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Regime clusters and challenges to democratisation in the eastern neighbourhood: Azerbaijan and Belarus

Marianne Kneuer, TU Dresden
Murad Nasibov, TU Dresden

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Executive Summary

This policy paper explores where and how authoritarian control is most persistently entrenched. Rather than analysing causal factors of entrenchment, the paper identifies the institutional arenas where democratic governance is most constrained, offering a diagnostic basis for context-aware democracy support. For that purpose, our analysis offers a regime-sensitive analysis of autocratisation in the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) region, focusing on Azerbaijan and Belarus – the two long-term closed autocracies in the EN. Drawing on a comparative framework, we identify the historical and institutional features that *reflect* – rather than explain – the long-term persistence of authoritarian control. In doing so, this paper follows two basic premises: first, a regime-sensitive perspective needs to take into consideration the overall dynamic, and second, the direction of the regime development. This constitutes a critical and basic assessment for policymakers and their democracy support strategies and actions.

In a separate policy paper¹, the focus lies on cases of potential democratisation in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, identifying specific areas of democratic backsliding and tailored, time-sensitive strategies to support democratic consolidation in each country. The differentiation of these two clusters relies on the direction of change in regime quality – the long-term tendency in the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) towards the democratic end of the political regime spectrum, observed in the cases of Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, while Belarus and Azerbaijan are clearly outliers as closed autocracies in the EN region.

Both policy papers apply the framework of regime states developed by Buscanenau and Kneuer (2024), which links regime types offered by Lührmann et al. (2018) – closed autocracy (CA), electoral autocracy (EA), electoral democracy (ED), and liberal democracy (LD) – to dynamic regime states, including stasis, upturns and downturns, and progressions and regressions. This approach enables a more granular diagnosis of regime quality and political trajectories. Additionally, the analysis draws on expert and policy assessments, which strengthen the plausibility and contextual relevance of the findings. These sources help anchor the regime classifications in recent political developments and ensure that the framework reflects on-the-ground realities. This combination of conceptual precision and empirical grounding enhances the face validity and practical utility of the overall approach.

The paper finds that both Azerbaijan and Belarus are entrenched in CA regime stasis. The qualitative analysis reveals that CA stasis in both countries is characterised by distinct institutional weaknesses: in Azerbaijan, it stems from judicial subordination, executive dominance, electoral manipulation, and voter intimidation; in Belarus, from severe civil society repression, restricted civic space, curtailed academic freedom, and politically controlled courts. The comparative analysis of Azerbaijan and Belarus shows that **autocratisation in the region is neither uniform nor ideologically monolithic but varies in institutional configuration, temporal trajectory, and regime practice**. These cases illustrate that although the regime type (CA) is shared, the regime state – that is, **the direction, rhythm, and institutional coherence of autocratic control** – **differs markedly**. Democracy support must therefore account not only for **what kind of regime exists** but also for **how its closure is maintained and where engagement may be feasible**.

The paper traces the specific institutional logics underpinning authoritarian resilience. By identifying the lowest-performing areas during each country's CA periods of stasis—measured by indicators of the LDI by Varieties of Democracy (Coppedge et al. 2024)—we isolate domains that are most consistently constrained within each regime. Even though they might not be the most contributing factors to the overall LDI indicator, these "lowest-performing areas" are the aspects of democratic governance most suppressed by authoritarian regimes, revealing where authoritarian control is most persistently entrenched and thus where resilience is institutionally rooted. However, our diagnostics of most entrenched aspects of these authoritarian regimes

¹ The separate REDEMOS policy paper is authored by Exadaktylos, Theofanis and Vassilis Karokis-Mavrikos (2025).

do not assert or rule out that other dimensions of governance have likewise contributed to sustaining CA and therefore should be viewed as insignificant. The identified areas can thus only be seen as *binding constraints* or persistent weaknesses. Our study shows that, even in cases of countries with authoritarian stasis, there can be different reasons, that is: different aspects that contribute to this authoritarian persistence.

Crucially, **this study proves wrong one-size-fits-all solutions and enables to tackle in a more precise way the vulnerabilities of individual authoritarian regimes.** It offers the EU a **regime-sensitive diagnostic tool to assess authoritarian durability, identify realistic entry points, and minimise the risk of reinforcing repression through miscalibrated pressure.** In Azerbaijan, the EU should adopt a dual-track approach that combines incremental institutional reform with support for civil society and mid-level bureaucrats. To strengthen the independence of the judiciary, the EU should prioritise the promotion of merit-based appointments, transparent disciplinary procedures, and legal training for the judiciary. The currently ongoing reforms of the judiciary can offer entry points for the EU. For free and fair elections, the EU should continue actively promoting and supporting electoral reform via a revised Election Code, inclusive of the Election Commission and dispute resolution mechanisms. Simultaneously, the EU should build the local capacity of civil society and political parties in election monitoring and addressing electoral intimidation. Facilitating a constructive dialogue among civil society actors and oppositional parties is key to the successful exercise of election monitoring and addressing electoral intimidation. Last but not least, the EU should expand its portfolio of programmes supporting the young, professional bureaucracy that has emerged in the recent period.

In Belarus, the EU should pursue a calibrated strategy focused on empowering exiled civic actors, bridging between the civil society in exile and the remaining democratic actors in the country, and preparing for a democratic transition. This involves scaling diaspora hubs into support platforms, funding informal civic networks, and preventing Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisation (GONGO) co-optation. Academic and cultural autonomy should be restored through a dedicated Academic Freedom Fund, digital platforms, and partnerships for scholar reintegration. Judicial reform efforts should support independent appointments, due process, and transitional justice planning. The EU is also called to promote CSO legal reform, support unregistered initiatives, and fund civic infrastructure, including crowdfunding platforms and memory projects. Quiet, long-term engagement—rather than broad sanctions—will better equip Belarussian democratic forces (as well as their Azerbaijani counterparts) for eventual democratic re-entry and enable the EU to deliver targeted, regime-sensitive democracy support.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

BYHELP	Belarusian crowdfunding platform providing support to repressed individuals
BYSOL	Belarusian Solidarity Foundation (supports civil society and protest victims)
CA	Closed Autocracy
CIB	Comprehensive Institution Building
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSOSI	Civil Society Organisation Sustainability Index
C	Categorical (used to denote specific V-Dem indicators as categorical variables)
EA	Electoral Autocracy
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
ED	Electoral Democracy
EDI	Electoral Democracy Index
EN	Eastern Neighbourhood
EMB	Election Management Body
EU	European Union
EUA	European University Association
GONGO	Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisation
HOG	Head of Government
ICJ	International Commission of Jurists
LD	Liberal Democracy
LDI	Liberal Democracy Index
LCI	Liberal Component Index
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NCDF	National Council of Democratic Forces (Azerbaijan)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
REDEMOS	Reconfiguring EU Democracy Support? Toward a Regime-Sensitive Approach (EU-funded project)
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty
TAIEX	Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Instrument (EU)
UN OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy (research project and dataset)

Introduction

This policy paper explores where and how authoritarian control is most persistently entrenched. Rather than analysing causal factors of entrenchment, the paper identifies the institutional arenas where democratic governance is most constrained, offering a diagnostic basis for context-aware democracy support. For that purpose, our analysis offers a regime-sensitive analysis of autocratisation in the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) region, focusing on Azerbaijan and Belarus – the two long-term closed autocracies in the EN.² Drawing on a comparative framework, we identify the historical and institutional features that *reflect* – rather than explain – the long-term persistence of authoritarian control. In doing so, this paper follows two basic premises: first, a regime-sensitive perspective needs to take into consideration the overall dynamic, and second, the direction of the regime development. This constitutes a critical and basic assessment for policymakers and their democracy support strategies and actions.

