EUROPEAN INTERFERENCE IN AUTOCRATIC PROCESSES

The Prospects for the Promotion of Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership Countries

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Democracy versus autocracy
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DEMOCRACY VERSUS AUTOCRACY. WHY THE DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IS SUPERIOR AND HOW IT CAN DEFEAT AUTOCRACY

EUROPEAN INTERFERENCE IN AUTOCRATIC PROCESSES: THE PROSPECTS FOR THE PROMOTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a moment where attention is caught between reflections on democratic vulnerabilities inside Europe and reaction to the authoritarian atrocities emanating from Russia, many stories from the Eastern Partnership region risk being underappreciated in the EU policy community. The countries of Ukraine, Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Armenia have undergone immense changes thanks to their democratic citizens and despite authoritarian governments. The EU has been eager to support their growing civil societies but unable to protect them in the face of violent government crackdowns. Authoritarian actors often perceive active citizenries as a threat. When in government, they face a trade-off between good relations and dealing with their perceived weaknesses. With this background, the EU has sought to broaden the benefits of cooperation. Yet this has proved insufficient deterrence to regimes in a crisis. The EU needs new policies to better protect those who share its values abroad.

Social Media summary

When the EU needs to choose between values and diplomacy, civil society should play a deciding role.

Keywords

#EuropeanUnion #EasternPartnership #CivilSociety #DemocracySupport #ForeignInterference #AutocraticRegimes

Short bio

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TABLE OF ACRONYMS

AA	Association Agreement
CEPA	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
CSF	Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EED	European Endowment for Democracy
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EP	European Parliament
EPD	European Partnership for Democracy
EU	European Union
FRA	Agency for Fundamental Rights
GONGO	Government-Organised Non-Government Organisation
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative

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Introduction

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya escaped her home country of Belarus on 11 August 2020. Despite years of engagement from the EU, the government had again turned to force after citizens protested the results of the discredited elections. While much of its engagement had been aimed at the state, the strongest voices for the EU's values turned out to be little-known members of the Belarusian civil society. The suddenness of the breakdown in relations meant that single member states bore the burden of protecting the EU's friends in its neighbourhood. The consequences of the authoritarian turn in Belarus became even more apparent in the regime's complicity in Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Despite their government's repression, civil society in Belarus continues to fight for democratic values. In the meantime, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya had called on the EU to adopt a more proactive stance against autocracy. This paper aims to help the EU's policy community to find an answer to that call, which prioritises democratic values, protects civil society, and targets authoritarian weaknesses.

In recent years, the EU has hosted much self-reflection on its shortcomings. On 9 March 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on *Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union*. Its proposals had grown out of the deliberations of a special committee with the same name (INGE) and a broader conversation about the weaknesses of democratic systems in the face of disinformation and intimidation from authoritarian actors. Civil society was given an important role to play in closing this vulnerability. In the one and a half years since its inauguration, the committee's written reports and commissioned studies consistently present civil society as a means of building EU citizen's resilience against hybrid threats. The Parliament adopted another resolution on 8 March 2022, which focused on the *Shrinking Space for Civil Society in Europe*. This earlier resolution had considered recommendations by groups outside the Parliament, such as the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). Here, civil society was presented as itself a target of authoritarian actors. This led the earlier resolution to take on a wider scope. Threats to civil society were increasing both within the EU and in its neighbourhood. This raises the question, is a piece missing from a picture that considers civil society both as a bulwark against and a target for authoritarian actors?

This paper makes the case that there is. More specifically, it proposes that authoritarian actors, whether ruling, aspiring to rule, or supporting those that are, often view civil society as a threat to their influence at home. If information channels, voter engagement, and citizen dialogue are considered to be vulnerable to foreign interference in a democratic system, it is worth considering the other side. Decisionmakers in authoritarian states may perceive the EU's support for civil society as a form of foreign interference in their autocratic processes. Moreover, democratic actors based in the EU appear to underestimate the disruptive potential of their work abroad. Autocratic regimes in the EU's neighbourhood sometimes seem ready to tolerate this kind of support in exchange for the economic benefits of cooperation (Gromadzki, 2015). EU policymakers could put their energies into understanding the trade-off between good diplomatic relations and impactful democratic support in such countries. However, a string of recent crises has shown that authoritarian actor's perceptions of their own weaknesses is more volatile than was initially believed. Therefore, this paper proposes several measures that can help

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EU policymakers support civil society more effectively and sustainably in difficult environments abroad.

