media portrayed the incumbent post-Maidan government as an illegitimate 'junta,' claiming it had violently silenced the pro-Russian opposition (Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018).

On the other hand, the Russian government attempted to *empower pro-Russian forces*, such as the Opposition Bloc, which received logistical support and favourable coverage in Russian state-controlled media. Before the first round of the 2019 presidential elections, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev

and Gazprom CEO Alexey Miller met in Moscow with pro-Russian presidential candidate Yuriy Boyko, accompanied by oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk. Medvedev promised to restore fruitful economic relations with Ukraine, while Miller assured a 25% discount on Russian gas (Mazurenko 2019). The meeting received broad coverage in the Russian press, as well as Ukrainian channels affiliated with Medvedchuk, such as *112 Ukraine* and *NewsOne*.

Russian hybrid attacks, including personal discrediting and delegitimation, continued in the first years of President Zelenskyy's term in office. Russian stakeholders portrayed Zelenskyy as a 'clown', whereas his entourage were depicted as 'drug addicts' and 'Nazis' (Patrushev 2022; Lavrov 2024; Volodin 2025; Zygar 2023). Russian media joined in with sheer disinformation. The main Russian *Channel One* (*Pervyi Kanal*) put out footage of Zelenskyy's Instagram page, which was edited to illustrate the *Totenkopf* used by a particular German SS unit during WWII (Johansson-Nogués and Şimanschi 2023). However, without succeeding to derail Ukraine's pro-Western course (Blackburn 2024), Moscow launched a full-blown military assault in 2022 (Galeotti 2024; Applebaum 2024). Earlier in his article on the 'Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,' Putin warned: 'We will not allow our historical territories and our kinsmen living there to be used against Russia. Those who make these efforts […] destroy their own country by doing so' (Putin 2021). As a result of the full-scale military invasion, Russia expanded its direct territorial control to parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson. Donetsk and Luhansk *oblasti* had been contested since 2014, but Moscow formalised their annexation, along with that of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, in September 2022 (Galeotti 2024). Following the assault, about 12,800 Russian *TikTok* bots and hundreds of *Telegram* accounts continued to *delegitimise Zelenskyy's government*, portraying it as incompetent and corrupt, embezzling war-related aid and selling arms on the black market. The ROC echoed the official line, declaring at the 'World Russian People's Council' that the war against Ukraine is 'sacred' and that Moscow is, in fact, defending the world from 'the West, which has fallen into Satanism' (Laputska and Yeliseyeu eds. 2024; Zygar 2024).

The fallout from the war has had (and continues to have) tremendous repercussions for both sides. First, Ukraine imposed a visa regime for all Russian citizens since July 2022. Second, bilateral trade experienced a dramatic fall from 47.19% in 1994 to just 1.95% in 2022 (see Figure 5). Bilateral trade exchanges have been disrupted since 2014 and 2016, when Ukraine and Russia have reciprocally suspended the effects of the CIS FTA, with the war leading to a near-complete decoupling of Ukraine from the Russian market. Third, since 2014, Ukraine has made efforts to reduce its reliance on Russian energy supplies, sourcing alternative energy routes from Europe. Fourth, as Ukraine relied earlier on Russian FDI, these ties diminished following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, with further declines after Russia's invasion in 2022. Fifth, as shown in Table 3, the size of the Ukrainian diaspora in Russia dropped significantly from 2,942,849 in 2002 to 884,007 in 2020 (Rosstat 2013, 2021), with an expected further decline post-2022. However, while a high depletion rate of the Ukrainian diaspora after 2014 was anticipated, the even higher depletion rate (by 74%) of the Belarusian diaspora is striking, especially given the deeper political and socioeconomic integration with the launch of the EAEU in 2015. Curiously, the depletion rates are higher among the Slavic groups, with the Belarusian diaspora experiencing the most significant decline. The depletion rate has increased since 2010 and can be attributed to lower wages in the less favourable economic environment post-2014, under conditions of falling energy prices, and Western sanctions. Hence, one can speculate, before confirming it in more formalised research setting, that the attack launched against Ukraine in 2014 may have also led to diminished social linkages with other neighbours, including the closest ally, Belarus.

Table 3: National diasporas in Russia

Diasporas	2002	2010	2020
Armenians	1,130,502	1,182,388	946,172
Azerbaijanis	621,840	603,070	474,576
Belarusians	807,970	521,443	208,046
Georgians	197,934	157,803	112,765
Moldovans	172,330	156,400	77,509
Ukrainians	2,942,849	1,927,988	884,007

Notes: The table shows the size of national diasporas residing on the territory of the Russian Federation in 2002, 2010, and 2020.

Similarly, the post-2014 environment saw a significant informational decoupling, with many Russian TV and radio stations, as well as print outlets, banned due to their disinformation campaigns. This trend intensified with the onset of the Russian war of aggression in 2022. For reasons related to national security, Russian media institutions – including *Channel One, RT, NTV, TNT, Vesti,* and *Sputnik* – have been banned due to their association with the Russian government's narratives. Nonetheless, as in the Moldovan case, Russia still maintains an important informational presence through the Internet and social media platforms, with hosts of influential pro-Russian TV channels migrating to video platforms such as *YouTube*.

Finally, a similar decoupling trend can also be noted in the realm of religion. In response to the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the sponsored insurgency in eastern Ukraine, the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) was created in 2018, cutting off about 7,000 parishes from the Moscow Patriarchate's influence. The remaining approximately 12,000 parishes continue to be under the authority of the UOC, which remains autonomous in governance but operates within the ROC's jurisdiction (DESS 2023). A recent opinion poll indicates that about 42% of Ukrainians identified with the OCU by 2023, compared with only 6% of those identifying with the UOC-MP (Laputska and Yeliseyeu eds. 2024). The war has also had negative effects on the operations of Russian cultural centres. While such cultural establishments continue to operate freely in Belarus and Armenia, their activities have been suspended in Ukraine. Banning Russian films, books, and music followed suit as part of a *Kulturkampf* for national survival against culture used as a form of hybrid aggression (Lutsevych 2016; Zhurzhenko 2021; Snegovaya et al. 2023).

Hence, while Russia has gained control over about 18% of Ukrainian territory, it has lost the loyalty and friendship of the Ukrainian people for an indefinite time. Counterintuitively, Russia's reliance on brute force stems not from strength, but from its inability to exert influence through non-violent means.

Figure 5: Bilateral trade with Russia

Notes: The figure illustrates the dynamic of bilateral trade exchanges between the EN countries, including Armenia, and Russia in the period 1994-2022.

China

Foreign policy strategy

Under Xi Jinping, Chinese foreign policy has undergone a shift from "lying low" to an active and dynamic approach which promotes seemingly apolitical mutual economic cooperation on one hand, and increased assertiveness in protecting national interests on the other (Poh & Li 2017). This shift is interlinked with the emergence of the "China Dream" discourse – a slogan attributed to idealogue Wang Huning – which underlined the need for China to sustain economic growth and achieve a heightened position in global affairs, in turn safeguarding the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC) regime (Xi 2012; Feng 2015).

Maintaining domestic regime stability therefore involves boosting economic growth through greater economic connectivity. This is most represented by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – a massive-scale international project that aims to develop land and maritime links across multiple regions connecting East Asia and Europe. Foreign minister Wang Yi describes the initiative as mainly serving two aims: (1) to spur development of China's central and western regions and accessing new markets for Chinese goods and services, and (2) to close development gaps through infrastructure investment, financial cooperation, and trade facilitation (State Council of the PRC 2014). The latter objective underpins a recurring discourse of *win-win cooperation* in its diplomatic engagements.