Where democratisation studies often emphasise moments of transition and institutional opening, autocratisation research must grapple with the persistence of authoritarian rule and the subtle ways in which it adapts and consolidates over time. In both Azerbaijan and Belarus, early post-Soviet openings gave way to democratic reversals, executive aggrandisement, and the progressive erosion of institutional constraints. Yet, despite their shared autocratic outcomes, the mechanisms of consolidation as well as the areas mostly repressed by the regimes over the years differ. To explain these differences and even to explore them in full is well beyond the scope of this paper. However, they carry a particular salience for democracy support practitioners. This paper addresses one such question among many: *What are the binding constraints – the areas most entrenched in autocracies?* Recognising the binding constraints enables external actors to target their engagement more strategically, focusing on domains where institutional closure is strongest and reform would be most consequential if conditions allow.

To address the stated question, this paper adopts the regime states framework (Buşcaneanu & Kneuer, 2024). Different from other approaches, this framework is able to capture regime states in its dynamic evolution. It distinguishes three types of regime states: autocratic stasis or democratic stability; downturns or upturns within a given regime category; and regressions or progressions across different regime categories. This approach enables a more granular diagnosis of regime development and political trajectories and offers a prescriptive tool to devise custom-made instruments of policy action, arguing: the more precise regime states and their development can be captured, the more precise democracy support activities can be tailored.

The framework borrows the four main regime types offered by Lüthmann et al. (2018) – closed autocracy (CA), electoral autocracy (EA), electoral democracy (ED), and liberal democracy (LD) – and then maps them onto a continuum of regime states, which reflect whether a country is in a static state (stasis or stability), experiencing intra-regime movement (upturns or downturns), or undergoing inter-regime transition (progression or regression). This approach not only captures the type of regime but also the quality and direction of change, offering a more refined lens through which to assess political trajectories. Within this framework, Azerbaijan has remained in CA stasis since 1995, following an early but short-lived move toward electoral pluralism. Its autocratic consolidation was characterised by the centralisation of executive power under the Aliyev dynasty, manipulation of elections, and the exploitation of energy rents to secure domestic loyalty and mute international criticism. After a similarly long period of CA stasis (2000-2019), Belarus experienced a brief period of downturn – further deterioration – in 2020-2021, marked by the regime's violent repression of the 2020 protest movement. Since 2022, Belarus has entered into a qualitatively new CA stasis. Here, autocracy manifests less through economic leverage and more through the systematic destruction of civil society, politicisation of the judiciary, and repression of cultural and academic freedoms.

² This policy paper is complemented by another REDEMOS policy paper authored by Exadaktylos, Theofanis; Karokis-Mavrikos, Vassilis (2025) that focuses on the cases of the democratisation cluster, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

To identify which institutional domains are most persistently constrained during CA stasis in Azerbaijan and Belarus, we applied a two-stage empirical strategy combining quantitative diagnostics with expert-informed qualitative validation. First, using the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), we identified all component indicators relevant to institutional dimensions of democratic governance. For each country, we focused on the period of CA stasis – 1995–2023 for Azerbaijan and 2022–2023 for Belarus – as determined by the regime states framework (Buşcaneanu & Kneuer, 2024). In the first stage, we calculated the average scores of each LDI component indicator during the CA stasis period and ranked them from lowest to highest. This allowed us to identify the six lowest-performing indicators in each country, those where democratic quality was consistently weakest across time. In the second stage, we invited country experts to review the six lowest-scoring indicators and select four indicators they considered most substantively relevant to *reflecting* the persistence of CA stasis and most indicative of entrenched autocratic resilience in each national context. This expert input ensured that selection was not purely statistical but grounded in country-specific political and institutional dynamics. These expert-selected indicators were then subjected to qualitative analysis, drawing on legal texts, policy changes, academic research, and international monitoring reports. This step allowed us to confirm that the identified indicators not only scored low in the data but also reflected meaningful institutional practices and constraints characteristic of long-term regime durability. Through this mixed-methods approach, we explore the most salient democratic institutional weaknesses potentially underpinning CA stasis and use them to inform tailored policy recommendations.

The paper finds that both Azerbaijan and Belarus are entrenched in CA regime stasis. After a brief period of EA in the early 1990s, Azerbaijan has remained in CA regime stasis since 1995. In turn, Belarus experienced ED in the early 1990s, quickly regressing to EA already in 1994 and CA in 1999. For the long period of 2000–2019, it remained in a CA stasis regime state. After a CA downturn in 2020–2021, the period of mass demonstrations that were violently suppressed, it remained in a qualitatively new CA stasis for 2022–2023. The qualitative analysis of country experts, accordingly, focused on the last regime state in the respective countries: CA stasis in Azerbaijan since 1995 and CA stasis in Belarus in 2022–2023. The qualitative analysis has revealed that CA stasis in both countries is characterised by distinct institutional weaknesses: in Azerbaijan, it stems from judicial subordination, executive dominance, electoral manipulation, and voter intimidation; in Belarus, from severe civil society repression, restricted civic space, curtailed academic freedom, and politically controlled courts. Both regimes display resilience through a combination of coercion and adaptive strategies, such as technocratic co-optation in Azerbaijan and exile-based repression in Belarus. These empirical findings not only illuminate the distinct institutional configurations of autocratic resilience in each case but also inform the broader objective of the study, providing regime-sensitive policy recommendations on EU democracy support towards these countries. It should be noted that the indicators identified here do not represent the only areas of democratic suppression. Rather, they capture the most persistently constrained domains within the available data, while other dimensions of governance may likewise reflect enduring authoritarian control.

The Framework of Regime States

A regime-sensitive approach to external democracy support needs to start from a precise diagnosis of target political regimes (Kurki, 2008; Hobson, 2009). To diagnose political regimes in the EN region, we rely on the regime states framework (Buşcaneanu & Kneuer, 2024), which starts with the regime classification borrowed from Lührmann et al. (2018). Accordingly, countries can be classified into four regime categories: closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, and liberal democracy. Closed autocracies represent polities where power is highly centralised, and no meaningful elections take place. Electoral autocracies conduct elections, but they are heavily manipulated to maintain the ruling elites in power. Electoral democracies hold competitive elections, yet their democratic institutions remain vulnerable to internal weaknesses or external pressure. Liberal democracies function with strong protections for civil liberties, the rule of law, and institutional checks and balances. Riedl et al. (2024) refine the threshold calibration of these four regime categories using global LDI means. They calculate global mean values of the LDI for 1990–2023 to set the cut-off point between EA and ED (≈ 0.393 on LDI) and similarly use 0.80 as the ED–LD boundary. Their approach focuses on *where to draw the numerical boundaries* between regime types along the LDI

continuum, thus improving empirical precision in identifying static categories. Buşcaneanu and Kneuer's regime states framework (2024) takes it a step further and transforms this static categorisation into a dynamic model of regime trajectories. Hence, instead of treating these categories as rigid and separate, we also accept the assumption that political regimes can exist on an autocracy-democracy continuum, ranging from full autocracy to full democracy. This perspective allows us to track gradual political changes rather than focusing solely on dramatic shifts. Countries rarely transform overnight from dictatorship to democracy or vice versa; rather, they usually move incrementally along this spectrum. Third, we agree that political regimes can be grouped into two broad segments: an autocratic segment, which includes closed and electoral autocracies, and a democratic segment, which consists of electoral and liberal democracies.

Following, building on these assumptions, we distinguish three types of regime states: 1) autocratic stasis or democratic stability; 2) downturns or upturns within a given regime category; and 3) regressions or progressions across different regime categories. We define regime states as distinct manifestations of political regimes along the autocracy–democracy continuum, capturing both static conditions and dynamic changes within or between categories over a connected time period.

The first type (autocratic stasis or democratic stability) consists of static polities, where no meaningful regime change occurs. In autocratic regimes, this condition is referred to as stasis, while in democratic systems, it is described as stability. Stability in democracies is generally seen as a positive outcome, reinforcing institutional resilience and political inclusion (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In contrast, autocratic stasis is generally negative, as it prolongs repression and political exclusion. Despite these substantive differences in terms of inclusion and exclusion, both autocratic stasis and democratic stability define static political regimes, which do not experience meaningful change in quality over a connected time period.