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) has been a test for the EU's values and relations in practice. The term is used both to refer to the joint initiative, headed by the European External Action Service (EEAS), as well as the region comprising the six countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. The results of more than a decade of EU engagement have varied considerably from state to state (Bosse, 2019). Many of these countries have gone through wild constitutional and policy changes. For instance, the Belarusian state went from an aspiring partner, playing a geopolitical balancing act, to an accomplice in Russia's atrocities in Ukraine. It is worth considering what role the regime's perception of a threat from its own civil society played in this shift. While the ability to crackdown on dissidents can enable autocratic governments to persist despite the people's will, the need to do so should be regarded as a weakness (Marin, 2011). In an increasingly volatile environment, authoritarian actors in the region are likely to become increasingly reactive to this weakness. Therefore, this paper focuses on research on and developments from the EaP region, while the overall argument is broken down into three steps.

The first section looks at how the EU has sought to promote democracy and build relationships in the region. It follows the work of academics and analysts that have considered proactive but indirect methods to be the best-suited for managing the diplomatic-democratic trade-off. The second section examines how authoritarian actors have perceived and responded to democratic interference. It argues that a sudden shift in their political environment can change how an authoritarian actor perceives the threat of civil society, and thus, can unbalance an established compromise with the EU. The third section evaluates how the EU has adapted its approach after recent crises in the EaP region. It proposes that where there is a simultaneous breakdown of relations and crackdown against dissidents, the EU would benefit from mechanisms that are reactive but direct to ensure the safety of those that share its values in times of authoritarian crises.

Recognising civil society as a threat to authoritarian actors is the missing piece of the picture. The EU needs to better understand both the democratic actors and authoritarian regimes in its neighbourhood. When the former mobilises citizens around a cause the latter can take volatile shifts when they perceive the threat of civil society to outweigh its benefit to the regime. A reactive and direct set of measures would provide the EU with an insurance policy against these authoritarian reactions. The paper then makes five recommendations that build on current imperatives and initiatives of the EU, which can be enhanced to better respond to authoritarian crises in the EaP region.

European support to civil society

The EU's primary method for influence in the EaP region has been to negotiate and implement state-oriented cooperation agreements. These often come with direct financial assistance or prospects for integration in strategic areas such as the trade in goods or the movement of people. From the foundation of the EaP initiative in 2009 to 2019, the European Commission (EC) disbursed more than €1.1 Billion in funds to EaP countries (Bosse, 2019). These have principally gone to projects in public sector development, judicial reform, decentralised governance, and human rights. Policymakers have regarded these kinds of financial aid packages as a form of

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leverage that restrain authoritarian governments from harming civil society and the wider populace (Zamfir, 2021). Research on development aid had shown that such funds tended to strengthen existing systems of government, making democratic states more democratic and autocratic regimes more autocratic (Dutta *et al.*, 2013).

These warnings were taken to heart in the Commission's review of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which introduced greater conditionality to funded projects (EC, 2015). The cumulative impact of this approach can clearly be seen when comparing the amount of funds received and agreements signed with each of the six countries in the EaP region. The 'more for more' and 'less for less' approach continued to be viewed as a favourable turn in the EU's policy direction for several years (EC, 2020). It's first association agreement (AA) with an EaP country had been signed with Ukraine on 29 May 2014 and was followed closely by Georgia and Republic of Moldova on 30 August 2014. Armenia was considered by some observers as being willing but unable to follow suit due to being locked into Russian geopolitical influence (Ademmer, 2015). The EU and Armenia were able to conclude a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2017 after the Sargsyan government's surprise rupture of negotiations in 2013. Meanwhile within the new framework, the Azerbaijani and Belarusian have clearly chosen the option of less cooperation for less democracy.

Table 1: Timeline of major bilateral agreements between the EU and the EaP countries since 2009		
Armenia	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement	2017
Azerbaijan	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement	
Belarus		
Georgia	Association Agreement	2016
	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area	2016
Republic of Moldova	Association Agreement	2016
	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area	2016
	Treaty of Accession to the European Union	
Ukraine	Association Agreement	2017
	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area	2017
	Treaty of Accession to the European Union	

Notes: The year given refers to entry into force; agreements that are coloured indicate ongoing negotiations.
Sources: (European Union, 2021).