At the same time, protecting regime stability at home involves creating a normative counterweight to the Western-led liberal democratic institutional order that is inherently hostile to autocratic rule and has been increasingly threatening with its "democratic domino effects" (Bader 2015; Benner et al. 2018). This necessitates China to take a more offensive role in promoting autocracy through advocating what is being portrayed forcefully in speeches and statements of important Chinese leadership figures as "a new type of international relations". China promotes an alternative political and economic order that tolerates autocracy on the idea that each state has a unique path to prosperity based on their national contexts, using China's development story as an example (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2017; Nikkei Asia 2021). Under Xi Jinping, the CPC has modelled "increasingly its ideology as an alternative to the dominant ideology of the West – however unique to Chinese conditions" (Bo & Weiss 2022: 349). In the Chinese context, "true" democracy is understood generally as a representation of public interests through public consultation and does not correspond to an electoral multi-party political system. Therefore, China points out that there is no "one-size-fits-all" democracy and that democracy should be suited to a country's national contexts, and thus promotion of a "Western-style" democracy is a form of "stoking division and confrontation under the guise of promoting democracy" (Xi 2023). These discourses form ideological frames that China uses to contest liberal democratic forces, pursuing two goals: (1) to discredit Western ideas and institutions, and (2) to make the Chinese model seem more attractive (Ohlberg 2016).

These goals are in turn closely linked to the overall strategy of developing *a community of shared destiny*, a group of like-minded states which share China's values enshrined in its *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence – sovereignty, non-interference, non-aggression, equality, and peaceful coexistence.* In this context, the BRI – aside from being a purely economic initiative – also provides China with a long-term source of influence to socialise its norms and objectives in securing political support in the international system (Callahan 2016; Vangeli 2018). China expects to garner support for certain issues of importance, such as the Taiwan question or the repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, in which it strictly sees as internal issues constantly subject to Western meddling. Democratic movements such as colour revolutions are thus also understood and promoted by China as Western interference aimed at destabilisation and containment, a view that it shares with Russia (Global Times 2021; Presidential Executive Office of Russia 2022). By shaping global discourse in this way, China seeks to create an international environment that is more conducive to authoritarian resilience, reducing external pressure for democratic reforms both at home and abroad (Beckley and Brands 2023). While China seeks to make "the world safe for autocracy" (Weiss 2019), Chinese officials at the same

time are careful to distinguish between advertising an alternative and pushing others to adopt it (Bo & Weiss 2022: 351).

China's economic-strategic goals as well as ideological, order-related goals form the background of its activity in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. China's interest in the region primarily lies in their position along the BRI's economic corridors – the New Eurasian Land Bridge and the Central Asia-West Asia Middle Corridor. Overall, China's actions in the region remain limited due to the geographical distance and a lack of deep historical or cultural ties with the target states, especially when compared to Russia, which Beijing acknowledges as the dominant power in the region. Yet, China still plays an active role in promoting autocracy and anti-democratic values in these countries through mechanisms of both hard and subtle leverage. It can be noted that China has been mostly absent in the region before the latter half of the 2010s, and its engagement has intensified only in the recent years, particularly as the BRI develops as well as several critical junctures (i.e. the 2022 invasion of Ukraine). China has rarely engaged in hard leverage by utilising economic incentives to influence political decisions of target states in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. It has mostly relied on subtle leverage by providing rhetorical support through high-level meetings and public statements, utilising soft power tools such as Confucius Institutes and educational cooperation, as well as spreading disinformation and propaganda.

Actions of influence in autocratic settings

Autocratic consolidation in Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan, an already authoritarian regime, a deepening economic relationship with China has been accompanied by the *consolidation of autocratic* rule in the form of frequent executive and intra-party exchanges as well as mutual statements of praise for each other's model of governance. China has also utilised its Confucius Institutes as a platform to advance its ideology for such a strategy. However, we cannot find significant measures of democratic prevention. Regarding measures, China uses hard as well as subtle instruments.

Bilateral economic linkages between Azerbaijan and China are anchored in the BRI, which Azerbaijan was among the first to join. Azerbaijan is keen to benefit from its advantageous position in the Middle Corridor, and initiated the development of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the Baku International Sea Trade Port to attract further Chinese investment. In 2019, Azerbaijan and China signed ten agreements to develop new non-oil projects in Azerbaijan amounting to over 800 million USD (Baghirov 2019). This is in line with Azerbaijani interests to diversify its economy away from oil and provide more diversified export opportunities in the long term, as over half of Azerbaijan's exports to China are crude petroleum (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2022a). Since joining the BRI in 2015, Azerbaijan has seen increasing trade dynamics with China. In 2023, China has overtaken Turkey as Azerbaijan's second-largest source of imports (RFE/RL 2024a). Yet, Azerbaijan has been wary of receiving private Chinese investments for infrastructure projects, instead dealing primarily with Chinese state-owned companies in order to avoid overall reliance (Baghirov 2019). Even so, Chinese economic engagement can be seen as a form of autocratic consolidation in that it allows Azerbaijan to diversify trade relations, driving the regime further away from Western partners which may be critical to the country's human rights record.

Against this backdrop, China has applied consistent rhetoric in consolidating Azerbaijan's regime through supporting its "chosen development path", reinforcing the idea that autocratic governance models are legitimate. This was especially evident in bilateral exchanges between Xi and Aliyev since 2019. In a 2021 phone exchange, Xi expressed Chinese support for "the Azerbaijani people's choice of development path based on its conditions" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2021). The same support for a "development path suited to national conditions" was also repeated by Xi in a meeting to declare the Azerbaijani-China strategic partnership in 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2024). China has also supported Azerbaijani participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), an organisation whose membership includes autocratic powers and has functioned as a forum for autocratic rule export (see Harnisch 2020). Azerbaijan has also expressed support for China's Global Development Initiative and Global

Security Initiative. This ideological alignment was further strengthened by direct party-to-party exchanges between the CPC and Azerbaijan's ruling New Azerbaijan Party. In 2021, Chinese ambassador Guo Min visited the New Azerbaijan Party headquarters for an exchange with party officials Ali Ahmadov and Tahir Budagov, who later praised the CPC's "experience in state governance" (Embassy of the PRC in Azerbaijan 2021).

Beyond economic support and the establishment of political networks, China has also utilised soft power influence as platforms to promote its viewpoints in Azerbaijan that supports autocracy. The Confucius Institute at the Azerbaijan University of Languages has hosted multiple events celebrating China's governance model, including seminars marking the anniversary of the CPC's founding, commemorating China's Army Day, and even Chinese Dream Day, where a discussion of the Chinese Dream concept and China's development model to become a powerful and prosperous state under autocratic rule is discussed (Batashvili, 2021a). These initiatives contribute to promoting China's political system and portraying authoritarianism as an alternative "development story" to Western liberal democracy.

Overall, we can observe Chinese strategies of autocratic consolidation in Azerbaijan, but not on democratic prevention. This can be attributed to the strength of Aliyev's regime the way in which it has effectively eliminated the democratic opposition so as to render democratic prevention unnecessary. However, there are instances in which Chinese state-controlled media tries to undermine Western democratic principles in promoting narratives favourable to China. In 2019, an opinion article published on Chinadaily by an Azerbaijani journalist claims that repression of the Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang province is fake news propagated by the US (Mammadov 2019). China Global Television Network (CGTN) has also been found to run ads promoting pro-Russian perspectives on the invasion of Ukraine (Axios 2022).