The second type of regime states (downturns or upturns within a given regime category) involves changes within a regime type but without full transition. That means a country experiences noticeable shifts in the governance quality while remaining within the same regime category. These shifts can be classified as either downturns or upturns. A downturn is reflected in declines in regime quality, for example, through increased media restrictions, weakened institutional independence, or fraudulent elections. Conversely, an upturn is reflected in improvements in regime quality, such as when judicial independence is strengthened or political freedoms are expanded. These changes do not push a country into a new regime category but indicate important fluctuations within its existing political system. Monitoring these movements is critical for assessing whether a country is at risk of further decline or positioned for democratic progress.

The third type of regime states (regressions or progressions across different regime categories) involves transitions from one regime category to another, signalling not only a fundamental shift in regime quality but also a change in the regime type. Figure 1 illustrates this as follows: when a country experiences a categorical movement towards score 0 (= worst), which is located at the left end of the autocracy-democracy continuum, this is referred to as regression. For example, this can be observed when an electoral democracy turns into an electoral autocracy. Conversely, a categorical movement towards score 1 (= best) located at the right of the autocracy-democracy continuum is referred to as progression. This is seen when an electoral autocracy transitions into an electoral democracy. These shifts indicate regime change in *kind* rather than regime change in *degree* (Sartori, 1970). A transition from electoral autocracy to electoral democracy marks an autocratic breakdown, whereas a shift from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy represents a democratic breakdown. For more details on the regime states framework, consider Buşcaneanu and Kneuer (2024). We illustrate all three types of regime states in Figure 1.

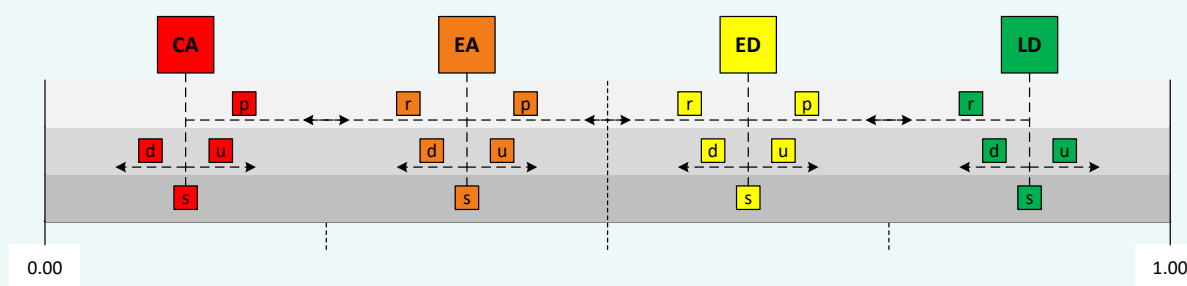


Figure 1: The Regime States Framework

Notes: CA – closed autocracy, EA – electoral autocracy, ED – electoral democracy, LD – liberal democracy; s – stasis/ stability; d – downturn, u – upturn; r – regression, p – progression. Dashed vertical lines delineating regime categories imply that corresponding thresholds can vary depending on definitions, concepts, and the type of data used.

The framework of regime states suggests practical insights for policymakers and democracy support organisations. Understanding where a country stands on the autocracy-democracy continuum allows for more effective and tailored policy interventions. By identifying whether a regime is static or in flux, decision-makers can most effectively anticipate risks and seize opportunities to strengthen democratic institutions or prevent backsliding. Recognising whether a shift is an upturn, downturn, regression, or progression ensures that interventions are designed appropriately to fit the specific political context.

Rather than a purely academic typology, the framework offers a diagnostic perspective for policymakers, ensuring that responses remain informed, timely, and aligned with each country’s political trajectory. The next section applies this framework to two autocratic regimes in the EN: Azerbaijan and Belarus.

Analyzing Regime Dynamics in Azerbaijan and Belarus

Long-term Trajectory and Regime Transitions

The analysis in this section *maps* where and how autocratic closure has persisted in Azerbaijan and Belarus using V-Dem’s LDI and the regime states framework. It traces patterns of regime continuity and change to characterise the institutional manifestations of closed autocracy. The discussion is descriptive and diagnostic: it does *not* model or test why these trajectories occurred, nor does it imply causal mechanisms behind regime persistence.

Based on LDI data by V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2024) and the approach to regime classification by Riedl et al. (2024) and Buşcaneanu and Kneuer (2024), Azerbaijan and Belarus have experienced closed autocratic rule for most of the 1990-2023 period. As illustrated in Figure 2, both Azerbaijan and Belarus experienced a long-term downward trend, pointing to a slight but consistent loss in regime quality. In this measurement, references to downturns, upturns, and transitions follow the regimestates classification applied to the LDI series. They denote observed movement on the index rather than statistical determinants of that movement.

Throughout 1990-2023, Azerbaijan underwent two regime transitions, while Belarus experienced three regime transitions. As many other regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union underwent political fragmentation and democratic openings at the end of the Cold War (Fukuyama, 1989; Przeworski, 1992; Fish, 1999; McFaul, 2002), Azerbaijan transitioned to EA, while Belarus briefly moved toward ED in 1992. However, these positive changes were short-lived. Azerbaijan’s reversal to CA took place with the election of Heydar Aliyev as president of Azerbaijan in 1993. His administration oversaw the rapid dismantling of judicial and legislative constraints on executive power, reversing early gains in the domain of free and fair elections and freedom of association.

In Belarus, a similar pattern unfolded between 1994 and 1999. The rise of Aleksandr Lukashenko to the presidency in 1994 marked the beginning of a gradual shift back to autocratic rule. Belarus regressed first to EA in 1995 and then further to CA in 1999. By that point in time, all key indicators of democratic governance had substantially worsened. The most severe losses were linked to the weakening of legislative and judicial independence, which was a direct consequence of the 1996 constitutional referendum (D’Cruz et al., 2023). This referendum, widely viewed as rigged, established a superpresidential system that concentrated power in the hands of the executive. The opposite transitions to inferior regime categories in Azerbaijan and Belarus illustrate the vulnerability of early democratic openings under weak institutional checks on executive power.

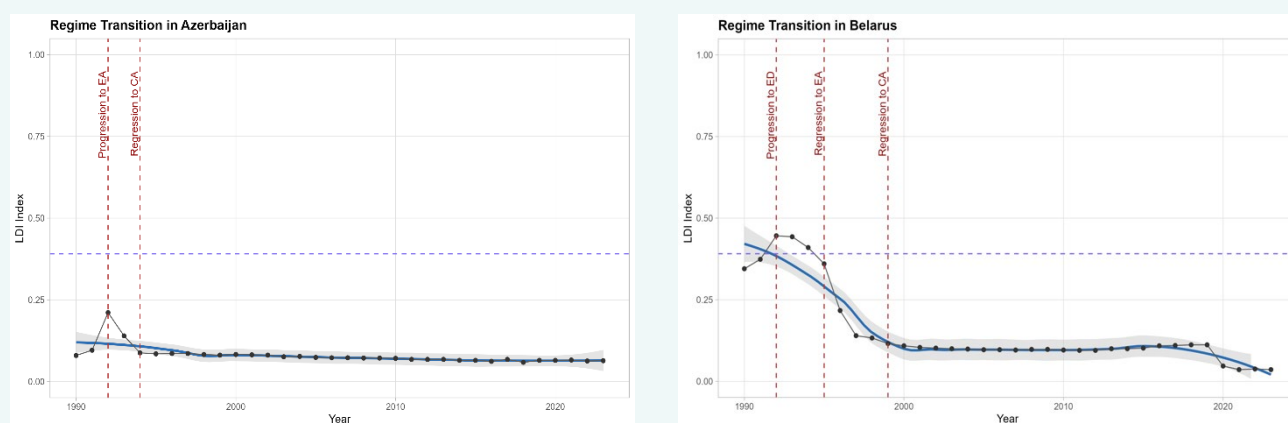


Figure 2: Regime trajectory and transitions in Azerbaijan and Belarus

Notes: Black dots show annual LDI scores from V-Dem v14. The blue line is a non-parametric smoothing trend that fits a flexible curve through noisy data (Locally Estimated Scatterplot Smoothing - LOESS) with a 95% confidence band, illustrating the long-term trajectory of regime change. Vertical dashed lines mark key regime transitions, and the horizontal dashed line denotes the LDI threshold (≈ 0.393) between electoral autocracy and electoral democracy.