A similar, though more conceptual, method for influence has been the EU's projection of it values. There are some hints of this idea in official documents. For instance, in a joint communication on *Reinforcing Resilience* the European institutions note that negotiations with Belarus have helped foster relations, under a section on key achievements of the EaP initiative (EC, 2020). This idea has been

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developed further to argue that an approach based on spreading values to partner states helps enable civil society and political diversity. This includes the pronouncements of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, which brings together representatives from the EP and the EaP counties' legislatures (Petrova, 2016). For instance, the assembly has condemned political violence in EaP member states (Euronest, 2013). However, it is not clear whether the body has an influence beyond diplomacy. Both Azerbaijan and Belarus have previously had their memberships suspended for human rights abuses, with little apparent consequence at home or in the international arena. Whether in the form of union-state cooperation agreements or top-down value projection, the EU's leverage for protecting civil society comes with significant limitations.

The alternative to this approach consists of bottom-up value projection and material support to civil society actors in the EaP region. While the recalibrated ENP included the ambition to engage with civil society, the financial weight of this engagement has remained well below the funds available for state-based projects and beneath the expectations of several analysts. To illustrate, of the more than €9 Billion of estimated total spending on aid for the EaP countries between 2009 and 2021, the EU and its member states have disbursed circa €300 Million to support civil society and promote democratic participation (EC and IATI, 2022). The number of recorded projects is also quite substantial compared to other aid categories. For instance, in a period of five years over 600 civil society organisations from the EaP region are estimated to have received funds (EaP, 2020). This spreads a relatively small portion of the EU's aid budget amongst a relatively large group of recipients. These funds are often managed by the programmes of legally independent organisations such as the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (CSF) founded in 2009 and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) founded in 2013.

A number of analysts have offered arguments for increasing this financial support to civil society organisations and enhancing the bottom-up approach. Marin (2011) considers that this approach enables more inclusive relationships with citizens, rather than only with leaders, who have more reasons and means to challenge EU values. Bosse (2019) views civil society as a way to put pressure on governments to pursue reforms and refrain from backsliding. Kurowska and Pawlak (2011) argue that using independent organisations to take over the implementation of bottom-up projects would significantly reduce their bureaucratic burden. Kaca (2021) proposes that the successes of assistance sent via legally independent organisations also stems from their ability to redirect aid where it is needed without directly implicating EU decisionmakers. In effect, this somewhat allows the EU to bypass the democratic-diplomatic trade-off faced when dealing with authoritarian governments.

A final, more fundamental, form of support that the EU offers to civil society in the EaP region is simply that its values are implemented at home. In many cases, citizens in activist networks, academic institutions, charitable organisations, local communities, news media, opposition movements, religious groups, social enterprises, trade unions, voluntary associations can find access to information, funding, and protection inside the EU. The impact of this on the neighbourhood is difficult to estimate. However, on a conceptual level, it is worth considering the EU is not only a strategic partner with funding opportunities. Instead, it also represents a space for civil society actors to escape their authoritarian governments. The Polish foreign minister Sikorski once stated that the EU would not "apologise for the civilizational attraction of its Eastern Partnership project" (Nielsen and Vilson, 2014). At the time, this was a response to Russian complaints that the EU was creating a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus. With a

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contemporary perspective, it is worth considering how the EU's fundamental supportiveness to civil society is perceived by authoritarian actors in its more immediate neighbourhood.

Authoritarian reactions to citizen engagement

The EU has a variety of authoritarian actors to deal with in the EaP region. The most prominent are Alexander Lukashenko, President of Belarus since 1994, and Ilham Aliyev, President of Azerbaijan since 2003 after the death of his father Heydar Aliyev. However, the field for authoritarian actors is still more diverse. It includes elected politicians such as the Prime Minister of Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who has permitted the inhumane treatment of political prisoners, including the former President, Mikheil Saakashvili. There are actors from the armed forces, business sector, and youth organisations. For instance, Onik Gasparyan, the former Chief of General Staff tried to lead a coup in Armenia, Vladimir Plahotniuc, an escaped plutocrat, organised corruption and the illegal use of force in Republic of Moldova, and Konstantin Knyrik, who ran Eurasianist propaganda organisations in Crimea before and after the Russian invasion in 2014. This small sample helps to show that, despite some similarities, support for autocracy takes many forms.

When writing about authoritarian actors in the EaP region, analysts tend to tie their work to one country, sector, or network due to the number, variety, and relative obscurity of the target persons and organisations (Shmatsina, Navumau and Chulitskaya, 2021). In some cases, the field of vision narrows to a single personality. For instance, countries that have been ruled by one person, as Belarus has for the past 27 years, invite an analysis of the autocrat's own perceptions (Usov, 2015). However, this approach is difficult to integrate into policymaking. A more reliable view is to turn attention to the citizen engagement. A timeline of major protests in each country can somewhat stand in for this since they are often caused by or resultant from other political events such as a government scandal or a citizens' campaign.

