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Non-EU external actors' perceptions in the Eastern Neighbourhood case countries

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Abstract

This paper is a report prepared for Work Package (WP) 6 "Non-EU External Actors: Partners, Competitors or Adversaries?" of the SHAPEDEM-EU project. The report contains the outcomes of two separate yet parallel tasks related to the analysis of non-European Union external actors' impact on the three case countries of Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine as well as perceptions of this impact. The non-EU external actors under analysis are China, the Council of Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States from the period 2010 to 2024.

This deliverable contains information related to the conceptual insights applied for analysing the actors and the SHAPEDEM-EU activities involved to gain these insights. The key results from this deliverable involve impact assessments, perceptions analysis and case study conclusions. The annex contains three longer, separate reports on the impact of external actors on Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine.

1 Introduction

Deliverable 6.2 "Report on non-EU external actors' perceptions in the Eastern Neighbourhood case countries" constitutes a report produced within *Work Package (WP) 6 "Non-EU External Actors: Partners, Competitors or Adversaries?"*. This deliverable contains a report based on two separate but complementary tasks within the SHAPEDEM-EU project. This deliverable concludes the efforts of **SHAPEDEM-EU's tasks 6.3 and 6.4**, which focus on the impact of non-European Union (EU) external actors as well as the perceptions thereof in practices of democracy support and/or authoritarian consolidation in the Eastern Neighbourhood, respectively. The objective of these tasks is to analyse how local actors in **Armenia**, **Georgia** and **Ukraine** perceive the practices of non-EU external actors in areas such as democracy support (DS), democracy prevention (DP), autocracy support (AS) and authoritarian consolidation (AC). The non-EU external actors under investigation include **China**, the **Council of Europe** (CoE), the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO), **Russia**, the **United Kingdom** (UK) and the **United States** (USA). The study covers the period from **2010 to 2024**.

This report assesses the impact of non-EU external actors' involvement in the (non) democratic developments in the Eastern neighbourhood along most relevant turning points selected from the three case countries. This report's main goal is to provide **insights into local perceptions of the impact of non-EU external actors' practices in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine** to provide a better understanding of how those actor's discursive and behavioural practices in the realms of democracy support, democracy prevention, autocracy support and autocracy promotion in the Eastern Neighbourhood are seen.[1]

As illustrated in previous reports prepared for **D6.1 "Comparative report mapping external actors' capacities"**, the SHAPEDEM-EU project provides evidence that democratic non-EU external actors do not necessarily entail into unwavering support for democratic values, as interests often take precedence over ideals. The conceptual approach holds that geopolitical goals and geostrategic and security concerns can be prioritised over democracy-related objectives. In this sense, authoritarian non-EU external actors may act as democracy-preventing or autocracy-promoting actors within the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood but can implement incoherent or even contradictory policies. This can be

[1] SHAPEDEM-EU builds on fundamental conceptualisations and empirical research of non-EU external actors being involved in democracy support on both EU Neighbourhoods, as indicated in the SHAPEDEM-EU report, "The Role of non-EU External Actors in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods" as submitted in SHAPEDEM-EU's project output, on 4 July 2024. See the SHAPEDEM-EU publication "The Role of Non-EU External Actors in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods" for a discussion of the conceptual and empirical findings.

exemplified by promoting rule of law reforms on the one hand and stalling the passage of Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) anti-discrimination legislation on the other. Furthermore, norms of non-interference can lead to indecisiveness towards basic democratic norms. When competing narratives emerge, local perceptions of a given non-EU external actor may reveal contradictions as well. Hence, not all non-EU external actors, can expect to be seen as role models to countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Yet, the agency of Neighbourhood citizens cannot be overlooked and thus perceptions of external actors merit closer inspection.

Perceptions of such external actors are clear consequences of the array of instruments, mechanisms and strategies, which they applied. SHAPEDEM-EU's conceptual approach to democracy support maintains that local democratic knowledge exists in all communities, although the transfer of this knowledge to European institutions can remain elusive without appropriate learning practices. The difficulty of transferring such knowledge produces challenges is frequently rooted in the production of poorly suited understandings of democratic practices in their local contexts as well as threat perceptions of local actors based on past interactions on the other hand. Sustainable tools for democracy support, however, would need to listen to local needs and democratic interests.[2]

SHAPEDEM-EU conceptual approach to the practice of democracy support recognises the importance of **key domestic turning points in Eastern Neighbourhood countries** and highlights these for the European Union. Crucially, these events can beget periods of reflection and/or contestation for local actors, those in EU institutions, and beyond. The period of study, 2010-2024, bears a number of key turning points in Armenian, Georgian, and Ukrainian politics. The most important turning points for these countries include the following:

- **Georgia:** the contested elections in 2020, protests against the Foreign Agent Law in 2023 and 2024 and the EU granting Georgia candidate status in 2023. However, significant historical turning points prior to the study period fundamentally influence the present, namely the Rose Revolution in 2003 and the Russo-Georgian War in 2008.
- **Ukraine**: the Euromaidan revolution of 2013-2014, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the invasion of the Donbas region, the Russian full-scale invasion starting in 2022, and the EU's 2023 decision to open negotiation talks with Ukraine. Earlier noteworthy events, not covered by this study, include the Orange Revolution in 2004.
- **Armenia**: the Velvet Revolution in 2018, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, and Azerbaijan's 2023 offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh and the displacement of Karabakh Armenians.

Within SHAPEDEM-EU's research on non-EU actors involved in DS, DP, AS or AC in the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods, we examine the role of 12 external actors, including both state actors and international and regional organisations. These actors include the African Union, the Arab League, China, the CoE, NATO, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UK, the United Nations and USA. However, many of these actors are less relevant for the case studies selected from the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, or were prioritised due to their impact on Armenian, Georgian and Ukrainian politics.

[2] See the SHAPEDEM-EU Publication "Non-learning Within a Constellation of Communities of Practice: The Case of the EU and Its Democracy Support in the Arab World" for further explanations on knowledge transfers or "Concepts Manual" for discussions on democracy support, democracy learning loop, knowledge, or communities of practices for further reading.

For the purpose of studying the perceptions of non-EU external actors in these countries, SHAPEDEM-EU's tasks 6.3 and 6.4 as well as this report focus on **China**, the **CoE**, **NATO**, **Russia**, the **UK** and the **USA**. All three country reports include the analysis of the *USA* as it has been seen as a highly supportive actor throughout the period of study. In addition, *NATO's* impact and perception are investigated as all three countries have experienced security threats during the period of study, providing insights into the nexus between security and democracy (support). Finally, *Russia* is also covered in all three case countries as a democracy preventing actor. For the Georgian case, *China* is included in this regard given its activities in the South Caucasus and potential for democracy prevention. In addition, *the Council of Europe's* impact and perception in Armenia and Ukraine are also covered to analyse the impact of an international organisation deeply involved in the countries' post-communist reform agendas, alongside their incongruous paths of European integration. Lastly, the *UK* is incorporated into the study of Ukrainian perceptions given its outsized role in providing support to the country following Russia's full-scale invasion.

Below, Table 1 provides an overview of the key turning points in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine as well as the most relevant actors for analysing the impact of non-EU external actors as well as perceptions thereof.

Country	Turning points in the period of study 2010 - 2022	Previous Turning Points	Most relevant actors
Armenia	**2018**: Velvet Revolution **2020**: Second Nagorno-Karabakh War **2023**: Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno- Karabakh war		Russia, USA, CoE, NATO
Georgia	**2020**: Contested elections by the opposition **2023**, **2024**: Protests against the Russian-inspired Foreign Agents Law **2023**: EU grants Georgia candidate status	**2003**: Rose Revolution **2008**: Russo-Georgian War	Russia, USA, China, NATO
Ukraine	**2013-2014**: Euromaidan Revolution **2014**: Russian annexation of Crimea & invasion of the East of the country **2022-present**: Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine **2023**: EU decision to open negotiation talks with Ukraine	**2004**: Orange Revolution	Russia, USA, UK, CoE, NATO

Table 1: Turning points in the three cases study countries

This report is structured thusly: following this introduction, the proceeding section details the division of tasks among the SHAPEDEM-EU partners to develop the insights contained in this report. Then, the results on each of the three case countries are presented, highlighting the perceptions of the non-EU external actors in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Then, the conclusion and deviations conclude the final aspects of the report. Following the report, this deliverable contains three annex documents. The annex details findings on the impact of the six different non-EU external actors. Annex 1 presents the impact assessment of non-EU external actors in Armenia. Annex 2 presents the impact assessment of non-EU external actors in Georgia. Finally, Annex 3 presents the impact assessment of non-EU external actors in Ukraine.

2 Description of Activities

The compilation of this report was led by the **Justus Liebig University of Giessen** (JLU) team between months 10 and 35 of the SHAPEDEM-EU project. Under the guidance of the WP leaders **Barcelona Centre for International Affairs** (CIDOB), the deliverable was prepared by harmonising the contributions of two separate tasks. Task 6.3 was focused on assessing the impact of non-EU external actors in the Eastern Neighbourhood case countries. The task included efforts from the JLU, **Jagiellonian University of Krakow** (JUK), **Istituto Affari Internazionali** (IAI) as well as the **University of Warwick** (UoW), who mainly contributed to ensure congruence with the developments under WP2 of the project on the Eastern Neighbourhood. Table 2 below details the task description as well as the distribution of the actors across the SHAPEDEM-EU partners.

Task 6.3: Assess the impact of non-EU external actors' involvement in the (non) democratic developments the Eastern Neighbourhood	**Case Study Distribution**
Description: Building on WP2, this task assesses the perceptions of these six non-EU external actors' practices in the Eastern Neighbourhood case countries. The assessment relates to **identifiable effects of the six actors' practices of democracy support or democracy prevention**, reflecting whether additional external actors had a significant effect in some countries	**IAI:** USA **JUK:** UK & NATO **CIDOB:** China **JLU:** Russia & CoE

Table 2: SHAPEDEM-EU's task on the impact of non-external actors in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries

In parallel to the steps taken for task 6.3, task 6.4 focused on assessing the perceptions of the selected non-EU external actors in the Eastern Neighbourhood. This task included the primary contributors to WP2 of the SHAPEDEM-EU project, namely UoW, the **National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy**, and the **Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum** (EaP CSF). Table 3 below includes the key aspects outlining this task.

Task 6.4 Explore local actors' perceptions of non-EU external actors' involvement in practices of democracy support and practices of authoritarian consolidation in the Eastern Neighbourhood
Description: Analyse **how local actors in the three case countries perceive** the contribution of global and regional powers and international organisations to support democracy, prevent democratisation, or contribute to authoritarian consolidation.
Partners involved: UoW, NaUKMA, EaP CSF

Table 3: SHAPEDEM-EU's task on the perceptions of non-external actors' impact in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries

As these two tasks overlapped in terms of time and content, they were conducted in parallel. In the early phases of these tasks, the partners met to select the most relevant non-EU external actors, analysed in the first deliverable of WP6 in a joint meeting, to determine the methods for study and to assign the case studies. The impact assessments were primarily achieved via desk research and document analysis as well as expert interviews. The perceptions analyses were conducted via reviews of secondary literature as well as in concert with activities implemented in Work Package 2 in focus group discussions. Finally, the partners held a workshop on non-EU external actors at the offices of CIDOB in September 2024 to finalise the objectives of the analyses.

3 Results

This section provides the results of our case study analysis on Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine. For each country, the set of third actors, which shows a certain degree of responsiveness in the local societies, is highly individual. The differentiated approaches to supporting or preventing democracy by Russia, the USA, NATO, CoE, China and the UK led to divergent results in the local perceptions of the three countries.

3.1 Case Study Results on Perceptions of non-EU External Actors in Armenia: Democracy support and democracy prevention at the geopolitical crossroads

In **Armenia**, Russia's response was marked so far by caution and restraint, relying on economic ties and diplomatic signalling rather than overt coercion to counterbalance Armenia's growing Western orientation and ensure the preservation of its regional influence. Armenia emerges as a crucial case for testing the possibility and feasibility of decoupling democratisation and foreign policy orientation among the cases considered and generally in the region.

Armenia is now at the geopolitical crossroads. After its democratic turn in 2018 and even more after Azerbaijan's offensive in 2023 and Russia's inaction about it, the country chose to be democratic and look for alternative partners instead of Russia. It opened the geopolitical window of opportunities for the Western countries, primarily the EU and US, to enter the space Russia left. The trends in popular opinion prove the worsening attitude towards Russia while increasing the positive stance on potential cooperation with the Western countries. At the same time, the West should consider that it is security that Armenians primarily expect from partnership while democracy is considered derivative from it. Thus, it is essential to support and promote security-related reforms and facilitate security cooperation. However, it is necessary to find a balance between sticks and carrots for the Armenian government to keep the pace of reforms. The programmes of institutional capacity building for political parties as well as support for humanitarian grass-roots initiatives should be maintained. Additionally, the local context of interethnic relations should not be disregarded in designing the democracy support programs.

The approaches of external actors from non-EU countries in Armenia differ markedly from those of the EU, particularly in terms of their focus and methods. Russia's approach has historically been characterised by structural and interpersonal influence over Armenia and often exhibits features of authoritarian diffusion and dependency, in contrast to the EU's emphasis on promoting democratic institutions and government reforms through initiatives such as the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement. The United States, meanwhile, has focused on strengthening democracy and economic resilience, emphasising transparency, anti-corruption, and civic engagement, which aligns with EU objectives but also brings a strategic partnership dimension. NATO, by contrast, engages in Armenia primarily through military and governance reforms and clearly lacks the democratic focus of EU efforts. These practices are intertwined with those of the EU in a variety of ways. While the UK complements the EU's objectives in promoting democratic reforms and resilience, particularly in cooperation with the US, its practices often compete with and frustrate EU efforts by maintaining Armenia's structural dependency and authoritarian tendencies. Between the EU and US approaches, there is a synergy of cooperation, particularly evident in their joint engagement on democratic values, as evidenced by joint high-level meetings. For policy-oriented recommendations, it is crucial for the EU to intensify its cooperation with the USA in supporting democratic change in Armenia, focusing on strategic areas such as judicial reforms and civic participation. Furthermore, the EU should consider introducing conditionality of aid to ensure economic assistance is aligned with democratic reforms. Building local capacity for democratic governance and reducing Armenia's dependence on external actors are also crucial to maintaining Armenia's democratic course amid regional and global uncertainties.

3.2 Case Study Results on Perceptions of non-EU External Actors in Georgia: Illiberal consolidation and Europeanisation in open conflict

Overall, there is a clear linkage in **Georgia** in the local perceptions between “the West” (the EU, the US) and democracy support. At the same time, the other external players (Russia, China), though politically viewed as (non-)democratic are simultaneously seen as strategically important partners in trade and economy. Many experts remark (Georgian Institute of Politics 2023b) on the failure of Georgia’s “normalisation policy with Russia” (as the countries still don't have diplomatic relations). Such policy ended up in heightening Georgia’s dependency on Russia and decreasing of “Georgia's ability to manoeuvre vis-a-vis Russia and join international sanctions against it” (Georgian Institute of Politics 2022), as well as in Georgia helping Russia to circumvent sanctions by exporting dual-use products (Patoka 2024). Also, the signing of the Strategic Partnership agreement with China in 2023 is seen by some experts as a source of concern and possible sign of Georgia’s alignment with non-democratic/authoritarian players (Georgian Institute of Politics 2023b, 2024a).

There is also a widespread notion of the lack of “the West” strategic support for Georgia (Georgian Institute of Politics 2022, 2024b). While since 2017 there had been frequent claims that “the West” (USA and EU) should impose targeted actions (or even sanctions) against the ruling party (Georgian Dream) and their initiative for contesting democratic practices, stalling reforms, backsliding into autocracy, and only rhetorical supporting the EU integration, local public and experts almost unanimously agree that such sanctions shouldn’t “punish the whole of Georgia” or touch all of Georgian people, or impede Georgian cooperation with “the West” and its EU integration (Georgian Institute of Politics 2024b). There is also an insistence that Georgia shouldn’t fall between the West and Russia or China, instead maintaining pragmatic relations with external actors. For example, regarding foreign policy and according to the EU Council 2023 report, Georgia aligned itself with only

51 declarations out of 107, registering a further drop from the previous year (48%) to 31% (Georgian Institute of Politics 2023b).

