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# Social drivers and barriers to democratisation

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# 1 Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have not only experienced profound political and economic, but also major social changes. In examining democratisation processes and the factors that determine their success or failure, the literature points to several key issues as well as facilitating factors. Merkel's concept of "embedded democracy"<sup>1</sup> identifies an electoral regime, political liberties, civil rights, horizontal accountability, and the effective power to govern as core features. However, his model also emphasises the importance of external conditions that are not defining components of democracy but make it more likely to evolve, function well, and remain stable. These external conditions also prominently include social factors – that is, aspects relating to countries' societies as well as their structure and functioning.

The literature attributes a great deal of importance to civil society as one of these social factors, understanding it as an actor that enables, enhances or enforces democracy where it does not exist<sup>2</sup> and to maintain and strengthen it where it does.<sup>3</sup> In this context, civil society can be understood in a comprehensive sense, not only including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and trade unions, but also other kinds of associations and relationships that "bond" people within a community, "bridge" communities across the country and thus create shared norms, identities, and trust within its society.<sup>4</sup> Civil society might also be seen through the lens of a "public sphere"<sup>5</sup>, that is, a social space in which citizens can deliberate and where a "civic culture"<sup>6</sup> is formed and maintained.

Moreover, the literature points to factors related to the structure of society more generally. Emphasising the impact of a modern liberal market economy on the composition of society, modernisation theory links the spread of democracy throughout the world to the emergence of large and influential middle classes. Similarly, modernist thinkers point to high levels of education as a key factor that drives democratisation and sustains democracy, with Lipset arguing that "it comes close to being a necessary condition"<sup>7</sup> and Glaeser et al.<sup>8</sup> showing that differences in schooling help to explain differences in political institutions. With the information media space increasingly contested as both fake news and disinformation flourish online, media literacy and agreement on a basic common set of agreed-upon-facts within a society seem to be a further key prerequisite for democracy and democratisation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Merkel, 'Embedded and Defective Democracies', *Democratization* 11, no. 5 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340412331304598>.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Diamond, 'Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation', *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 3 (1994): 4–17, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1994.0041>.

<sup>3</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton University Press, 1993), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7s8r7>.

<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Suhrkamp, 1962).

<sup>6</sup> Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton University Press, 1963).

<sup>7</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy', *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (1959): 80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1951731>.

<sup>8</sup> Edward L. Glaeser et al., 'Do Institutions Cause Growth?', *Journal of Economic Growth*, no. 9 (2004): 271–303, <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOEG.0000038933.16398.ed>.

<sup>9</sup> Lance E. Mason et al., 'Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Challenge of Fake News', *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 10, no. 2 (2018): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2018-10-2-1>; Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, *Truth and Democracy* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

Beyond the central argument that a “modern” society is essential for democracy, a second strand of factors relates to the composition of that society. Dahl argues that democracy is likely to emerge and flourish in a country that is “culturally fairly homogeneous and less likely in a country with sharply differentiated and conflicting subcultures”. Given the history of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, many countries in the region display a certain level of ethnic and linguistic diversity, which are paired with differing identities and at times conflicting interests and political preferences. A long and ongoing history of migration and displacement adds an additional layer of complexity in this regard. Some countries also have large diasporas that are economically relevant due to remittances and that may exert political influence in different ways. Meanwhile limited opportunities at home continue to drive young and well-educated people abroad.

Other sources of domestic division include differences between urban and rural communities, which might relate to norms and values but also very practical issues such as infrastructure or access to government services. This is partly interlinked with economic inequality, which is discussed in greater depth in the REDEMOS policy paper on economic drivers of and barriers to democratisation by Rabinovych, Turcanu, and Enachi.<sup>10</sup> Social stratification informed by such divisions can undermine social cohesion and may thus affect democracy and democratisation. Notably, it can also reinforce political polarisation.

While facilitated by other social factors, political polarisation can strongly affect democracy and democratisation processes. Ideological differences can become so fundamental and irreconcilable that consensus-building becomes ever more difficult, and that the legitimacy of each side is no longer accepted – even if it is legitimised by a democratic majority. Ideological polarisation can also lead to affective polarisation, meaning that political non-acceptance of the other side is leading to or accompanied by fundamental antipathy towards it and distrust of it.<sup>11</sup> This threatens to destabilise functioning democracies and undermine democratic transitions.<sup>12</sup>

This paper examines various elements related to the structure of society and the public sphere in the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In doing so, it explores key social drivers and barriers to democratisation. It identifies civil society as a crucial force in each country, though its nature, scope, challenges, and impact varies significantly across them. Other drivers and barriers also vary strongly and are shaped by country-specific contexts. On a regional level, the paper highlights polarisation and social division as well as migration, brain-drain and diasporas as common issues that all six countries face. Based on its findings, the paper makes several policy recommendations for the European Union and its institutions.

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<sup>10</sup> Maryna Rabinovych et al., *Economic Drivers and Barriers to Democratization in the Eastern Neighbourhood*, REDEMOS Policy Papers (REDEMOS, 2026).

<sup>11</sup> Shanto Iyengar et al., ‘The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States’, *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019): 129–46, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034>.

<sup>12</sup> Milan W. Svobik, ‘Polarization versus Democracy’, *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019): 20–32, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0039>.

## 2 Armenia

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Armenia has endured an eventful and challenging several years since its 2018 “Velvet Revolution”, when the soft autocracy that had governed the country since the end of the Soviet Union came to an end. The uprising and the ensuing elections elevated journalist and opposition politician Nikol Pashinyan into office. With Azerbaijan’s 2020 repossession of the previously Armenian-controlled territory around Nagorno-Karabakh, both Pashinyan and the democratic transition faced their first major challenge. The former elites blamed Pashinyan for the loss. However, in a snap election that Pashinyan called in June 2021, Armenians decided against returning to the political status quo-ante and in favour of continuing Armenia’s path towards democracy.

The 2020 44-day-war demonstrated Azerbaijan’s substantial military superiority. A tripartite ceasefire agreement ended open conflict, with Russia underpinning the armistice and sending peacekeepers. In December 2022, Azerbaijan began blockading Nagorno-Karabakh without Russian peacekeepers showing any meaningful reaction. In September 2023, Azerbaijan launched a large-scale military offensive to take control of Nagorno-Karabakh, which led to the ethnic cleansing of the territory and more than 100,000 refugees entering Armenia proper within one week.<sup>13</sup>

These developments had a significant impact on Armenian society. To begin with, the country is in a state of shock and trauma due to the mass displacement of Karabakh Armenians. Given the Azerbaijani government’s openly hostile rhetoric, including but not limited to government-aligned actors and media organisations frequently referring to Armenia as “Western-Azerbaijan”, Armenian society is marked by fear that further conflict may be on the horizon and that Armenia’s very existence is under threat. Meanwhile, the arrival of displaced Karabakh Armenians has created several practical challenges and social tensions.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1 Drivers: Civil society

Civil society has been and continues to be a key driver of democratisation in Armenia. The 2018 revolution itself was enabled by a coalition of civil society actors that coordinated the bottom-up “Reject Serzh” protests against the former Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan. These activists teamed up with opposition MP Nikol Pashinyan and his “My Step” movement, which evolved from a protest march from the city of Gyumri to Yerevan. Key figures from Armenian civil society played a role in coordinating the protests but primarily did so as private citizens. Most leading NGOs were not directly involved in organizing them. However, their work had played a key role in preparing the ground.<sup>15</sup>

Various factors shaped the events of April and May that year and led to the revolution’s success. However, activities of Armenia’s civil society over the previous decade had played a key role in enabling it by educating citizens across the country about democratic rights and principles as well as strategies for organising and mobilisation. The 1990s and 2000s had seen a rise of NGO activity within Armenian civil society, with Western

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<sup>13</sup> UNHCR, *Armenia Emergency Refugee Response Plan* (UNHCR, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> International Crisis Group, *Armenia Struggles to Cope with Exodus from Nagorno-Karabakh* (International Crisis Group, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Yevgenya Jenny Paturyan, ‘Armenian Civil Society’, in *Armenia’s Velvet Revolution: Authoritarian Decline and Civil Resistance in a Multipolar World*, by Laurence Broers and Anna Ohanyan (I.B. Tauris, 2021).

funding allowing for the emergence of professionally run associations. From the mid-2000s onwards, this was increasingly complemented by protest initiatives such as the 2007 “Save Teghut” initiative<sup>16</sup> against a mining project in North-Eastern Armenia or the 2015 “Electric Yerevan” protests against a substantial increase in electricity prices. These initiatives and protests provided necessary experience and served as a training ground for the two weeks of protest that led to Serzh Sargsyan’s resignation.<sup>17</sup>

Civil society continued to play a key role following the revolution. Existing associations grew and new organisations emerged, not least thanks to increasing external funding in the aftermath of the revolution. At the same time, civil society started to face several challenges. Given its crucial role in the revolution as well as a lack of reform-minded and competent public officials, many activists moved from positions in civil society to the government. Over time, this also contributed to emerging divisions within civil society. Some activists and organisations were sympathetic to the government and its agenda – not least because it now included many acquaintances and former colleagues. However, over time and in the light of the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as increasingly undemocratic actions on behalf of Pashinyan’s government, others not only started to fundamentally reject the government but also those civil society actors that they deemed too close to it.