With a better overview of the protest movements in EaP countries, it appears that states with closer cooperation with the EU are more likely to see political change due to citizen mobilisation. Where this outcome can be attributed to EU support, it could stem from successes in the top-down approach, which constrains government misuse of power or from the bottom-up methods, which help strengthen civil society, or both. However, nationwide protests do not necessarily signal support for change amongst a majority of the populace. Nikol Pashinyan was re-elected two months after resigning his position as Prime Minister of Armenia. Similarly, widespread protests also do not necessarily mean that the organisers are democratically inclined. Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan, who come from the authoritarian wing of the Armenian political landscape, played leading roles in the recent protests in the country. It is interesting to consider the claim that their method of civil disobedience is borrowed from the democratic movement that swept Pashinyan into power (Khudoyan, 2022). This is reassuring since authoritarian actors have other strategies open to them.

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Table 2: Timeline of major protests in the EaP region since 2000		
Armenia	Protests against Kocharyan government	2003 - 2004
	Protests against Sargsyan government	2008
	Protests against Sargsyan government (Velvet)	2018
	Protests against Pashinyan government	2020 - 2021
	Protests against Pashinyan government	2022
Azerbaijan	Protests against Aliyev government	2003
	Protests against Aliyev government	2011
	Protests against Aliyev government	2020
Belarus	Protests against Lukashenko government (Jeans)	2006
	Protests against Lukashenko government	2011
	Protests against Lukashenko government	2017
	Protests against Lukashenko government (Slipper)	2020 - 2021
Georgia	Protests against Shevardnadze government (Rose)	2003
	Protests against Ivanishvili influence	2019 - 2020
Republic of Moldova	Protests against Voronin Government (Grape)	2009
	Protests for European Union association	2013
	Protests against Gaburici government	2015 - 2016
	Protests against Chicu government	2020
Ukraine	Protests against Kuchma government	2000 - 2001
	Protests against Kuchma government (Orange)	2004
	Protests against Yanukovych government	2013
	Protests against Yanukovych government (Euromaidan)	2013 - 2014

Notes: Events that are coloured indicate that government members or policy changed due to the protests.
Sources: Author

The timeline also shows that citizen mobilisation can threaten authoritarian governments. States with looser cooperation with the EU are also more likely to successfully entrench the status quo. Though it seems that they are unable to keep the trend of mass protests from recurring. In response to this weakness authoritarian actors can target EU support to civil society through a variety of methods that are broken down here into three categories.

The first option is to disengage from cooperation with the EU and any other organisation that could lock the regime into respecting democratic norms. Authoritarian governments seem to face their own counterpart to the democratic-diplomatic trade-off. Here the dictator chooses between maintaining control and accepting foreign aid, trade, and investment in exchange for conditions relating to civil society, human rights, and the rule of law. A problem for authoritarian regimes is that the emergence of citizen mobilisation against it is not predictable. However, authoritarian regimes can be more reactive to domestic developments than EU

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policymakers. The EU's willingness to cooperate under open and transparent conditions risks giving autocrats the ability to set their preferred level of democracy support, at a given time. For instance, there were warnings that the Lukashenko regime viewed restarting talks, after reactive state repression broke them down in 2011, as a sign of weakness from the Union (Marin, 2011).

A second option is to engage citizens with democratic-appearing but regime-centric institutions. Most autocratic systems still inhabit states that retain nominally democratic processes, such as regular elections. Many analysts have viewed these features to be part of a dictator's legitimation strategy for their regime aimed at the people (von Soest and Grauvogel, 2017). Some others have considered them as a low-risk deception, allowing the dictator to promise liberalisation, and thus, extend the space for cooperation in their own autocratic-diplomatic trade-off with wealthier democracies (Morozov, 2020). However, both these ideas are based on a prevalent assumption that dictators design the institutional frameworks they inhabit, which is not necessarily the case (Usov, 2015). In fact, authoritarians sometimes choose to bypass state institutions, even in their own countries. EU representatives have spent more time outlining the differences between a civil society organisation (CSO) and a government-organised non-government organisation (GONGO). The latter usually differs from the former in its aim of keeping established regimes in control and its methods, which can rely on formal and informal coercive assistance from their patron (Shorina, 2018).