There is a consistent proclamations that in Georgia "we naturally belong to the Euro-Atlantic space" (Georgian Institute of Politics 2023a), but it doesn't go beyond the claims that Georgia is a democratic country and strong association of Euro-Atlantic space with economic growth and development. Based on local data and experts opinions, it should be assumed that "Georgian elites' pro-European platform is generally more about geopolitical protection than signing up to common values" (Waal 2021) and "that general support in Georgia for European integration stems more from expectations of economic prosperity than an endorsement of European values" (Lejava 2021). This is particularly evident in the overly negative and strained popular opinions and attitudes towards ethnic minority rights and representation as well as regarding gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. For example, in April-May 2024 poll, 73% disapprove of doing business with a sexual minority persons (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2024c). While there is a notion that Georgia is historically part of Europe and one of the cradle and for posts of its traditions and Christianity (Lejava 2021), such narratives are too conservative to be aligned with those associated with liberal democracy and "European values" and instead fall into place with Russian, anti-Western, non-democratic and populist rhetoric of "traditional values". Some experts recommend educational programmes (both formal and informal) and proactive counterbalancing of such narratives both by political parties and civil society organisations as measures to combating national-populism and "traditionalist" rhetoric (Georgian Institute of Politics 2020).

For many local experts and civil society organisations as well as ordinary citizens, the most significant events of 2023-2024 for Georgian society has been the mass mobilisation and protests against the ruling party "Georgian Dream", its "law on foreign agents", 2024 elections. As some say:

> *"Attending the protests is the most civil way to express my stance, and there is no alternative. To call Georgia a democratic state would be misleading — if not an outright lie. The government does not respond to its people, leaving protests as the only viable way to make our voices heard. When all is said and done, I will at least know that I was there, fulfilling my civic duty"* (Cole and Wright 2024).

Overall, based on the local perceptions, it is possible to divide the non-EU external actors into two groups. Russia, China, and Türkiye fall into the group of outsiders whose role is perceived as challenging and contesting the proclaimed strategic and political goals of Georgia - democratisation and EU integration, as well as the EU democracy support. Still, the economic and trade cooperations with these external actors are seen as important by a variety of local groups as well as by the local public (according to polls and expert opinions).

The USA and NATO fall into another group of democracy supporters whose efforts and policies are seen as aligned with those of the EU, particularly the EU democracy support. Still, there is a widespread local sentiment that these actors shouldn't try to impose the liberal democracy values in Georgia, particularly regarding minority rights and representation and gender policies and rights. Thus, the EU democracy support policies as well as corresponding efforts by the USA in those areas are seen as redundant by the local public. Still, that is precisely the area in which the USA and the EU should amplify their efforts in supporting civic education and civil society organisations according to some local experts, particularly to combat the populist and autocratic/anti-liberal local groups and their rhetoric.

While the Georgians see themselves as part of the European space and support the view that their country is inherently democratic with a deep-rooted tradition of democracy, the geopolitical positions and orientations of Georgian society are ambiguous. Relations with other countries are seen to the

wide extent through the lenses of security and economic stability. Thus, there is a widespread demand among local actors and local public and expert opinion not only to be integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures, but also to sustain "good" relations with Russia, China and others.

Considering the current situation in Georgia and ongoing mass protest and civil mobilisation, the EU democracy support policies should be aligned with those of the other external actors (US, UK, EU MS) and aimed at maintaining connections with civil society organisations and providing support for their activities in civic education and democratic governance as well as countering populism and enhancing media literacy. Such programmes should include a particular focus on youth, rural population, and ethnic minority groups, but also aim to include campaigns for the wider population about rights and equality.

3.3 Case Study Results on Perceptions of non-EU External Actors in Ukraine: An invaded country seeking deeper integration

The role of pro-democratic external actors is seen as important in support of the most critical reforms in **Ukraine**. In the EU Advisory Mission's (EUAM) survey in September 2024, the 74% of Ukrainians named fighting corruption as the most critical reform (and 62 % marked it as priority for the EU support) (EUAM Ukraine 2024). Next ranked were reforms in national security and defence and the judicial system reform (36 % support each). Local actors and experts see the EU (and the majority of EU MS), the US, and UK as aligned and allied external actors in their support of Ukraine and of reforms. In the same survey, such areas as assistance to liberated territories (43 %), support in investigating war crimes (38 %), and ensuring fair justice (31 %) were also defined as the most relevant areas for support of allied external actors was most needed.

Further external actors, not covered in our SHAPEDEM-EU analysis on Ukraine, mainly such as China, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, are seen mainly through their economic and trade relations with Ukraine. They are, however, relevant here, as in the local perceptions, expert opinions, media and public discourses in Ukraine, concerns are voiced over those countries, helping Russia by-pass sanctions, to import sanctioned goods and services as well as dual-purpose products and thus assisting Russia in its war against Ukraine.

Overall, based on local perceptions, it is possible to divide the non-EU external actors into three groups. Russia and China fall into the group of outsiders who contest democracy, employ authoritarian practices and tactics, and threaten Ukraine. In the case of China, the threat is perceived more in a context of potential economic dependency and China's support of Russia. At the same time, the threats from these countries are not perceived as threats to Ukraine's democracy, democratisation and EU integration, but rather as existential threats that endanger Ukraine's existence and sovereignty.

Türkiye falls into another category, which is perceived in the same category with external actors as the Gulf states. Those are seen as showing generally neutral to positive sentiments and attitudes. External actors of these type neither facilitate nor hinder democratisation and/or EU integration of Ukraine.

Finally, the US, UK and NATO fall into the group of democracy supporters whose actions and policies are seen as aligned and consistent with those of the EU. While there might be discussions regarding particular steps and democracy support measures, the overall perception and public opinion in Ukraine equate liberal democracy with "European democracy", "Western democracy", "European values", "Western values", freedom of speech and expression, human rights, and the rule of law and divisions of powers. Thus, such external actors as the US, UK, and NATO are seen as those whose actions and

initiatives are aligned with such types of democracy and kind of democratic practices and values as they are understood in Ukraine.

The support of the US, UK, NATO, and the EU is perceived as important and vital in such sectors and areas as legislative and judicial reforms, anti-corruption and transparency, maintaining the rule of law and human rights, local self-governance, reforms in energy and security and defence sectors. Among local actors (insiders) civil society organisations and grassroots social movements (particularly, volunteers) on national and local levels (communities) are seen as disseminators and bearers of democratic practices and knowledge and thus the external actors are expected to engage and assist them.

At the same time, external actors are not necessarily perceived as those with more knowledge or expertise and there is a widespread request for them to adhere to the local CSO and expert's competence and knowledge in particular areas, especially regarding conflict resolution, reconciliation, transitional justice etc. This is partly due to the fact that Ukraine is perceived by its citizens as an inherently democratic country with a strong tradition of valuing freedoms and of civic engagement/participation, and also as a part of European/Western civilisation. Still, such external actors as the US, UK, the EU, NATO, CoE are also seen by both local experts and the general public as watchdogs (on part with the civil society organisations) for the Ukrainian government and for reforms needed for the democracy support and the EU integration.

Since February 2022, Ukraine has been fighting a full-scale war against Russia with the assistance of its allies, the EU, the USA, UK, etc. This has been hugely colouring the Ukrainians' perception – both general public and expert communities – of how external actors are seen. Thus, the democracy support policies are hugely seen as secondary to the assistance in the war efforts. Still, the most common critique about the DS programmes stems from the understanding that they are ineffective in supporting particular DS practices, local or civic programmes, or civil society organisations. The most frequently mentioned areas and programmes that should be in focus for the DS are those aimed at civic education and local/civic engagement into governance, anti-corruption, and media literacy programmes with a focus on the most war-affected communities and youth.

3.4 Summary of Case Study Results

This analysis reveals significant differences in the approaches of external actors from non-EU countries and those of the European Union in their engagement with Georgia and Ukraine. The EU's strategy is predominantly focused on institutional reforms, civic engagement, and adherence to democratic norms and governance structures, as evidenced by initiatives such as the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement. In contrast, actors like Russia and China often promote structural dependencies and exert influence through economic pressure and geopolitical manoeuvring, which can undermine the EU's democratic principles and strategic objectives.

The methods used by non-EU actors differ significantly from those of the EU. Russia, for example, often relies on economic pressure, energy dependency, and military intervention—practices that stand in stark contrast to the EU's priorities of promoting transparency, the rule of law, and civic participation. China's Belt and Road Initiative (New Silk Road) is also an expression of an economy-driven agenda with limited emphasis on governance or democratic frameworks, setting it apart from EU practices. The US, more closely aligned with EU objectives in the Biden administration, emphasised strategic partnerships and anti-corruption tied aid, highlighting another aspect of democratic support. The trajectory of this alignment regarding Ukraine appears less predictable under the second Trump

administration, despite overtures made by President Biden and cabinet officials to the Russian government to negotiate a settlement.

While there is a certain complementarity between EU and US practices, particularly in strengthening democratic institutions and promoting governance reforms, competition and blockades are emerging, especially with regard to actors such as Russia and China. Russia's objectives often directly contradict EU aspirations, as it seeks to maintain geopolitical dominance and resist Western influence, hindering EU integration efforts in these regions. Nevertheless, there are examples of cooperation within specific communities of interest, where the USA and EU's efforts have converged to strengthen democratic governance and the resilience of civil society in Georgia and Ukraine. By contrast, China's role often appears to be more economically oriented, occasionally complementing EU efforts in infrastructure development but not making a clear commitment to broader democratic goals.

To increase the effectiveness of democracy support and foster a conducive learning cycle, several policy-oriented recommendations emerge. Integrated multilateral strategies should be pursued, promoting cooperation between the EU, the US, and other democratic allies to present a united front in combating authoritarian influences and to ensure that democracy promotion is strategic and comprehensive. Furthermore, local capacity-building should be prioritised, focusing on understanding the local context and supporting local civil society organisations in promoting grassroots initiatives that embody democratic values and practices resonating with the local population. Flexible conditional support should be introduced, adapting to changing political landscapes to ensure aid is targeted towards genuine democratic progress and governance reforms. Coordination with non-traditional actors, such as regional organisations and non-state actors, should be explored to diversify the model of democratic support and reduce the influence of authoritarian competitors. Easier access should be pursued through civic education programs, strengthening civic education and media literacy campaigns that aim to empower citizens, particularly youth and marginalised communities, to actively engage in democratic processes and resist authoritarian narratives. By addressing these areas, the EU and its partners can increase their impact in supporting democratic resilience in Georgia and Ukraine amid complex geopolitical challenges. A differentiated approach that recognises the heterogeneity of non-EU actors' practices and adapts to evolving regional dynamics will be essential to promoting stable and democratic societies.

The impact of these various actors on the countries in question assesses whether Armenia, Georgia, and Ukraine are right. In a sense, it can be said that certain actors have had a positive influence on supporting democratic developments, while others may have been more harmful. In general, we would see positive effects from certain actors or a lack of impact from others in Ukraine and Armenia, as their democracies have proven resilient in one way or another, while in the case of Georgia, we would have to argue that countries such as Russia or China have had a negative influence. The narratives of democracy and autocracy can be applied to the cases and the external factors at play. Countries such as Russia or China have had a rather negative influence. Russia, for instance, acts as a 'black knight' with clear geopolitical ambitions, often undermining democratic efforts. There is a lack of coherence and cooperation among actors, particularly between Western states, which is worrying in the case of regional actors and organisations such as the Council of Europe and NATO. The United Kingdom, unlike the United States, does not seem to have sufficient continuity in its long-term commitment to democracy and support for Ukraine. The volatility of USA institutions and strategies poses challenges for the EU, as it seeks to create stability with other actors such as NATO. The relevance of supporting democracy through organisations with symbolic value but limited impact is

questionable, as seen in several countries where public debate and parliamentary actions do not align with EU cooperation efforts.

The competing models presented by the United States and Russia, even if not necessarily promoting a model that exhibits polarity, are strategic decisions to portray these countries in a certain way. China's model of authoritarian modernisation, which focuses on economic interaction without attaching importance to the rule of law, is also applicable to the cases studied. Russia's influence in the former Soviet countries, demonstrating authority without condensation, is evident but limited to specific contexts. Turkey's influence, supporting a Turkish model, is not relevant to this democracy analysis. The United Kingdom's approach is comparable to that of the United States, with volatility and lack of interest in deeper integration posing potential challenges to cooperation. The perception of these actors, despite discussions about volatility and lack of reliability, remains positive. In conclusion, a comprehensive understanding of the threat and danger posed by Russia and the unreliability of the USA is crucial.

The EU must navigate the complexities of competing narratives and models, ensuring that democracy promotion efforts are strategic, comprehensive, and adaptable to evolving regional dynamics. This includes fostering local capacity-building, promoting civic education, and coordinating with non-traditional actors to enhance democratic resilience in Georgia and Ukraine.

3.5 Structured Comparison of the Case Study Analysis of Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine

Despite the uniqueness of the Armenian, Georgia and Ukrainian experiences in the time period analysed, the case studies reveal certain shared characteristics. Based on the perceptions analyses and impact assessments, the following trends can be summarised.

- **Divergent Perceptions of Russia:** Each country's foreign policy is moulded by their relationship with Russia. These are determined largely by security concerns but also ties between elites. Ukraine perceives Russia as an existential military threat, Armenia sees it as an increasingly unreliable security partner, prompting a pivot to the West, while Georgia maintains a complex stance, viewing Russia as an adversary but also pursuing pragmatic economic dependency.
- **Motivations for Western Alignment:** The drive towards integration with the West stems from contrasting motivations. For Ukraine, it is an existential necessity rooted in a shared identity of liberal-democratic values, particularly following the 2014 Euromaidan Revolution and 2022 full-scale Russian invasion. For Armenia, it is its own pragmatic search for security after Russia's inaction during the 2nd Nagorno Karabakh War as well as economic stagnation. For Georgia, the motivation is largely tied to economic prosperity and security, with significant societal tensions over adopting Western liberal social values.
- **The Dominance of Security Issues:** Security is the paramount concern for all three countries, but it manifests in different expectations of Western support. Whereas Armenia prioritises security-related reforms and partnerships, Ukraine views military assistance as the overlying objective, with democracy support as a secondary, yet crucial, objective. Georgians seek Euro-Atlantic integration for its security umbrella but are frustrated by a perceived lack of strategic Western commitment, further exacerbated by elite state capture.
- **Alignment of Government and Society:** An obvious contrast exists in the internal democratic dynamics of the three countries. In Georgia, a pro-democratic civil society is in open conflict with the Georgian-Dream government as it suppresses civil and political rights. In contrast, the

governments and popular opinion in both Armenia and Ukraine are more aligned in their pro-Western, democratic orientation, albeit for different strategic motivations.