Regime States

As shown in Table 1, Azerbaijan experienced a progression to EA in 1991-1992, a period characterised by high executive turnover and the first Nagorno-Karabakh war. Despite the ongoing conflict, this transition was accompanied by improvements across all dimensions of the LDI, with the most notable progress seen in electoral integrity, freedom of association, and judicial constraints on executive power (Coppedge et al., 2024). However, within the following two years, Azerbaijan experienced a reversal to CA. This regression occurred as the newly elected president, Heydar Aliyev, systematically dismantled the judicial and legislative checks on his executive power.³

The next 29 years have been marked by CA stasis. Flanked by the loss of control over Nagorno-Karabakh in 1994 and its regaining in 2023, which represent two opposite outcomes of the same strategic problem, this long period of CA stasis is the longest in the entire EN region. This pattern reflects how internal legitimacy has often been constructed through the attribution of blame for strategic losses to outgroup agents while crediting the incumbent regime for strategic gains. This skilful framing of blame and merit notwithstanding, Azeri incumbent elites under the leadership of Heydar Aliyev’s son, Ilham Aliyev, have also relied on energy-based revenues to reinforce internal legitimacy. This was accomplished using at least four strategies: securing a broad base of support through substantial investments in public goods; co-opting dissenting voices; increasing repression through better-staffed and equipped state agencies of control; and counteracting Western democratic pressures in return for lucrative trade agreements in the energy sector (Buşcaneanu,

³ Country narratives combine LDI-based evidence with secondary sources to characterise patterns associated with each regime state. Terms such as *reversal*, *consolidation*, or *legitimacy* are used descriptively to denote recurring features, not as causal explanations.

2017). Following Azerbaijan’s strategic victory over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, which strengthened Ilham Aliyev’s domestic legitimacy, autocratic rule appears likely to persist in the near term.

Similar to Azerbaijan, the trajectory of Belarus’ political regime started in the first two years of independence with a progression to ED. At the end of 1992, Belarus had the most open and competitive regime in the whole post-Soviet region. Transition to ED was expressed in better conditions for the exercise of freedom of association and expression, and increased protection of equality before the law and individual liberty (Coppedge et al. 2024). Whilst the first opposite regression to EA took place in 1995, it was part of a transformation period that started in 1994 with presidential elections that elevated Aleksandr Lukashenko to the main executive post in Belarus. By 1997, losses in regime quality affected all LDI dimensions. However, similar to the trajectory observed in Azerbaijan, the most significant setbacks in Belarus involved the dismantling of legislative and judicial constraints on executive power (Coppedge et al., 2024). This pattern indicates that the erosion of institutional checks is a recurring feature of autocratic consolidation.

After a consecutive regression to CA in 1999, with virtually no horizontal checks on the executive power, the period from 2000 to 2019 was marked by CA stasis. The relative stability of this period reflected an implicit social contract whereby the incumbent regime committed to ensuring basic social needs in exchange for public loyalty and support (Korosteleva et al., 2023). The provision of public goods was, in turn, dependent on the ability of Belarusian authorities to generate resources that relied on a Soviet-style inherited industrial base and cheap energy resources subsidised by Russia (Alachnovič & Korosteleva, 2023). At the same time, a relatively strong coercive apparatus emerged, serving to protect the regime against domestic potential challengers. The regime’s security apparatus played a decisive role during the mass protests across Belarus in the wake of the 2020 presidential elections that were marred by massive fraud and irregularities. Following large-scale repression, Belarus’ regime experienced a CA downturn in 2020-2021. Losses in quality have been registered, especially on the electoral component of LDI: free and fair elections, freedom of association, and freedom of expression (Coppedge et al., 2024). As the incumbent regime managed to thwart the most significant opposition protests in the history of Belarus since 1991, another period of CA stasis set in during 2022-2023. If anything, the case of Belarus illustrates that the election of an autocratic leader through a competitive process may coincide with the entrenchment of long-term authoritarian rule, trapping an entire country in prolonged autocratic governance.

Table 1: Regime states in Azerbaijan and Belarus

Years	Regime state	Change	Years	Regime state	Change
1991, 1992	Progression to EA	Positive	1991, 1992	Progression to ED	Positive
1993, 1994	Regression to CA	Negative	1994, 1995, 1996, 1997	Regression to EA	Negative
1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023	CA stasis	No change	1999	Regression to CA	Negative
			2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019	CA stasis	No change
			2020, 2021	CA downturn	Negative
			2022, 2023	CA stasis	No change

Notes: The table includes all regime states experienced by Azerbaijan and Belarus in the period 1990-2023 (based on LDI).

When formulating policy implications, it is essential to focus on *the most recent regime state* of a given country, which is CA stasis for Azerbaijan in 1995-2023 and for Belarus in 2022-2023. Because the most recent CA stasis (2022-2023) follows an earlier, longer CA stasis (2000-2019) that was interrupted by a brief downturn, these periods are interpreted cumulatively to capture *durational persistence* rather than short-term variation. This aggregation serves diagnostic purposes only and does not infer causality.

While understanding earlier regime states is valuable for developing a long-term strategic vision, policy actions should be designed based on the most recent political developments. The regime states framework helps ensure that policy decisions are not arbitrary by identifying the most recent continuous period of either stability or change within and between regime categories. However, a key question remains: Do the CA stasis periods in Azerbaijan (1995-2023) and Belarus (2022-2023) manifest in the same underlying factors? We briefly examine this issue in the next subsection. To reiterate, the patterns identified in the next section serve to illustrate – rather than exhaust – the domains of closure in each regime. They indicate where institutional constraints have been most persistent, not necessarily which factors explain the endurance of authoritarian rule. Rather, the analysis identifies where authoritarian closure is most pronounced and enduring, acknowledging that other institutional domains may also reinforce autocratic equilibrium.

Understanding Most Entrenched Areas of CA stasis in Azerbaijan & Belarus

In order to identify the most entrenched, and thus persistently weakest, areas of CA stasis in Azerbaijan in 1995-2023 and Belarus in 2022-2023, we adopt a two-step diagnostic approach. To do so, we use the LDI (v2x_libdem). The LDI (v2x_libdem) is a composite measure that combines two key components: the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) (v2x_polyarchy) and the Liberal Component Index (LCI) (v2x_liberal) (Coppedge et al., 2024a). The EDI captures the foundational aspects of democracy, focusing on election quality and integrity as the essential minimum standard of democratic governance, as well as on equality before the law. In contrast, the LDI goes beyond elections, incorporating civil liberties as well as judicial and legislative constraints on executive power. The LDI is the most appropriate index for measuring moving away from democracy as it takes the level of electoral democracy into account, but beyond that also judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government (Coppedge, 2017; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Mainwaring & Bizarro, 2019; Pelke & Croissant, 2021). This composite scope enables the LDI to detect political trends such as the concentration of executive power, erosion of the rule of law, and weakening of institutional checks and balances.

In the first step, within the confirmed periods of CA stasis, we apply a diagnostic rather than inferential approach. We take all component indicators of the LDI and, for each country, rank them by their arithmetic mean over the stasis period to identify those with persistently lowest average values. Averaging indicator values across the regime period allows us to identify long-term institutional patterns rather than year-to-year volatility. The logic is binding-constraint oriented: the lowest-scoring indicators signal domains where authoritarian closure has been most durably entrenched and institutionalised. While weaknesses across many LDI dimensions may co-exist, persistently low values mark the core sites of entrenchment – areas regimes routinely keep most restricted to preserve equilibrium. We therefore isolate the lowest-value indicators not because others are unimportant, but because they serve as diagnostic bottlenecks, indicating where closure is tightest. At the end of the first step, the six lowest-scoring indicators are isolated.