Meanwhile, the challenges of accommodating and integrating more than 100,000 refugees who fled Nagorno-Karabakh constituted a major challenge to Armenian authorities and society. Against the backdrop of an overwhelmed state, civil society played a crucial role in these efforts. While this constituted a major achievement, it also took and continues to take away resources and attention from other causes that are crucial to Armenia’s democratic transition.

## 2.2 Barriers: Polarisation, distrust and post-war trauma

Civil society’s internal differences regarding Pashinyan’s government mirror, to some extent, divisions between different camps in an increasingly polarised society. It is hard to exaggerate the trauma that the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh had not only inflicted on those Armenians that had to leave their homeland, but also on Armenian society more generally. Additionally, Armenians have experienced Azerbaijan’s military superiority in 2020 and 2023 and are exposed to on-going threatening Azerbaijani rhetoric, which instils fear on Armenian society. At the same time, the realities on the ground put the Armenian government into a position where it has no real choice but to make decisions that are highly contested within the country. A peace deal with Azerbaijan is crucial for Armenia’s security, but as negotiations are held from a position of weakness, they require extremely painful concessions. The lack of an alternative to making such concessions is, however, not universally recognised in Armenia. Political forces linked to pre-2018 government and their supporters perceive and frame any concessions to Azerbaijan as treason.

In that context, Armenian society is, very broadly speaking, divided into three camps. A first camp subscribes to the narrative of the opposition, putting exclusive blame on the Pashinyan government for its military losses, accusing him of selling out to Azerbaijan and Turkey while at the same time persecuting those opposing his course of action. This camp was notably mobilised during Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan’s 2024

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Matosian, “‘Save Teghut’ Redefines Environmental Activism in Armenia”, *The Armenian Weekly*, 12 March 2025, <https://armenianweekly.com/2012/02/21/save-teghut-redefines-environmental-activism-in-armenia>.

<sup>17</sup> Paturyan, ‘Armenian Civil Society’.

march from Tavush Province to Yerevan in protest against the cession of territories to Azerbaijan as well as ensuing large-scale protests in Yerevan and beyond.

A second camp largely rejects these narratives and supports Pashinyan and his government. While not necessarily uncritical of him, this camp acknowledges the dilemma that Pashinyan's government finds itself in as well as the lack of a realistic alternative to very painful concessions to Azerbaijan given latter's military and economic superiority and the apparent loss of Russia as a reliable ally. At the same time, it recognises several concrete improvements that Pashinyan's government has achieved since 2018, especially in terms of significantly reforming the county's police forces and reducing petty corruption.

A third camp both fundamentally rejects the old forces and their recent reincarnation as the country's new opposition, while also distrusting and opposing Pashinyan. These include many disenchanted former Pashinyan supporters, who sympathise with the post-2018 path but oppose and distrust the current prime minister. Some former allies fell out with him politically or personally. Within the broader public, many deem Pashinyan to be incompetent, some consider him corrupt and dishonest, while others believe he is on a path towards authoritarian rule himself. In that context, it is worth noting that Pashinyan is accused of having made several strategic mistakes in the run-up to the confrontation with Azerbaijan, and of having mislead the public during the 2020 war.

The polarisation between these camps is both political and affective.<sup>18</sup> Significant portions of the two anti-Pashinyan camps deem him and his government fundamentally illegitimate. In that context, they often resort to narratives such as accusing Pashinyan and his supporters of being traitors to the Armenian nation, and as being Turkish and Azerbaijani agents, or that they will go or should be imprisoned. The level of polarisation is notably illustrated by an incident at the 2024 Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day. When Pashinyan's wife Anna Hakobyan and her youngest daughter approached the eternal flame of the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial Complex, part of the crowd started chanting that "Nikol is a murderer, a traitor, a Turk" and similar slogans.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the pro-Pashinyan camp tends to frame all its opponents as anti-democratic forces and stooges of Russia. This was notably illustrated by a controversial statement by former Yerevan mayor Hayk Marutyan, who said in 2018 that "there are white forces, and there are black forces. [...] We are the white forces, and all those who don't want us to succeed, I can say, are the black forces."<sup>20</sup> Ironically, Marutyan also fell out with and became a major critic of Pashinyan after the latter instigated his removal from office. Meanwhile, the rejection of any opposition has become ever more fundamental and at times vicious in nature. Notably, Parliament speaker Alen Simonian spat at a Canadian-Armenian activist who called him a traitor and told his bodyguards to "take this garbage cat away from here" after a Nagorno-Karabakh activist berated him.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Civilnet, 'Call for Transparency, Divisive Rhetoric and Political Polarization: Democracy Watch', *CIVILNET*, 29 April 2024, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/773559/call-for-transparency-divisive-rhetoric-and-political-polarization-democracy-watch>.

<sup>19</sup> JAMnews, *Anna Hakobyan, Wife of Nikol Pashinyan, Faced Jeers at the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial Complex*, Twitter, 24 April 2024, <https://x.com/JAMnewsCaucasus/status/1783166379186692402>.

<sup>20</sup> Zara Harutiunian and Samson Martirosyan, 'Fair but Boring? An Overview of Yerevan's City Council Elections', *openDemocracy*, 26 September 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/fair-but-boring-overview-of-yerevan-city-council-elections>.

<sup>21</sup> Naira Bulghadarian, 'Armenian Speaker Unrepentant About Insulting Detractor', *Azatutyun*, 2 October 2024, <https://www.azatutyun.am/author/naira-bulghadarian/-qomy>.



## 3 Azerbaijan

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In February of 2024, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev won his fifth consecutive term, garnering 92% of the country's vote. The election marked the country's first to be held with the inclusion of the repossessed territories of Nagorno-Karabakh, following a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Notably, the election also saw a high turnout of 76% of eligible voters.<sup>22</sup> Despite this turnout, civil society and representatives of political opposition groups expressed concern around the lack of any genuine alternative to an Aliyev presidency. Additionally, observers noted increased limits to freedom of assembly and public gatherings leading up to the elections.<sup>23</sup> The limitation of such freedoms coincided with a year of intense crackdown by the government on the country's independent media and NGO sectors. Journalists, political opposition, civil society representatives, and activists have been subject to arrests, detainment, and disappearances that, according to Human Rights Watch, are in violation of international human rights law. These arrests and crackdowns on critical voices have led to an exodus of activists and independent journalists from the country, diminishing Azerbaijan's formerly diverse NGO and independent media sectors.<sup>24</sup> President Aliyev's fifth consecutive term thus saw the country's deepening slide into authoritarianism, with crackdowns on independent and oppositional voices as well as unreliable elections.

### 3.1 Potential drivers: Civil society and independent media

Operating in exile, Azerbaijan's independent media has drawn attention to the country's embrace of autocratic governance. Increasingly, the reality in Azerbaijan is that a functioning civil society is not possible given the country's restrictions on, and subsequent targeting of, critical voices. However, it is important to note international pressure aimed at promoting democratic principles, human rights, and fundamental freedoms in the country. Some success was reached in 2020, when the EU and European Parliament pressed the Azerbaijani government to pass moderate liberalisation of the country's repressive NGO law, along with ending the criminal prosecution of several high-profile civil society leaders. This shift indicates room, albeit limited, for dialogue between NGOs critical of Aliyev's regime and the government. Thus, Azerbaijan's civil society depends on foreign actors to bolster, promote, and call attention to pro-democratisation efforts, while also pressuring the regime to not breach international human rights law.<sup>25</sup> However, it needs to be acknowledged that in light of Azerbaijan's current state, civil society is at best a *potential* driver of democratisation.

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<sup>22</sup> IFES, *Elections: Azerbaijani Presidency 2024 General* (The International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024), <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/4314>.

<sup>23</sup> OSCE, *Lack of Genuine Political Alternatives in a Restricted Environment Characterized Azerbaijan's Presidential Election, International Observers Say* (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2024), <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/azerbaijan/562494>.

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch, *We Try to Stay Invisible, Azerbaijan's Escalating Crackdown on Critics and Civil Society* (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

<sup>25</sup> Najmin Kamilsoy, *Assessing Recent Government-Civil Society Interactions in Azerbaijan* (Baku Research Institute, 2021), <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/assessing-recent-government-civil-society-interactions-in-azerbaijan>.



## 3.2 Barriers: Weak social capital

One initial barrier to democratisation in Azerbaijan is a lack of social capital. While bonding social capital (e.g. family and clan ties) are strong in the country, bridging social capital – “characterized by networking between people of various backgrounds, ethnicities or professions, but united by belonging to a common association, party, or organization where membership is open to almost everyone” – is weak.<sup>26</sup> This presents a number of problems for democratisation. Firstly, weak ties outside of family or a clan means that some forms of organising and exercises in collective power are ineffective. Few people in Azerbaijan reported being either active or inactive members in a number of voluntary organisations, which could promote collective action, community, or democratic principles such as: church or religious groups (2.9%); sports or recreation (2%); art, music, or educational groups (2.2%); labour unions (5%); political parties (10.2%); environmental organisations (0.5%); professional groups (1.4%); humanitarian or charitable organisations (1.8%); consumer groups (0.6%); self-help, mutual aid organisations (1.5%); and others (0.6%).<sup>27</sup>

Political repression further compounds problems surrounding organising and exercising collective power in Azerbaijan. While there are some benefits to strong bonding social capital, the accepted practice of hiring family and acquaintances for sought-after positions and jobs creates a system of loyalty to those who make the decisions, providing stability to the status quo.<sup>28</sup> Social stratification in Azerbaijan also reinforces loyalty to the status quo among those benefiting from it and apathy among those who do not.