- **Embrace of "European Values":** Ukraine shows the strongest ideological alignment, fusing together "Western values" such as freedom and human rights with its own resistance to Russian aggression. Armenia's pivot towards the EU is more functional, focusing on democratic institutions as a derivative of security needs rather than a deep ideological shift. Meanwhile, Georgia presents a major contradiction, rhetorically claiming a European identity while public opinion remains highly conservative and resistant to liberal values, which aligns with anti-Western narratives.
- **Role of Civil Society:** Civil society is seen as a key democratic actor in both Georgia and Ukraine, but its relationship with state institutions differs. In Georgia, civil society maintains a leading role in the popular resistance to Georgian Dream government. In Ukraine, civil society acts as a vital watchdog and partner for the state in reform initiatives. In Armenia, the geopolitical pivot appears more state-led, though it remains supported by popular will and civil society.
- **Differing Strategic Challenges:** Each country faces distinct challenges. Armenia's challenge relates to navigating the high-stakes geopolitical decoupling from Russia's sphere of influence. Georgia faces a domestic power struggle between the pro-EU aspirations of ordinary citizens and the government's anti-democratic shift. Meanwhile, Ukraine is fighting a two-front war: one for its survival against Russia and another for deeply ingrained internal democratic reforms like anti-corruption.
- **Perception of Non-Western Powers:** Georgia and Ukraine view actors like China and Türkiye primarily through an economic lens with fewer significant security caveats. Although Ukraine is primarily concerned over China's potential support for Russia's war economy, Georgia is wary of its alignment with the increasingly authoritarian Georgian Dream. This dimension is less evident in the Armenian context, which focuses largely on the Russia-West dynamic.
- **Demands on Western Partners:** Expectations from the West are tailored to each country's crisis. Ukraine demands respect for local expertise while seeking aid for war efforts and key reforms (anti-corruption, judicial). Georgia's civil society calls for more direct Western intervention, such as targeted sanctions against its government. Armenia seeks a balance of "sticks and carrots" to ensure its government continues reforms while receiving security support.
- **National Identity and Democracy:** Both Georgians and Ukrainians see their nations as inherently democratic. In Ukraine, this identity fuels its integration agenda with the European Union and NATO. In Georgia, however, this self-perception is often used to justify a unique, conservative path that clashes with liberal European norms, creating an ambiguous geopolitical posture. Finally, Armenia's shift towards European institutions is less definitive to prevent an overt provocation of Russia.

4 Conclusions

The SHAPEDEM-EU Deliverable 6.2 "Report on non-EU External Actors' Perceptions in the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries" is a compilation of insights generated by a number of project partners. Lead by the JLU, researchers from CIDOB, IAI, JUK, NaUKMA, UoW and EaP CSF generated findings related to the impact of non-EU external actors on democratic practices in Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine. These states and international organisations were found to have contributed to a complex web of geopolitical, security and democratic dynamics and highly divers images.

Each country is significantly impacted by its relations with Russia, which is perceived differently. Ukraine views Russia as an existential military threat, leading to a strong alignment with Western

democratic values and institutions. Armenia, on the other hand, sees Russia as an increasingly unreliable security partner, leading to a pragmatic shift towards the West for security and economic reasons. Georgia takes a complex stance, viewing Russia as both an adversary and a necessary economic partner, which complicates its geopolitical position. The motives for rapprochement with the "West" vary greatly among the three countries. For Ukraine, the quest for integration with the "West" is based on an existential necessity and a shared identity of liberal democratic values, especially after the Euromaidan revolution and the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. Armenia's turn towards the West is more pragmatic in nature, focusing on security and economic stability following Russia's inaction during the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Georgia's motivation is largely related to economic prosperity and security, although there are significant social tensions regarding the adoption of Western liberal social values. Security remains the most important concern for all three countries, but this is reflected in differing expectations of "Western" support. Armenia prioritises security-related reforms and partnerships, Ukraine considers military aid a primary goal and support for democracy secondary, and Georgia seeks Euro-Atlantic integration as a security guarantee but is frustrated by what it sees as the West's lack of strategic engagement. This frustration is exacerbated by the elite's appropriation of the state and the suppression of civil and political rights in Georgia.

The internal democratic dynamics of the three countries also differ significantly. In Georgia, a pro-democratic civil society is in open conflict with the Georgian Dream government, which suppresses civil and political rights. In contrast, the governments and public opinion in Armenia and Ukraine are more aligned in their pro-Western, democratic orientation, albeit for different strategic motives. Ukraine shows the strongest ideological alignment with 'Western values' and combines this with its resistance to Russia's invasion. Armenia's orientation towards the EU is more functional and focuses on democratic institutions due to security needs. In Georgia, civil society plays a leading role in the population's resistance to the increasingly autocratic Georgian Dream government. In Ukraine, civil society acts as an important watchdog and partner to the state in reform initiatives. In Armenia, the geopolitical orientation seems to be more state-driven but is nevertheless supported by the will of the population and civil society. The challenge for Armenia is to manage the risky geopolitical decoupling from Russia's sphere of influence.

The perception of non-Western powers such as China and Turkey varies. Georgia and Ukraine view these actors primarily from an economic perspective. Ukraine is concerned about China's support for Russia's war economy, while Georgia views its rapprochement with the increasingly authoritarian Georgian Dream party with suspicion. This dimension is less apparent in the Armenian context, where attention is largely focused on the dynamics between Russia and the West. Expectations of "West" are tailored to each country's respective crisis. Ukraine demands respect for local circumstances while asking for help in its self-defence and for crucial governance reforms. Georgian civil society calls for more direct intervention by the West against its government, such as targeted sanctions. Armenia seeks a balance between 'carrot and stick' to ensure that its government continues reforms while receiving security support. Both Georgians and Ukrainians consider their nations to be inherently democratic. In Ukraine, this identity fuels the integration agenda with the European Union and NATO. In Georgia, however, this self-perception is often used to justify a unique, conservative path that clashes with liberal European norms and creates an ambiguous geopolitical stance. Armenia's orientation towards European institutions is less clear-cut in order not to openly provoke Russia. In summary, the EU should align with its external partners to address this complexity with a differentiated and adaptable approach in closer cooperation as so far. Integrated multilateral strategies, local capacity building, flexible conditional support and coordination with a broad variety of local actors,

including non-traditional actors, are crucial to resist authoritarian narratives and strategies. By addressing these areas, the EU and its partners can increase their leverage in supporting democratic resilience in Georgia and Ukraine amid complex geopolitical challenges.

For further information on the impact of the selected third countries and international actors and perceptions thereof, see the reports in the Annex below.

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Annex

This annex contains three sections, each detailing the impacts on non-EU external actors on the case countries examined in SHAPEDEM-EU. The **first annex** contains analyses of the impact of Russia, the United States (USA), the Council of Europe (CoE) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on *Armenia*. The **second annex** contains analyses of the impact of Russia, China, the USA and NATO on *Georgia*. The **third annex** contains analyses of Russia, the US, the United Kingdom, the CoE and NATO on *Ukraine*.

Annex 1: The Impact of non-EU External Actors on Armenia & their Local Perceptions

As introduced above, for the case country of Armenia we selected three crucial democracy relevant turning points, on which we might see a reaction by non-EU external actors as well as changing local perceptions. Those are the 2018: Velvet Revolution as well as the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh war and the Azerbaijan's Retaking of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Displacement of Karabakh Armenians in 2023. We furthermore selected one democracy-preventing external actor, Russia, as well as three supportive ones of different kind, the US, the CoE and NATO.

Though Armenia is considered "partly free" and its political regime as hybrid according to the Freedom House, the country, where demand for democratisation is critically connected with security issues, is going through a democratic transition accompanied by a geopolitical turn. In 2018, the mass anti-government protests, also known as the Velvet Revolution, resulted in resignation of Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan and the later election of the oppositional MP and one of the protest leaders Nikol Pashinyan as a new Prime Minister. Further Armenian politics and policy, while aimed at democratisation and reforms, were still shaped by the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh and significant economic and security dependence on Russia. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and the conditions of the ceasefire agreement caused anti-Pashinyan protests and the alleged military coup that ended up with snap elections and the re-election of Nikol Pashinyan as Prime Minister. The new and final iteration of the Azerbaijani offensive in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2023, when Azerbaijan gained control over the rest of the contested territory mainly due to Russian so-called peacekeepers' inaction, marked Armenia's geopolitical shift from Russia to the West – primarily, the European Union. However, the results of Azerbaijan's offensive sowed the seeds of vulnerability for the Armenian government due to popular dissatisfaction, displacement of over 100,000 Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh and slowing down of reforms.

Democracy Prevention by Russia & Local Perception

From the early days of independence, Armenia emerged as one of the closest allies of Russia among the former Soviet republics, with significant dependence on the former imperial centre in the economic and security realms (Ter-Gabrielian and Nedolian 1997; Vieira and Vasilyan 2018; Bartlett 2000), joining the regional organisations established by Russia (Delcour 2018; Eder 2021). It is a member of the Russia-led alliance, Collective Security Treaty Organisation, hosting a Russian military base and co-constituent of the Caucasus Joint Air Defence System along with Russia. It is also an economic partner of Russia as a member of the Eurasia Economic Union and preserves its seat at the Commonwealth of Independent States, too (Davtyan 2023; Delcour

2018; Hovhannisyan and Urutyan 2023; Ter-Matevosyan et al. 2017). While its economy significantly depends on the remittance of Armenian migrants in Russia, several major companies, from railways to electricity distribution, are owned by Russian companies. Hence, among the cases considered above, it is the one most structurally dependent on Russia (Roberts and Ziemer 2018) and the national elite has seen the region for a long time as part of the Russian sphere of influence (Ter-Matevosyan 2024).

Armenia's ties to Russia were not, however, only structural. At the interpersonal level, from 1997 to 2018, Armenia was ruled by people who are known to have personal friendships with Putin (Atanesian 2019) and clear elements of Russian authoritarian diffusion (Roberts and Ziemer 2018). The first president of modern Armenia had to leave his position in 1997 under the pressure of his Prime Minister, Robert Kocharyan, Defence Minister Vazgen Sarkisyan, and others, who opposed his agreement to the phased resolution packaged for the Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict offered by the OSCE Minsk Group (Congressional Research Service 1998). The subsequent leaders of the country – Robert Kocharyan and his ally Serzh Sargsyan, known as the leaders of the so-called "Karabakh Clan" – ruled the country until the Velvet Revolution of April-May 2018 (Sargsyan 2021; Nazaretyan 2021). The rule of Robert Kocharyan and Serzh Sargsyan was marked by power consolidation, electoral manipulation, and repression, lingering between autocracy and polyarchy (Iskandaryan 2012; Badalyan and Vasilyan 2020; Grigoryan 2018) and marginal interest in the European Union (Delcour 2019), though it was receptive to the EU's incentives in the late years of this period (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015b; Casier 2022; Freire and Simão 2013; Tololyan 1995). The 1999 parliamentary attack fostered fear, enabling their dominance (Sargsyan 2021). Kocharyan's 2003 re-election and Sargsyan's rise in 2008 were marred by fraud and violent suppression of dissent. Sargsyan's 2013 re-election and the 2015 constitutional referendum further entrenched their authoritarian governance, prioritising regime stability over democratic legitimacy (Sargsyan 2021). However, the most recent of these events—the 2015 constitutional amendments that transformed Armenia from a presidential to a parliamentary republic—failed to achieve their intended goal of prolonging the regime's tenure (Grigoryan 2015; Viti 2023). In April 2018, after then-President Serzh Sargsyan, contrary to previous assurances, was nominated for the position of Prime Minister following Armenia's transition to a parliamentary system, protests erupted nationwide. Demonstrators called for Sargsyan's resignation and for the parliament to elect opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan as Prime Minister, which was achieved in a second attempt on 8 May. He fully installed his rule following the victory of the coalition led by him in the 9 December 2018 elections, concluding the revolution (Feldman and Alibašić 2019; Lanskoy and Suthers 2019; Hoellerbauer 2019).

While the Velvet Revolution lacked any clear anti-Russian and pro-Western tone, Russia adopted a wait-and-see approach towards the new government. Putin himself congratulated the new leader of Armenia (Kucera 2018), while Pashinyan paid a visit to Moscow in September 2018, prior to the December elections, assuring the Kremling of the continuation of cooperation in defence and security realms. Nevertheless, given Pashinyan's earlier critical comments on Armenia's foreign policy, Moscow had underlying concerns (Mejlumyan 2019). Over time, however, Pashinyan's government proved Moscow right in their concerns (Miarka and Łapaj-Kucharska 2022; Nikoghosyan and Ter-Matevosyan 2023). As soon as he took office, he confirmed his government's commitment to the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement signed with the EU in 2017 and showed significant progress in its implementation already in 2019 and 2020, carrying out significant reforms in areas like justice, transparency and

anti-corruption (EEAS 2021; CoE 2019). During this period, the high-level visits between Armenia, on the one hand, and European states and the US, on the other, intensified. US National Security Advisor John Bolton's visit in 2018 laid the groundwork for continued engagement (Ghazanchyan 2018). In early 2020, Armenia hosted high-level discussions with US officials, emphasising cooperation in areas such as democracy, trade, and economic development. Simultaneously, Pashinyan's government worked to expand trade relations with the United States, showcasing its willingness to diversify partnerships beyond Russia (Chukuran et al. 2024). These steps, particularly the arrest of pro-Russian figures in Armenia and judicial reforms which eliminated the influence of pro-Russian actors, led over time to increasing scepticism and tension in Moscow, manifesting in cold diplomatic relations between the sides despite all the reassurance of the Pashinyan government.

The situation, however, started changing following the Second Karabakh War fought between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the period of 27 September – 10 November 2020 after almost three decades of fruitless negotiations facilitated by an OSCE Minsk Group with the US, French and Russian co-leadership (Strategic Comments 2023; Cheterian 2022; German 2012). Although Armenia was disappointed by Russia's failure or unwillingness to interfere in support of Armenia during the war, it had to rely on Russia in the absence of any tangible security support from the West (Nikoghosyan and Ter-Matevosyan 2023), particularly given that now Russian peacekeepers deployed to Nagorno-Karabakh – an option Armenia rejected earlier (Cheterian 2022) – were the only guarantor of the unrecognised local Armenian government there (Atanesyan et al. 2024; Ibrahimov and Oztarsu 2022).

Nevertheless, beginning in 2022, especially after Armenia accused Azerbaijan of an incursion into its territory within a non-demarcated border area—a situation Armenia cited to invoke the CSTO's mutual defence clause (Ghahriyan et al. 2024), Pashinyan's government began to adopt a more pro-Western stance and expressed increasing dissatisfaction with Russia's role in safeguarding Armenia's security (Amoris 2024; Çakmak and Özşahin 2023). He now strongly emphasised the need to diversify Armenia's foreign policy and sovereignty and sought closer diplomatic ties with France and the United States. Notably, Pashinyan welcomed an EU proposal to deploy a civilian monitoring mission along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border, challenging Russia's traditional role in the region.

By 2023, Armenia's pro-Western orientation became more pronounced. Pashinyan openly criticised Russia and the CSTO for their inadequate support, expressing Armenia's diminished reliance on its traditional ally. The deployment of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMA) in February marked a significant step, inviting Western involvement in regional security. The hosting of joint military drills with the United States in September further highlighted Armenia's pivot, making 2023 a defining year for its evolving foreign policy (Kucera 2023b; Wojtasiewicz 2024; de Waal 2024). Particularly, the 23-hour operation of Azerbaijan bringing the end of the unrecognised regime in Nagorno-Karabakh and leading to the exodus of local Armenia has further strengthened Armenia's pro-Western orientation (Górecki 2023). Armenia initially suspended its participation in the CSTO in February 2024 (Karabashian 2025) and signalled its intention to raise the status of its relationship with the USA in June 2024 (US, Armenia pledge to increase ties as Russia's influence dealt a blow 2024) before formalising a Strategic Partnership Charter with the United States on 14 January 2025 (RFE/RL Armenian Service 2025), which in turn, was characterised by Kremlin as "destabilising" the region (Reuters Media 2025). In parallel, it received the first EU military assistance in July 2024 (The Economist 2024) following the US-EU-Armenia Joint High-Level Dialogue held in April 2024 (DG NEAR 2024; Rasmussen 2024). In its

turn, on 9 January 2025, the Armenian government welcomed the introduction of a draft law on the launch of negotiations on EU accession, proposed by a civic initiative, to the Armenian parliament (Civilnet 2025). Earlier, the European Parliament backed a motion calling for the consideration of Armenia's candidacy and Armenian foreign minister Mirzoyan confirmed that applying for EU membership "is being discussed" (Gavin 2024).