In the second step, we leverage qualitative expert knowledge to assess the selected sets of indicators for face validity, ensuring they reflect the situation in the given national contexts accurately.⁴ , Four indicators are examined qualitatively to trace how these entrenched institutional weaknesses are manifested during stasis. For this, we involved one expert per country case. Experts weighed the lowest scoring indicators from the perspective of their salience for the CA stasis in Azerbaijan along the period of 1995-2023 and in Belarus along the last period of CA stasis in 2022-2023. However, it has been confirmed that in the case of Belarus,

⁴ Country experts originate from the respective national contexts, hold advanced degrees in social sciences, and possess extensive experience in analysing political developments in their countries.

the brief interruption of the CA stasis period in 2020-2021, after twenty years (2000-2019), did not alter the overall nature of CA stasis but intensified its manifestations. Hence, the indicators selected for the 2022-2023 period are weighed to equally apply for the earlier CA stasis preceding the 2020-2021 interruption.

While this ranking-based approach offers a structured diagnostic overview, it is important to clarify that the six lowest-ranking indicators identified for each case are not fixed by any statistical rule. The purpose is to maintain analytical comparability across countries while ensuring that the selection remains both interpretable and policy-relevant. The focus on a limited subset of lowest-ranking indicators reflects a pragmatic balance between inclusiveness and clarity: it captures the institutional domains that most persistently underperform during a given regime period, without diluting attention across the entire set of variables. This selection should therefore be understood as illustrative rather than exhaustive. It does not imply that indicators outside the identified subset are insignificant or irrelevant for understanding the regime state. All LDI components contribute to the composite measure of democratic quality, but highlighting those that remain persistently weaker allows for a more targeted and policy-oriented interpretation of institutional fragility and reform needs.

As a result of this two-step diagnostic process, the analysis identifies the institutional domains where democratic performance has remained chronically low during periods of CA stasis. In Azerbaijan (1995–2023), the lowest-scoring indicators are compliance with high court rulings (v2juhccomp), election government intimidation (v2elintim), election free and fair (v2elfrfair), and head of government appoints cabinet in practice (v2exdjcbhg). In Belarus (2022–2023), the persistently weakest areas are civil society organisation (CSO) repression (v2csreprss), government control over CSO entry and exit (v2cseeorgs), freedom of academic and cultural expression (v2clacfree), and lower-court independence (v2juncind). These domains do not statistically explain the persistence of CA; rather, they signal where authoritarian control has become most entrenched and institutionalised. Viewed through this lens, CA stasis in the two countries reflects distinct configurations of entrenched closure that delineate the binding constraints on potential liberalisation. This two-step approach suggests that although both Azerbaijan and Belarus are characterised by CA stasis, the manifestations of this static regime state differ across key institutional domains.

Azerbaijan: Most Entrenched Areas of CA Stasis in 1995-2023

As discussed above, from the long-term perspective, the regime's durability in the case of Azerbaijan is reflected in two major recurring patterns: the continuous centralisation of executive authority and the systematic dismantling of the autonomy of state institutions, particularly in the judiciary and electoral arenas. Both actually have gone hand-in-hand, sustaining the final blow – the crackdown on free media, civil society, and political parties at the later stages. These two patterns that have accompanied Azerbaijan's CA stasis since 1995 are reflected in the four indicators selected for qualitative analysis: Compliance with High Court (C) (v2juhccomp), Election Free and Fair (C) (v2elfrfair), Election Government Intimidation (C) (v2elintim), and Head of Government Appoints Cabinet in Practice (C) (v2exdjcbhg). They thus serve as a concise diagnostic lens into where Azerbaijan's autocracy has consolidated equilibrium by legalising control, ritualising elections, and neutralising accountability rather than relying solely on overt repression.

Azerbaijan's **compliance with high court rulings** (v2juhccomp) declined from -2.24 in 1995 to -3.58 in 2023, placing it among the worst performers in the EN. The Azerbaijani judiciary is widely seen as operating under the control of the executive, with courts frequently granting prosecution requests without independent scrutiny. This dependence reflects a broader failure to uphold the authority of the country's highest judicial institutions, as executive influence dominates judicial decision-making, eroding the principle of judicial independence (Bychawska-Siniarska, 2016; Shahbazov & Muradov, 2019).

Since gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan's judiciary has consistently seen its independence erode under the tight grip of the executive. Although the country's first constitution, adopted in 1995, nominally established a separation of powers, judicial authority has remained, in practice, subordinate to the presidency (Cornell, 2015; Valiyev, 2025). The 2002 constitutional amendments enhanced executive influence over state institutions: they eliminated the necessity for constitutional referenda on judicial and legislative issues and thus allowed the government to revise laws impacting judicial independence without

requiring direct public approval (International Crisis Group, 2010). The third blow came in 2009. This year's new constitutional referendum further weakened judicial autonomy by removing presidential term limits, enabling indefinite re-election and reducing institutional constraints on executive power (Guliyev, 2009). The 2016 constitutional amendments not only prolonged the presidential term from five to seven years but also strengthened the executive branch, introducing the office of the Vice President and eliminating a key check on executive power (Council of Europe, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2014). As a result, Azerbaijan's judiciary has continuously issued politically motivated rulings against opposition figures, journalists, and civil society activists (European Court of Human Rights, 2014). The country's repeated non-compliance with European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings – such as the unlawful imprisonment of opposition leader Ilgar Mammadov, despite ECtHR decisions – demonstrates how courts function as extensions of the executive rather than independent institutions (Freedom House, 2020; Hajiyeu, 2016; Remezaitė, 2013). Over time, these trends have undermined judicial autonomy and entrenched an autocratic legal order.

In 2019, Azerbaijan launched a series of reforms in the country's justice system (Qafqazinfo, 2019). One major reform has been the restructuring of the Judicial-Legal Council. Consequently, executive influence within this council has been reduced, and the chairperson position has passed from the Ministry of Justice, which has been leading this position since the Council was established in 2005, to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (№ 818-IIQ, 2004/19 June 2020; Qafqazinfo, 2023). While the newly established Committee for the Evaluation of Judges aims to address corruption, it can also discipline the judiciary rather than establish its independence. The government's motivation for judicial reforms is double-edged. On the one hand, it aims to discipline lower-level courts to cut the widespread corruption, a source of social discontent, and hence, strengthen its legitimacy. In this sense, it continues the motivation of the earlier reforms, such as the introduction of ASAN Service – a one-stop shop for most government services. On the other hand, it has a political aim to tighten its grip over the judiciary. Ultimately, these reforms serve to further consolidate state authority, reinforcing executive control while selectively addressing public grievances.

Azerbaijan's V-Dem score for **election fairness** (v2elfrfair) declined from -2.18 in 1995 to -2.7 in 2023, keeping it among the least democratic electoral systems in the EN region, second only to Belarus (-3.12 in 2023). Since independence, but particularly so starting from the early 2000s, elections in Azerbaijan have been heavily manipulated, resulting continued dominance by the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP). The 2003 presidential election, held after the death of Heydar Aliyev, was marred by widespread fraud and violent post-election crackdowns against protesters challenging Ilham Aliyev's victory (Human Rights Watch, 2003). After 2013, elections were held without any genuine challenger and, thus, meaningful competition (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2024a, 2024b). The 2016 constitutional referendum further consolidated executive power, extending the presidential term to seven years and creating the institution of a vice presidency appointed directly by the president, thereby weakening the role of elections in political transitions (Council of Europe, 2016; Geybullayeva, 2016; RFE/RL, 2016). Simultaneously, Azerbaijan's judiciary and electoral commissions have become increasingly subordinated to the executive, with courts routinely ruling in favour of the government and the Election Management Body (EMB) lacking independence (Freedom House, 2025). Today, elections in Azerbaijan function as a procedural formality, tightly choreographed to provide the appearance of a democratic façade while fortifying the dominance of the ruling elite.