Further obstructing any calls for democratisation in Azerbaijan is the alleged popularity of the Aliyev regime, especially following the capture of Nagorno-Karabakh in September of 2023. The region’s repossession was declared an end to a conflict which stretched over two decades and provided longevity to Aliyev’s rule, as the region’s separatists and neighbouring Armenia were weaponised as the primary source of Azerbaijan’s social and economic challenges. Now, although Azerbaijan has repossessed Nagorno-Karabakh, peace negotiations with Armenia are continually stalled.<sup>29</sup> Prolonged conflict, in this sense, serves as a tool to distract from threats to human rights protections or calls for democratic processes in the country.

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<sup>26</sup> Anar Valiyev, ‘Social Capital in Azerbaijan: Does It Help to Build Democracy?’, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 31 (2011).

<sup>27</sup> Firuza Nahmadova, *An Autocratic Middle-Class in Azerbaijan: Does State Dependency Lead to Authoritarian Resiliency?* (Baku Research Institute, 2021), <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/an-autocratic-middle-class-in-azerbaijan-does-state-dependency-lead-to-authoritarian-resiliency>.

<sup>28</sup> Nahmadova, *An Autocratic Middle-Class in Azerbaijan: Does State Dependency Lead to Authoritarian Resiliency?*

<sup>29</sup> Joshua Kucera, ‘After Winning Back Nagorno-Karabakh, What Will Aliyev Do Next?’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-karabakh-regained-what-next-aliyev-armenia/32680561.html>.

## 4 Belarus

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Belarus's 2020 presidential elections were the largest challenge to President Alexander Lukashenka's rule to date. Lukashenka was elected president in a relatively democratic election in 1994 and transformed the country into an autocracy afterwards. A poor response to Covid-19 and ensuing socio-economic challenges led to substantial support for three primary opposition candidates. Unusually for Belarusian politics, two of the candidates – former ambassador and politician Valery Tsapkala and banker Viktor Babaryka – hailed from the establishment itself. Meanwhile Siarhei Tsikhanouski, a businessman turned YouTuber and anti-corruption campaigner mobilised people against Lukashenka with the slogan “Stop the Cockroach”.<sup>30</sup> Belarusian authorities barred all three from running and arrested two of them, but allowed Tsikhanouski's previously not politically active wife Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to register as a candidate. With the support of Valery Tsapkala's wife, Veranika Tsapkala, and Viktor Babaryka's campaign manager, Maria Kalesnikava, Tsikhanouskaya went on to launch a relatively successful campaign. However, official results credited Lukashenka with just over 80% of the vote and Tsikhanouskaya with around 10% – a very clearly fabricated outcome that sparked massive nationwide protests.<sup>31</sup>

The protests presented a strong challenge to the regime, which brutally cracked down on them with the help of major Russian support in the form of propaganda and security assistance. In doing so, Lukashenka, who had previously been trying to balance Russian influence by improving relations with the European Union, had to make numerous concessions to Moscow that allowed for ever greater Russian political, economic, and military influence and control.<sup>32</sup> In that context, the Belarusian authorities closed the already limited space for independent media, the opposition, and civil society. Independent journalists and opponents of the regime largely ceased their activities, were arrested or left the country.<sup>33</sup> In 2021, the regime forced a Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius to land in Minsk to arrest opposition activist and editor-in-chief of the Nexta news outlet Roman Protasevich and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega, causing international outrage. Moreover, the regime began to actively attract migrants from the Middle East and Afghanistan, instrumentalising them to deliberately create border crises in what have been referred to as ‘hybrid attacks’ on the EU member states Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.<sup>34</sup> In 2022, Belarus served as a staging ground for Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In January 2025, the regime held presidential elections without allowing serious opposition candidates, resulting in Lukashenka allegedly receiving more than 87% of the vote.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Andrew Roth, ‘Belarus Blues: Can Europe's “last Dictator” Survive Rising Discontent?’, *The Guardian*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/16/slipper-revolution-lukashenkos-reign-under-pressure-in-belarus>.

<sup>31</sup> Lucan Ahmad Way, ‘How a Dictator Became Vulnerable’, *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 4 (2020): 17–27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0052>.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Masters, *The Belarus-Russia Alliance: An Axis of Autocracy in Eastern Europe* (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023), <https://www.cfr.org/background/belarus-russia-alliance-axis-autocracy-eastern-europe>.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Coalson, ‘The Human Cost Of Dismantling Belarus's Independent Media’, Belarus, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pressfreedom-journalism-belarus-lukashenka-repression/32925251.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Maria Margarita Mentzelopoulou, *Instrumentalisation in the Field of Migration and Asylum* (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2022).

<sup>35</sup> Leonie Cater, ‘Lukashenko Wins “Sham” Election in Belarus with 87.6 Percent of Vote’, *POLITICO Europe*, 26 January 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/alexander-lukashenko-wins-sham-election-in-belarus>.

## 4.1 Potential drivers: Civil society and women's empowerment

The 2020 protests came as a major surprise and shook the Belarusian regime to the core. To some extent, Lukashenka's blunders and miscalculations contributed to their success. Rather than dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, he humorously suggested vodka as remedy, chose not to cancel the annual victory parade, and allowed the Belarusian football league to continue while public health officials reported unrealistic case numbers that were promptly ridiculed.<sup>36</sup> The regime's decision to let Tsikhanouskaya run for president reflected how Lukashenka did not take her – and women's involvement in politics more generally – seriously. This backfired as she and her team ran an effective campaign that allowed for the opposition and its sympathisers to unite behind one candidate. Meanwhile, Lukashenka's regular misogynist comments about Tsikhanouskaya, Tsapkala, and Kalesnikava backfired, galvanising Belarusian women to vote against him as well as to organise themselves and to take to the streets in protest of the election results.<sup>37</sup>

Although Belarus maintains a 30% quota for female parliamentarians, very few women played a major role in Belarusian politics or within the country's opposition prior to 2020. The authorities' take on women in politics is well reflected by various statements from the Central Election Commission Chair, Lidziya Yarmoshyna, whose career constituted one of the few exceptions. After a brutal dispersal of protests following the fraudulent 2010 presidential elections, she stated that women who had joined the protests "better stay home and cook borscht instead of hanging around at squares."<sup>38</sup> Over the years she also stated that "women are apolitical by nature" and "cannot make unexpected and brave decisions", echoing Lukashenka's view that "if this burden is placed on a woman, she will collapse, poor thing."<sup>39</sup> With the exception of Tatsiana Karatkevich, who ran against Lukashenka in 2015, the opposition did not feature many women prior to 2020 either. This contrasted with women's role in society more generally. While Belarus scored poorly for "political empowerment" in the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report, it came in fifth and ahead of all EU member states on "economic participation and opportunity". Overall, it was ranked 29 out of 153 countries – ahead of countries like the Netherlands, Australia, and the United States.<sup>40</sup> Women thus do play a major role in Belarusian society, and the events before, during and after the 2020 presidential elections demonstrate their potential to shape its politics too. Their role in the protests prompted Belarus expert Olga Dryndova to suggest that "much of the society has moved beyond archaic patriarchal values, and that women will be at the forefront in the country's ongoing struggle for democracy."<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, civil society and independent media organisations played a key role in exposing the level of election fraud and managed to mobilise many Belarusians against it. Generally, Belarusian civil society had enjoyed slightly more freedoms over the previous decade, which contributed to its ability to organise and respond. This opening resulted, in part, from Lukashenka's attempts to counterbalance Russian encroachment by engaging with the EU. Furthermore, civil society drew strength from an increasingly empowered Belarusian citizenry, shaped by the country's well-educated middle class and its thriving tech industry. When Belarus participated in the OECD's 2018 PISA study, it outperformed several EU member

<sup>36</sup> Connor Sephton, 'Coronavirus: Belarus President Refuses to Cancel Anything - and Says Vodka and Saunas Will Ward off COVID-19', *Sky News*, 30 March 2020, <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-belarus-president-refuses-to-cancel-anything-and-says-vodka-and-saunas-will-ward-off-coronavirus-11965396>.

<sup>37</sup> Alice Bota, *Die Frauen von Belarus: Von Revolution, Mut und dem Drang nach Freiheit* (Berlin Verlag, 2021).

<sup>38</sup> Maryna Koktysh, 'Dictatorship: It's a Man's Game', *Index on Censorship*, 3 August 2013, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/03/belarus-a-country-without-a-first-lady>.

<sup>39</sup> Olga Dryndova, 'Revolution in Belarus: Surprisingly Female?', *New Eastern Europe*, 17 November 2020, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/11/17/revolution-in-belarus-surprisingly-female>.