Autocratic consolidation and democratic prevention in Belarus

In Belarus, which is already an authoritarian regime, China has engaged in *consolidating the Lukashenko regime* by providing rhetorical support, ideological validation, and diplomatic backing. Through framing pro-democracy movements as Western interference, Beijing has also actively contributed to *preventing internal and external democratic pressures*. The bilateral relationship, once primarily economic, has increasingly taken an ideological dimension particularly since the 2020 Belarusian protests and subsequent Western sanctions. China uses hard as well as subtle leverage.

Belarus and China have long-standing political and economic linkages. The two countries signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement in 2013 and a friendship and cooperation treaty signed in 2015 ((Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2013; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2015). Bilateral trade has steadily increased since 2010, reaching nearly 10% of Belarus' total trade by 2022 (see Figure 6). For Belarus, deepened economic cooperation with China is aimed at modernising its economy as well as reducing overreliance on Russia. On the other hand, China views Belarus as an important link within its BRI, serving as a "gateway to Europe" (Chinadaily 2019). This strategic position has attracted significant Chinese investment in transport, logistics, and infrastructure, most notable the China-Belarus Great Stone Industrial Park near Minsk. Beneath China's economic interest in Belarus, strengthening economic cooperation with Belarus can be regarded as a form of autocratic consolidation, considering Belarus' centrally planned economy.

However, Belarus' economic significance to China has been negatively impacted by the 2020 sanctions imposed by the West following Lukashenko's controversial election victory and the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine. Increased risk perceptions of operating in Belarus have caused a flight of companies from Belarus and weakened financial cooperation between the two countries (Yeliseyeu and Aleszko-Lessels 2022). In the context of the BRI, China has since shifted its focus towards the Middle Corridor as an alternative route to Europe (Ahmadzada 2024). Despite this recalibration, Beijing has seemingly strengthened its political ties with Minsk through an "All-weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2022, signalling that ideological alignment, rather than economic pragmatism, is driving its engagement vis-à-vis Belarus.

Chinese strategies of autocratic consolidation and democratic prevention in Belarus became especially visible after the 2020 presidential elections, when Beijing actively defended Lukashenko's regime against EU

criticism and sanctions. On 24 September 2020, Belarusian state media Belta reported that the Chinese Ambassador to Belarus Cui Qiming denounced "external interference" in Belarus, affirming that "China has always respected the path of development chosen by the Belarusian people" and supports Belarus' "national independence, sovereignty, security, and development" (Belta 2020a). Following additional rounds of EU sanctions, Cui's successor Xie Xiaoyong reiterated China's support for "the efforts of Belarus to protect national independence and sovereignty" and the Belarusian political model (Belta 2020b). Here, China is consolidating Lukashenko's regime by framing protests by opposition forces as external interference and legitimising their repression as a defence of Belarusian sovereignty.

In turn, this strategy of autocratic consolidation has produced a net effect of democratic prevention as it provides the Lukashenko regime external legitimacy to suppress the opposition and prevent democratic pressures domestically and internationally. Domestically, the Belarusian government has presented China as a reliable partner amidst Western sanctions, while pushing the narrative that such sanctions are a Western destabilisation tactic. In May 2021, ambassador Xie Xiaoyong met with Lukashenko and Belarusian parliamentarians, reaffirming China's commitment to deepening bilateral relations amid sanctions (Belta 2021b). Since then, Xie repeatedly emphasised China-Belarus economic relations, portraying the Belarus-China relationship as a bulwark against external interference, while equating pro-democracy protests with foreign-backed destabilisation (Belta 2021c; Belta 2022a). Following the All-weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership which was signed in 2022, China's support for Belarus was then domestically propagated by Lukashenko so as to justify the resistance of Western demands for democratic reform, arguing that Belarus no longer needs to "appease the West" (Yeliseyeu and Aleszko-Lessels 2022).

Internationally, China has also played a role in preventing democratic pressures by diplomatically defending the Lukashenko regime at the UN. In March 2021, the Chinese delegation voted against a UN Human Rights Council resolution condemning Lukashenko's use of force against peaceful protesters. Chinese Permanent Representative Chen Xu dismissed the resolution as an attempt to "use human rights as a pretext to exert pressure and interfere in the domestic affairs of Belarus" (Belta 2021a). The All-weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was also reinforced by a mutual commitment to uphold "non-interference in internal affairs and recognition of the right of each state to an independent path of progressive development" (Belta 2022b; Belta 2022c).

In terms of subtle leverage, China has expanded its soft power network of Confucius Institutes in Belarus, operating seven of them in the country as of today. Around 1000 Belarusian students are studying in China, and some 200 Chinese scholarships are given out to Belarusian youth. In 2024, the Chinese Ambassador to Belarus Zhang Wenchuan announced further educational cooperation between the two countries (Belta 2024).

Mixed strategies in hybrid settings

Autocratic empowerment and democratic delegitimation in Armenia

In the case of Armenia, a hybrid regime, we do not see instances of democratic delegitimation. This is potentially the result of China's overall limited interest to engage with the country. China has however, despite having cooperated with the incumbent pro-Western Pashinyan regime, interacted with Armenia's political opposition, particularly those factions that challenged Pashinyan's government. Yet, as these parties bear little relevance, we are cautious to assess these interactions as autocratic empowerment.

Economic and political influence with China has grown under both prime ministers Serzh Sargsyan and Nikol Pashinyan. Meetings with Xi have emphasised mutual support for sovereignty, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges. In March 2015, Xi and Sargsyan jointly reaffirmed bilateral support and economic cooperation under the BRI. Sargsyan has supported the one-China policy and stated that "the Taiwan issue is an internal Chinese affair" (RFE/RFL 2015). In 2016, foreign minister Edward Nalbandian met with his counterpart Wang Yi to sign an agreement on Armenia's admission as a dialogue partner at the SCO

(People.cn 2013). Despite being isolated within the BRI's middle corridor, excluded from east-west infrastructure such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway due to its conflicts with both Turkey and Azerbaijan, China has invested in a north-south highway project in Armenia (JAM News, 2024). In terms of trade, In Armenia, China has become the country's second largest trading partner in 2022, falling just behind Russia (Caucasus Watch 2023b). 66% of Armenia's exports to China is copper ore (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2024). China and Armenia have also cultivated military ties.

China and Armenia have also cultivated military ties. In 2012, the two sides signed a military cooperation agreement that forms the basis for continuous cooperation under Sargsyan and Pashinyan (RFE/RL 2017). In 2017, China provided aid of 10 million RMB – about 1,5 million USD – for the Armenian military to procure Chinese weaponry (Embassy of Armenia to China 2017). Armenia's top military generals were also given training from their Chinese counterparts. Armenia's reaching-out to China is part of its multi-vector foreign policy that seeks to diversify political relations amidst hostilities with Azerbaijan and prominent Russian influence (Giragosian 2019). In gaining a foothold in the region's security affairs, China is provided with a source of hard leverage over Armenia. Contrary to Armenian expectations, China's position in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has been largely pragmatic. China does not attach much importance to Armenia and has no interest in overshadowing Russia's role in the region, therefore remaining largely silent on the outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh war in favouring a quick resolution to the conflict (Kogan 2024).

After Nikol Pashinyan came to power following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, China continued deepening ties with Yerevan. In 2019, Xi Jinping met Pashinyan and reiterated China's commitment to strengthening economic cooperation under the BRI, particularly in trade, investment, and infrastructure. Yet, China has also pursued engagement with Armenia's political opposition, particularly those factions that challenged Pashinyan's government. In April and May 2021, amid political instability following Armenia's defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, Chinese Ambassador Fan Yong met with leaders of opposition parties critical of Pashinyan's regime, including Serzh Sargsyan of the Republican Party and Gagik Tsarukyan of the Prosperous Armenia Party (Batashvili 2021a; Batashvili 2021c). Furthermore, in October and November 2022, Fan Yong held meetings with leaders of several Armenian opposition parties, including the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the Armenian Communist Party, reinforcing China's willingness to cultivate relationships with actors opposed to Pashinyan's government (Batashvili 2022b). Even if the ACP has a marginal relevance, it represents a pro-Russian program and supports the Russian invasion in Ukraine.