Despite repeated OSCE and EU criticisms of Azerbaijan's elections, Western diplomatic pressure has remained weak due to Azerbaijan's strategic importance as an energy supplier (LaPorte, 2024; Sabadus, 2023; Zabanova, 2024). Domestically, election-related protests have declined in recent years due to state repression and growing political apathy among voters (Bedford & Vinatier, 2019; Nozadze, 2024a). The latest mass protest, organised by the National Council of Democratic Forces (NCDF), a coalition of opposition parties, occurred in the spring of 2019 and was violently dispersed by Azerbaijani police (Bagirova et al., 2019; Human Rights House Foundation, 2019; Limås-kollberg, 2019).

Although Azerbaijan's V-Dem intimidation score slightly improved from -2.64 in 1995 to -2.24 in 2023, it remains among the most **repressive electoral environments** (v2elintim), closely resembling Belarus (-2.88 in 2023). Azerbaijani authorities have long employed various intimidation tactics during elections to suppress

the opposition (Human Rights Watch, 2004). The first explicit use of harassment and coercion targeting the electoral process was observed in 1995 during the country's first parliamentary elections after independence (Sultanova, 2014). Since then, government intimidation in elections has only intensified, with an expanding arsenal of repressive measures as the ruling elite has consolidated power (Guliyev, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2013). Law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, have employed a range of tactics, including arrests, legal persecution, physical violence, threats, campaign restrictions, surveillance, harassment, and community-based coercion of voters (LaPorte, 2015). The years 2003 and 2005 marked particularly severe episodes of state intimidation – first during the transfer of power from Heydar Aliyev to Ilham Aliyev and later when the opposition sought to trigger a colour revolution in the parliamentary elections (Human Rights Watch, 2004). The 2013–2016 period witnessed a sweeping crackdown on civil society, targeting non-governmental organisations and independent media (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Umudov, 2019). Since then, the government has routinely arrested, harassed, and persecuted the remaining independent media outlets and civil society leaders, with the number of political prisoners rising accordingly (Pearce & Guliyev, 2015; Seyidov, 2020). Divisions within the opposition – particularly between the Popular Front, which boycotted the 2020 parliamentary elections and rejected dialogue on the government's terms, and Musavat and ReAl parties, which participated in elections and engaged in dialogue – have led to a harsh demonisation campaign against the former in government-controlled media, followed by arrests and persecution of those who boycotted the elections (Guliyev, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). In recent years, election-related intimidation has become increasingly institutionalised (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2020). Opposition figures have been subjected to house arrest, travel bans, and fabricated criminal charges, while the government has shifted from overt violence to legal and bureaucratic mechanisms, disqualifying opposition candidates, imposing stringent registration requirements for political parties, and using administrative detentions to disrupt opposition campaigns. Moreover, the government has developed co-optation tools, targeting NGOs, educated youth and new political figures (Guliyev, 2020).

Despite ongoing documentation of election-related intimidation by both international human rights organisations and local activists, and declaratory condemnations from bodies such as the European Parliament, Azerbaijan has yet to face any substantial sanctions (Nozadze, 2024a). On the contrary, the country has grown increasingly repressive in recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic (Geybullayeva, 2020; Samadov, 2025). The ruling elite's domestic legitimacy was further bolstered by its victory over Armenia in the 2020 war and the full reassertion of control over the Karabakh region, enabling it to intensify its crackdown on independent voices and journalists (International Press Institute, 2024, 2025; Nozadze, 2024b).

Azerbaijan's **executive dominance over cabinet** (v2exdjcbhg) appointments has worsened, dropping its score from -2.35 in 1995 to -2.78 in 2023, making it comparable only to Belarus (-2.92 in 2023) in the EN region. Since the adoption of the 1995 Constitution, the President has been authorised to appoint not only the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers, but also the heads of executive bodies, including agencies, committees, commissions, and independent departments such as the Baku City Boulevard Department (The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1995/24 August 2002; 18 March 2009; 26 September 2016). While the Constitution does not explicitly mandate it, deputy ministers are also appointed by the President in practice (Mammadov, 2024; News.az, 2025; The Official Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2025). Additionally, appointments to ministerial department heads require pre-approval from the presidential office, reinforcing centralised control. Beyond the central government, the heads of local executive committees, who wield greater authority than municipal officials, are also directly appointed by the President. Of these appointments, the President only seeks the approval of the legislature (Milli Majlis) in the appointment of the Prime Minister. However, this approval is only sought twice, after two rejections of the legislature the President can bypass it (The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 1995/24 August 2002; 18 March 2009; 26 September 2016). As a result, the Prime Minister plays no role in executive appointments, further consolidating presidential dominance over governance. The constitutional amendments made in 2002, 2009 and 2016 have further consolidated the executive power. The amendments of 2002 shifted the line of succession to the president from the Speaker of Milli Majlis to the prime minister (RFE/RL, 2002), while the 2009 amendments removed presidential term limits (Robinson & Antidze, 2009). Finally, the 2016 amendments extended the term in office from five to seven years, created the vice

presidency and empowered the president to dissolve the legislature (Council of Europe, 2016; RFE/RL, 2016). No-confidence votes against ministers are virtually non-existent, and legislative hearings on executive decisions are symbolic rather than substantive.

In today's Azerbaijan, power is fully concentrated in the hands of the President, marking a shift from Heydar Aliyev's rule in the 1990s, when authority was shared with a broader patrimonial network (Guliyev, 2009), and from the oligarchic governance of the 2000s and early 2010s (Ibadoghlu, 2021). Elite cohesion is at its highest point in the country's modern independence history, with no visible risk of defection. Whereas political promotion within the government was once based solely on patrimonial ties or personal loyalty, it now follows a dual criterion of competence and loyalty, purported to enhance governance efficiency while maintaining the one-man rule, often struggling with the discrepancy between the two uncomplimentary drives (Cornell, 2025).

Belarus: Most Entrenched Areas of CS Stasis in 2022-2023

Belarus's current CA stasis in 2022–2023 builds directly on the configuration factors that characterised its earlier two-decade-long CA stasis (2000–2019), interrupted by a brief period of downturn in 2020–2021. During that earlier phase, the Lukashenka regime relied on a combination of limited social provision, bureaucratic control, and selective coercion to maintain stability, gradually hollowing out independent civil society, subordinating the judiciary, and constraining academic and cultural autonomy. The brief downturn of 2020–2021 did not alter these foundations but merely exposed them under conditions of mass mobilisation. These enduring patterns are mirrored by the four indicators selected for qualitative analysis: CSO Repression (v2csreprss), CSO Entry and Exit (v2cseeorgs), Freedom of Academic and Cultural Expression (C) (v2clacfree), and Lower Court Independence (C) (v2juncind). They mark domains where long-standing practices of co-optation and administrative control intensified into comprehensive repression after 2020, as the regime re-established stasis through the near-total absorption of civic, cultural, and judicial autonomy into executive authority.

Since the 1990s, Belarus under Alexander Lukashenka has steadily **restricted civil society** (v2csreprss) space through a mixture of administrative regulation and informal coercion. The regime has not only relied on bans and raids but also promoted loyalist Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs) to simulate civic engagement while undermining independent voices (Freedom House, 2021). However, following the mass protests in 2020 after falsified presidential elections, repression against CSOs entered a new phase of intensity. What had previously been a pattern of selective targeting became a strategy of systematic dismantling. Over 1,000 CSOs were forcibly dissolved or compelled to liquidate themselves between 2020 and 2023, including organisations focused on human rights, education, culture, and community development (Viasna, 2023).

As of 2023, the independent civil society landscape in Belarus is almost entirely eradicated inside the country. The Ministry of Justice continues to deny re-registration applications for non-governmental organisations. Human rights defenders, journalists, and CSO workers face criminal prosecution, long-term imprisonment, and surveillance (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Many civil society actors have been forced into exile, with significant concentrations now based in Lithuania, Poland, and Georgia. The repressive environment is sustained through a combination of overt mechanisms (such as police raids, organisational liquidations, and judicial harassment) and more subtle strategies, including public discreditation and regulatory obstruction (Amnesty International, 2022). Despite this, efforts to maintain civic engagement continue across borders and through informal networks.