<sup>40</sup> World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020* (World Economic Forum, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Dryndova, 'Revolution in Belarus: Surprisingly Female?'

states as well as all enlargement and neighbourhood countries that took part.<sup>42</sup> The country's tech boom exemplified by the Belarus High Technologies Park (HTP) in Minsk, which some dubbed the "Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe"<sup>43</sup> – established and led by Valery Tsepkalo, one of the Lukashenka's jailed challengers in 2020.

While pre-2020 Belarus had a very restrictive media environment, there were several independent news outlets operating within the country, such as radio station euroradio.by, weekly newspaper Nasha Niva, and internet portal tut.by. These were complemented by new media outlets that made use of Telegram and other social media channels, the most notable example being Nexta. In the context of the 2020 elections, they were complemented by various social media and web initiatives stemming from the tech community. Notably, the "Honest People" platform encouraged and helped citizens to apply to election vote-counting commissions and become election observers. The Zubr platform allowed voters and observers to share information about electoral violations. Moreover, 30% of voters registered and stated their voting decision on the Golos platform, making up for the absence of exit polls. The three initiatives also collected and processed reports from around a quarter of the country's polling stations, allowing them to show inconsistencies in the Central Election Commission data. Through these tools and initiatives, Belarusian citizens essentially created an "alternative Central Election Commission".<sup>44</sup> However, as the next section will discuss, the post-2020 crackdown means that, just as in the case of Azerbaijan, Belarusian civil society is currently at best a *potential* driver of democratisation.

## 4.2 Barriers: Domestic crackdown and societal polarisation

Just as Belarusian civil society's strength in 2020 facilitated the protests and thus the most serious challenge the regime has faced so far, the authorities' Russia-backed, ruthless, and comprehensive crackdown on any form of dissent after 2020 drastically reduced any possibility for change. Belarusian civil society and independent media remained very active in the aftermath of the failed 2020 uprising. However, they are largely forced to operate from abroad now. As a result, their messaging no longer reaches as many Belarusians as before and they do not maintain as much legitimacy among the public as they previously enjoyed. Moreover, Russia-backed counterpropaganda has proven to be effective in breaking people's will.

However, it is not just civil society activists who have left the country. Belarus has experienced a wide exodus of reform-minded citizens. At the same time, the cost of any form of political contestation has risen dramatically. Speaking up, let alone organising, now comes with major risks to health and well-being for both activists and their family and friends. This climate of fear, combined with diminishing hope following the failure of the major protests in 2020 and the increasing presence of Russian security actors, has reduced peoples' motivation to speak out or organise themselves. Many of those who are in a position to speak up – such as the founders of Golos – have a lot to lose. At the same time, people working in the IT sector can still have a decent life in Minsk if they don't meddle in politics.

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<sup>42</sup> OECD, *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do*, PISA (OECD, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en>.

<sup>43</sup> Olga Razumovskaya, 'Belarus Is Emerging as the Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe', *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 December 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/belarus-is-emerging-as-the-silicon-valley-of-eastern-europe-1481032802>.

<sup>44</sup> Максим Трудолюбов, 'Активисты в Беларуси Умело Используют Интернет Для Самоорганизации, а Власти — Просто Выключают Его. Кто Из Них Победит?', *Meduza*, 2 September 2020, <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/09/02/aktivisty-v-belarusi-umelo-ispolzuyut-internet-dlya-samoorganizatsii-a-vlasti-prosto-vyklyuchayut-ego-kto-iz-nih-pobedit>.

Moreover, although the 2020 protesters hailed from different parts of society, they did not represent all its layers. They were predominantly young and hailed from the well-educated middle class, especially from creative professions, the IT sector and education. Older people, and generally those working in industrial or agrarian sectors, were far less involved.<sup>45</sup> This reflects a broader division in society, that is also linked to peoples' views on the regime as well as the country's political orientation. Despite the regime's unpopularity in 2020, Lukashenka's government maintained some genuine support. While reliable polling in Belarus is difficult and prone to inaccuracies, public opinion studies by Chatham House suggest that ahead of the 2025 presidential elections around 33% of the Belarusian population supported the government, 13% were dissatisfied for economic reasons, 14% were pro-democratic, and 41% declared themselves neutral.

Meanwhile, Russia's war in Ukraine has split the country into three camps. Polls conducted between June 2022 and December 2024 suggest that support for Russia's war lies between 30% and 36% and opposition to it between 28% and 34% – with the remainder of respondents stating they were “not sure”.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the idea of Belarus joining the EU on the one hand and Belarus forming a union state with Russia on the other, are both supported by about a quarter of Belarusians.<sup>47</sup>

Supporters of both Lukashenka and the opposition believe that their respective camps represent the majority in Belarus after 2020. As these camps also rely on different sources of information – independent media versus Belarusian and Russian state media – they are also becoming increasingly antagonistic not just in terms of their political views but also the realities they live in. As a result, we have seen the emergence of “a social divide as Belarusians begin to live in increasingly different worlds from each other.”<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, there are also divisions emerging within the opposition. Tsikhanouskaya and her team, as well as other activists and media organisations based outside of Belarus, tend to be fundamental in their rejection of Lukashenka. Meanwhile, the domestic opposition is more open towards engaging with his regime. These divisions may constitute a challenge to future attempts at democratisation – even if Lukashenka left power.

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<sup>45</sup> Sergei A. Mudrov, ‘Doomed to Fail? Why Success Was Almost Not an Option in the 2020 Protests in Belarus’, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 29, no. 1 (2021): 109–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2021.1928880>.

<sup>46</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, *Perceptions of the Electoral Campaign and the Situation in Belarus. Results of a Public Opinion Study Conducted between 9 December 2024 and 15 January 2025* (Chatham House, 2025), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KFKicAVCWGX2GmkBk2HdAaNI2Xf6QoX/view>.

<sup>47</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, *Belarus: The Changing Social Contract. The Results of a Public Opinion Poll Conducted between 3 and 22 February 2024* (Chatham House, 2024), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hVYn5esNKSDAykhcOGL2lphmTtSeLVJO/view>.

<sup>48</sup> Ryhor Astapenia, *Belarusians Live in an Increasingly Divided Country* (Chatham House, 2021), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/10/belarusians-live-increasingly-divided-country>.

## 5 Georgia

*Zachary Fabos, CRRC Georgia*

Until recently, Georgia was praised among countries of the Caucasus for moderate improvements to its democratic processes. The first peaceful democratic transition of power occurred in 2012, when former Prime Minister Mikheil Saakashvili and the United National Movement (UNM) conceded to billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition.<sup>49</sup> Despite previous optimism around improvements to democratic processes in the country, the Georgian Dream government has increasingly embraced policies and practices that European Union officials have labelled as evidence of democratic backsliding, halting the country's EU accession progress and resulting in the sanctioning of Georgian Dream party leaders and other elites by various Western governments.<sup>50</sup>

In the days following Georgia's 2024 parliamentary elections, accusations from civil society organisations, political opposition groups and the President, Salome Zourabichvili, of systemic vote-rigging were abundant.<sup>51</sup> Although these claims demonstrate clear violations to democratic processes in the country, the organised response of civil society organisations, political opposition groups, and independent media demonstrates existing desire and demand for reliable democratic institutions in the country.

### 5.1 Drivers: Civil society

Georgia's civil society has long worked with Western partners on a wide range of initiatives, not limited to the promotion of democratic norms in the country. The Georgian Dream regime's targeting of civil society organisations (CSOs) that receive foreign funding, however, presents existential challenges for the sector. With the fate of Georgia's formerly robust CSO sector already uncertain, the unexpected pause and subsequent closure of USAID, only exacerbated the grim outlook of the industry. As a result of the programme's closure, long-standing organisations which promoted civic engagement and democratic norms in Georgia, such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), ceased operation in Georgia. USAID alone had funded over 35 programmes in Georgia which aimed to strengthen the country's "resilience to malign influence, consolidate democratic gains through enhanced citizen responsive governance, and enable high-value employment through increased economic growth".<sup>52</sup> This effort was underscored by approximately \$6 billion in assistance from the US government to promote democratic institutions in Georgia.<sup>53</sup> The abrupt halt and cancellation of this aid leaves a major hole for development and the promotion of democracy in Georgia. Aside from USAID, however, other sources of funding persist, such as from the EU, which as of October 2024 had provided €121 million in assistance for economic development and the promotion of Georgia's accession into the Union.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Freedom House, *Georgia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report* (Freedom House, 2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2022>.

<sup>50</sup> Civil.ge, 'EP Debates on "Democratic Backsliding and Threats to Political Pluralism in Georgia"', *Civil.Ge*, 8 October 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/627700>.

<sup>51</sup> OC Media, 'Georgian Election Commission Calls on Prosecutor to Investigate Claims of Voter Fraud', *OC Media*, 2024, <https://oc-media.org/georgian-election-commission-calls-on-prosecutor-to-investigate-claims-of-voter-fraud>.

<sup>52</sup> USAID, 'Our Programs', USAID: DOA, 11 April 2024, <https://www.usaid.gov/georgia>.

<sup>53</sup> USAID, 'Georgia Country Overview', USAID: DOA, 11 April 2024, <https://www.usaid.gov/georgia>.

<sup>54</sup> Gabriel Gavin, 'EU Strips Georgia of €121M in Funding over "Democratic Backsliding"', *POLITICO Europe*, 8 October 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-georgia-130-million-funding-democratic-backsliding>.