While all this happened, Russia has only issued measured criticism, recently emphasising the conflict between EU membership and Armenia's obligations within the EAEU while also reminding Armenia of the advantages it derives from its EAEU membership (TASS 2025). Nevertheless, by the time of writing, no measures beyond diplomatic criticism and political signalling were taken by Russia in response to Armenia's growing pro-Western orientation or, more precisely, the declaration of such an intention.

The situation in Armenia presents a stark contrast to the cases of Georgia and Ukraine regarding Russia's responses to colour revolutions and the adoption of pro-Western foreign policies. Unlike its approach to these other countries, Russia refrained from immediate economic sanctions or pressure on Armenia. Nor did it resort to hard power tactics to penalise Armenia for its pro-Western leanings or force a policy reversal akin to the 2013 scenario involving EU Association Agreement negotiations under Serzh Sargsyan's leadership (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015b). Russia's cautious stance may be attributed to its desire to avoid inflaming anti-Russian sentiment within Armenian society, which still sees Russia as the most important economic partner (de Waal et al. 2024), while also hoping for the re-emergence of pro-Russian factions, potentially under former President Robert Kocharyan. Additionally, Russia's considerable leverage over Armenia, stemming from the latter's economic dependence, allows Moscow to more subtly gauge Armenia's Western shift. Since the onset of the war in Ukraine, Armenia's trade with Russia has increased significantly, often attributed to Armenia's role in facilitating re-exports and imports for the Russian economy under Western sanctions (Grigoryan 2025a; Kuzio 2024). Pashinyan's criticisms of Russia have remained largely confined to the security domain, particularly regarding the CSTO and EAEU, which could explain Russia's patient approach. Moreover, Russia's lack of direct geographical access to Armenia, unlike the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, further constrains Russia's potential use of hard power. Finally, the broader regional sentiment reflects a general unease regarding the closer ties between Armenia and the West, with regional geopolitics posing challenges to Armenia's potential pivot towards Western alliances. Despite maintaining positive bilateral ties, Iran, which stands as Armenia's sole alternative for energy supplies if Russia cuts off the gas, has expressed its unease over the increasing military collaboration between the United States and Armenia, particularly given Armenia's southeastern border with Iran. With its borders with Türkiye closed and lacking normalisation with Azerbaijan, Armenia finds itself in a position where it might shift its security alliances but remains constrained economically. This limitation could further explain Russia's measured response, as Armenia's economic dependency indirectly keeps it tethered to its traditional alliances.

Armenians' attitudes towards Russia, previously pro-Russian, have worsened after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War and continued to shift after the one-day Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, when Russia refused to provide support to Armenia. To compare survey results of April and December of that year, the percentage of respondents evaluating the state of the relationship between the countries as good fell from 50% to 31% (furthermore, in 2019, 93% of Armenians believed the relations were positive) and keeps almost at the same level – 35% – in 2024 (International Republican Institute 2024c, p. 50). Thus, most

Armenians see the current state of relations with Russia as bad. After the significant worsening of the attitudes in 2023, in 2024, more Armenians (41%) see Russia as a political threat (third after Azerbaijan and Türkiye**)** rather than a political partner (33%), while only 25% perceive it as a security partner (International Republican Institute 2024c, p. 52) (to compare with 64% in 2021 (International Republican Institute 2022a, p. 36)). Additionally, 51% of respondents blamed Russia for posing an economic threat to Armenia in 2023 (International Republican Institute 2024a, p. 57).

Regarding Russia's war on Ukraine, a 2022 survey shows that only 8% of Armenians think that Vladimir Putin is responsible for the war in Ukraine (compared to 14% that named Volodymyr Zaleski), even less – 5% – blame the Russian Federation in general, and 16% stated that all parties are equally responsible (International Republican Institute 2022b, p. 42). In 2023, 43% of Armenians agreed with the statement that Russia had no choice but to intervene to protect the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, though this number has decreased by 18% since 2022 (Regional Communication Programme for the Eastern Neighbourhood 2023a, p. 17).

Noteworthy, even before the shift in the general public opinion in 2023, Armenian youth also did not perceive Russia as an ally. Armenia-Russia relations they call "forced relations" due to "the provision of improper support to Armenia, pursuing its own interests, and, in young people's opinions, with the regular past and contemporary attempts at sacrificing Armenia" (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2023).

Finally, when asked about the desirable foreign policy course, only 6% of Armenians choose "only pro-Russian" and 20% – "pro-Russian but keep up relations with the European Union and the West". At the same time, 31% support the "pro-Western but keep up relations with Russia" course (International Republican Institute 2024c, p. 53).

Despite the continuous political, economic, and security cooperation between the two countries and the significant trade, energy, and security dependence of Armenia, the events in the Nagorno-Karabakh region during 2020-2023 have undermined Armenia's trust in Russia and noticeably shifted the geopolitical course away from it.

Russia and those political groups who support the restoration of previous close relations with Russia are associated with authoritarian tendencies. Putin's Russia is compared with pre-2018 Armenia, emphasizing similar authoritarian characteristics (Vardanyan 2023). After the Velvet Revolution and further geopolitical shift at the beginning of the 2020s, anti-Russian rhetoric increased, clearly identifying Russia's way of political development as undemocratic and undesirable for Armenia. Local experts describe Armenia as "a counterpoint to regional autocracies like Russia and Azerbaijan" (Avedissian 2024).

The issue of affiliation with Russia is also instrumentalised within Armenian politics. During the first after-2018 parliamentary elections in 2021, the country's old political elites spread the narrative that "Russia was offended by Armenia's democratic transition and therefore chose not to intervene decisively in last year's fighting" and "only deeper integration with Russia can prevent further wars" (Dickinson 2021). After further political developments, in 2024, Armenian political experts still conclude that "there is fear that pro-Putin forces may usurp power and bring an end to democracy in Armenia" (Sargsyan 2024). It is noteworthy that even in the expert public discourse, undemocratic practices, like propaganda, are marked as "Russian-style" (Grigoryan 2025b).

Democracy Support by the USA in Armenia & Local Perception

Security challenges have long influenced the development and support of democracy in the South Caucasus, and Armenia is no exception. Over the decades, its transition toward democracy has been shaped by the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. In 2013, then-President Serzh Sargsyan was pressured by Russian President Putin to abandon the signing of the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the European Union, under the threat that Moscow would withdraw its support for Yerevan in the event of renewed military action in Nagorno-Karabakh. This decision effectively halted Armenia's EU integration process, despite Brussels' attempts to work around it by launching Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). However, CEPA clearly fell short of enabling the scale of democratic reforms achieved by other Eastern Partnership countries over the past decade. That said, the 2018 Velvet Revolution and the rise of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signalled a new era for Armenia. The revolution set the country on a path toward faster democratic transition, as reforms began to take root.

In 2023, after multiple efforts and military interventions, Baku succeeded in reclaiming the territories it lost in the early 1990s. While the loss of Karabakh has been perceived as a national tragedy for Armenia and its people, it also marked a critical turning point, providing another fresh momentum for the country's democratic development and signalling a new chapter in Armenia's integration with the EU. At the same time, it has reinvigorated U.S. support for democracy in the country.

While the Department of State is in the process of developing a new 4-year State-USAID Joint Strategic Plan, the old one approved in 2022, asserts that the U.S. approach to supporting democracy in Armenia is multi-faceted, driven by a strategic commitment to reinforcing democratic institutions, promoting good governance, and countering external influences that threaten Armenia's sovereignty. Following the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which official Washington assessed as a significant shift in Armenia's democratic trajectory, the U.S. has thought to capitalise on the country's reform momentum by deepening its engagement in key areas that directly influence democratic governance. Central to this effort is reinforcing Armenia's democratic institutions, particularly by supporting electoral integrity and the rule of law. Through these measures, the U.S. has aimed to expand the progress made since the 2018 Velvet Revolution, ensuring that democratic gains were consolidated. A critical aspect of this strategy is combating corruption by increasing transparency and enhancing civic oversight, which fosters a more decentralised, participatory governance structure where citizens hold the government accountable. (United States Department of State 2022)

Following Karabakh 2023 war and Armenia's efforts to reduce dependence on Russia, the U.S. has intensified its support for economic and energy resilience, aiming to bolster country's long-term stability. This relationship is expected to deepen through a Memorandum of Understanding, elevating U.S.-Armenia dialogue to a Strategic Partnership Commission, signifying a new phase in the bilateral relations. (United States Department of State 2024a)

The U.S.-Armenia Local Democracy Forum, first held in 2024, exemplifies the broad scope of U.S. support. The forum brought together leaders to discuss critical issues like transparency, election integrity, and economic development, while further advancing reforms in law enforcement and governance. (United States Department of State 2024b) These efforts, coupled with USAID's support for trade and infrastructure, are helping Armenia realise its vision as a regional hub for peace and connectivity.

In summary, the U.S. has strategically responded to Armenia's turning points and critical junctures by bolstering democratic institutions and supporting economic resilience. The support is comprehensive, focusing on institutional reforms, anti-corruption efforts, media integrity, and civic engagement. By addressing both internal governance challenges and external threats emerging, the U.S. aims to help Armenia maintain its democratic trajectory while enhancing its resilience against external challenges. These efforts complement the European Union's ongoing democracy support in Armenia. The joint EU-U.S. commitment was underscored during a trilateral EU-Armenia-U.S. high-level meeting in Brussels, (DG NEAR 2024) where both actors have pledged continued partnership with Armenia as it strengthens democracy and the rule of law. They also have promised further assistance to help Armenia diversify its trade and bolster its economic and institutional resilience.

The general attitude towards the USA has been positive. In the most recent poll, 82% of Armenians consider the current state of the USA-Armenia relationship as either very good or somewhat good while 14% assessed it as bad (International Republican Institute 2024c, p. 46), which puts the USA in fourth place in the attitude-towards-country ranking after India, France, and Iran. Such a high estimation has prevailed at least since 2018 (International Republican Institute 2018, p. 48), as the available data allows us to see, with the lowest point at 65% in 2021 after the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (International Republican Institute 2022a, p. 32)

Also, the USA is seen as one of Armenia's key partners. In 2024, the USA is considered the third most important political and security partner after France and Iran: 48% believe the USA is the most significant political partner (International Republican Institute 2024c, p. 52) (compared with 31% in 2018 (International Republican Institute 2024a, p. 45) and a bit less – 37% – consider it the most essential security partner (International Republican Institute 2024c, p. 52). The perception of the USA as the most important economic partner has fluctuated, albeit has grown in the end result, from 24% in 2018 (International Republican Institute 2018, p. 50) to 16% in 2021 (International Republican Institute 2022a, p. 35) and 33% in 2023 (International Republican Institute 2024a, p. 54). Only 5% and 2% see the USA as a political/economic threat, respectively (International Republican Institute 2024a, pp. 56–57). In December 2021, 18% of respondents said they would prefer the USA to assist Armenia in defending its borders – the second largest group after those who saw Russia in this role (International Republican Institute 2022a, p. 49). At the same time, 17% put responsibility for the full-scale war in Ukraine on the USA in the June 2022 survey (International Republican Institute 2022b, p. 42), and this option was the most popular among the respondents.

Thus, the tendency of the Armenians' attitudes towards the USA has been positive during the last few years, excluding the slight worsening of the relations in 2020-2021, and the ties in all key areas with this external actor are considered beneficial for the country.

The USA is perceived as a part of the democratic West, and its increasing role (along with the EU) is considered to be strengthening and even safeguarding Armenia's fragile democracy. The Armenian government acknowledges the importance of the US support for democratic reforms, particularly in the justice sector (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2024), while the non-government sector representatives emphasise the USA's role in "strengthening political parties, supporting grassroots NGOs, and empowering women to run for office" (Avedissian 2024). The local experts' concerns over the impact of Trump's presidency on democracy in Armenia only prove how essential the political cooperation between the two countries is (Avedissian 2024). As Armenia's democracy survival is significantly dependent on the security situation and the government's ability to balance between the desire to maintain peace and popular demand to save Armenia's face during the

negotiation process with Azerbaijan, the US foreign policy also influences domestic politics of Armenia (Grigoryan 2024b).

Nevertheless, Armenian civil society also criticises the Western partners (both the USA and EU) for the unconditional support approach. They claim that "the US and the EU continue to praise the Armenian government for its commitment to the reform process, despite the fact that some major reforms supported by these external actors have failed" (Grigoryan 2024a). Thus, according to local experts, conditionalities for economic aid and prioritisation of democratic institutions and norms over particular political forces should guide further cooperation. At the same time, others call for developing local capacities necessary for democratic transformation and decreasing Armenia's dependence on external support due to "the growing instability and volatility of Western democracies" (Avedissian 2024).

Democracy Support by the Council of Europe & Local Perception

Assessing the singular impact of the Council of Europe on Armenian democracy is a difficult task. On the one hand, because the Council of Europe is but one of the regional organisations involved in promoting rule of law and democracy reforms in the country (Ishkanian 2008; Simão 2012). Furthermore, Armenia is one of the less conspicuous members of the Council of Europe, making a precise determination of the CoE's role in this small country difficult. As one of the smallest member states, Armenia's Soviet past has exposed its present constitutional and democratic order to a high number of violations of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Despite its relatively small population, as of 2025, Armenia has had 949 cases before the European Court of Human Rights, more than Georgia and the three Baltic states, but less than Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Ukraine. (Council of Europe and ECHR-CEDH) Nevertheless, successive Armenian governments have collaborated together with the Strasbourg-based body as much as other former Soviet states with tangible results.

Although the Armenian government had requested an invitation to join the Council of Europe in 1996, five years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it was only granted membership in 2001 with its constitutionally permitted capital punishment being the main point of contention. As it was the last former Soviet state, alongside Azerbaijan, to join the Council of Europe, considerable conditions were placed upon Yerevan prior to accession. While pre-accession monitoring phase saw a number of reforms enacted to help Armenia satisfy the CoE's standards for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, the country's membership in the IO has opened up a number of opportunities for the country.

The CoE and Armenia together have enacted a number of projects and programmes aimed at improving the democracy, human rights, and rule of law standards of the country. On the one hand, these include consecutive National Action Plans since 2012. (Council of Europe and Directorate of Programme Co-ordination 2025) These Action Plans are targeted specifically at reforms in Armenia with clear objectives and goals for the country. From norms transfers through legislation and judicial reconfigurations, these Action Plans have improved the country's compliance with the standards set forth by the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Attributing these successes to the Council of Europe's individual, country-focused action plans, however, is not possible as the regional format known as the "Partnership for Good Governance", a joint programme of the EU and CoE, has also targeted judicial reforms, anti-corruption as well as human rights and legal education goals, as well as

an explicit democracy-focused objective in its first iteration from 2015-2018. (Council of Europe 2025)

Furthermore, Armenia's cooperation through the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has yielded positive improvements. In the area of elections, PACE has jointly monitored these democratic exercises together with the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. This was especially vital in the post-Velvet Revolution landscape of Armenian politics. While PACE is not per se responsible for the conduct of the elections themselves, its positive reporting on the event, which it deemed to be competitive and generally well-managed offered the country a considerable degree of international legitimacy, (Council of Europe and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2021a) particularly following the country's war with Azerbaijan in 2020. Moreover PACE's regular reporting on Armenia has continued to draw attention to the small country in the South Caucasus, especially as it deals with the consequences of the aforementioned war. (Council of Europe and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2021b)

Although Armenia has demonstrated considerable progress during its membership in the Council of Europe, particularly judicial independence remains a challenge. In 2024, the COE's Group of States Against Corruption released a report lauding the country's improvements, while seeing distinct problems in the lack of certain supervisory and ethical bodies. (Csúri 2025) However, the Armenian Minister of Justice requested an opinion of the Venice Commission regarding a draft law on the country's judicial code. Hence, while corruption and judicial independence in Armenia present a significant hurdle to the country's democratic practices, the government continues to work closely with the CoE to enact reforms.

