



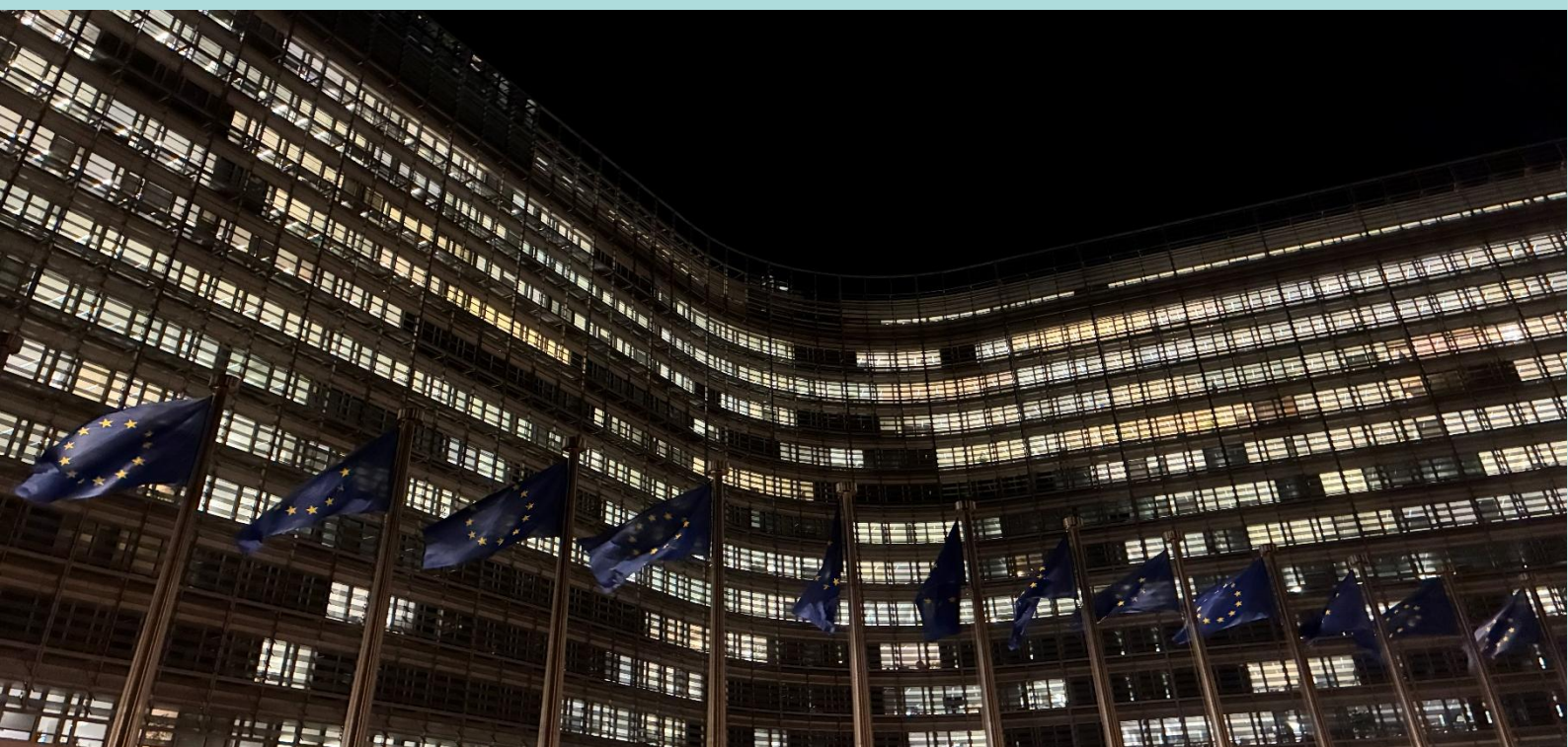
# REDEMOS

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

## Policy Brief 6

# Where and how is authoritarian control most persistently entrenched? The cases of Azerbaijan and Belarus

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## Context (Setting the Scene)

The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood is marked by increasingly divergent regime trajectories. While some countries have experienced periods of democratic opening or partial consolidation, others have moved in the opposite direction and settled into **long-term authoritarian rule**. Azerbaijan and Belarus stand out as the two most persistent cases of closed autocracy in the region, both remaining resistant to meaningful democratic change over extended periods.