China's soft power presence in Armenia has also been growing. China maintains one Confucius Institute at Yerevan State Linguistic University and several Confucius Classrooms (JAM news 2024). In 2018, the Chinese-Armenian Friendship School in Yerevan opened. The school has more than 600 students, with its curriculum managed by the Confucius Institutes. Scholarships to study further in China are offered to the students. Aside from educational networks, China has also cooperated with Armenia's public television channel. In 2015, China has provided numerous technical equipment and grants. More recently in 2023, China also provided another grant to the Armenian public television for the construction of a new TV studio (Ministry of High-tech Industry of Armenia 2023) . Despite the aid received from China, we could not find strong evidence to prove an alignment with Chinese narratives. The public channel has published in 2017 incorrect information claiming China as Armenia's second largest trading partner (Fact Investigation Platform, 2017), but the channel was still able to air critical programs on China, such as one highlighting poverty amongst the population (First Channel News 2017).

Mixed strategies in Georgia

For Georgia, we find confirmed the mix of strategies of autocratic influence in a hybrid regime. It can be observed that China has played an active role in *autocratic consolidation* under the Georgian Dream government through rhetorical support. China has expanded its use of subtle leverage promoting its ideological narratives. At the same time, China has *empowered autocratic parties* linked to Georgian Dream through the formation of networks. China also engages in *democratic delegitimation* through disinformation and official messaging against democratic movements and civil society, particularly during the highly

controversial debate on the so called "foreign agents bill" that has been approved in June 2024. Furthermore, China is directly involved in *democratic prevention* through the supplying of surveillance technology which have increasingly been utilised by Georgian law enforcement to crack down on opposition forces in light of the 2023 protests.

Since 2013, Georgia has increasingly looked to China to diversify its economic and political partnerships. Economically, Georgia hopes to capitalise on its geographical position within the BRI in inviting Chinese investment. Georgia's orientation towards EU membership is also believed to be attractive to Chinese investors as there is a potential for EU market access through Georgia (Brattberg et al. 2021). Politically, Georgia seeks to balance against Russia by having China as an active stakeholder in the region. Since China is firmly against Taiwanese independence and opposes foreign recognition of Taiwan, Georgian officials may have initially expected China to back its position concerning Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This is especially because China did not officially recognise the breakaway states since the 2008 war, although its overall stance is ambiguous. These hopes may have dwindled however as China has more recently gravitated towards Russia's positions on the breakaway states. In 2015, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced Georgia's willingness to participate in the BRI, followed by the Tbilisi Silk Road Forum, jointly organised by the Georgian and Chinese governments later that year (Agenda.ge 2015).

Trade linkages between China and Georgia expanded with the 2017 FTA. By 2019, China had become one of Georgia's top trading partners, just behind Turkey and Russia (Kemoklidze 2021). Trade dynamics with China have gradually increased from 2012 (see figure 6). In terms of investment however, statistics have shown that Chinese investment in Georgia has been limited since 2010 (Civic Idea 2024a). Despite Chinese companies having received contracts for multiple infrastructure projects in Georgia, most of these projects have been funded by the Georgian government and other non-Chinese financing (Khidasheli 2024). Lack of transparency surrounding Chinese involvement in the projects have also been linked to corruption and elite capture (see Bader 2025). Thus, here we find a possible new variant of autocratic empowerment if external actors provide the potential for co-optation, clientelism and thus ultimately also corruption through their material allocation. A practice that has also been associated with Russia weaponising corruption (CSZE 2017).

Chinese political influence has clearly deepened, culminating in a bilateral strategic partnership agreement in July 2023 signed by Garibashvili and Xi during the former's visit to Chengdu. The agreement reinforced an ideological convergence between the two countries, with Georgia endorsing the one-China principle, the official CPC position on the Taiwan question (Embassy of the PRC in Georgia 2023). Georgia also welcomed the BRI and supported China's Global Development Initiative, stating that "Chinese modernisation offers a new path and a new option for mankind to achieve modernisation". However, the agreement made no mention of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This therefore underscores the asymmetry in the relationship.

A mixed strategy of *consolidating the autocratic course of the ruling party* and *empowerment of like-minded autocratic parties* can be observed in China's cultivation of networks among Georgian politicians both within the incumbent Georgian Dream party as well as anti-Western opposition parties such as the European Socialists and the People's Power. From July 2022 to November 2022, the Chinese Ambassador organised meetings with leaders and members of the ruling Georgian Dream party and pro-Russian party European Socialists to strengthen cooperation with the CPC. In an 18 November meeting attended by 30 people from Georgian think tanks, academia, and members of the European Socialists party, Ambassador Zhou criticised the Western model of modernisation as being rooted in "foreign expansion, exploitation of colonies, and the slave trade" while promoting "Chinese-style modernisation" based on harmony and prosperity for all (Batashvili, 2022). The People's Power party is also an ardent supporter of close China-Georgia relations, with its party leader having met representatives from the Chinese Embassy (Ivaniadze 2024).

Pro-Chinese political narratives have been embraced by Georgian elites. Prime Minister Garibashvili was interviewed by CGTN, where he praised Xi Jinping's style of governance, calling him "an exemplary leader" whose initiatives are "pro-peace, pro-progress, modernisation, prosperity, and pro-development" (Civil Georgia 2023). Alignment with China was also demonstrated when pro-Western President Salome Zourabichvili stated in a 2023 interview with French media that Xi Jinping should be put on trial for genocide

against the Uyghurs, which sparked swift condemnation from top Georgian Dream officials (Batashvili 2023). During a meeting with Ambassador Zhou Qian immediately after the controversial remarks, Prime Minister Garibashvili reaffirmed to the Ambassador that Zourabichvili's remarks "do not even formally express the attitude of the Georgian government towards the Chinese state and its leader" and even accused Zourabichvili of violating the Georgian constitution by damaging the country's international image and overstepping her role by "making personal assessments of international affairs" (Caucasus Watch, 2023a).

China is expanding its soft power networks in Georgia and has utilised Confucius Institutes to advance its political narratives and consolidate autocracy. The Georgia-Chinese Center for Economic and Cultural Development and the Georgia-Chinese Friendship Association are key organisations in facilitating closer cooperation between Chinese and Georgian universities, offering scholarships at a time when Western funding has declined (Popkhadze 2023). Georgia hosts four Confucius Institutes, the highest number in the South Caucasus. Despite being promoted as cultural and language-learning institutions, Confucius Institutes are directly operated by the CPC and often disseminate political messages. At a June 2021 event at the Confucius Institute at Tbilisi Free University, ambassador Li Yan outlined China's ambition to build "a new type of international relations" and a "community with a shared future for mankind". Since the 2023 strategic partnership, Chinese influence in Georgian higher education has intensified. Guram Tavartkiladze Teaching University in Tbilisi was rebranded as Georgian International University under the leadership of China Multinational Education Group (Civic Idea 2024b).

Since Georgia's 2020 political crisis in the context of the alleged fraud in the 2020 elections, China has also targeted the wider public by intensifying its anti-Western disinformation campaigns, aimed at delegitimising domestic democratic movements and democracy promotion efforts by the US and the EU. Chinese state media – Global Times, CGTN, and Xinhua – have framed Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution as such a case in coverage from December 2021 to January 2022 (Batashvili 2021b; Batashvili 2022b). An opinion article in Global Times has also targeted the EU's Eastern Partnership framework, portraying it as an attempt to encircle Russia and thoroughly transform the post-Soviet space" by "using access to the European market as bait" (Cui 2021).