Prior to USAID's closure, perhaps most indicative of Georgian civil society and its NGO sector's success in cultivating pro-democratic sentiment was the massive turnout in protest of Georgian Dream's "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence", also commonly referred to as the "Foreign Agents Law" and "Russian law" due to its resemblance to legislation enacted in Russia in 2022.<sup>55</sup> The law, passed in May of 2024, requires organisations that receive 20% of their funding from foreign powers to register as an organisation, "pursuing the interests of a foreign power". Registered organisations may be subject to an audit of finances and internal communications by the Ministry of Justice of Georgia.<sup>56</sup> In response to the law, tens of thousands of Georgians took to the streets of the capital, demonstrating their disapproval of the legislation in a series of protests that drew international attention.<sup>57</sup> Although unsuccessful in their attempt to sway the Georgian Dream government to repeal the law, the size and scope of the protests displayed the public's ability to mobilise in defence of democratic norms.

## 5.2 Barriers: Distrust, clientelism, and emigration

Regardless of the Georgian public's ability to mobilise in the face of democratic backsliding, barriers preventing society's full embracement of democratic principles persist. One significant hurdle manifests itself in the public's lack of trust in formal institutions. Georgia can be characterised as a country with high "bonding" social capital, but low "bridging" social capital, meaning that bonds between individuals are strong but they do not extend to collaboration with larger groups with shared goals or organisational structure. In-group solidarity and out-group mistrust in Georgia may be credited to low rates of formal participation in civil society and public meetings, with less than one percent of Georgians claiming to have ever participated in a formal meeting of a club or civic organisation.<sup>58</sup>

Out-group mistrust among Georgians is not limited to politics, but extends to NGOs and news media. According to the Caucasus Research Resource Center's 2024 Caucasus Barometer, 44% of the public distrusts Parliament, with only 22% claiming to trust the institution. With regard to NGOs, 32% of Georgians claim to distrust them, while only 22% feel a degree of trust towards such organisations. Distrust extends to media, with 36% of the public identifying some degree of distrust, and less than a quarter (24%) trusting news outlets.<sup>59</sup> Although Georgians demonstrated a willingness to mobilise against legislation representing democratic backsliding, a formal pro-democratic movement is limited due to the public's lack of trust towards institutions in general, resulting in an unwillingness to organise around them or any affiliated figures.

Further complicating institutional distrust is the nature of employment in public service and a tradition of political clientelism in Georgia. Nearly ten percent of the population of Georgia works in the public sector, including local government, municipal operations, and education.<sup>60</sup> Although extensive, the establishment

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<sup>55</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Russia: New Restrictions for 'Foreign Agents'* (Human Rights Watch, 2022), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/01/russia-new-restrictions-foreign-agents>.

<sup>56</sup> Parliament of Georgia, 'Law of Georgia on Transparency of Foreign Influence', Parliament of Georgia, 29 October 2024, <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/6171895>.

<sup>57</sup> Civil.ge, 'Tens of Thousands Protest Against Foreign Agents Law —', *Civil.Ge*, 12 May 2024, <https://civil.ge/archives/605652>.

<sup>58</sup> Leslie Hough, 'Social Capital in Georgia', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 31 (2011): 2.

<sup>59</sup> CRRC, *Caucasus Barometer 2024: Georgia* (Caucasus Research Resource Center, 2024), <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge>.

<sup>60</sup> JAMnews, '65% of Employed in Georgia Work in Public Sector', *JAMnews*, 28 October 2022, <https://jam-news.net/65-of-employed-in-georgia-work-in-public-sector/>.



of a politically neutral civil service has proved challenging in Georgia.<sup>61</sup> Expectations of party loyalty often extend from local government, to municipal services, and even schools, where reciprocity is expected in the form of voter loyalty towards the ruling party in exchange for one's employment and wages.<sup>62</sup>

Following trends among Eastern Partnership countries and among countries of the Caucasus, Georgia also faces the challenge of accelerating emigration. The Georgian National Statistics Service suggests that 815,608 Georgians emigrated from the country between 2014 and 2023 and projected this number to grow by up to a million in 2024.<sup>63</sup> Increased emigration from Georgia raises concerns around the strength and development of civil society and democratic norms, as many that leave possess the skills and level of education required for its promotion.<sup>64</sup> Although this brain drain may undermine the promotion of democratic norms as highly skilled and educated Georgians leave the country, it paradoxically may also allow for the introduction of democratic ideals as those who migrate and receive high-skilled training or an education elsewhere return to Georgia.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Tamar Charkviani, 'Public Management Culture and Meritocracy in Georgia – through the Prism of Development of State Institutions', *Journal of Politics and Democratization* 4, no. 1 (2019).

<sup>62</sup> Sophia Gorgodze, 'Rise and Fall of Decentralized School Governance—Decision-Making Practices in Georgia', *International Education Studies* 9, no. 11 (2016): 25, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v9n11p25>.

<sup>63</sup> IDFI, *Statistics of Migration of Georgian Citizens* (Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 2024), <https://idfi.ge:443/en/statistics-of-migration-of-georgian-citizens>.

<sup>64</sup> Lasha Labadze and Mirjan Tukhashvili, *Costs and Benefits of Labour Mobility between the EU and the Eastern Partnership Partner Countries: Country Report: Georgia* (Brussels, 2012), <https://iset-pi.ge/storage/media/other/2021-10-07/79519290-2784-11ec-bd99-dd33bdbb9ca3.pdf>.

<sup>65</sup> Tamar Khoshtaria and Rati Shubladze, 'The Gap Between Support for Democracy and Liberal Values in Georgia', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 116 (July 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3929/ETHZ-B-000428141>.

## 6 Moldova

**Katharine Khamhaengwong, CRRC Georgia**

On 3 November 2024, incumbent president and independent candidate Maia Sandu, backed by the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), won a highly contested runoff election against Alexandr Stoianoglo, also running as an independent but backed by the pro-Russian Party of Socialists (PSRM). A referendum to include EU accession as a national goal in the constitution was passed by a very slim majority of 50.46% on 20 October 2024, the same day as the first round of presidential elections. Sandu and her allies said they had won an “unfair fight,” as criminal and Russia-backed groups had funnelled tens of millions of euros into the elections in an effort to buy votes.<sup>66</sup>

Sandu was first elected president in 2020 on a pro-European and anti-corruption platform, defeating pro-Russian PSRM candidate Igor Dodon.<sup>67</sup> Her anti-corruption focus was compelling in the wake of a 2014 scandal in which one billion dollars – approximately 12% of the country’s GDP – were stolen from several Moldovan banks, which were subsequently bailed out by the state. One of those ultimately sentenced for the theft was Israeli-Moldovan oligarch Ilan Shor.<sup>68</sup> Even prior to the theft, Moldova was known for being one of the poorest countries in Europe and one of the post-Soviet countries with the highest levels of corruption and state capture by oligarchs.<sup>69</sup>

Further contributing to Moldova’s litany of challenges are separatist movements by minority-language communities in Gagauzia and Transnistria, supported by Russia. Gagauzia remains an autonomous part of Moldova, but Transnistria is today a de facto independent state. The Kremlin has used this “frozen conflict” to maintain a strategic foothold and to continue to play a political role in the country.

Moldova’s post-independence struggles have contributed to the formation of large diaspora communities, which played a large role in the 2024 referendum, with 77% of the 180,000 diaspora votes cast in favour of EU integration.<sup>70</sup>

Sandu’s election and her party’s parliamentary win in 2021 accelerated the country’s anti-corruption agenda and its alignment with EU standards, including reforms aimed at democratisation. At the same time, the government’s pro-European orientation faces significant domestic contestation.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Tom Balmforth and Alexander Tanas, ‘Moldova’s Sandu Secures Knife-Edge EU Vote Win after “Unfair Fight.”’, *Reuters*, 21 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/moldovas-eu-referendum-goes-wire-after-sandu-decries-vote-meddling-2024-10-21>.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Roth, ‘Moldova Election: Blow to Kremlin as Opposition Candidate Sweeps to Victory’, *The Guardian*, 16 November 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/16/moldova-election-blow-kremlin-opposition-candidate-sweeps-victory-maia-sandu>.

<sup>68</sup> Sergiu Gaibu, *Money Laundering in Moldova* (Centre for East European and International Studies, 2018), <https://www.zois-berlin.de/en/publications/zois-spotlight/archiv-2018/money-laundering-in-moldova>.

<sup>69</sup> William Crowther, ‘Moldova’s First Quarter Century: Flawed Transition and Failed Democracy’, *Nationalities Papers* 51, no. 1 (2023): 33–46, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.93>.

<sup>70</sup> Mihai-Razvan Corman, ‘Three Takeaways from the Nearly Failed EU Referendum in Moldova’, *Verfassungsblog: On Matters Constitutional*, 1 November 2024, <https://doi.org/10.59704/b586421167a15dce>.

<sup>71</sup> Isabell Burmester, ‘Divided Paths to Europe: Politicization and the 2024 Referendum in Moldova’, *Moldovan Analytical Digest*, no. 1 (2025): 6–10.