The Council of Europe has been a close cooperating partner for Armenia since gaining its independence. Its policies of norms transfer and expertise have provided a resource for Armenia through the preceding decades. These have been a particular asset for the country, especially in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution, which led to the election of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. The country's devastating defeat at the hands of Azerbaijan in 2020 as well as the forced displacement of a number of Karabakh Armenians in 2023 presents a significant human rights challenge to Yerevan, alongside its persistent shortfalls in democracy and rule of law standards. Nevertheless, the Armenian government has demonstrated a willingness to continue working with the CoE institutions.

Democracy Support by NATO & Local Perception

Contrary to Georgia and Ukraine, Armenia has never voiced any interest in joining the Alliance. Moreover, it perceived it as potentially hostile due to Turkish NATO membership and well as its strong ties with Russia. Despite this Armenia joint NACC and participated in the PfP since the early 1990s. It has also signed the IPAP and is considered by NATO as one of the partners of the Alliance. Armenia turned out to be a useful partner, as it contributed forces to NATO's Kosovo mission and was geographically important in the context of NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, NATO's democracy support potential in Armenia is very limited and most notably touched upon fighting corruption in the military and educational projects. The main instrument for such activity has been the Information Centre on NATO in Armenia located in Yerevan (although it is uncertain whether it still operates) as well as the Building Integrity program focused on good governance and integrity. On a systemic, international level, partnership with NATO may be conducive towards softly balancing Russia's influence without antagonizing the Kremlin through membership aspirations (Özdemir 2023).

NATO as a military alliance is not considered to be among the key external actors involved in democracy support in Armenia.

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Annex 2: The Impact of non-EU external actors on Georgia & their local perceptions

In Georgia, the political landscape has been characterised by significant events in recent years that have shaped the country's democratic path and international relations. In 2020, the country experienced controversial elections that saw the opposition contest the results, highlighting underlying tensions and the pursuit of electoral integrity. This period of political unrest was exacerbated by 2023 and 2024 protests against a foreign agents law, a law perceived as inspired by similar Russian laws aimed at limiting foreign actors' influence in domestic affairs. These protests highlighted public resistance to measures seen as curtailing civil society and democratic discourse. Amid these domestic challenges, Georgia reached a milestone in 2023 when the European Union granted the country candidate status. This was a significant step in Georgia's pursuit of European integration and reaffirmed its commitment to aligning with European democratic standards. These developments paint a picture of a nation navigating complex political dynamics while striving to strengthen its democratic institutions and forge closer ties with the European community.

Within the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood countries, Georgia has been strongly associated with democratic movements, street protests and people's quest for democracy since the early 2000s. In 2003, there were mass-scale protests against the machinations and manipulations of the Presidential elections - the "Rose Revolution" - which resulted in the democratic and pro-Western candidate M. Saakashvilli election as president. This opened the doors for EU integration processes, talks of integration into NATO, and intensified democratisation and reforms in Georgia. Still, Russia remained steadfast in its desire to preserve Georgia under its dictate and within its sphere of influence. This led to the intensification of Russia's support for separatist movements and passportisations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for covert support of populist and anti-Western sentiments and politicians. This culminated in the Russian-Georgian War in August 2008.

While Russia has been perceived by the population as a threat to Georgia's democracy and its prevailing European integration aspirations, since 2014 the Georgian political milieu and elections has been systematically dominated by politicians who insisted on restoring and maintaining strong economic ties with Russia and demonstrated populist and somewhat traditionalist rhetoric. In 2016, the "Georgian Dream" party associated with Bidzina Ivanishvili secured a parliamentary supermajority gaining near-total control of all democratic institutions and thus consolidating its hold on power. Since the 2018 presidential election and the 2019 protests, Georgia has been in a political crisis. All these resulted in increased polarisation and in 2020's elections and Georgian Dream's victory being contested by the pro-EU/Western/democratic opposition. The efforts to mediate the crisis and lessen polarisations, including the EU's mediation, haven't achieved any significant results. In 2023, the Georgian Dream introduced the Foreign Agent Law (i.e. "The Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence") inspired by similar legislation in Russia, which aimed at circumventing political opposition and democratic freedoms in the country. This resulted in mass protests in 2023-2024. While the EU granted Georgia candidate status in 2023, the integration process has been de facto stalled by the actions and decisions of the Georgian ruling party. In October 2024, the parliamentary elections were held in Georgia, but as they had been widely considered to be un-democratic and "neither free, nor fair", their result has been contested by the opposition and wider groups of Georgian people with the still ongoing mass protests (as of December 2024).

Democracy Prevention by Russia & Local Perception

During the latter half of the 1990s, Georgia, under Shevardnadze, sought to maintain pragmatic ties with Russia while also pursuing a Western-oriented integration path. This (semi-)balanced foreign policy was largely shaped by internal political instability and economic challenges in Georgia, as Russia played a crucial role in the breakaway regions and was a key export market for the country (Kakhishvili 2021; Rondeli 2001). However, following the Rose Revolution of 2003, which brought Mikheil Saakashvili, a staunch pro-Western and anti-Russian actor, the relationships between the sides soured (Jones 2006; Kakhishvili 2021; Jakopovich 2007; Delcour and Wolczuk 2015a). Initially, Russia was cautious in its public response, but it was clear that the Kremlin did not welcome the changes. Moscow was particularly wary of Saakashvili's emphasis on closer ties with the United States, NATO, and the European Union, which contradicted Russia's strategic interests in the South Caucasus. The Rose Revolution represented a rejection of Russia's influence in Georgia and a desire to align more with Western institutions, which Russia saw as a threat to its regional dominance. In the aftermath of the revolution, relations between Georgia and Russia deteriorated sharply (Stronski and Vreeman 2017). Russia took several retaliatory actions, including halting direct flights to Georgia, imposing economic sanctions, tightening its grip on and supporting the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and expanding Russian passportisation (Allison 2009; Stronski and Vreeman 2017; Delcour and Wolczuk 2015a). Russia also increased its military presence in the region, further exacerbating tensions. The tensions between the sides continued deteriorating, culminating in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, which was triggered by the conflict in South Ossetia (Karagiannis 2014, 2013). The offensive started by Georgia against the separatists in Tskhinvali on 7 August was immediately met with Russia's direct interference, with Russian forces soon reaching 40 km of the Georgian capital, Tbilisi (Stronski and Vreeman 2017). The ceasefire deal brokered by French President Sarkozy took the sides back. However, Russia strengthened its position in the breakaway regions (Allison 2009; Bowker 2011; Gerrits and Bader 2016) and in the region, generally (Mikhelidze 2009). It first recognised their independence immediately after the war (Blakkisrud et al. 2021). Consequently, Russia took control of the borders of South Ossetia (or State of Alania, first through a five-year agreement signed in 2009 and then through an "alliance and integration" agreement signed in 2015 (South Ossetia profile 2012), while Abkhazia signed a "strategic partnership" agreement with Russia in 2014 and an agreement for the building of Russian naval base in the Abkhazian Black Sea port Ochamchire (Abkhazia profile 2012).

The relationship between the sides started showing some signs of improvement already in the late term of Saakashvili but accelerated with the Georgian Dream-led coalition government of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili's rise to power in Georgia in 2012 (Kakachia et al. 2018; Kakachia et al. 2024; Lebanidze and Kakachia 2023). Above all, under Georgian Dream's rule, the rhetoric has shifted on both sides. The Georgian Dream governments, since 2012, have maintained a more conciliatory tone, emphasising "peaceful coexistence" with Russia. Georgian authorities indicated a willingness to engage in dialogue on issues such as trade, transport, and regional security, although they remained steadfast in their position on the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Nikoladze 2024). One of the significant steps towards normalisation was the resumption of direct flights between Georgia and Russia. Regular direct air links, which had been suspended since the 2008 war and only episodically operated since then (RFE/RL 2010), were restored in 2014 (Agenda.Ge 2014a). In turn, Russia lifted its ban on Georgian wine and mineral water exports (Gutterman 2013), which was introduced in 2006 (BBC News 2006), and simplified the visa regime for Georgians that had been in place since 2000 (Agenda.Ge 2014b). The

reopening of markets for Georgian products, especially wine and agricultural goods, was a significant boost for Georgia's economy. In parallel, Georgia opened its doors to Russian media and NGOs (Clem et al. 2023). The same year, Russia extended an invitation to Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili to visit Moscow. Hoping to address the unresolved issues surrounding Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia proposed including these topics on the agenda for bilateral discussions (TASS 2014). The suggestion was reiterated in 2015. However, Moscow declined to engage on the matter, and the visits ultimately did not occur (Emmot 2015).

The normalisation of relationships was also felt in the positioning of Georgia towards Russia in the international arena. In March 2014, Georgia condemned Russia's annexation of Crimea (civil.ge 2014). However, it avoided broader sanctions against Moscow, thereby sidestepping Russian retaliation. Similarly, in 2022, Georgia expressed diplomatic support for Ukraine during the Russian invasion, endorsing numerous resolutions condemning Russia. However, it refrained from joining international sanctions, leading Russia to exclude Georgia from its Unfriendly Countries List (Górecki 2022; Avdaliani 2023; Piechowska and Wojtasiewicz 2024).

The tendency of normalisation between the sides, however, did not go so smoothly. On 20 June 2019, protests erupted outside Georgia's parliament after Russian politician Sergei Gavrilov addressed the Greek set up Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodox from the Speaker's chair in Russian, praising Orthodox ties between Georgia and Russia (civil.ge 2024a; France 24 2019). The protests, which turned violent, strained bilateral relations, prompting Russia to ban direct flights to Georgia and tighten regulations on Georgian exports like wine and mineral water (Kucera 2023a). The direct flights were restored only in 2023, amidst the war in Ukraine, accompanied by the introduction by Russia of a visa-free regime for Georgia citizens (Gabritchidze 2023) despite criticisms from the West (Kucera 2023a).

The efforts of the Georgian government to normalise relations with Russia went, at least until recently[3], hand-in-hand with the integration into the European Union (Tsuladze et al. 2024; Siroky and Dzutsev 2012; Lebanidze and Kakachia 2023), with Georgia receiving a candidate status in 2023. Similarly, the presidency of Margvelashvili from 2013 to 2018 demonstrated a strong commitment to Georgia's path to NATO membership (Sajaia 2018). Ivanishvili's support to a pro-Western political figure, Salome Zourabichvili, in her run for the parliament and later for the presidency, was seemingly aimed at pursuing a balanced foreign policy, satisfying the West, too (Katamadze 2024). However, with increasing efforts of the Georgian Dream rule to moderate its pro-Western policy and pursue a more balanced foreign policy, already starting in 2019 but particularly since the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022, has soured both the personal relationship between the de-facto ruler of Georgia, Ivanishvili, and President Zourabichvili, as well as between Georgia and the West (Jochecova 2024; Koberidze 2024; Parulava 2024; Hodge et al. 2019). The adoption of the so-called "foreign agent" law in Georgia, introducing stricter government control over the foreign funding of NGOs operating in Georgia, in a second attempt, after withdrawing the bill in 2023 (Goedemans 2024), as well as the alleged fraud in the parliamentary elections held in Georgia in November 2024, further soured relations of Georgia with the West, culminating in harsh criticisms of the move by the European Parliament (European Parliament 2024) and US sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili, the figure behind the Georgian Dream (Psaledakis and Light 2024). Arguments circulate in the public about the backdoor diplomacy between Georgia and Russia, in which Georgia seeks to fully normalise and restore the Abkhaz

[3] The Georgian Prime Minister announced halting the EU integration process by 2028 in late November in 2024 only to reject it weeks later, in mid-December 2024.

railway section linking Russia to Armenia through Georgia in return for the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity (Chedia 2024; de Waal 2021; Kucera 2024).

The “pragmatic turn” of the Georgian Dream government, compared to the Saakashvili rule, however, was also observed with the increased efforts to consolidate power at home, particularly since 2016 (Grozovski 2025; Fix and Kapp 2023; Caliskan 2023), bearing a resemblance to the late periods of Saakashvili who was accused of gaining authoritarian inclinations (Mitchell 2009; Jones 2006; Sumbadze 2009). Building on a conservative discourse (civil.ge 2024b), which is also echoed by the Russia-styled or affiliated media and non-governmental actors operating inside Georgia or towards the Georgian audience (Kapanadze 2023), the Georgian Dream government projects a more balanced foreign policy and subjectivity for Georgia in the broader geopolitical context (Kakachia et al. 2024; Avdaliani 2023). Similarly, the adoption of the law on foreign funding of NGOs, which is to limit eventually not only Western but any other foreign funding in Georgia, including Russian, empowers the Georgian government (Gelashvili 2024; Goedemans 2024; Dolbaia and Snegovaya 2023), which is often said to be weaker vis-à-vis civil society (Lieven 2024). The country, particularly the capital city, Tbilisi, has been swayed by frequent protests since 2019, with the latest wave emerging in November 2024 against the results of the parliamentary elections. Even though the OSCE’s observer mission points out some significant shortcomings in the conduct of relations, particularly concerning the political environment of the election, it does not portray it as a rigged one (OSCE 2025). Nevertheless, as of January 2025, the protests continue with irregular small gatherings or mass demonstrations, tuned to frequent triggers.

In conclusion, while Russia’s role in shaping democratic or autocratic inclinations in the region is undeniable, it is not as immediate as the portrayal of the recent parliamentary elections by now the former president of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, as a “Russian special operation” (Dougherty 2024). It is subtler and more interwoven in a broader geopolitical context. Undoubtedly, Russia’s grip over the breakaway regions of Georgia and, consequently, direct military intervention in response to Saakashvili’s attempt at the military takeover of the region directly curtailed Georgia’s Western integration and transformation into a stronger democracy in this process. However, one should also be reminded of the authoritarian inclinations of the pro-Western president, Mikheil Saakashvili. On the other hand, the geopolitical rivalry between the West and Russia in the shared neighbourhood provides a wider room for manoeuvre for autocrats or autocratically inclined political actors or movements. As already noted, Russian-affiliated media and actors feed into a conservative discursive line not only in Georgia but also in the wider region that encourages anti-Western arguments, contextualises developments in geopolitical narratives, and promotes illiberal norms (Clem et al. 2023; Davtyan 2024; Muradov 2022). As such, the existence of such a Russia in the region plays into the hands of conservative governments also by triggering fear in society about the cost to be paid should an unbalanced position in the regional geopolitical rivalry be abandoned in favour of the West, hence pragmatizing balanced policies abroad and a consolidated power at home. When necessary, as in the example of Georgia, even closer cooperation emerges as Russia’s tool in cultivating non-democratic regimes in the shared neighbourhood. Overall, the Georgian case demonstrates a record of lingering between pro-Western partisanship and Russia-fed (either directly or indirectly) pragmatist balancing; nonetheless, both leaned towards a tighter grip over power over time.

In 2024 Caucasus Barometer, Russia is defined as the main enemy of Georgia by 69% of Georgian citizens (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2024e). Even more, in 2023 IRI’s survey, 73%

stated that Russian aggression towards Georgia is still going on (International Republican Institute 2023, p. 42). When asked to name the top threat to Georgia's national security, 4 out of 5 most popular answers mentioned Russia: 27% of respondents named Russian military aggression, 13% occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, 11% Russian propaganda (top three), and 5% Russians' immigration to Georgia (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023j). This could be compared with the results from 2022: when asked whether Russia is a military threat to neighbouring countries, 73% named it a major threat (a 16% increase since 2017), 10% a minor one, and only 10% do not think of Russia as a threat at all (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2022b); noticeably, these answers were collected in February 2022 before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This distribution correlates with the answers to the question of who's fault is the full-scale war in Ukraine, which was added to the poll at the end of 2022: 54% named Russia as such and 25% named Putin individually (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2022i). Additionally, out of 51% who stated that Russia's influence on Georgia in the last 5 years has increased, the majority of respondents – 89% – assessed this change as a bad thing (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2022f).