The framing of the Rose Revolution as Western interference has even gone beyond coverage in state media, when the Chinese foreign ministry published a report in May 2022 condemning the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) of instigating the Rose Revolution in which it "participated in the entire process from selecting opposition leaders, training the opposition, and providing huge funds" (Chinadaily 2022). In April 2023, the Chinese embassy in Georgia published a report that portrays the Rose Revolution as a CIA operation (Embassy of the PRC in Georgia 2023b). In 2024, amid debates over the foreign agents bill, a Chinese report further accused the NED of sponsoring colour revolutions and funding three Georgian NGOs to mobilise protests in Tbilisi against the legislation. Members of the Georgian Dream party actively utilised this report to discredit the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and Transparency International, particularly in response to their investigations into Bidzina Ivanishvili's undisclosed Russian assets (OC Media, 2024).

Additionally, China has played an important role in *democracy prevention* through the provision of surveillance technology to the incumbent regime. The procurement of Chinese-made surveillance cameras has surged since 2020. Based on available procurement data, over 7,379 surveillance cameras used by the Georgian police force are sourced from Chinese companies Hikvision and Dahua (RFE/RL 2024b). Given Georgia's increasing use of Chinese surveillance tools amid protests since 2023, there is a growing risk that Beijing's technology could be leveraged to monitor and suppress dissent. This is accompanied with a meeting between internal affairs minister Vakhtang Gomelauri – who was sanctioned by the US and the UK for human rights abuses against protesters in the pro-EU protests – with Ambassador Zhou on 20 December 2024 to commence "strengthening cooperation in the field of law enforcement" (Civic Idea 2025). Chinese-made cameras with face-recognition technology is noted to have been instrumental in the arrests of protesters in February 2025 (RFE/RL 2025).

Autocratic empowerment and democratic delegitimation in Moldova

In Moldova, being an electoral democracy, we expect autocratic empowerment or democratic delegitimation by China. However, no meaningful action in this regard can be observed. Chinese influence in Moldova is limited, as it does not view Moldova as particularly strategic to its interests. Unlike Belarus and Ukraine, Moldova lies geographically isolated from the BRI. Its small domestic market also does not make it particularly attractive to Chinese investment. As China began investing around the Black Sea region, China Shipping Container Lines began services to the Moldovan port of Giurgiulesti in 2015. Chinese companies have also planned to invest in the development of an industrial park around Giurgiulesti International Free Port (Giurgiulesti International Free Port 2015). China and Moldova have also signed an investment agreement in 2019 for road infrastructure projects together with China Highway Group and China Railway Group (Davi 2020). Bilateral trade is also limited, with Moldova exporting insulated wire, textiles, and wine (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2022c). Trade dynamics have steadily increased, with China being Moldova's sixth main trading partner (Moldpres 2020). Negotiations of a free trade agreement between the two countries began in 2017 but have so far not been closed. There have been no executive-level exchanges between Moldova and China.

In regard to soft power, China maintains one Confucius Institute at the Free International University of Moldova. During the Covid-19 pandemic, pro-Chinese and pro-Russian propaganda that portray have been spread by Russian media outlets such as Sputnik.md (CRPE, 2020). Pro-Russian Moldovan president Igor Dodon has also promoted Chinese humanitarian aid on his personal Facebook page.

Despite limited engagements by China in Moldova, things may change in the future as pro-Russian political forces in Moldova are attempting to strengthen their position by expanding relations with like-minded actors such as China. As party leader of the Party of Socialists, former president Igor Dodon called for more cooperation with Russia and China in campaigning against pro-Western President Maia Sandu in the 2024 election. Furthermore, Igor Dodon has visited China that same year on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the proclamation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, where he participated at a forum (Infotag 2024).

Moldovan authorities have also been procuring Chinese surveillance cameras. A total of 7,210 Chinese-made cameras have been acquired by Moldovan state institutions, including 2,300 by the Central Election Commission after the 2019 parliamentary elections (RFE/RL, 2024b). Although there is no evidence of the cameras being used for democratic prevention purposes, there is a concrete possibility that it may be used in the event of pro-Russian forces winning the upcoming parliamentary elections in the fall of 2025, as illustrated by the case of Georgia.

Autocratic empowerment and democratic delegitimation in Ukraine

When analysing China's influence in Ukraine, it must be borne in mind that Russia's invasion has, of course, fundamentally changed the conditions for China's activities in exerting influence. In an electoral autocracy such as Ukraine, China can be expected to engage in a mix of strategies. However, since the start of Russian aggression towards Ukraine in 2014, China has regarded Ukraine as exclusively a part of Russia's sphere and is careful not to partake in engagements in Ukraine that may be misinterpreted. Therefore, even though China worked to advance its economic-strategic interests vis-à-vis Ukraine, it is difficult to assess concrete strategies of authoritarian influence due to the conflictive war situation.

In 2011, Viktor Yanukovych and Chinese President Hu Jintao established a strategic partnership, reviving relations after a period of decline under the pro-Western former President Viktor Yushchenko (Poita 2022). In 2013, Yanukovych met Xi Jinping and expressed interest in China's BRI. However, after Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan revolution and Russia's annexation of Crimea, China distanced itself as it is wary of supporting democratic uprisings. Despite this, China refrained from explicitly endorsing Russia's invasion, maintaining strategic ambiguity by abstaining from a UN resolution rejecting Crimea's Russian-organised referendum (Gerasymchuk and Poita 2018). It was not until 2017 that Xi met President Poroshenko to discuss a deepening

of political and economic relations, with Ukraine proposing full participation in the BRI and China expressing its willingness to play a diplomatic role in addressing the conflict with Russia (Xinhua 2017).

China's economic linkage with Ukraine has primarily revolved around trade. Bilateral trade grew steadily from 2007 onward, peaking in 2022 when nearly 15% of Ukraine's total trade involved China (figure X). By 2021, China was Ukraine's second-largest trading partner after the EU, with Ukraine supplying over 80% of China's imported corn, as well as significant quantities of iron ore (Observatory of Economic Complexity 2022b). Beyond trade, China has sought to expand its economic footprint in Ukraine through BRI-related investments infrastructure and energy projects, such as the dredging of key ports. China has also sought control over strategic and critical sectors, particularly in the defence industry. In 2015, Chinese companies, including Skyrizon, began purchasing shares in Motor Sich, a Ukrainian manufacturer of helicopter and jet engines. However, in 2021, amid growing US pressure, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy intervened, blocking the acquisition and arguing that Ukraine "does not have the right to sell a controlling stake in the management of strategic defence enterprises to any country" (Euronews 2021).

On the lead-up to Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion, China's positioning towards Ukraine has shifted dramatically. On February 4, 2022—just 20 days before Russia launched its attack—Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin issued a joint statement explicitly opposing "colour revolutions" as well as the "further enlargement of NATO", pledging to "increase cooperation" in their "common adjacent regions" (Presidential Executive Office of Russia 2022). Beijing has employed similar rhetoric against Ukraine's pro-Western aspirations, reinforcing its broader opposition to democratic transitions in post-Soviet states, as it sees that such transitions are a result of Western democracy promotion efforts which it sees as ultimately strategic and aimed at containment of Russia and China.