EU democracy support has traditionally focused on moments of transition, democratic backsliding, or reform windows. This approach is less effective in contexts where authoritarian rule has become **institutionally entrenched and politically stabilised**. In such settings, external engagement faces the risk of being miscalibrated if it does not account for how authoritarian control is maintained in practice. Rather than explaining why democratisation has failed, this policy brief therefore asks a more practical question for policymakers: **where is democratic governance most persistently constrained?**

Azerbaijan and Belarus illustrate that authoritarian persistence is not uniform. Although both are closed autocracies, they differ significantly in their institutional configurations. Azerbaijan's authoritarian order rests on executive dominance, controlled elections, and judicial subordination, combined with technocratic governance and elite co-optation. Belarus, by contrast, has consolidated authoritarian rule through the near-total closure of civil society, repression of academic and cultural freedom, and politicisation of the judiciary, particularly after the violent suppression of the 2020 protests.

These differences matter for policy design. Treating closed autocracies as a single category risks overlooking variation in institutional vulnerabilities and potential entry points for engagement. By focusing on regime dynamics and institutional constraints, this policy brief provides a diagnostic basis for **regime-sensitive democracy support** that avoids one-size-fits-all approaches and instead tailors engagement to the specific configuration of authoritarian control.

## Evidence, Analysis and Results (*Key Findings*)

Using V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index and expert-informed qualitative analysis, the study isolates the **most persistently constrained institutional domains** during CA stasis.

### Azerbaijan (CA stasis since 1995)

Authoritarian resilience is anchored in:

- **Judicial subordination**, including systematic non-compliance with high court and ECtHR rulings
- **Executive dominance over cabinet appointments**, eliminating horizontal accountability
- **Electoral manipulation**, rendering elections procedurally performative
- **Election-related intimidation**, increasingly institutionalised through legal and bureaucratic means

These mechanisms legalise control, ritualise elections, and neutralise accountability while maintaining a technocratic façade.

### Belarus (CA stasis since 2022)

Authoritarian consolidation is characterised by:

- **Comprehensive repression of civil society organisations**, including forced liquidation and criminalisation
- **Strict control over CSO entry and exit**, eliminating organisational pluralism
- **Curtailed academic and cultural freedom**, producing intellectual isolation
- **Politicisation of lower courts**, transforming the judiciary into an instrument of repression

Belarus's current regime state reflects the **institutionalisation of repression as a stabilising mechanism**, rather than selective or adaptive authoritarianism.

## Policy Recommendations

### Azerbaijan

Given limited EU leverage and Azerbaijan's rejection of integration pathways, democracy support must be **incremental, pragmatic, and regime-sensitive**:

- **Adopt a dual-track approach** combining quiet institutional engagement with selective support for civic actors
- **Prioritise technical cooperation** (TAIEX, Twinning, CIB) to strengthen bureaucratic professionalism, transparency, and administrative traceability
- **Focus judicial engagement on procedural predictability**, including transparent disciplinary mechanisms, anonymised rulings, and merit-based training
- **Support electoral administration reforms**, targeting voter lists, complaint mechanisms, and vote tabulation rather than political competition
- **Mitigate election-related intimidation** through confidential reporting systems, legal aid, and documentation training

Short-term efforts should target judicial transparency and election administration; medium-term engagement should focus on career-based reforms; long-term strategies should aim at bureaucratic pluralisation.

### Belarus

With all formal cooperation channels suspended, EU engagement must focus on **capacity preservation and transition preparedness**:

- **Strengthen exiled civil society**, scaling diaspora hubs into coordination platforms for legal aid, documentation, and civic education
- **Preserve academic and cultural autonomy** through a dedicated Academic Freedom Fund, expanded Erasmus+ and Marie Skłodowska-Curie access, and digital academic infrastructures
- **Support rule-of-law preparedness in exile**, including drafting judicial reform blueprints and transitional justice frameworks
- **Enhance coordination among exiled civic actors**, supporting crowdfunding platforms, independent media, and pooled funding mechanisms

Sanctions should remain targeted and reversible, while EU support prioritises **institutional continuity, expertise preservation, and long-term democratic readiness**.

The full study – **REDEMOS Policy Paper: Regime clusters and challenges to democratisation in the Eastern Neighbourhood: Azerbaijan and Belarus** – can be found at <https://redemos.eu/resources/publications/policy-papers/>



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Towards a sustained demos in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood**

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