Regarding the Georgia's foreign policy, in NDI's survey from October 2023, 8% said that it should be pro-Russian but good relations with the EU and NATO should still be maintained (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023k); another 2% chose just "pro-Russian", and 36% selected an option "Pro-Western, however we should maintain good relations with Russia". Another 37% said it should be just "pro-Western". It clearly demonstrates that the Georgians' preference is for maintaining a multivector foreign policy and good relations both with Russia and with the West (EU and NATO). Still, while the sentiments towards Russia have been becoming more positive since 2016, they still are mainly pro-EU and pro-Western. Thus, another question posed in October, 2023, shows that 66% of Georgians think that their country will benefit from Euro-Atlantic integration more, while 11% believe it should be abandoned in favour of better relations with Russia (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023k).

Regarding economic relations with Russia, 34% of Georgians stated that they should remain unchanged; an equal percentage think that they should be deepened or limited – both 25% (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023h). During ten years since 2013, the number of citizens supporting Georgia's membership in the EEU led by Russia has dropped significantly from 32% to 7% (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2024d) . Considering economic cooperation, in October 2023, 25% mentioned Russia as one of the three key actors that Georgia should have closest ties with (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023i) , while 20% named Russia as one of the key political partners (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023l) . These numbers have increased from 16% (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023i) and 12% since March 2023 when data was collected right after the first wave of anti-foreign agent law protests. However, a different poll by IRI in November 2023, shows that, when assessing the real state of affairs, only 9% named Russia among the most important political partners for Georgia and 16% among economic partners (International Republican Institute 2023, pp. 34–35) .

Overall, while Russia is seen as a security threat and a threat to Georgian democracy and sovereignty, it is still considered and perceived by the Georgian population as an important economic and geopolitical partner with whom good relationships should be maintained.

Democracy Prevention by China & Local Perception

Even if China's presence in the South Caucasus is negligible compared with other regions – given the consideration of the region as part of the competition between Russia, the European Union

and NATO – their relationship with Georgia has accelerated in recent years. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 gathered new incentives for the rapprochement of both actors, coinciding with what appeared to be a period towards democratisation in Georgia. The intensification of these relations was evident with the signature of a Free Trade Agreement in 2017. This led to a customs tax reduction in 94% of the goods and galvanised the trade relations between both countries. China is currently Georgia's 4th largest trading partner and 9th investor. However, while the FTA was expected to improve the trade of Georgian local products, these have mostly benefitted the extractive industry through the export of ore and metals (around 86% of total exports in 2022 - according to OEC, 2024 (The Observatory of Economic Complexity 2024) while failing to benefit or affect small- and medium-sized businesses (Tsaava and Baletic 2023).

Interestingly, between both milestones, China was very active in the economic sector compared to the mild political contact. On the one hand, 2013-2014 saw the biggest Chinese investment in Georgia in the real estate and financial sectors – through the investment of an individual private company, Hualing Group (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2025; Hualing Group 2025). On the other, through foreign aid, China destined around $580 million to business and banking services until 2020, including $63 million destined to improve trade policies and regulations and a $5 million line of credit to JSC Basis Bank for international trade operations (bank in which Hualing Group owns a controlling share) (AidData 2024).

As argued by Arabidze (Arabidze 2022), China's most visible presence in Georgia was in the construction sector through the development of infrastructure projects in the energy and transportation sectors via state-owned enterprises (American Enterprise Institute - AEI 2024). More recently, in May 2024, a Chinese-Singaporean consortium won the public procurement bid for developing a part of the Anaklia deep-sea port – while the marine infrastructure (which raised fears of its development to meet exclusively Chinese needs) will be developed by a Belgian company (Menabde 2024; Business Media 2024). Some of the Chinese companies operating in the country, however, have been associated with corruption, mismanagement, the violation of labour rights protection and a negative impact on local people's livelihoods in some projects (Rekhviashvili and Lang 2024). While China is not an exceptional case, the development of infrastructural projects in the country – often in a combination of Chinese state-owned and private companies with Western counterparts and Western-led financial institutions – has often led to the lack of inclusion and participation of local knowledge (ibid.), solidifying top-down political and economic projects with little accountability from Georgian authorities and resisting democratic processes around development.

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and ensuing Western sanctions, the lack of viability of the Northern Route of China's BRI – which crossed Russia and Belarus – and growing instability in the Red Sea as a result of the ongoing Israeli assault on Gaza prompted a renewed interest in Georgia through the potential development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (also known as the Middle Corridor), which includes Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. Indeed, the signature of the 2023 Strategic Partnership between Tbilisi and Beijing marked a critical juncture for these actors. In the joint declaration, three points are worth highlighting. First, the document acknowledges an apparent Georgian recognition of China's modernisation process as an alternative – even if it falls short of showing its interest or willingness to follow. Second, it expresses a commitment to closer political collaboration, sharing governance experience, and conducting high-level political consultation and among parties (Embassy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Georgia 2023). The visit from a Georgian

Dream delegation to China in January 2024, led by now Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, and its meeting with the International Department of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC) is the first example of that (Light 2024). Third, the strategic partnership also mentions strengthening telecommunication and digital technology cooperation, which relates to the country's digital transformation. In 2021, Georgia signed a Memorandum with the USA to curtail the expansion of Huawei into Georgia by agreeing to use 5G technologies based on the "rule of law, security environment, ethical supplier practices and a supplier's compliance with secrete standards and industry best practices" (U.S. Embassy in Georgia 2021); as such, there are no ongoing projects of the Chinese private company in the Caucasian country. Nevertheless, there have been some exchanges in 2023 between former Prime Minister Garibashvili and Huawei officials to explore opportunities in ICT, industrial and digital transformation and network coverage in remote areas that have yet to materialise (Civil Georgia 2023).

Two other events are also significant: first, Chinese authorities didn't address the foreign agents law or the youth protests in Georgia during Spring 2024; and second, after the fraudulent elections of October 2024, the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, Lin Jian, acknowledged the celebration of elections without disruptions in Georgia and mentioned the respect of "the choice of the Georgian people" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2024), as such offering legitimacy and political support towards an increasingly authoritarian government. This seems to solidify a shift in the Georgian government towards increasing cooperation with China for economic opportunities while further eroding Tbilisi's democratic credentials and distancing itself from its Western commitments. And, in the meantime, China is seen as an untrustworthy partner by the Georgian population (Redeker and Kuhnke 2024), widening the gap between the authorities' actions and the people's will.

In October 2023, only 2% of respondents mentioned China when asked which counties Georgia should have closest political cooperation with; this number has lowered since the peak of 9% in 2011 (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023f). China is a little bit more popular as a top-priority economic partner but still on a low level, with 6% mentioning it in a similar question (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023m). At the same time, China is not viewed as a threat either: only 2% see it as a political threat and 3% as economic (International Republican Institute 2023, p. 36). Lack of data from earlier years does not allow a comparison but signals that China has not been assessed as a crucial external actor for Georgia. Still a 2019 poll shows that 62% think of Georgia-China relationship as positive (International Republican Institute, p. 14).

Assessing the China's influence on Georgia over the past 5 years in the February 2022 poll, 32% saw it as increased, 18% as stable and 8% as decreased (with significant number of respondents selecting a "don't know" answer – 41%) (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2022a). Among those who noticed an increase, 56% perceive it as a bad thing; and 52% think of the decrease they had noticed as a positive thing (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2022c).

To sum up: for Georgians China is not a key external actor and is neither friend nor foe. Overall respondents would not want China increasing its influence and connections with Georgia and are not interested in deepening either economic or political ties with China. Still, the relations between the two countries are rated positively.

Democracy Support by the USA in Georgia & Local Perception

The 2024 surge of protests in Georgia, ignited by the ruling "Georgian Dream" party's decision to reintroduce the Russian-style "Foreign Agents Law" (after shelving an earlier version in March

2023 amid protests and Western criticism), marks a pivotal moment in the nation's post-Soviet journey toward democracy. However, the root of Georgia's democratic backsliding extends beyond government actions, pointing to a critical misstep by the EU. By prioritizing geopolitics over democracy and tolerating the Georgian government's authoritarian tendencies over the years, the EU has not only jeopardised the country's path toward EU integration but also stalled key democratic reforms. Despite Georgia's failure to fully comply with the 12 conditions required for EU candidate status, Brussels still granted this status in December 2023. In response, the Georgian parliament passed or introduced several legislative acts that undermine democracy and counter the country's EU integration efforts (Mikhelidze 2024). Although the EU's strong reactions finally came in 2024, U.S. responses to Georgia's democratic backsliding had already been notably different. The U.S. appeared more committed to applying the principle of conditionality, taking a firmer stance on the issue than the EU.

Georgia has been a leading recipient of U.S. foreign and security assistance in Europe and Eurasia, with bilateral relations anchored in the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership signed in 2009. However, following the passage of the foreign influence law in 2024, the U.S. Department of State announced a “comprehensive review” of U.S.-Georgia bilateral cooperation. As a result of this review, the State Department paused over $95 million in assistance that directly benefited the Georgian government (United States Department of State 2024c).

In May 2024, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James O’Brien announced that around $390 million in planned U.S. assistance to Georgia was "under review," due to concerns that Georgia was treating the U.S. as an adversary rather than a partner (US Ambassy in Georgia 2024). Additionally, the Department of State imposed a new visa restriction policy targeting individuals responsible for undermining democracy in Georgia, including their family members. By June 2024, these restrictions were imposed on "dozens" of Georgian officials, including members of the ruling party, parliamentarians, and law enforcement.

In July, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken condemned the Georgian government’s anti-democratic actions, declaring them "incompatible with the norms of EU and NATO membership." However, Blinken also emphasised that U.S. support for programs benefiting the Georgian people—such as those promoting democracy, rule of law, independent media, and economic development—would continue. (United States Department of State 2024c)

Tensions in U.S.-Georgia relations had already begun to emerge before 2024, particularly since 2023, when the Georgian parliament passed controversial legislation and failed to implement judicial reforms to safeguard the independence of the judiciary. In 2023, the parliament overrode a presidential veto to amend the law governing Georgia’s central bank, the National Bank of Georgia (NBG), in ways that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned could undermine the bank’s “independence and credibility” (International Monetary Fund 2023). In response, the U.S. imposed visa restrictions on four Georgian judges for alleged corruption in April 2023, and in September, the State Department sanctioned a "Georgian-Russian oligarch" who was allegedly used by Russian security services to influence Georgian politics (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2021).

The U.S. consistently urged the Georgian government to uphold democracy and governance reforms, while imposing targeted sanctions on individuals linked to corruption and Russian influence. As the Georgian parliament passed more controversial legislation, the EU’s policy response began to align more closely with that of the U.S., in a complementary approach between Washington and Brussels in supporting democracy in Georgia.

Following the introduction of the "Foreign Agents Law," the EU expressed strong disapproval, stating it "deeply regrets" the law's passage, which "goes against EU core principles and values" (Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood 2024). In June 2024, the European Council's resolution urged Georgian authorities to reverse course, warning that the current trajectory jeopardised Georgia's EU integration and could effectively halt the accession process. By July, EU Ambassador to Georgia Paweł Herczyński confirmed that Georgia's accession process was "put on hold" and that the EU had "frozen" $30 million in security assistance to the country (Civil Georgia 2024).

Thus, the alignment between U.S. and EU responses became evident in 2024 as both powers took firm actions against Georgia's democratic backsliding. While the U.S. imposed sanctions and visa restrictions on key individuals, the EU responded with financial and diplomatic measures. Together, these actions reflect a unified effort to hold the Georgian government accountable and push for reforms essential to its democratic development.

In October 2023, The USA have been mentioned by 38% of respondents as one of the entities with which Georgia should have closest political cooperation (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023n), and by 34% in a similar question about economic ties (in both cases second after the EU) (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023o). Also in 2023, a different poll asking similar question showed higher results for the US: 55% regarding political ties (however, lower by 16% since 2011) (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023c) and 47% regarding economic cooperation (lower by 11% since 2011) (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023d). 19% think that the USA can best support their country (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023e) while 50% chose the EU and 9% – Russia. At the same time, 9% of Georgians think that the USA is the greatest political threat to Georgia, and less – 6% – the greatest economic threat (International Republican Institute 2023, p. 36).

In February 2022, 31% described the USA's influence on Georgia in the previous five years as increasing (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2022d), 71% of which think that this dynamic is a positive thing (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2022e). In consistence with this, out of the 18% who see a decrease, 79% rate it as a bad thing. Similarly, lack of change is perceived negatively by 66% of those 30% who chose this answer (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2022e).

This leads to the conclusion that the USA is perceived by Georgians as the second most important external actor after the EU and a beneficial partner in the spheres of politics, economics, and security. Strengthening of ties with the USA and its influence are welcomed by the majority of the citizens. Still, when compared to 2005-2012, there had been a decline in perception of the USA and the major partner for political and economic cooperation.

Democracy Support by NATO in Georgia & Local Perception

Similarly to Ukraine, NATO-Georgia relations can be dated back to the mid-1990s and the PfP program. Since then the intensity of cooperation has been smaller compared to Ukraine, but the critical juncture for both those countries came at the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit and was signified by a clear message of possible membership. Unfortunately for Tbilisi, the very same year another critical occurrence took place – it was invaded by Russia and parts of its territory have been occupied ever since. The amount of NATO declarations and documents pertaining to Georgia is also much smaller in comparison with the Ukrainian case. The democracy support discourse is also much weaker. In the 2008 framework document establishing the NATO-Georgia Commission, democracy does not feature prominently (NATO 2008). In the subsequent NATO

official texts, the issue of country's democratic transformation on its way towards NATO is however always present. The most important instrument for NATO with regard to democracy support seems to be the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP). The package is first and foremost focused on security and defence issues, however it also tackles accountability and transparency as well as enhancing Georgia's resilience in general. Also in 2010 the NATO Liaison office in Georgia was opened, which carries out project that also tackle political reforms, which are necessary in case of Georgia's accession into the Alliance.

It is unclear to what extent NATO has fostered democratic transition in Georgia. It was rather the push towards European integration that contributed towards democratisation. As in the case of Ukraine, NATO also may support democratic changes, however in Georgia's case one could argue that a strife to join the alliance could have been counterproductive in this area. The argument here is that it was a direct cause of Russia's intervention in 2008 and that without the push for NATO, Europeanisation (and thus democratisation) of the country could have continued uninterrupted (Nodia 2014, p. 148).

The general perception of NATO has been gradually improving: in 2023, 47% of citizens saw it as positive or rather positive (a 10% increase since 2015) (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023b) with another 36% having a neutral general attitude. Also, the majority of citizens – 62% – judge the relations between Georgia and NATO as neutral (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023a).

Polls have been showing a somewhat V-shape level of support for Georgia's membership in NATO through the years: from 70% of Georgians partially or fully approving of this geopolitical course in 2010 (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2010), to 38% in 2015 and back up to 57% in 2024 (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2024a) (or 67% when there is no neutral option in the survey; it has lowered by 5% since the protests in March 2023 (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023g)). The IRI survey from autumn 2023 demonstrated even higher support for the joining of NATO: 78% (International Republican Institute 2023). Still, in 2024, the level of trust in NATO is lower than the will to join it: 38% (with 25% distrusting) (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2024b).

In the Caucasus Barometer survey in the end of 2021, the main reason for joining NATO has been named by the supporters of such a move as: protection from foreign threats (30%), a better chance for restoring territorial integrity (24%), and improvement of economic conditions (23%) (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2021a). The two most mentioned reasons among those against joining were: NATO membership not benefitting Georgia (27%) and such membership hindering relations with Russia (24%) (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2021b). In October 2023 survey, 20% of Georgians answered that NATO membership would help the most to ensure the national security of their country (second top answer after EU membership) (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2023p). At the same time, in February 2022, 72% agreed that the risks of Russian aggression would be higher if Georgia joined NATO (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2022g). Still, in the same survey more than 2/3 of respondents who gave this answer also think that NATO membership will help restore territorial integrity (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2022h) which is indicative of mixed positions and attitudes.