Additionally, China has actively amplified Russian disinformation about the war in Ukraine while maintaining an appearance of neutrality. Chinese officials and state media avoid using terms like "invasion" or "war," preferring phrases like "special military operation," "Ukrainian issue," or "Ukrainian crisis"—terminology that mirrors Russia's propaganda and downplays the scale of its aggression (Cooper et al. 2022). Chinese state-owned media and high-ranking officials further disseminate narratives blaming NATO's eastward expansion for the war, arguing that Western provocations left Russia with no choice but to defend itself. These narratives align with broader Chinese messaging that seeks to delegitimise Ukraine's government and frame Western support as interference rather than solidarity.

China's narrative has also veered into outright denial of Ukraine's sovereignty. In 2023, China's Ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, stated that former Soviet countries "have no effective status in international law," suggesting that their sovereignty was never formally established (The Kyiv Independent 2023). Such statements align with Russian justifications for its invasion, directly challenging Ukraine's legitimacy as an independent state.

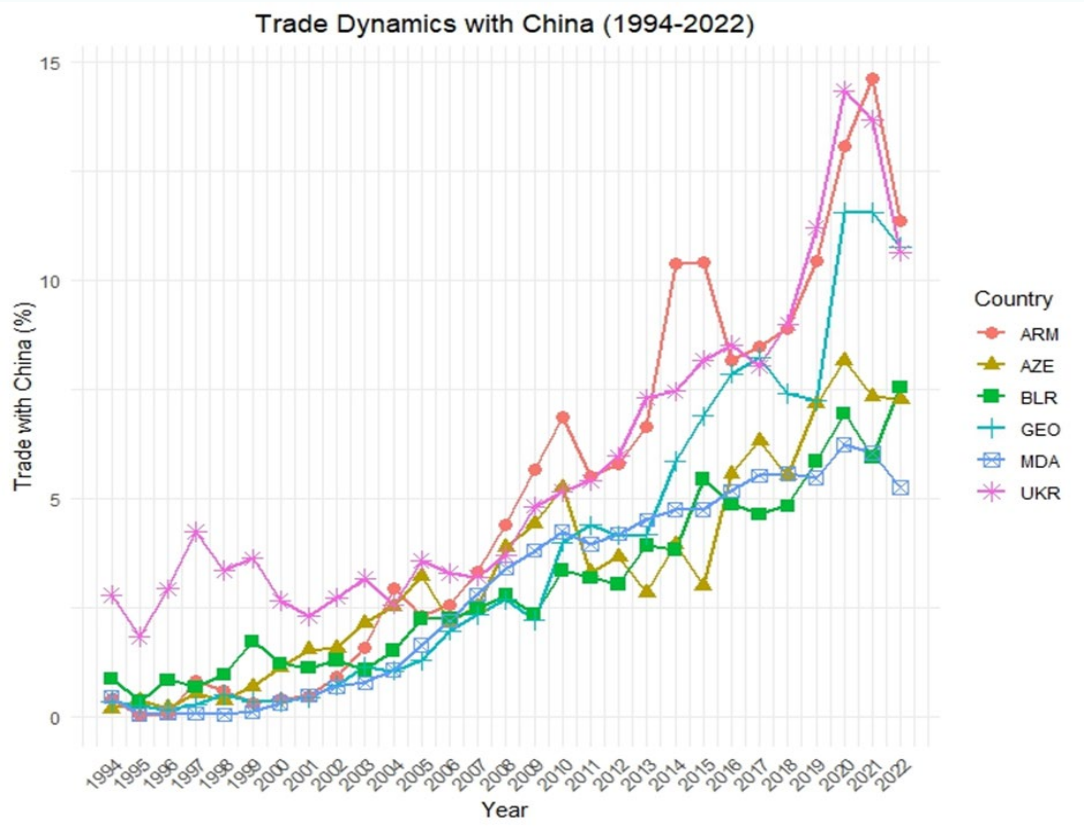


Figure 6: Bilateral trade with China

Notes: The figure illustrates the dynamic of bilateral trade exchanges between China and countries in the eastern neighbourhood in the period 1994-2022.

7. Conclusions: the findings and their relevance for future avenues for democracy support

The aim of this Working Paper was to unravel how external third actors like Russia and China exert autocratic influence in the countries of the EN, and which strategies and instruments of autocracy promotion the two authoritarian gravity centres (AGCs) were applied.

As we are aware of the different linkages as well as the different interests of both AGCs, we expected a different degree of efforts and intensity in the actions of external influence which we find confirmed. This plays out, in particular, in regard to the instruments used (discussed see below).

Our main argument was that external actors choose different strategies for countries with different regime types. The strategies differ if a country is already (and enduringly) autocratic or if a country is oscillating between electoral autocracy and electoral democracy with strong democratic forces that have a realistic chance to come into power and advance more towards democracy. It goes without saying that those parties and groups that strive for democracy also are pro-European and thus also aspiring to closer relations with the EU or even EU membership. This connection plays a role especially for Russia (less for China) which not only attempts to prevent democratisation but also EU-integration in its self-defined “near abroad”.

A first important result of our analysis is that indeed we find the assumed ***strategies for already autocratic countries***, and this refers both to Russia and China (see Table 4 for the results). Both AGCs use strategies of autocratic consolidation in Azerbaijan and Belarus, while democratic prevention only is followed in Belarus. Interestingly also, there exists a consonance between the external actors.

Regarding the group of target states reflecting ***hybrid regime states***, we also see confirmed the use of a mix of strategies. However, some strategies dominate more than others. Thus, Russia as well as China rely on the delegitimation of democracy itself or democratic actors and principles in an extensive way, namely in all target states. Almost equally prevalent is the empowerment of autocratic incumbents, parties or forces. Only in Armenia, could we not confirm this strategy for Russia. While we have not yet found the definitive evidence - likely intentionally obscured – Russia might be rather interested in supporting the old guard (Kocharyan and the RPA), especially with the new turn in Pashinyan‘s foreign policy after 2023. In all, democratic delegitimation and autocratic empowerment are the dominant strategies while democracy prevention occurs much less. China engages in democracy prevention in Georgia by providing surveillance technology that, for example, also was used during protests in 2024. Russia only uses this strategy in Belarus and Ukraine both countries being central to Russian foreign policy goals. Thus, the salience of a given target state in the foreign policy agenda of a given AGC can also influence the choice of the strategies. The salience of EN countries for Russian strategic interests is obviously different, with Belarus and Ukraine representing ”priority partners”. Moreover, the scarce use of preventing democratic upheavals or protests in hybrid regimes can be explained by the fact that both AGCs rather resort to the delegitimising democracy and democratic actors which might be considered as a less costly way to influence than intervening (more or less openly) into protests. Delegitimation strategies can be deployed in a more subtle way by disinformation and propaganda tools of which both AGCs dispose in a systematic and sophisticated way. Autocratic consolidation also is a less followed strategy. Russia uses it in Armenia and Ukraine, China in Georgia.

This leads us to examine Ukraine in more depth as it constitutes a special case due to the repeated attempt by Russia to bring the country under its own control by firstly invading Crimea and then deploying a full-blown invasion and war. The wide range of strategies (namely all four) that Russia has used in Ukraine can be explained by the country's tumultuous history, which has seen a succession of democratic and pro-Western governments followed by authoritarian and pro-Russian ones. But on top of that, there is what is called hybrid destabilisation in this case and – as said – the war against Ukraine. We find this phenomenon of hybrid destabilisation also in Moldova. Interestingly, such a broad range of activities, in which all four strategies are used, can be seen in Georgia for China.