## 6.1 Drivers: Diaspora and civil society

Moldova's population has shrunk by 20 to 25% in the last thirty years,<sup>72</sup> as nearly one million Moldovans moved abroad – initially mainly to Russia and more recently to the EU – amidst challenging economic circumstances. However, this diaspora population continues to actively participate in politics; it is overwhelmingly supportive of the country's pro-EU path<sup>73</sup> and thus enabled Sandu's 2024 win and movement towards EU integration. However, these diaspora votes also open Sandu and the country's pro-EU orientation up to accusations that they do not have real support within Moldova. Stoianoglo's good performance had partly been the result of major Russian interference and disruption aimed at undermining the countries' pro-democracy and pro-EU orientation.<sup>74</sup> Against the backdrop of this interference, Stoianoglo actually won a majority among Moldovans residing within the country. In that context, the pro-Russian PSRM party framed Sandu as "an illegitimate president, recognized only by her sponsors and supporters abroad."<sup>75</sup>

Prior to Sandu's 2020 win, the oligarch-led government took steps to limit the diaspora vote,<sup>76</sup> but diaspora members organised, virtually and via non-governmental organisations, to ensure continued participation.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, there is evidence that communities with high migration to Western Europe see a decrease in votes for communist candidates,<sup>78</sup> even after controlling for pre-migration electoral preferences and a number of other factors. Even if the migrants do not return, democratic and "European" values seem to trickle back to home communities through information transmission and cultural diffusion.

The diaspora also plays a role in civil society, which is the second main social driver of democratization. Hometown associations mobilise the diaspora in support of community development and activities that strengthen social cohesion.<sup>79</sup> Other NGOs often compensate for deficits in public administration capacity by providing the specialised legal and policy expertise required to transpose EU rules on good governance and the rule of law into domestic legislation. Given that role, Moldovan civil society organisations are often seen as pro-government. At the same time, they also act as a critical watchdog, pushing back against potentially undemocratic moves from the PAS government, including the shutdown of six television channels accused of spreading Russian disinformation or pre-election abuse of administrative resources. However, other NGOs have been used by Russia to funnel hundreds of millions of dollars into anti-European campaigns.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Tiina Kaukvere, 'Is Moldova's Diaspora Ready to Return Home?', *Emerging Europe*, 13 April 2024, <https://emerging-europe.com/analysis/is-moldovas-diaspora-ready-to-return-home>.

<sup>73</sup> Sabrina Hernandez, *Moldova's Diaspora Flexes Its Political Muscles* (Atlantic Council, 2020), <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/moldovas-diaspora-flexes-its-political-muscles>.

<sup>74</sup> Oana Marocico et al., 'How Russian-Funded Fake News Network Aims to Disrupt Election in Europe', *BBC*, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4g5kl0n5d2o>.

<sup>75</sup> Stephen McGrath and Nicolae Dumitrache, 'Moldova's Diaspora Tipped the Scales in a Pivotal Election. Critic Question the Vote's Validity', *AP*, n.d., <https://apnews.com/article/moldova-election-president-russia-europe-diaspora-sandu-40b98d140fef92a2bd06d5db8b5d82f>.

<sup>76</sup> Mihai Popsoi, 'Changing the Rules of the Game in Moldova.' ODR: May 15, 2017.', *Open Democracy*, 15 May 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/changing-rules-of-game-in-moldova>.

<sup>77</sup> Hernandez, *Moldova's Diaspora Flexes Its Political Muscles*.

<sup>78</sup> Toman Omar Mahmoud et al., *The Effect of Labor Migration on the Diffusion of Democracy: Evidence from a Former Soviet Republic*, no. 7980 (Institute for the Study of Labor, 2024).

<sup>79</sup> UNDP, *Hometown Associations Drive Local Development and Social Cohesion in Moldova* (United Nations Development Programme, 2025), <https://www.undp.org/moldova/press-releases/hometown-associations-drive-local-development-and-social-cohesion-moldova>.

<sup>80</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2024: Moldova* (Freedom House, 2024), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/moldova/nations-transit/2024>.

## 6.2 Barriers: Divided national identity, oligarchic and Russian influence, and emigration

A key barrier to democratisation is a political divide on ethnic and linguistic lines. As Moldova approached independence from the Soviet Union, the population was about 64.5% Romanian/Moldovan, 14% Ukrainian, 13% Russian, 4% Gagauz (a Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christian group), 2% Bulgarian, and 2% Jewish, with smaller but still significant numbers of Belarusians, Poles, Roma, and Germans.<sup>81</sup> In light of this diversity, polarisation stems from both Romanian nationalists arguing in favour of reunification with Romania as well as Russia-backed separatists claiming that they need independence to protect themselves from said nationalists.<sup>82</sup> While most Moldovans do not fall on either of those extremes, there is nonetheless an important divide between Romanian/Moldovan-speaking Moldovans, who tend to favour EU integration and, in some cases, reunification with Romania, and Russian speakers, who tend to support closer ties to Russia.<sup>83</sup> The latter are vulnerable to large-scale Russian disinformation efforts. This split, exacerbated by ideas that “Moldovan” identity is a Soviet construct, has inhibited democratisation and intra-Moldova unification efforts.<sup>84</sup>

This polarisation comes hand in hand with a similar divide between pro-European, usually centrist or right-leaning, and pro-Russian, usually left-leaning political parties.<sup>85</sup> The latter receive funding from oligarchs as well as from Russia. Russian-backed vote-buying and disinformation campaigns in support of these anti-European parties have highlighted the weakness of Moldova’s democratic institutions. Meanwhile, independent media and pro-democracy NGOs that relied on US funding are now struggling in the face of the US withdrawal from foreign aid and related programmes.<sup>86</sup>

Some of the PAS government’s efforts to combat these Russian influence operations, including invoking a state of emergency to block some candidates from running, have been criticised as undemocratic. As long as this societal and political divide remains, a solution to the problems of Transnistrian and Gagauzian separatism will be difficult to come by.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, while the substantial emigration Moldova has faced provides economic and democratic benefits, it also constitutes a brain drain, with some of the best and the brightest citizens leaving. Many democratically-inclined young people that could work on addressing Moldova’s corruption, polarisation, and other problems have left the country for Western Europe and elsewhere. Those who remain often work for international organisations and NGOs, leaving important gaps in government bodies.

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<sup>81</sup> Helen Fedor, *Moldova: A Country Study* (Library of Congress, 1995).

<sup>82</sup> Crowther, ‘Moldova’s First Quarter Century’.

<sup>83</sup> Minority Rights Group, *Russians and Russian-Speakers in Moldova* (Minority Rights Group, 2018), <https://minorityrights.org/communities/russians-and-russian-speakers>.

<sup>84</sup> RFE/RL, ‘Fake Facebook Accounts Aimed at Moldovans Removed After Pressure from U.S. Lawmaker’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 October 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/sandu-cardin-election-chisinau-moldova-russia-disinformation/33155033.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Burmester, ‘Divided Paths to Europe: Politicization and the 2024 Referendum in Moldova’.

<sup>86</sup> Ion Marandici, ‘Oligarchs, Euroscepticism, and Russia’s Strategy in Moldova’, *Moldovan Analytical Digest*, no. 1 (2025).

<sup>87</sup> Bob Deen and Wouter Zweers, *Walking the Tightrope towards the EU* (Clingendael, 2022).

## 7 Ukraine

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Democratisation efforts in Ukraine have been sidelined by Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion. Amidst the bombing and occupation of large swaths of the country, democracy itself has been largely put on hold. Parliamentary elections that should have been held in October 2023 and presidential elections for March 2024 were both postponed under martial law. This was in line with the Ukrainian constitution and is supported by the general public though.<sup>88</sup>

As such, the last elections were the 2019 presidential election, in which current president Volodymyr Zelenskyy defeated incumbent Petro Poroshenko, and the 2019 parliamentary elections, in which Zelenskyy's Servant of the People party won a majority. Zelenskyy, a comedian and actor without previous political experience, won a landslide victory on a light-on-the-details anti-corruption, anti-oligarch platform.

Before the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian democracy had faced barriers from corruption, clientelism, and very high levels of Russian interference, including propaganda, support for separatists, and the 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea. Despite these challenges, the country had been making slow progress towards democracy.<sup>89</sup>

### 7.1 Drivers: Civil society, societal cohesion, and decentralisation

An important impact of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was increasing solidarity within Ukrainian society, both in terms of civil society participation and societal cohesion more broadly. Following the 2014 Euromaidan uprising, in which President Viktor Yanukovich was ousted after declining to sign an EU association agreement, Ukraine saw a burst of formal and informal civil society activity. This declined in the years that followed, until Russian missiles began to hit Kyiv in 2022 and Ukrainians jumped into action. In 2019, only 8 % of Ukrainians engaged in any sort of civil activity. In the months after the full-scale invasion, that number rose to up to 80%. While much of this civic activity was initially quite informal, it has become more structured and professionalised in the years since 2022.<sup>90</sup>

In addition to supporting the defence effort, civil society organisations provide expertise, advocacy, and monitoring for democratisation and European integration efforts. Activists have also restarted pressure on the government with protests for various causes (despite the martial law ban on mass gatherings), demands for transparency, and petitions.<sup>91</sup> Most prominently, major protests across Ukraine led the government to change course on its attempt to curb the independence of two key anti-corruption agencies in July 2025.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2024: Ukraine* (Freedom House, 2024), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/nations-transit/2024>.