More than half of Georgians support Georgia's membership in NATO and believe in its capacity to protect their country and to assist in getting its occupied territories back. Still, the majority of Georgians consider that there is a potential threat from Russia in case of Georgia joining NATO.

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Annex 3: The Impact of non-EU external actors on Ukraine & their local perceptions

Ukraine's recent history has been shaped by a series of defining events that have influenced its national identity and international relations. Ukraine's path to democracy started in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the following years, though autocratic tendencies followed democratic transformations and vice versa. The desire to live in a democratic and prosperous country pushed Ukrainians to defend their democratic choice during two mass protests, known as the Orange Revolution (2004-2005) and the Euromaidan Revolution/Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014). In 2013, the then President Yanukovych's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU resulted in mass protests (Euromaidan) that after police violence spread and evolved into a much larger people's uprising (Maidan / Revolution of Dignity) with a much broader agenda regarding not only (pro-)European choice, but at the same time democracy/democratic freedoms, human rights etc. It culminated in the fleeing of Yanukovich to Russia and signing of the Political Part of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement on 21.03.2014. Still, using the moment, Russia invaded Crimea in late February 2014 and tried to annex it. Subsequently, Russia also instigated ''separatist'' groups in Donbas, which was followed by Russian military aggression and the war in Eastern Ukraine.

Previous years of civil society growth, further Ukraine's European integration, and the need to counter Russia's hybrid aggression shaped the local political agenda and reforms aimed at both democratic institutions development and citizens' engagement in policy and politics. Also, a strong volunteering movement raised from the numerous local grass-roots initiatives to help the army and internally displaced people.
The complexities of Ukraine's geopolitical challenges were exacerbated in 2022 with the onset of a full-scale Russian invasion, sparking a protracted conflict that tested the resilience and unity of the Ukrainian people and government. Amid these trials, a ray of hope for Ukraine's European aspirations came in 2023 when the European Union announced its decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine. This decision marks a significant step towards Ukraine's integration into the European community and reflects its commitment to reform and its enduring hope for a future firmly rooted in European values and partnerships.

Since 2022, Ukraine has been a "frontline democracy" according to the apt definition by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The country has been facing the challenge of simultaneously repulsing Russia's military aggression, implementing reforms within the European integration following the candidate country status, and keeping democracy operating under martial law.

Democracy Prevention by Russia & Local Perception

Ukraine emerged out of the Soviets as an economy heavily dependent on Russia (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2016). Moreover, it had to deal with an identity issue due to its diversity in language identity (Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2018; Kulyk 2018, 2024; Onuch and Hale 2018; Onuch et al. 2018). Politically, even though Russia recognised its independence, it deployed all available tools to maintain its control over Kyiv, even from early years of independence (Lester 1994; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2016). However, unlike many other former Soviet states (all three South Caucasus countries, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), Ukraine did not go through any ethnic or territorial conflict. Overall, the 1990s was, in this regard, largely a period of stability (despite a

high degree of informal ruling through oligarchic power) both inside the country and in its relations with Russia. In foreign policy it has been the first former Soviet country to join NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme and sign the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU in 1994. Even though Ukraine never demonstrated any explicit aspiration for membership in NATO or the EU under the rule of president Kuchma, it pursued close cooperation with both organisations (Kuzio 1998, 2012c). Similarly, it signed the Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) but never ratified it, remaining always merely as a founding member. Ukraine also joined the Eurasian Economic Community, established in 2000, as an observer state but did not seek a full membership. Such a neutral position of multivectorality, which emphasised a commitment to non-alignment and neutrality in military affairs, was enshrined in its Declaration of State Sovereignty adopted in 1990 and reiterated the Act of Independence. Under the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine adopted a law on the Principles of Domestic and Foreign Policy in 2010, which briefly reinstated non-alignment as an official policy. However, the law was repealed in 2014, following the Maidan revolution.

The neutrality or non-alignment position of Ukraine canonised in its Independence Act and followed in the 1990s reflected its unique situation – a big nation with a historically geostrategic location between Europe and Russia (Kollakowski 2023), its economic dependence on Russia (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2016), and Russia's vast range of tools of influence over the country (Götz 2016; Malyarenko and Wolff 2018), which earns it a special place in Russia's strategic culture (Götz and Staun 2022). However, already under Kuchma in the early 2000s, Ukraine's neutrality tended to tilt towards the West (Lane 2016; Kuzio 1998). The Orange Revolution of 2004 marked Ukraine's first major confrontation with its post-Soviet identity, where the contested presidential election between Viktor Yanukovych, seen as Moscow's preferred candidate, and Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-Western reformist, ignited widespread protests. Following reports of electoral misconduct, Ukraine's Supreme Court annulled the initial results and ordered a revote, which, under international scrutiny, declared Yushchenko the winner (Katchanovski 2008; Kuzio 2005, 2007; van Zon 2005). The revolution ended with his inauguration in January 2005, marking a significant moment of democratic triumph, though its legacy faced criticism in pro-government circles in Russia. Russia overtly supported Yanukovych in this process and portrayed the revolution "as a Western-orchestrated coup" and part of the West-promoted colour revolutions across the post-Soviet space (Ortmann 2008). However, the victory of the pro-Western figure, Yushchenko, did not end the political struggle between pro-Western and pro-Russian political forces (Mierzejewski-Voznyak 2014), exposing a deep divide between the country's western and eastern regions (Kuzio 2012a; Kulyk 2011).

In response to Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, Russia employed a series of economic measures designed to exert pressure on the new pro-Western government under Viktor Yushchenko, bringing about significant economic challenges to Ukraine (Åslund 2009). Above all, it increased the prices of the natural gas Ukraine imported from Russia, justifying it on a commercial basis. It cut the gas supply in 2006 and 2009, known as "gas wars" (Wolczuk 2016; Stulberg 2015). Moreover, Russia imposed trade restrictions on Ukrainian products, particularly in sectors critical for Ukraine, like agriculture and steel. The energy debt of Ukraine piled up by that time was another tool of pressure in the hands of Moscow. Furthermore, Russia curtailed economic support, such as favourable loans, and exploited Ukraine's economic dependency on Russian markets and remittances (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015a). All these actions were aimed at preventing Ukraine from shifting a non-aligned position to close integration into the trans-Atlantic space, particularly NATO and the EU, which was the case since the Orange revolution

(Kuzio 2012c; Malek 2009; Kuzio and Moroney 2001). Russia's response to the Orange Revolution yielded the expected results by igniting economic challenges and, hence, weakening the reformist, pro-Western agenda, which resulted in Yanukovych's return to power in 2010.

However, the pro-Western and democratic forces in the country continued resisting Yanukovych's rule, rising against his abrupt decision to suspend negotiations on an Association Agreement with the European Union in favour of closer ties with Russia (Katchanovski 2008; Mierzejewski-Voznyak 2014; Kuzio 2012b; Krapfl and Kühn von Burgsdorff 2023). This move led to the Euromaidan revolution in 2013-14, ousting Yanukovych, who immediately fled to Russia (Krapfl and Kühn von Burgsdorff 2023; Kulyk 2016; Kuzio 2018). Russia reacted to the Euromaidan revolution with economic measures similar to the ones it deployed earlier. This included raising natural gas prices from discounted rates to market levels, cutting off gas supplies in 2014, and imposing trade restrictions on Ukrainian exports, particularly in sectors like agriculture and steel. Russia also accused Ukraine of failing to pay its energy debts, using these claims to justify further price hikes and harsher payment terms. Additionally, Moscow curtailed financial support, withdrew promised loans, and exploited Ukraine's dependence on Russian energy and trade to destabilise its economy. However, unlike the first revolution, this time, Russia deployed its hard power, too. Using a mix of military intervention, local proxies, and information warfare, in March 2014, Russia orchestrated the annexation of Crimea (Karagiannis 2014; Kuzio 2018), a strategically important spot for the power rivalry in the Black Sea (Kollakowski 2023; Kormych and Malyarenko 2023). The Kremlin justified its actions by invoking the protection of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Crimea, framing the annexation as a response to an alleged Western-backed coup in Kyiv (Götz and Staun 2022). The annexation also served as a prelude to the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine, where Russian-backed separatists established self-proclaimed republics in Donetsk and Luhansk (Cavandoli 2016). The negotiations pursued in the so-called Normandy format with the facilitation of the OSCE as well as Germany and France led to a series of agreements known as Minsk Agreements I and II that remained unattended by both Russia and Ukraine (Åtland 2020; Wittke 2019; Tzimas 2024).

With severing relationships between the sides in the aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution, Ukraine pursued a stronger agenda of integration into NATO and the EU (Lanoszka and Becker 2023; Pridham 2014; Ekman 2024). First, articulated by post-Euromaidan president Poroshenko in 2014, Ukraine adopted the NATO Annual National Programme in 2017 (Interfax-Ukraine 2017). Following this, Ukraine amended its constitution to explicitly reflect the goal of NATO membership in 2019 (RFE/RL 2019). In 2021, Ukraine reiterated its desire for NATO membership (Reuters Media 2021b), which Russia characterised as its "red line" (Reuters Media 2021a). Similarly, Ukraine aimed for a fast-track EU membership in the aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution. The Association Agreement signed with the EU in 2014 entered into force in 2017 (Jozwiak 2017). In 2019, Poroshenko set a target to officially apply for EU membership by 2024 (Ukrinform 2019a). However, these steps, fully breaking Ukraine's chain with Russia and its past of neutrality or non-alignment, received an unprecedented response from Russia, which, despite all its efforts in the last two decades, was continuously losing its influence over Ukraine. On 21 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed decrees formally recognising the two separatist regions as independent states, and, consequently, on 24 February, it launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, justified through a mix of normative and political rhetoric claiming to "historical Russian regions" (Allison 2024; Kordan 2022). Although Russia was unsuccessful in its "Blitzkrieg", aiming to quickly reach Kyiv, thanks to the resilience of Ukraine, the Ukrainian counteroffensive of late 2022 and 2023 proved similarly unsuccessful in pushing Russian forces

out from Ukrainian territories. The situation evolved into an attrition war throughout 2024, though Russia moving slowly further westward. The situation remains fragile as of January 2025. The Kellogg plan of the incoming Trump administration and a potential meeting of the US-Russia presidents following Trump's inauguration had been planned. Ukraine's path to NATO remained gloomy (Fix 2024).

As demonstrated in the preceding discussion, Ukraine's trajectory towards democratisation is deeply entangled with the broader question of its security and its aspirations for integration into NATO and the European Union, placing its internal political evolution at the heart of the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West. This rivalry has not only influenced political allegiances within the country but has also been translated into profound domestic cleavages, like a geographic divide between its western and eastern regions. This geographical divide was not only rooted in historical, cultural, and economic factors but also was actively cultivated by the external parties. Its path of democratisation, therefore, cannot be considered in isolation from these geopolitical dynamics. On the one hand, Ukraine's journey towards a more democratic political system has been intrinsically linked to its ambitions for integration into European structures such as the EU and NATO. These aspirations, in turn, have been viewed by Russia as a direct challenge to its traditional dominance in the region, leading to repeated attempts to destabilise Ukraine's political landscape through economic pressures and, eventually, military interventions. On the other hand, the question of alignment with Russia by default promised an autocratic pathway. The period of non-alignment and stability in the late 1990s, however, was similarly corrupt and undemocratic. Thus, the political choices facing Ukraine are not simply matters of internal governance but are inextricably linked to its position in the broader geopolitical rivalry. The dichotomy between democratisation and autocracy in Ukraine is not just a domestic debate over governance and political reform but a profound struggle for the country's place in the world—a struggle shaped by the competing geopolitical interests of Russia and the West.

Though Ukrainians' sentiments towards Russia and maintenance of good relations with it used to be not that bad, the situation changed drastically after 2013 and the Euromaidan/the Revolution of Dignity and the beginning of Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014. Public opinion polls show that the percentage of respondents who view Russia fully or rather positively dropped from 17% and 36% respectively in September-October 2013 to 6% and 11% in September 2014. Despite the ongoing war in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the occupation of Crimea, there had been a slight rise in these attitudes, which slowly grew more positive: in 2021, 26% of Ukrainians had a generally positive attitude and 64% had a generally negative one (Razumkov Centre 2024a).

The full-scale invasion of Russia in February 2022 became a decisive turning point. Since then, the level of positive or neutral attitudes towards Russia has remained extremely low: in January 2024, less than 3% of respondents expressed a (rather) positive attitude and 95% negative. (Razumkov Centre 2024a) Additionally, in April-May 2024, 78% of respondents stated they associate Russia with degradation and decline, while only less than 4% said that the Russian model of societal development seems attractive to them. (Razumkov Centre 2024b) In March 2024, 74% stated that their attitude towards the citizens of Russia is negative (School for Policy Analysis 2024, p. 19). In August 2024, 76% agreed (completely or partially) that "all Russians bear responsibility for the aggression against Ukraine" and 64.5% think that they push their government to continue the war («Democratic Initiatives» foundation and Razumkov Centre 2024, p. 3). In May-June 2024, three out of four respondents would like to see the Russo-

Ukrainian borders closed, with visa regime and customs. (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2023) Russia is perceived as an existential threat to Ukraine and not just a threat to its democracy or civic liberties. For example, in May 2024, when asked about Russia's main goal in the war, 34% of Ukrainians named the genocide of the people, 26% – destruction of the Ukrainian nation and assimilation of it into Russia, and 12% – turning Ukraine into a puppet state (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024a). Moreover, 59% are sure (completely or partially) that regardless of the conditions on which the current war ends or a cease-fire would be achieved, Russia will attack Ukraine again in the future («Democratic Initiatives» foundation and Razumkov Centre 2024).

Whilst a negative attitude and sentiments towards Russia has been steadily prevailing for the last ten years, the full-scale Russia's aggression and continuous war against Ukraine left no space for any significant expression of pro-Russian positions and/or inter-regional differences on this matter. An absolute majority of Ukrainians hold a highly unfavourable view of both Russia and its citizens, and there is lots of scepticism regarding possible peace negotiations and potential future relations between the two countries. This external actor is undoubtedly perceived as a threat and an enemy by Ukrainians, detrimental to the very existence, independence, and sovereignty of Ukraine.

All in all, it could be observed that Russia deployed a variety of means to prevent Ukraine's democratisation. Most crucial tools have been the of military character, as are the occupation of Crimea, the war in Eastern Ukraine and the full-scale invasion in 2022. There is not much emphasis on diplomatic tools. The one-sided recognition of two separatist regions in 2021 as independent, goes, without doubt, against all diplomatic standards. Russia's strategies have been overtly and blunt.

Democracy Support by the USA in Ukraine & Local Perception

Ukraine's recent history has been fraught with turmoil and significant developments, shaping several pivotal moments in the country's modern history. It has endured two major revolutions (in 2004 and 2014), and the conflict with Russia, which began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the invasion of the Donbas, escalated into a full-scale invasion in 2022. This ongoing war has not only challenged Ukraine's democratic and security structures but has also put its very statehood at risk.

Western responses on Ukraine's journey toward democracy, especially the revolutions 2003/4 and 2013/14 have often fallen short of addressing Ukraine's security needs - especially from the EU and the US. While Germany - despite the 2014 events - moved forward with the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, the then-US President Barack Obama vetoed lethal arms sales to Kyiv for eight years. However, despite these shortcomings in measures of energy security and military security, Western support for Ukraine's democracy has remained consistent.

From fiscal years 2015 to 2020, the State Department and USAID provided an average of $418 million annually in aid to Ukraine, plus over $350 million in humanitarian assistance since 2014. In FY2021, this rose to $464 million, including $115 million in Foreign Military Financing (Congressional Research Service 2021). Following the Euromaidan revolution, the U.S. passed the "Support for the Sovereignty, Integrity, Democracy, and Economic Stability of Ukraine Act", which helped Ukraine implementing reforms and recover assets linked to corruption.