Hybrid destabilisation refers to a blend of covert and overt actions used by external actors to undermine or destabilise a target state. These actions can encompass promoting separatism, exerting economic pressure, backing like-minded political factions, manipulating electoral processes, and executing disinformation campaigns. The overarching aim is to foster an environment of uncertainty and instability, which creates an opportunity for internal power shifts that favour political forces aligned with the external actors' interests. Although there is an overlap between goals and methods of autocracy promotion and what we call hybrid destabilisation (see backing like-minded political factions, manipulating electoral processes, and executing disinformation campaigns), hybrid destabilisation turns the screw even further.

Table 4: Russian and Chinese strategies of autocracy influence in the EN

Regime type	Country	External actor: Russia	External actor: China
Autocracies	Azerbaijan	Autocratic consolidation	Autocratic consolidation
	Belarus	Autocratic consolidation Democratic prevention	Autocratic consolidation Democratic prevention
Hybrid regimes	Armenia	Autocratic consolidation Democratic delegitimation	Autocratic empowerment Democratic delegitimation
	Georgia	Democratic delegitimation Autocratic empowerment	Autocratic consolidation Autocratic empowerment Democratic delegitimation Democratic prevention
	Moldova	Democratic delegitimation Autocratic empowerment	Autocratic empowerment Democratic delegitimation

		Hybrid destabilisation	
	Ukraine	Autocratic consolidation Autocratic empowerment Democratic delegitimation Democratic prevention Hybrid destabilisation Full-blown attack	Autocratic empowerment Democratic delegitimation

Notes: The dominant strategy is listed first. The italic strategies mark strategies that are not covered by the framework.

Hence, **the findings corroborate that AGCs do in fact use different strategies in countries with different regime types**. This does not mean, though, that other factors may not also play a role. We assumed that **linkage can function as an intervening variable** meaning that the outcome may differ according to the degree of linkage that connects the external actor and the target state. This refers especially to Russia which has generally speaking a higher degree of potential linkage than China in the region. In this regard, Armenia from 2015 to 2023 and Belarus from 2010 to 2023 represent cases of high Russian linkage. Prior to joining the EAEU, Armenia was characterised by medium linkage, similar to Azerbaijan from 2010 to 2023, Georgia from 2013 to 2023, Moldova from 2010 to 2021, and Ukraine from 2010 to 2013. Before the gradual restoration of its linkage with Russia beginning in 2013, Georgia experienced low linkage following Russia's violent incursion in 2008. Moldova has shifted to a case of low linkage due to structural vulnerabilities reassessed post-2022. Ukraine transformed into a case of low linkage in 2014, a situation that intensified with the war in 2022, leading to an almost complete decoupling from Russian ties.

A further finding refers to the **instruments** used distinguished by the degree of coercion: control as coercive including military actions, hard leverage as material incentives or pressure, and subtle leverage as non-coercive and non-material means. In general, the analysis shows that both AGCs use hard and subtle leverage. While hard leverage by China predominantly embodies economic objectives, Russia to a significantly higher degree connects hard leverage to security issues. And more than that, Russia repeatedly has been and is resorting to the strongest form of influence, namely military intervention. In these cases, but in particular in the case of Ukraine, this goes far beyond the issue of autocracy promotion, which is the subject of this paper. Other motives such as imperialist expansion have to be considered. However, this goes beyond the scope of this paper. At the same time, our analysis corroborates the increasing relevance of subtle leverage, soft power and also sharp power tools. This very much resonates with different areas of research: the literature that deals very specifically with digital authoritarianism and digital methods of influence, the literature that investigates disinformation and propaganda, and the literature that focuses on sharp power.

From our findings we can **conclude the following**:

1. Autocracy promotion is a **multi-faceted foreign policy approach that fans out in various different strategies which entails tools of different kind**. For developing counter-strategies of autocracy promotion, these different strategies need to be identified.
2. **Autocracy promotion and its (ideological) motives can overlap with other foreign policy motives** such as territorial expansion, destabilisation or subjugation of a country. However, the fact that other motives are present, does not exclude that authoritarian gravity centres are also guided by the idea of creating an environment of like-minded authoritarian allies.
3. **The EU's response to the observed activities of AGCs as external third actors should result in a differentiated approach to countering** – especially – Russian and also Chinese actions of influence in various national settings. The application of our framework helps to understand better which preferences the Russian and Chinese leadership have for which strategies and actions in different target states. This can direct the EU's responses and counter-strategies in a more specific and targeted manner. Thus, knowing that Russia and China deploy determined but different strategies for autocratic and for hybrid states includes an important indication of **how the EU should tailor related countermeasures**.

4. Notably, **hybrid regimes bear a high degree of vulnerability** and at the same time – as especially Moldova and Georgia, but also Armenia and Ukraine show – developed steadily towards more democratic regimes. Thus, the external strategies of authoritarian gravity centres towards hybrid regimes deserve special attention. The fact that **democratic delegitimation and autocratic empowerment are dominant strategies in hybrid regimes informs us about which arenas the EU should focus this attention**: firstly, countering autocratic empowerment means addressing networks with authoritarian parties and groups that are entertained by Russia in order to support potential candidates for government and equally for weakening the democratic forces. And secondly, as delegitimation is a method where mainly rhetoric and discursive means are used. Therefore, the EU's response must also take this communicative level into account in order to be effective. This does not only refer to technological counter-measures but also, and more importantly, to targeting and uncovering false information and conspiracy narratives, presenting fact-based information etc.

Finally, it is important to note that this working paper covers the period up until the beginning of March 2025. Therefore, the assumptions have been developed and the analysis has been done before the far-reaching decisions taken by the Trump administration, inter alia the way of handling the aspired peace talks with Putin, the freezing of military support for Ukraine, and the scrapping of decades-long democracy promotion programs such as USAID, Radio Free Europe etc. This change in the US government's attitude will undoubtedly have an impact on the overall situation of democracy support, but also specifically on the attitude of the third countries considered here, in particular Russia. This means that, unlike this paper, future analyses but also future democracy support policies will have to assume a triangular scheme, in which the West can no longer be thought of as a single entity, but where the EU must simultaneously take into account the USA as a player with its own approach, which in turn can shape Russia's strategies of autocracy promotion. One consequence of this change could be that autocracy promotion by authoritarian centres of gravity will be reconceptualised and consequently handled less covertly and with a renewed dynamism and offensiveness.

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Supplemental Material

Appendix: List of speech acts included in the analysis

Table A: Russia Case Study

Name	Date	Speech	Source
Dugin, Alexander (ideologue)	28/7/2012	Alexander Dugin on Global Revolution	https://www.4pt.su/en/content/alexander-dugin-global-revolution
	07/12/2014	Alexander Dugin on Eurasianism, the Geopolitics of Land and Sea, and a Russian Theory of Multipolarity	https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/186232/Theory%20Talk66_Dugin.pdf
	25/10/2022	Alexander Dugin's speech at the XXIV World Russian People's Council"	https://katehon.com/en/article/alexander-dugins-speech-xxiv-world-russian-peoples-council
Lavrov, Sergey (Minister of Foreign Affairs)	7/10/2008	Interview with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, S.V. Lavrov, published in "Rossiyskaya Gazeta"	https://viennamission.mid.ru/ru/news/07-10-2008_interv-u-min_3809ef498776e0ecaab365bc3e5223b5/
	25/2/2010	Interview with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov, for "RIA Novosti," the radio station "Voice of Russia," and the TV channel "Russia Today"	https://ria.ru/20100225/210903080.html
	14/5/2014	Interview of the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to "Bloomberg TV"	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1596432/
	28/6/2014	Interview given by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to the programme "Vesti v subbotu s Sergeem Brilyovim"	https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1617034/
	1/12/2021	Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks on Russia's foreign policy priorities and answers to questions during the Government Hour at the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation	https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1788249/