<sup>89</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2023: War Deepens a Regional Divide* (Freedom House, 2023), [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/NIT\\_2023\\_Digital.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/NIT_2023_Digital.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> Kateryna Zarembo and Eric Martin, 'Civil Society and Sense of Community in Ukraine: From Dormancy to Action', *European Societies* 26, no. 2 (2024): 203–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2185652>.

<sup>91</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2024: Ukraine*.

<sup>92</sup> Veronika Melkozerova, 'Zelenskyy Reveals Ukrainian Protests Forced U-Turn on Anti-Corruption Bill', *POLITICO Europe*, 25 July 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/zelenskyy-on-anti-corruption-u-turn-no-one-is-willing-to-risk-eu-integration>.

This increase in civic engagement was accompanied by an increased sense of community and, at least initially, a strongly united sense of trust in the military and the president as well as support for EU integration and NATO accession – the classic “rally-around-the-flag” effect. Surveys also suggest that Ukrainian society deems it very important that Ukraine becomes a fully functioning democracy.<sup>93</sup> Following Russia’s full-scale invasion, previous regional divides on issues like joining the EU and NATO largely disappeared. Additionally, the shared experience of the nearly one million people in the Ukrainian army has allowed for the lessening of some ethnic, religious, and class barriers. Meanwhile, tolerance of LGBTQ+ people has improved amidst the war.<sup>94</sup>

Another impact of the 2013-2014 Euromaidan was a push for decentralisation and a strengthening of local self-government, wherein local officials began to bring in higher revenues and provide more public services. When Russia launched its invasion, this meant that they were more prepared to address local problems, including repairing critical infrastructure, organising civilian defences, providing bomb shelters, and assisting the displaced and unemployed. Local officials are relatively highly trusted and conduct collaborative governance, including participatory budgeting. The advent of the war also led to increased public engagement from local authorities. These factors contribute to social cohesion and improved democracy, though some of these local powers have also been lost to military administration and wartime measures.<sup>95</sup>

## 7.2 Barriers: Separatism, war trauma, and emigration

Prior to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the country had been marred by nearly a decade of armed conflict in the country’s eastern Donbas region. Russia-backed separatists battled the central government, alleging “linguistic genocide” against Russian speakers in Ukraine, a narrative promoted by the Russian government. Prior to the war, those speaking Russian as a first language constituted about 30% of the country’s population and were largely centred in urban areas, the Donbas region, and Crimea. This linguistic divide, concentrated in the country’s east and in Crimea, reinforced regional divisions.<sup>96</sup>

Now, parts of the Donbas region have been under Russian control for over ten years, and the people who remained have been subject to unrelenting Russian propaganda. As such, it is likely that these divisions will continue, providing fuel for tensions rooted in linguistic differences and regionalism, while also spurring political polarisation and challenges to Ukraine’s autonomy from Russia.<sup>97</sup> This may constitute a challenge once Ukraine has managed to reestablish control over all its internationally recognised territory.

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<sup>93</sup> NDI, *Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine’s Democratic Transition* (National Democratic Institute, 2022), <https://www.ndi.org/publications/opportunities-and-challenges-facing-ukraine-s-democratic-transition-0#downloads>; Kateryna Zarembo and Eric Martin, ‘Civil Society and Sense of Community in Ukraine: From Dormancy to Action’, *European Societies*, 19 March 2023, 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2185652>.

<sup>94</sup> Masha Gessen, ‘Ukraine’s Democracy in Darkness’, *The New Yorker*, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/02/05/ukraines-democracy-in-darkness>.

<sup>95</sup> Sophie Schmäing, ‘Urban Democracy in Post-Maidan Ukraine: Conflict and Cooperation between Citizens and Local Governments in Participatory Budgeting’, *European Societies* 26, no. 2 (2024): 230–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2023.2183972>; Oksana Huss and Oleksandra Keudel, *National Security in Local Hands? How Local Authorities Contribute to Ukraine’s Resilience* (PONARS Eurasia, 2023), <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/national-security-in-local-hands-how-local-authorities-contribute-to-ukraines-resilience>.

<sup>96</sup> Egbert Fortuin, ‘“Ukraine Commits Genocide on Russians”: The Term “Genocide” in Russian Propaganda’, *Russian Linguistics* 46, no. 3 (2022): 313–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11185-022-09258-5>.

<sup>97</sup> Reporters Without Borders, *Ten Years of War in Donetsk and Luhansk: The Disappearance of Independent Journalism and the Proliferation of Russian Propaganda Media* (Paris, 2024), <https://rsf.org/en/ten-years-war-donetsk-and-luhansk-disappearance-independent-journalism-and-proliferation-russian>.



Much of the Ukrainian population is now displaced, traumatised, or both. War trauma can cause negative impacts on the value systems of adolescents and young people, disrupt social adaptation, and decrease psychological health more generally, including increasing rates of depression, numbness, memory impairment, and psychotic disorders. These issues can impact children's education and be passed on to future generations. Combined with inequality, economic instability, and social disintegration that may come with war recovery, these traumatic effects – leading to a sense of alienation, loss of faith in the potential for a better future, and perhaps less social involvement generally – may have a negative effect on democratisation.<sup>98</sup>

Emigration is another barrier to democratisation. An estimated seven or eight million<sup>99</sup> people have left Ukraine, taking with them immense amounts of knowledge and skills that could be put to use to improve Ukraine's democracy. As these people settle into their new homes, they may become less engaged with affairs in Ukraine. Additionally, ensuring that the millions of refugees outside of Ukraine and internally displaced people within the country are able to vote will be a challenge for any post-war elections.<sup>100</sup> Even before the full-scale invasion, Ukraine's population had been shrinking due to labour migration and low birthrates. Some of the losses cannot be fixed. Tens of thousands of the people most committed to Ukraine – the soldiers defending it, along with journalists and aid workers – have died, along with many civilians.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Elona Limaj et al., 'The Trauma of War: Implications for Future Generations in Ukraine (Comparison with the Eastern European Countries That Were at War at the End of the 20th Century)', *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 81, no. 1 (2024): 111–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207233.2023.2267388>.

<sup>99</sup> UNHCR, *Ukraine Population Movements Factsheet 2* (UNHCR, 2025), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/114591>; Joop Adema et al., 'The Effect of Conflict on Ukrainian Refugees' Return and Integration', European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2024.

<sup>100</sup> Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2024: Ukraine*.

<sup>101</sup> Marc Bennets, 'What Is the Ukraine War Death Toll?', *The Times*, 12 March 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/russia-ukraine-war/article/death-toll-latest-war-kqb8xwrqc>.

## 8 Regional level

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Academic and policy discourse often lump the six countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus into one category, framing them as “post-Soviet states” and engaging with them through frameworks such as the EU’s Eastern Partnership (EaP). This risks undue generalisations and simplifications, as each of the six countries are unique in their domestic characteristics and challenges, as well as in terms of their democratisation processes and the factors that determine their success or failure. That being said, they do share certain social challenges that affect democratisation processes, and that is at least in part a result of their shared legacy of having been a part of the Soviet Union. Notably, two sets of factors can be observed: First, all six have experienced and largely continue to experience a certain level of social division and polarisation. Second, all six faced and to some extent continue to face high levels of emigration and their politics is, at times, influenced by the presence of large diasporas.

### 8.1 Social division and polarisation

The causes and drivers of social division and polarisation differ from country to country. But as the previous sections have shown, a shared feature across the region is that they are not primarily structured around clear alternative political views and preferences, but rather around identity cleavages. These include geopolitical orientation, historical narratives, values and in some cases language. Divisions are sometimes amplified by territorial conflicts and security pressures that enable elites to frame dissent as disloyalty – both in democratising countries and in countries that are authoritarian. In this context, it does not help that while there is relatively high “bonding” social capital, “bridging” social capital is often low, meaning that bonds between individuals tend to be strong but they do not extend to collaboration with larger groups with shared goals or organisational structure.

Existing divisions and polarisation are exploited and further exacerbated by Russian propaganda and disinformation. Notably, Kremlin-backed actors frame liberal and pro-democracy actors in politics and society as an existential threat to traditions and values, amplify existing divisions and erode trust in democratic institutions where they exist or are emerging. More generally, they spread conspiracy myths about pro-Western actors in politics and civil society.

At times, civil society actors manage to serve as a counterweight to social division and polarisation. But while they are a relevant driver of democratisation in most of the six countries, they also face structural limitations. NGOs are often urban, elite-driven, and disconnected from rural or economically marginal populations. As a result, their capacity to overcome polarisation and social division, to bridge the debate or to mobilise for common visions and causes often remains limited. Moreover, the closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has drastically reduced access to funding, with devastating effects on the region’s civil society landscape.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> EaP CSF, *Eastern Partnership Civil Society in Dire Straits* (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2025), <https://eap-csf.eu/articles/eastern-partnership-civil-society-in-dire-straits>.