In Belarus, **CSO development** (v2cseeorgs) historically operated under an authoritarian regime that has persistently used legal and bureaucratic restrictions to limit civic space. Even prior to 2020, CSOs had to navigate a complex system of registration, often facing denial of legal status if perceived as political or oppositional. The government's approach combined repression with conditional tolerance: "non-political" CSOs, especially those engaged in service delivery or culture, were allowed limited room to function, provided they avoided political agendas. Independent groups like Viasna were systematically denied registration and subjected to intimidation (Freedom House, 2020).

From 2014 to 2020, a partial liberalisation allowed new organisations in spheres like local development and language promotion to emerge. This tentative opening encouraged civic engagement and even supported limited crowdfunding platforms like Ulej and MolaMola. However, this co-optation strategy backfired in 2020 when newly activated grassroots initiatives transformed into politically engaged actors in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the rigged presidential election (OECD, 2021). Since the crackdown on the 2020 protests, the Belarusian regime has significantly tightened its control over CSO activity. As of 2023, more than 1,000 CSOs have been liquidated or forced to self-dissolve. Remaining legal CSOs face constant surveillance, restrictive laws, and re-registration hurdles (CSOSI, 2023). The CSOSI 2023 report notes that Belarus saw one of the most drastic civil society closures in the region, with severe obstacles to founding new organisations, obtaining permits, or accessing funding. Operating without registration is criminalised, while exile-based organisations face challenges reaching domestic constituencies (CIVICUS, 2023).

Freedom of academic and cultural expression (v2clacfree) in Belarus has long been constrained, but state repression intensified dramatically following the 2020 presidential elections. For decades, the Lukashenka regime exerted pressure on academia and cultural sectors through ideological control, administrative subordination, and resource deprivation (Silitski, 2005). However, the events of 2020 marked a turning point. The subsequent crackdown targeted not only street protesters but also institutions of higher education, independent research initiatives, cultural platforms, and dissenting scholars (Amnesty International, 2021). Academic and cultural expression became explicitly politicised and heavily surveilled. Institutions lost what little autonomy they had, with administrators being forced to act as political gatekeepers. Belarus plummeted in the Academic Freedom Index, with “academic and cultural expression” scoring 0.07 out of 4 in 2023, marking one of the steepest declines globally (V-Dem Institute, 2024).

As of 2024, the repression of academic and cultural freedom in Belarus has become systematic. Independent scholars and cultural figures are routinely dismissed, detained, or branded as extremists or terrorists. The higher education system is fully subordinated to state propaganda, with pro-government ideology integrated into curricula (Human Rights Watch, 2022). International exchange has been restricted, students and faculty are sanctioned for dissent, and cultural spaces that deviate from state narratives are shuttered. Exiled scholars report targeted harassment, visa complications, and restricted access to academic documents due to Belarusian government policies (EUA, 2022). According to recent survey data and interviews conducted in Lithuania, Poland, and Germany, exiled Belarusian academics continue to face bureaucratic isolation, disrupted careers, and limited reintegration into host academic environments. Many are unable to resume their work, while those still active remain largely cut off from institutional support and meaningful scholarly exchange (Kozlov, 2023).

Since the consolidation of Lukashenka’s authoritarian rule, Belarus’s judiciary has lacked **institutional independence** (v2juncind). Lower courts in particular have been co-opted into the political machinery of repression. Judges are appointed and dismissed by the president without sufficient safeguards, creating a climate of systemic obedience (Freedom House, 2021). The Belarusian constitution nominally affirms judicial independence, but its practical implementation has been undermined by presidential decrees, executive pressure, and opaque disciplinary mechanisms. Since 2020, when mass protests followed rigged presidential elections, courts have increasingly been instrumentalised to silence dissent, criminalise civic activism, and facilitate repressive campaigns (ICJ, 2021).

Recent developments show a deepening subordination of Belarus’s lower courts to executive authority. Judges in politically sensitive cases — such as those involving protesters, journalists, or opposition figures — routinely deliver convictions in near-total alignment with the prosecution. Dissenting rulings are rare and often punished by dismissal or disciplinary action. For instance, judges who refused to impose politically motivated sentences in 2020–2021 were swiftly removed (UN OHCHR, 2022). Due process violations are systemic: trials are frequently closed, legal representation is obstructed, and verdicts appear predetermined. The judiciary now functions less as an arbiter of justice and more as an instrument of repression (Amnesty International, 2022).

Based on the analysis, the most vulnerable domains associated with autocratic stasis differ across Azerbaijan and Belarus. In Azerbaijan, four core areas stand out—judicial subordination, executive dominance over cabinet appointments, electoral manipulation, and voter intimidation—while in Belarus, near-total CSO closure is compounded by a politicised judiciary and the contraction of academic and cultural autonomy. Across both regimes, patterns of institutional capture, coercion, and legitimacy-framing are consistently observed in conjunction with CA stasis.

Policy Recommendations

Azerbaijan

Recognising that the EU lacks sufficient leverage mechanisms over Azerbaijan, which, unlike the others in the EN, but similarly to Azerbaijan rejected any integration path, and that any strong conditionality or punitive measures risk a strong backlash, the EU needs to deploy a **dual-track, context-sensitive approach**. Such a pragmatic strategy, however, should not compromise its commitment to democratic norms and the ideal of democracy support. Hence, the EU needs to balance limited leverage with sustained engagement, focusing on incremental institutional reform, bureaucratic professionalism, and selective empowerment of civic actors. Such an approach is likely to raise the costs of arbitrariness, improve administrative traceability, and sustain societal capacity for reform.

In such a dual-track approach, the EU should boost its **technical cooperation** programmes with Azerbaijan, engaging in the high-level dialogue to relaunch the ones closed (Erasmus+ and some EU Twinning projects) and double the efforts in existing ones (Twinning, TAIEX, CIB). Thus, the conventional EU approach, which promises “more for more”, might not prove to be the best strategy. Rather, the EU should be interested in building the capacity of technocracy within the government and facilitating normative diffusions at the low and mid-level state apparatus. Framing such engagement around efficiency, transparency, and service delivery ensures local buy-in. Azerbaijan’s ongoing bureaucratic renewal offers a rare opening for gradual norm diffusion. Through technical cooperation, the EU can thus potentially strengthen governance efficiency and administrative accountability, gradually constraining excessive executive dominance. Over time, professionalisation and peer networks may encourage the diffusion of democratic governance norms even within non-political sectors.

The technical cooperation needs to be paralleled by financial, capacity building, and international collaboration support to individual independent researchers, researchers from private and state universities open to international cooperation, lawyers and legal experts, as well as professional associations. When formal CSOs and traditional grant-making mechanisms are implausible, if not impossible at all, **supporting individual actors** can preserve limited civic oversight and policy debate. Supporting these groups of actors should go in parallel with support for individual activists, which may ultimately prove more effective. Framing engagement as **capacity-building** rather than conditionality is expected to enhance regime acceptance and reduce backlash.

The judiciary is one of Azerbaijan’s core institutional bottlenecks. Rather than pursuing unrealistic independence, EU assistance should promote **procedural transparency and predictability in the judiciary**. Publishing anonymised rulings, establishing transparent disciplinary mechanisms, and lengthening judicial terms can incrementally strengthen professionalism. These measures, supported through TAIEX, CEPEJ, Venice Commission, and Erasmus+ Justice, are intended to raise reputational costs for politicised rulings and to encourage gradual behavioural change. Pilot reforms should begin in commercial and administrative courts under an anti-corruption rationale. The currently ongoing reforms in the judiciary offer an opportunity for the EU intervention. As already noted above, as in other sectors, technical cooperation in this sector should be complemented by cooperation with independent legal experts, lawyers, and scholars.