	25/9/2022	Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the General Debate of the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1831211/
	18/1/2023	Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at the news conference on the performance of Russian diplomacy in 2022	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1848395/
	19/4/2024	Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with the radio stations Sputnik, Govorit Moskva, and Komsomolskaya Pravda	https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1945189/
	18/2/2025	Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions following talks with US administration officials	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1998294/
Patrushev, Nikolai (Secretary of the Security Council of Russia)	19/10/2022	Comment by Nikolai Patrushev following the Security Council meeting	http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/148/events/69635
	5/4/2023	Nikolai Patrushev's comment following the Security Council meeting	http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/148/events/70872
	27/3/2023	Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev's interview with Rossiyskaya Gazeta	https://embrusscambodia.mid.ru/en/news/security_council_secretary_nikolai_patrushev_s_interview_with_rossiyskaya_gazeta/
	11/11/2024	Patrushev: There is no defeat of the Black Sea Fleet, and Trump needs to take care: EADaily	https://eadaily.com/en/news/2024/11/11/patrushev-there-is-no-defeat-of-the-black-sea-fleet-and-trump-needs-to-take-care
	14/1/2025	Nikolai Patrushev: 'It is possible that Ukraine will cease to exist this year	https://www.kp.ru/daily/27651/5036217/
Putin, Vladimir (President of Russia)	10/2/2007	Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034
	25/7/2013	Meeting with representatives of different Orthodox Patriarchates and Churches	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/18942
	17/4/2014	Direct Line with Vladimir Putin	http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcr

			ipts/20796
	24/10/2014	Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860
	24/2/2022	Address by the President of the Russian Federation	http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843
	30/9/2022	Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia	http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465
	14/6/2024	President of Russia Vladimir Putin's speech at the meeting with senior staff of the Russian Foreign Ministry	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1957107/
Volodin, Vyacheslav (Chairman of the State Duma)	14/2/2017	Vyacheslav Volodin: "Can you explain to me where the Tatars came from?" during visit to Innopolis (Tatarastan) and meeting with university students	https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/56310-intervyu-s-vyacheslavom-volodinym-o-tatarah
	17/12/2019	Chairman of the State Duma Viacheslav Volodin met with PACE President Liliane Maury Pasquier in Moscow	http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/47350/
	28/12/2024	Vyacheslav Volodin spoke about legislative measures aimed at protecting sovereignty at an interview with TV channel "Russia 24"	http://duma.gov.ru/news/60674/
	21/1/2025	Vyacheslav Volodin at a plenary meeting: "the United States of America will continue to try to retain its hegemony"	http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/60758/
	14/1/2025	Vyacheslav Volodin's speech at the opening of the eighth session of the VIII convocation of the State Duma	http://duma.gov.ru/news/60716/

Zakharova, Maria (Director of the Information and Press Department of the MFA)	23/8/2021	Interview of Russian Foreign Ministry's Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova with „Gazeta.Ru" ahead of the Kiev-sponsored Crimean Platform Forum	https://germany.mid.ru/de/aktuelles/pressemitteilungen/de_de_2021_08_23_interview-of-russian-foreign-ministrys-spokeswoman-maria-zakharova-with-gazeta-ru-ahead-of-the-the-kiev-sponsored-crimean-platform-forum/
	17/6/2023	Maria Zakharova: Fear for our people is a sin - Interview with TASS	https://tass.ru/interviews/18045101
	18/12/2024	Mentioned Briefings: Developments in Moldova -Answers to Media Questions	https://mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/1988088/#Table
	23/1/2025	Mentioned Briefings - Answers to Media Questions	https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1992681/#Q04

Table B: China Case Study

Name	Date	Speech	Source
Chen, Xu (Permanent Representative to the UN)	26/3/2021	Statement by the Chinese delegation to the UN: China condemns using human rights as pretext to put pressure on Belarus	https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/china-condemns-using-human-rights-as-pretext-to-put-pressure-on-belarus-138526-2021/
Cui, Qiming (Ambassador to Belarus)	24/9/2020	Ambassador: China resolutely opposes interference in internal affairs of Belarus – following meeting with Lukashenko	https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/ambassador-china-resolutely-opposes-interference-in-internal-affairs-of-belarus-133738-2020/
Wang, Yi (Minister of Foreign Affairs)	26/12/2014	Wang Yi's Speech on the Symposium on the International Development and China's Diplomacy in 2014	https://english.www.gov.cn/state_council/ministries/2014/12/26/content_281475029808332.htm
	10/12/2017	Speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Opening of Symposium on International Developments and China's Diplomacy in 2017	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyjh/202405/t20240530_11341205.html
	7/3/2021	Wang Yi at a press conference on the 13th National People's Congress:	https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1217551

		China, Russia continue to cooperate on fighting colour revolutions, safeguarding political security	.shtml
	9/12/2021	Wang Yi video address to the 14th Bali Democracy Forum "Promoting True Democracy for a Better Future of Humankind"	https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/jj/2020zt/kjgzbdfyyq/202112/t20211209_10465885.html
Xie, Xiaoyong (Ambassador to Belarus)	12/1/2022	Interview to Belta: China, Belarus tackle challenges of rapidly changing world successfully	https://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/speeches-and-interviews/ambassador-china-belarus-tackle-challenges-of-rapidly-changing-world-successfully_i_139340.html
Xi, Jinping (President of China)	19/11/2012	"Achieving Rejuvenation is the Dream of the Chinese People" speech at the exhibition "The Road to Rejuvenation" at the National Museum of China	https://www.neac.gov.cn/seac/c103372/202201/1156514.shtml
	8/9/2013	Speech at Nazarbayev University to President Nazarbayev, faculty members, and university students	https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/BR/20130907.O1E.html
	28/3/2015	"Towards a Community of Common Destiny and A New Future for Asia" at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2015	http://www.xinhuanet.com//english/2015-03/29/c_134106145.htm
	9/9/2016	Keynote Speech "A New Starting Point for China's Development: A new Blueprint for Global Growth" by Xi Jinping at the Opening Ceremony of the G20 Summit	http://www.g20chn.org/English/Dynamic/201609/t20160909_3414.html
	14/5/2017	President Xi's speech "Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" at the opening of Belt and Road Forum	http://2017.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2018/0306/c25-1038.html
	1/7/2021	Xi Jinping's Speech on the CCP's 100th Anniversary	https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Full-text-of-Xi-Jinping-s-speech-on-the-CCP-s-100th-anniversary

	4/2/2022	Joint Statement with Vladimir Putin of the Russian Federation on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development	http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770?s=08
	21/4/2022	Xi Jinping's keynote speech "Rising to Challenges and Building a Bright Future Through Cooperation" at the opening ceremony of Boao Forum for Asia 2022	https://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202204/21/content_WS62616c3bc6d02e5335329c22.html
	25/6/2022	Xi's Remarks "Forging High-quality Partnership for a New Era of Global Development" at High-level Dialogue on Global Development	https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202206/25/WS62b657f6a310fd2b29e68813.html
	18/10/2022	Promoting World Peace and Development and Building a Human Community with a Shared Future: Speech to the National Congress	https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/China-s-party-congress/Transcript-President-Xi-Jinping-s-report-to-China-s-2022-party-congress
	16/3/2023	Xi Jinping's keynote address at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting	http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2023-03/16/content_85171478.htm
Zhou, Qian (Ambassador to Georgia)	16/5/2023	Ambassador addresses parliament: we are committed to cooperating with Georgia to protect national sovereignty and security	https://georgiatoday.ge/ambassador-of-china-we-are-committed-to-cooperating-with-georgia-to-protect-national-sovereignty-and-security/

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