The third option is the use of force. The EaP region has seen its fair share of coercive tactics at the behest of authoritarian actors. These cover acts such as the assassination of Elmar Huseynov in 2005, the intimidation of Tetiana Chornovol in 2013, and the imprisonment of Sergei Tikhanovsky since 2020. The variety of tactics also include the social isolation, economic privation, censorship, surveillance, and abduction of citizens that are perceived as threats. The willingness to use force seems to stem in part from a sense of autocratic weakness in the face of civil society. The EU can try to lock in a regime's policy into its values more stably while more effectively identifying authoritarian influencers. However, it has had issues protecting civil society actors in the EaP from coercion after a sudden development. Yet, this is precisely when authoritarian actors will face the strongest incentive to use coercion. Therefore, the EU needs new mechanisms that allow it to intervene for its friends in their time of need.

Policy gaps in supporting democrats in times of autocratic crisis

When authoritarian governments react to citizen mobilisation with force, the most-cited policy response has been the threat and implementation of sanctions. Thus far the EaP region had only seen country-wide sanctions from the EU after the Belarusian protests in 2020. In their fourth round, policymakers had decided to target strategic sectors such as financial services, fossil fuels, mineral fertilisers, and digital equipment. The crackdown on citizens and breakdown in relations also featured the refusal of EU representatives to recognise the regime's legitimacy, their support to the coordination council, the regime's illegal interception of a flight to abduct Roman Protasevich and Sofia Sapega, and its manipulation of migrants to engineer a border crisis with the EU (Przetacznik and Russel, 2021). With so many variables, it is difficult to estimate the effect that the threat of sanctions can have. Researchers from the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) argue that this threat has been effective at limiting actions aimed at the EU, but not to stop domestic

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repression of civil society, which authoritarian governments see as crucial to their survival of a citizen movement (Youngs *et al.*, 2021). The Belarusian regime's complicity in the continuing Russian atrocities show the EU cannot accept only to protect itself.

The most persistent weakness of the threat of sanctions has not come in their implementation, but rather where they are not considered at all for geopolitical reasons. This has been the most cited reason for the inconsistencies in the EU's approach, which is confrontational to Belarusian authoritarianism but is conciliatory to its Azerbaijani counterpart (Kobzova, 2012). This was especially apparent recently with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's trip to Baku. The inconsistency has come with great costs for European ties to civil society in the Caucasus (Amami, 2013). In fact, the most recent protests were not reformist in nature, instead they sought to force the government to restart the Karabakh conflict with Armenia. Compared to fair elections, this was not much of a concession for the government to make. The Aliyev regime also draws authoritarian support from Ankara similarly to that given to the Lukashenko regime from Moscow. The lesson the EU must learn in its vision and policy is that wandering between reliable autocracies based on geopolitical necessity continues to give authoritarians the ability to set the agenda on cooperation and values. This concern was recently confirmed on 13 September 2021 with the Azerbaijani incursion into Armenia and its refusal to pull back its forces despite condemnation from the EP.

Just as the EU would benefit from a review of the factors that limit its strategy, it should review the gaps in its support to civil society in the EaP region. When considered together financial assistance programmes, bilateral cooperative agreements, the projection of values, the threat of sanctions can be distinguished from one another. Support given to civil society actors can be either direct or indirect, based on whether the decision passes via independent channels or targets another actor. Similarly, it can be proactive or reactive, based on whether the decision to help was made on the EU's initiative or in response to developments elsewhere. With these two distinctions, it is possible to create a simple framework for showing the gap in the EU's approach. The projection of values could appear in each of the four categories. For instance, the Sakharov Prize in 2020 gave both direct support to the Coordination Council and indirect support to the Belarusian citizens' movement, while being reactive support after Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's arrest and a proactive sign of support for the cause.

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Figure 1: A framework for EU support to civil society actors in the EaP

	Proactive	Reactive
Direct	Funding Programmes	Policy Gap
Indirect	Cooperation Agreements	Economic Sanctions

Source: Author

With this considered, the missing piece in EU support to civil society in the EaP region has been direct but reactive. It would benefit from integrating mechanisms that react in a crisis to give direct support to activists, academics, journalists, philanthropists, protestors, and figures in communities that share democratic values. Such initiatives would merit the title of European interference in autocratic processes, as they target the methods authoritarian governments rely on when their rule is threatened at home. This kind of action would carry considerable diplomatic penalties. Therefore mechanisms should first be set to respond to the first signals of a regime's use of force against citizens and should then be made designed to be independent of the EU's internal indecision and geopolitical inconsistency. The principal aim should be to protect civil society actors that authoritarians seek to eliminate with shelter in the EU. Though, provisions could also be included so that they are able to continue the work needed in their home countries, only from abroad.