## 8.2 Migration, brain-drain, and diasporas

All six countries have, albeit to different extents and for different reasons, experienced a high level of emigration. Particularly in Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia, skilled professionals and youth have left to seek better economic opportunities in the European Union and beyond. Azerbaijan and Belarus have seen reform-minded people leaving in light of the major crackdowns on any form of dissent. Meanwhile, Ukraine's population has shrunk from 42 million before Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion to 36 million in 2024 – including several million in areas occupied by Russia.<sup>103</sup> These major brain drains do not only weaken the region's countries' economic potential, but also their respective internal democratic momentum. As many dissatisfied, educated, and potentially reform-minded citizens leave, they can no longer advocate for political change from within their respective countries. This can leave countries' demographic composition skewed towards elderly and state-dependent populations that might be more risk-averse or more susceptible to populist and authoritarian rhetoric.<sup>104</sup>

Meanwhile, the large-scale emigration has led to new diasporas and an expansion of existing ones. The existence of these diasporas creates a new set of factors influencing democratisation. A first one relates to their most prominent socio-economic impact, that is the flow of remittances. Remittances from emigrants are crucial for parts of society across the region. However, they also create a “safety valve”<sup>105</sup> for autocratic, semi-autocratic, or highly inefficient and corrupt regimes. As emigres provide a financial lifeline to their families back home, they reduce the immediate domestic pressure on governments to fix the economy, fight corruption, and improve public services. This allows ruling elites to avoid reforms without facing the full wrath of an impoverished population. In some contexts, the reliance on remittances also fosters a certain level political apathy, as citizens feel their economic well-being is detached from the performance of their local politicians.

Emigration can thus constitute a barrier to democratisation as it reduces pressures on governments, with reform-minded people leaving and remittances alleviating socio-economic challenges that might mobilise the population. At the same time, it can generate new drivers and barriers to democratisation. Many of those who left the six countries went to EU member states and other Western democracies. Their experiences can lead to pro-democratic, as well as more generally pro-European orientations that translate into sympathy for reform paths that enable their home countries to emulate democratic countries and to move towards closer cooperation with and possibly future membership of the EU.<sup>106</sup> Western-based diasporas can thus act as agents of democratic diffusion that transmit democratic and liberal principles and values from Europe back to their home countries. They can also get involved into politics themselves, for example by donating to and voting for pro-reform parties. As indicated above, this was most notably reflected in recent Moldovan elections, where unprecedented engagement of the Moldovan diaspora helped to pro-reform candidate Sandu to win against Stoianoglo, the candidate supported by the pro-Russian PSRM. And yet, the Moldovan elections also illustrated the inherent challenge of a diaspora determining election outcomes. Emigrants' right to vote in the elections of their home countries is a widely accepted practice. However, the diaspora

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<sup>103</sup> Max Hunder, 'Ukraine Stares down the Barrel of Population Collapse', *Reuters*, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-stares-down-barrel-population-collapse-2025-12-04>.

<sup>104</sup> Michael K. Miller and Margaret E. Peters, 'Restraining the Huddled Masses: Migration Policy and Autocratic Survival', *British Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 2 (2020): 403–33, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123417000680>.

<sup>105</sup> Emily A. Sellars, 'Emigration and Collective Action', *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 4 (2019): 1210–22, <https://doi.org/10.1086/704697>.

<sup>106</sup> Romana Careja and Patrick Emmenegger, 'Making Democratic Citizens: The Effects of Migration Experience on Political Attitudes in Central and Eastern Europe', *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 7 (2012): 875–902, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011428591>.

rarely ever amounts to a third of the voters, as it did in Moldova's recent presidential elections. And it usually does not tip the balance, as it did both in Moldova's 2024 presidential elections and the national referendum on whether to include the Moldovan citizens' wish for European Union membership into the country's constitution.<sup>107</sup>

In addition to raising questions about democratic principles, Moldova's large diaspora vote also provided fertile ground for Russian disinformation. It aided Moscow's attempts to discredit the election, which its massive meddling operation had nearly succeeded in tilting toward its preferred outcome.<sup>108</sup> Meanwhile, the case of Armenia shows that large diasporas abroad can also themselves constitute a barrier to democratisation. While exact numbers are hard to determine, up to two million Armenians are estimated to live in Russia. This diaspora adds to Russia's leverage over Armenia, with remittance flows and migrant labour access creating a constituency that prioritises stable relations with the Kremlin over domestic democratic reforms. Moreover, this diaspora is subjected to propaganda and disinformation by Russian media, which amplifies anti-Western and anti-reformist sentiments within Armenian society. Meanwhile, the Armenian diaspora in the West largely descended from genocide survivors from territory that is part of modern-day Turkey. While this Western diaspora makes a number of contributions to contemporary Armenian socio-economic development, its territorial maximalism regarding Turkey and Azerbaijan as well as its support for the Armenian Revolutionary Federation party (ARF, also known as "Dashnaks") at times constitutes a barrier to democratisation as well.<sup>109</sup> To sum up, emigration and the existence of large diasporas is a double-edged sword when it comes to democratisation processes in the countries of the region.

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<sup>107</sup> Stephen Mcgrath and Nicolae Dumitrache, 'Moldova's Diaspora Tipped the Scales in a Pivotal Election. Critics Question the Vote's Validity', *AP*, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/moldova-election-president-russia-europe-diaspora-sandu-40b98d140fef92a2bd06d5db8b5d82f>.

<sup>108</sup> Larissa Doroshenko and Bret Schafer, *The Moldovan Testing Ground? What the United States Can Learn from Russian Interference in Moldova* (German Marshall Fund, 2024).

<sup>109</sup> Maria Koinova, 'Diasporas and Democratization in the Post-Communist World', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 42, no. 1 (2009): 41–64, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2009.02.001>.

## 9 Conclusions and policy recommendations

Democratisation and democratic backsliding in the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have been influenced by various social factors. This paper shows that civil society remains a driver of democratisation across the region. Its transformative capacity varies significantly though. Meanwhile social division and polarisation obstruct democratisation across the region, whereas emigration and the existence of large diasporas can constitute both a catalyst and an obstacle. Other key drivers and barriers to democratisation are more diverse.

In **Ukraine**, the full-scale invasion acted as a powerful catalyst for solidarity, increased civic participation and reduced regional and social division. At the same time, the staggering demographic loss and the psychological trauma of the conflict create medium- to long-term challenges. In **Moldova**, civil society is a critical watchdog in day-to-day politics and contributes to the fight against Russian disinformation and election interference. It is bolstered by a politically active diaspora that strengthens democratic forces. At the same time, the country's positive trajectory is challenged by a socio-political divide drawn along ethnic and linguistic lines which Russia systematically exploits.

In **Georgia**, a historically robust network of associations is currently being suffocated. While the foundations of its strong and democratically minded civil society remain in place, the 2024 Foreign Agent law and the Georgian Dream government's ensuing crackdown have severely restricted its operational space. Further barriers are public distrust in formal institutions, a tradition of political clientelism that binds employment to party loyalty as well as emigration. In neighbouring **Armenia**, civil society played a crucial role in the context of the 2018 Velvet Revolution. It was subsequently weakened by the fact that many activists joined the government. More generally, the trauma of territorial loss has fractured both civil society and society at large into distinct camps.

In authoritarian contexts like **Belarus** and **Azerbaijan**, independent civil society has largely been forced into exile. In Belarus, the brutal post-2020 crackdown has created a disconnect between civil society abroad and a domestic population that is both silenced by fear and divided with regards to geopolitical orientation and attitudes towards the regime. In Azerbaijan, the regime is able to use the confrontation with Armenia to justify its authoritarianism and galvanise support. Meanwhile, low social capital and mistrust of institutions reinforce the public's unwillingness to organize around critical voices or formal opposition groups, resulting in a political field with virtually no alternatives outside of the ruling party.

Across the board, there is a common set of regional barriers. The closure of USAID has hit civil society hard and diminished a critical lifeline just as authoritarian pressure increases. Furthermore, the region is suffering from brain drain. The large diasporas this creates can help to achieve electoral victories of pro-democracy forces, but the exodus of highly qualified, often young and reform-minded citizens across the region is hollowing out the very demographic that could push for and sustain democratic principles and institutions.

Based on these findings, we encourage the European Union to:

- **Sustain and diversify support for civil society:** Given the devastating effects of the closure of USAID, the EU must step up its financial assistance. Support should also go beyond traditional NGOs based in national capitals to include grassroots movements and informal groups to broaden the base of democratic engagement.

- **Support media organisations:** Part of its support for civil society should be directed towards building and sustaining non-partisan media landscapes as well as increasing media literacy. This would help to combat foreign disinformation and propaganda, help to reduce separate realities that citizens find themselves in and thus help to reduce polarisation and social division
- **Maintain conditional pressure:** While the EU's leverage may be reduced given recent geopolitical changes, it should continue to apply pressure on autocratic regimes in order to buy space for civil society to operate. This involves conditioning economic aid and political cooperation and inducing tangible costs for regimes' repressive practices.
- **Counter the brain drain:** The EU should fund programmes that create professional possibilities for talented, educated young people within their home countries to retain the demographic that is most likely to drive reform. This could include grants for local startups, research fellowships, and further public sector capacity-building initiatives.
- **Bridge the class divide in democratic messaging:** With pro-democracy initiatives often failing to resonate outside urban elites, the EU should more actively frame and communicate the benefits of democratisation as a path towards economic fairness and social security.





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