In turn, **progress in elections** should focus on administrative reforms rather than political transformation. Particularly in this field, the EU needs to take an incremental but consistent and expansive approach. Revising

the Election Code to improve voter lists, complaint procedures, and vote tabulation would enhance procedural credibility. The EU can provide quiet technical support through NDICI, EU4Digital, and ODIHR follow-up projects, complemented by small-scale training for observers and party agents via EED and EIDHR. Moreover, the EU should help establish secure mechanisms for **reporting and addressing election-related intimidation**. Confidential complaints systems, legal aid, and documentation training, supported by ProtectDefenders.eu and EIDHR, can improve evidence credibility and increase the costs of intimidation. Emphasising technical assistance avoids direct political confrontation while strengthening institutional resilience. Domestic partners such as bar associations and journalists' networks should implement these efforts discreetly, supported by off-site data protection and emergency assistance for activists. Nevertheless, through close monitoring and collaboration with local actors, the EU needs to ensure that such cooperation is carefully designed to generate gradual effects in the long term, if not in the mid-term.

Short-term EU actions should focus on judicial transparency and electoral administration; medium-term steps on career-based reforms and anti-intimidation mechanisms; long-term efforts on bureaucratic pluralisation and local governance. Given limited political space, **quiet, cumulative engagement** remains the most credible and sustainable path toward democratic resilience.

Belarus

Unlike in Azerbaijan, where limited sectoral and technical cooperation with the EU remains possible, the Belarusian government has suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership since 2021 and effectively halted all formal channels of collaboration. The EU has no institutional access to Belarusian authorities, and engagement through conventional mechanisms such as Twinning, TAIEX, or CIB is no longer feasible. This situation necessitates a fundamentally different approach, one that is centred not on cooperation with the state but on the empowerment and protection of civic, academic, and professional actors operating in exile or through cross-border networks. The EU's engagement should therefore aim to sustain Belarus's social and institutional capacity abroad, preserve the country's intellectual and legal continuity, and **prepare the foundations for a democratic transition** once the political environment changes.

In the absence of government channels, the EU should focus on **strengthening exiled civil society** and maintaining its operational capacity. With domestic CSOs eradicated and over a thousand organisations forcibly liquidated, flexible funding under NDICI, EIDHR, and EU4Digital should prioritise Belarusian civic actors working on documentation of repression, digital security, and civic education. Existing diaspora hubs in Vilnius, Warsaw, and Tbilisi should be expanded into coordination platforms offering legal aid, networking infrastructure, and archival continuity. Support should also extend to informal civic initiatives and humanitarian or cultural projects that operate across borders and maintain community links with Belarus. These measures can help prevent the complete erosion of social capital and help sustain an independent civic sphere beyond the regime's reach.

Preserving academic and cultural autonomy must remain another central pillar of EU engagement. The regime's ideological control over universities and cultural institutions has led to a severe intellectual isolation that can only be mitigated through sustained international support. The EU should establish a dedicated Academic Freedom Fund and further expand Erasmus+, Marie Skłodowska-Curie, and Creative Europe programmes for exiled Belarusian scholars, artists, and students. Parallel digital universities, diaspora archives, and open publishing platforms can help safeguard Belarusian scholarship and culture from extinction. These initiatives should be complemented by cooperation with host institutions in Lithuania, Poland, and Germany to ensure credential recognition and facilitate career reintegration, while quiet diplomacy continues to address document restrictions and politically motivated dismissals.

Given that any form of judicial or institutional reform inside Belarus is currently impossible, EU assistance should focus on **rule-of-law preparedness in exile**. Support for Belarusian lawyers, legal scholars, and human rights NGOs abroad should include drafting independent frameworks for judicial appointments, disciplinary mechanisms, and due process guarantees, drawing on expertise from the Venice Commission, TAIEX, and OSCE/ODIHR. These legal blueprints, developed and refined over time, can serve as ready models for reform once conditions permit. At the same time, continued support for trial monitoring, evidence preservation, and

transitional justice initiatives can lay the groundwork for future accountability processes, ensuring that the rule-of-law dimension is not lost during years of exile.

The EU should also prioritise the **collective effectiveness of exiled civic organisations** through coordination among them. Existing crowdfunding platforms such as BYSOL and ByHelp, as well as independent media and documentation initiatives, should receive stable, multi-year funding and technical assistance. Establishing pooled financing mechanisms and dialogue platforms through trusted EU member states or international intermediaries could help improve strategic coherence among these actors, reducing duplication and strengthening their ability to represent Belarusian democratic voices internationally.

Legal and civic reintegration, including the repeal of repressive CSO legislation and the re-establishment of judicial independence, must be acknowledged as **post-transition objectives**, not current policy options. The EU's task for now is to **preserve the expertise, networks, and institutional continuity** necessary to rebuild these structures when political change becomes possible. Sanctions should remain part of the EU's principled stance but must be narrowly targeted and reversible, avoiding collateral harm to independent actors. Through this constrained but consistent engagement, one that is anchored in protection, capacity preservation, and long-term institutional readiness, the EU can help **preserve** the civic, intellectual, and professional foundations required for a credible democratic recovery once the authoritarian system begins to loosen.

Conclusions

This policy paper set out to map, rather than explain, the persistence of closed autocracy in the EN. Its aim was diagnostic: to identify where authoritarian control is most institutionally entrenched and how such entrenched domains differ across cases. It did not seek to establish causal relationships or determine the statistical drivers of regime persistence. Instead, it used the regime states framework to capture patterns of closure and to translate these diagnostics into differentiated strategies of democracy support.

The comparative analysis of Azerbaijan and Belarus shows that autocratisation in the region is neither uniform nor ideologically monolithic but varies in institutional configuration, temporal trajectory, and regime practice. Applying the regime states framework demonstrates that, while both countries are currently in CA stasis, this condition has emerged through distinct historical pathways and is reflected in different constellations of institutional weakness, each carrying specific implications for the design of democracy support.

Azerbaijan's CA stasis — persistent since 1995 — has been characterised by entrenched presidential dominance, institutional centralisation, and elite co-optation sustained by hydrocarbon wealth. The regime's manipulation of elections, erosion of judicial autonomy, and intimidation of opposition actors have produced a highly centralised yet adaptable form of autocratic governance, blending repression with patronage. Internationally, Azerbaijan has leveraged strategic resources to mitigate external pressure, constraining the scope of normative conditionality in democracy support.

Belarus, by contrast, entered CA stasis only in 2022, following the post-election crackdown of 2020–2021 and the collapse of electoral pluralism. Its current configuration is defined by the near-total closure of civil society, the subordination of the judiciary, and the ideological control of academia and culture. Repression of non-state actors has reached a depth that places the regime among the most restrictive in the EN region. The recent consolidation of CA stasis in Belarus reflects not only a deterioration in regime quality but also the institutionalisation of repression as a stabilising mechanism.

These cases illustrate that although the regime type (CA) is shared, the regime state — that is, the direction, rhythm, and institutional coherence of autocratic control — differs markedly. Democracy support must

therefore account not only for what kind of regime exists but also for how its closure is maintained and where engagement may be feasible.

The policy implications that follow are diagnostic rather than prescriptive in a deterministic sense. In Azerbaijan, meaningful support should engage with mid-level bureaucrats, fragmented civic actors, and electoral administration, combining quiet diplomacy with technical cooperation to encourage incremental improvements in transparency and accountability. In Belarus, the emphasis should remain on exiled civic and academic communities, enabling them to preserve institutional memory, document repression, and prepare for eventual re-engagement in a post-autocratic context.

The results of the policy paper emphasise that even across similar cases, EU democracy support should avoid uniform templates and instead adopt calibrated, regime-sensitive strategies rooted in contextual diagnosis. The regime state approach by Buscaneanu and Kneuer (2024) provides a tool for this kind of analysis. Its application on the cluster of autocratization in the EN corroborates its analytical added-value.

Ultimately, the analysis underscores a cautious but constructive insight: CA stasis does not imply irreversible closure, yet it reflects a high degree of resilience that cannot be altered through normative appeals or generic sanctions. By distinguishing between types and states of autocracy, and by grounding engagement strategies in empirical diagnostics rather than abstract conditionality, the regime states framework provides a more nuanced and substantive foundation for external engagement — one that prioritises strategic patience, contextual understanding, and the gradual strengthening of civic and institutional endurance.

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Dr Mădălina Dobrescu, NTNU
info@redemos.eu

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