There is an analogue to this mechanism on the authoritarian side. A recent prisoner of war exchange on 22 September 2022 saw 215 Ukrainians released in return for 55 Russians. The difference makes more sense when considering that the deal included the transfer of Viktor Medvedchuk, a traitorous Ukrainian politician and personal friend of Vladimir Putin, President of Russia. Small circles of regime elites are often cited as a feature of autocracies (Shmatsina, Navumau and Chulitskaya, 2021). This means that authoritarian regimes can more easily identify and protect their supporters. Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya only became an active citizen after the arrest of her partner Sergei Tikhanovsky, who in turn only began spreading information on social issues a year earlier. This demonstrates a strength of democratic values, as its base of supporters can come from the much larger citizenry. However, this also

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confers upon the EU a greater responsibility to protect people who share its value but about whom it knows little.

Integrating this mechanism into the EU's policy toolkit will pose a significant challenge. The top-down approach has had remarkable success where the states the EU deals with have remained pro-democratic. This has been seen recently in Ukraine and Republic of Moldova, despite the Russia's invasion, its occupation of territory, its persecution of civilians, and its assistance to authoritarian clients from Donetsk to Kyiv and Tiraspol to Chișinău. In spite of this both countries gained candidate status, opening to door to accession into the EU. The decision was seen as a strong sign of support to the democratic citizenries of each country. Meanwhile, more state-oriented academics have pointed to the lengthy and complicated reforms that would be required for accession to take place. However, the value of the decision goes beyond symbolic support. It represents a broadening of the EU's acknowledged friends in the Eastern Partnership from state governments and prominent persons to democratic societies as a whole. The next step is for the EU is to support democratic societies whose governments repress them.

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CONCLUSION

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's time in the EU began in Lithuania, where she received political asylum, and then Poland, where she gained a safe haven in Warsaw from which to continue the work of the Coordination Council. Both countries have since then borne the burden of the Lukashenko regime's hybrid threats. If the EU is to continue to collectively support civil society in its neighbourhood it needs collective mechanisms for when the weaknesses of authoritarian governments lead to a crisis.

Recent events have shown that the top-down approach of locking-in partners into cooperative agreements does not work. Authoritarian actors are not concerned about the trade-off between good relations with democracies and a stable grip over their society when they believe their regime to be threatened. Neither side can fully predict when the next crisis will occur. Therefore, the EU needs its own means of responding rapidly beyond economic sanctions and funding programmes. What is needed are mechanisms to coordinate and direct support to civil society actors at risk abroad.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Review geopolitical restraint to the use of sanctions in practice.

The Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime enables the Council of the European Union to sanction persons from foreign countries who have engaged in major violations of human rights. The mechanisms outlined below would function jointly with this one to deter and respond to authoritarian crackdowns in the neighbourhood. Therefore, EU policymakers should review whether geopolitical interest has restrained its use of sanctions.

2. Increase value-based conditions on state-based aid programmes.

The General Regime of Conditionality for the Protection of the Union Budget gives the Commission the right to suspend assistance when recipients breach the rule of law. The EU should increase the breadth of its values included in such mechanisms and its means for investigating breaches such that authoritarian actors lose funds but democratic governments and civil societies gain support.

3. Broaden the members of civil society receiving support from initiatives.

The European Democracy Action Plan covers a set of initiatives for the Commission to implement and review before the European Parliament election in 2024. The initiatives are principally aimed at supporting independent media protecting

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reporters at risk. The EU should broaden its approach to other parts of civil society in its neighbourhood.

4. Prepare a coordination mechanism for persons at risk of authoritarian reactions.

Institutions such as the delegations of the EEAS and organisations such as the CSF and the EED have detailed information on the civil society actors that are likely to face repression in the case of an authoritarian reaction. The EU should prepare the means to gather such information in a crisis and use it to identify those who share its values and need its support.

5. Develop a response mechanism for granting support to persons at risk of authoritarian reactions.

The Common European Asylum System has been proposed to streamline the treatment of asylum seekers in the EU. A similarly intended but more developed mechanism is needed to grant assistance to the civil society actors from the neighbourhood who are at risk of authoritarian reactions. The EU should tie its mechanism to identify friends at risk to a mechanism to offer them support across the Union.

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