USAID has since played a key role in advancing transparency and governance in Ukraine. Its support led to the ProZorro procurement system, which saved the country over $8 billion since 2015, and the Diia app, which offered over 120 digital services to more than 19 million Ukrainians, making the country a leader in e-governance. USAID funding also strengthened Ukraine's anti-corruption efforts and judicial reforms, crucial for EU integration. It partnered with institutions like the High Council of Justice

and helped establish NGO-run justice centres for war victims. Finally, it supported Ukraine's financial management, reform legislation, and civic engagement, crucial for the country's post-war recovery. (United States Agency for International Development 2023)

U.S. support for Ukraine has consistently been conditional, with Kyiv required to implement reforms to unlock further financial assistance. There are several examples of this dynamic. After years of delay, in 2018, the then Ukrainian president Poroshenko agreed to establish the High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC), a move urged by the U.S., the EU, the IMF, and the World Bank in line with international recommendations. Judges for the court were selected through a competitive process involving international experts (Jones 2018; Ukrinform 2019b).

Ukraine's fight against corruption has, at times, aligned with U.S. efforts. In 2014, the Obama Administration imposed sanctions on oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk for his role in Russia's invasion of Ukraine 2014 and brought bribery-related charges against oligarch Dmytro Firtash (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2014; U.S. Department of Justice 2014). During Poroshenko's presidency, the U.S. supported a wide range of governance and economic reforms, including the creation of new anti-corruption institutions. In 2015, then-Vice President Joe Biden reportedly threatened to withhold a $1 billion loan guarantee, unless Ukraine's prosecutor general resigned, due to widespread criticism of the office for blocking corruption investigations (Viser and Sonne 2019).

In 2019, U.S. Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch called for the replacement of Ukraine's anti-corruption prosecutor to preserve the integrity of these reforms (Yovanovitch 2019).

Since 2022 and the large-scale Russian invasion, the U.S., in coordination with the EU, has continued to support Ukraine's governance reforms, including energy, agriculture, civilian security, and demining efforts.

Thus, over the years U.S. support for Ukraine has been deeply intertwined with the country's commitment to reform, particularly in the areas of anti-corruption and governance. From the establishment of the High Anti-Corruption Court to the resignation of corrupt officials, U.S. financial aid and diplomatic pressure have played a pivotal role in driving Ukraine's reform agenda. The conditional nature of U.S. assistance, along with the coordinated efforts of the EU and international organisations, has pushed Kyiv to meet specific benchmarks, strengthening its institutions and governance structures. However, this support has not been without challenges, as ongoing corruption investigations and sanctions against key oligarchs highlight the continued struggle for transparency and accountability. As Ukraine navigates its path forward, U.S. backing (together with the EU) remains crucial in sustaining its reform efforts and securing its democratic future, especially in the face of ongoing Russian war and existential security challenges.

In the 2024 survey, the majority declared a positive attitude towards the US - 87% (45% completely and 42% partially positive) (Razumkov Centre 2024a). To compare, in 2014, right after the Revolution of Dignity (Maidan), the total sum of positive answers was 54%, and one out of five respondents stated that their attitude was completely negative. In 2021, a year before Russia's full-scale invasion, 70% had a positive attitude (Razumkov Centre 2024a).

As for the role that the US played in the Russo-Ukrainian war, 78% of respondents see it as very positive or rather positive, and another 78% think that this country is a very/mostly reliable ally (Krastev and Leonard 2024) of Ukraine (second after the UK). When asked what countries and organisations have been providing the biggest support to Ukraine during Russian military aggression, 68% of respondents mentioned the US (International Republican Institute 2024b, p. 41) which makes it the most popular answer. However, 47% respondents strongly or partially agree that the US might negotiate for a peace deal with Russia without involving the Ukrainian government (Krastev and Leonard 2024), which supposedly points out that Ukrainians are concerned and wary about a possible political shift in the US in the future and its prioritisation of the ceasefire over Ukraine's sovereignty as well as the lack of Ukraine's agency recognition. One of the facts that supports the notion that the US is seen as a key external actor for Ukraine is that the escalation of internal political confrontation in the USA was rated

as one of the most serious issues (4.3 points on the 1 to 5 range of influence) among external processes negatively affecting Ukraine (Razumkov Centre 2024a).
It is obvious that the role played by the US in Ukraine is well-received and appreciated by most Ukrainians and the percentage of citizens with a positive outlook on this country keeps increasing. The USA is perceived and relied on as one of the most important and beneficial partners in many dimensions, particularly in its democracy support policies.
All in all, the US puts most emphasis on means of financial support towards Ukraine, thereby deploying its large toolbox and broad budget of its state agency USAID. On the other hand, the US deployed a broad range of explicit diplomatic means, linked to financial offers, in re-shaping democracy and rule of law related institutions inside Ukraine.

Democracy Support by the UK in Ukraine & Local Perception

Due to UK's historical, colonial involvement in parts of Northern Africa and the Middle East, the EU neighbours in the south have been drawing significant part of United Kingdom's attention when it comes to democracy support. It does not mean that London has been disinterested regarding its relationship with the EU Eastern Neighbourhood. However, it perceived those by the presence of other, more traditional actors in this area - Russia and Germany. Due to the membership in the European Union and sharing democratic values and policies, Germany's role has been rather seen as to divide labour between the countries. However, when it comes to Russia, the UK has been particularly connected with this undemocratic regime through economic interests, yet since 2006-2007 started to be critical towards the government in Moscow and in one of the reports labelled it as a 'frosty pragmatist' (Leonard and Popescu 2007), as it was not afraid to criticise the Kremlin for human rights abuses and rule of law. UK supported the idea of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) aimed at democratisation of the EU's eastern neighbours. This support has been somewhat motivated by a potential to transform these neighbours into future EU members, which, in line with British expectations, could be instrumental in widening the European integration rather than deepening it.
The UK Government has been voicing its continuous support for Ukraine's EU integration, also in the period before the 2014 annexation of Crimea. During a debate in the House of Commons (HoC) on UK's relations with Ukraine, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Mr Hugo Swire, clearly stated that the "*Government have championed Ukraine's closer integration with the EU, where it has the potential to make a significant contribution to stability, prosperity and competitiveness, and we will continue to support Ukraine's European aspirations, including eventual membership of the EU, provided that the appropriate criteria are met and provided that it is what the Ukrainian people themselves want*" (UK Parliament 2013). It also should be noted that already in this debate the issue of rule of law, good governance and human rights were very much present. The MPs were critical towards the Yanukovych government's handling of the imprisonment and indictment of the opposition leader – Yulia Tymoshenko. In the same vein, the UK supported Ukrainian democratic transformation and boosted its support after the unlawful annexation of Crimea by Russia. This critical juncture has not changed the overall policy line. In a speech delivered in 2014, the Minister of State, Mr William Hague said that the most important activities should take place with regard to fighting corruption, strengthening financial management, supporting parliamentary and local elections (GOV.UK 2014). This has been followed up with concrete programs, such as the 2014-2018 Bilateral Program ran by the Foreign Office in order to further support democracy through reforms of public institutions and to strengthen the rule of law. Related UK support projects are those on

monitoring access to the media for the presidential candidates during the 2014 snap presidential elections campaign (British Embassy Kyiv),

- parliamentary capacity building through setting up an expert platform on anti-corruption and deregulation,
- Reintegrating Donbas by raising public participation in solving key problems of local communities,
- Civil society monitoring of Ukraine's progress on assets recovery,
- Support to anti-corruption laws and institutions via state bodies, NGOs and media (GOV.UK 2018)

In the UK's Department for International Development, work the area of rule of law and good governance has been particularly emphasised. In 2015/2016 the following achievements were identified:

- A road map for the establishment of the anti- corruption bureau.
- The reform of state-owned enterprises to improve transparency and efficiency of the sector.
- The internal reorganisation and improvement of investigation processes in the Prosecutor General's Office.
- Improving the investment climate through the reduction of State oversight functions and the number of State oversight bodies.
- Establishing a Business Ombudsman to investigate corruption or maladministration and bring this to the attention of Parliament and the President (Department for International Development 2015).

Following the 2022 Russian full-scale invasion it is unsurprising that UK's support switched priorities towards a more security-oriented approach, but also significant focus was put on humanitarian aid and reconstruction. It can therefore be stated that the UK has been supporting the rule of law and good governance aspects of Ukrainian democracy most strongly since 2012, but also before. The strengthening of civil society started to appear on the agenda more often since the annexation of Crimea and the 2022 war has altered this sustainable stream of support, however the good governance and anti-corruption aspect remained prominent owing to the Good Governance Fund for Ukraine, as well efforts to mobilise Ukraine's civil society with a democratic recovery in sight, mainly fostered by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Regarding the cross-cutting issues of gender equality and digital transformation, it seems that the latter has been emphasised by the UK. Countering disinformation through digital media and also resilience of e-services offered to Ukrainian citizens seem to be at the core.

The UK policy of democracy support in Ukraine has been in line with the EU as throughout most of the analysed period UK was still the EU member. It has always supported wide EU membership, hence was also in favour of Ukraine eventually becoming EU member. After Brexit this support has not waned. On the contrary, London has been very vocal supporting Ukraine, especially after the 2022 Russia's invasion and has been engaged in multilateral support through various channels. These include mechanisms and programs launched in partnerships with the World Bank aimed mostly at reconstruction efforts, as well as OSCE with investigation of human rights abuses in mind. In the same spirit it contributed additional funds to the International Criminal Court and joined the 'core group', which aims at ensuring criminal accountability for

Russia's aggression against Ukraine (GOV.UK 2023). Since 2017 it has also been hosting the Ukraine Reform Conference (in 2023 renamed to the Ukraine Recovery Conference) through which funds were collected for the purposes of ia. Reforming Ukrainian governance to make it more compatible with the standards required for the EU accession.

Even though the UK is not often mentioned in polls, the available data shows that it is perceived exceptionally well by Ukrainians. In the beginning of 2024, 89% stated their positive attitude towards the UK (55% completely and 34% partially positive), which is the highest score out of the list of 26 countries. The dynamics of these attitudes indicates an increase and political and military aid provided by the UK has played a significant role in it. To compare, in 2021, 78% of Ukrainians expressed their positive attitude towards the UK (24% completely and 54% partially positive) (GOV.UK 2023).

When asked which countries and organisations provided the most support to Ukraine after the full-scale invasion, 39% mentioned the UK (third most mentioned country after the US and Germany) (International Republican Institute 2024b, p. 41). Whilst this number has dropped from 60% in June 2022, the UK still remains the most reliable ally in the eyes of Ukrainians: 84% think that it is either very or mostly reliable (Krastev and Leonard 2024). Moreover, in January 2024, 92% of Ukrainians assessed the level of financial support provided to Ukraine by the UK as high – 5 or more out of 7 (Regional Communication Programme for the Eastern Neighbourhood 2023b, p. 13).

Overall, there is a strong and growing positive perception of the UK in Ukraine as a key partner and reliable ally. It also points to the critical role the UK plays in supporting Ukraine in the war. The aid and assistance, including in the reform and democracy support that the UK has been giving to Ukraine is noticed and duly appreciated by Ukrainians.

Democracy Support by the CoE in Ukraine & Local Perception

The Council of Europe has had a profound impact on its members in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, and none more so than Ukraine. Following Ukrainian independence in 1991, it quickly took steps towards membership in Strasbourg by 1995 and ratified the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) by 1997. Although Ukraine is one of the states with the most violations of the Convention, the Council of Europe and its institutions have worked closely with Ukrainian authorities to improve its democracy, human rights and rule of law at multiple layers of Ukrainian society. Furthermore, the Council of Europe took major steps to side with Ukraine not only after Russia's full-scale invasion, but also after its illegal annexation of Crimea and War in Donbas in 2013/15.

As a full member of the Council for Europe and a signatory to a number of its Treaties, Ukraine's political and legal system are subject to interpretation by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Since 2001, this has meant that individuals and organisations who see their rights violated according to the ECHR can take their case to the ECtHR. If the European Court interprets that a case is admissible to their jurisdiction, they can hear cases against a state such as Ukraine. Over its nearly 30 years of membership in the CoE, Ukraine has been frequently found in violation of the ECHR's articles in the areas of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. These violations are often on account of Ukraine's transition from the Soviet system to a liberal democracy and its accompanying systemic incompatibilities with the ECHR.

When violations are found, government representatives work closely with the CoE's Committee of Ministers to rectify injustices done to individuals and to reform legal and democratic structures. In this partnership, Ukraine's successive governments have worked closely to improve

its governance conditions. Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, these included *rule of law reforms* in areas from a misuse of rights restrictions by the state (e.g. Lutsenko and Tymoshenko v. Ukraine), excessive length of judicial proceedings and a lack of effective domestic remedies (e.g. Merit and Svetlana Naumenko v. Ukraine), non-enforcement delayed enforcement of domestic judgments (e.g. Burmych and Others v. Ukraine), ineffective investigations into ill-treatment or death caused by security forces (e.g. Kaverzin and Others v. Ukraine), as well as poor conditions of detention and medical care (e.g. Logvinenko cases v. Ukraine). Further violations in democracy standards included deficiencies in the legislation and administrative practices governing the right of freedom of assembly (e.g. Vyerentsov v. Ukraine) (Council of Europe and Committee of Ministers 2015) or freedom of association (e.g. Koretskyy and Others v. Ukraine) (Council of Europe and Committee of Ministers 2017). However, the CoM had always remarked upon Ukraine's firm commitment to uphold the standards of the ECHR (Council of Europe and Committee of Ministers 2021). Moreover, despite frequent and repeated violations of the ECHR, the CoM never took extraordinary measures such as infringement proceedings to sanction Ukraine within the organisation.

Instead, perhaps most importantly for the future of Ukrainian democracy, the Council of Europe has enacted a number of measures to punish Russia for its war against Ukraine. Following its annexation of Crimea, every single body within the CoE condemned it as illegal. Later as the War in Donbass escalated, the Russian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe was denied ratification of its credentials, leaving its members unable to participate in PACE meetings. This step, however, was overturned in 2019 "as a signal of its commitment to an open and constructive dialogue with the Russian delegation." (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2015)

This signal was ultimately turned off in 2022 when Russia commenced a full-scale terror attack on the Ukrainian people. The Council of Europe was quick to expel Russia from membership, doing so at first on an interim basis and then fully by 16 March 2022. The organisations support to Ukrainian democratic independence has since grown. Whereas previous National Action Plans supporting Ukrainian reforms were implemented to help it comply with the ECHR, it has since drafted an Action Plan for Ukraine's "Resilience, Recovery and Reconstruction" (Council of Europe 2022). Moreover, although the three previous summits of heads of state at the council of Europe were dedicated to broader European trends for the future of the Convention system, the 4th summit (the first since 2003) in Reykjavik was first and foremost convened to cope with Russia's invasion. Indeed, the first line of the Reykjavik Declaration states that they gathered "to stand united against Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and to give further priority and direction to the Council of Europe's work." (Council of Europe 2023)

Assessing the precise impact of the Council of Europe on Ukraine's young democracy in the 21st Century is difficult. To attribute gains to the CoE alone is firstly a challenge as many other organisations have been involved in the process with the OSCE and EU often collaborating in different projects – from assisting in drafting programme objectives to funding and implementing the projects in concert. Secondly, to attribute the impact to the Council of Europe would miss that it was Ukraine that implemented reforms. From individual judges, parliamentarians to government ministries, each Ukrainian played a role in these changes, albeit with the guidance and expertise of the CoE at their side. At the same time, successive governments have also demonstrated varying levels of commitment to upholding the ECHR. For example, it was former Ukrainian President Yanukovych whose government imprisoned his

opponent, Julia Tymoshenko, in such dire conditions that led to an ECHR violation in the first place.

Democracy Support by NATO in Ukraine & Local Perception

Ukraine has been of interest to NATO since the mid-1990s. Even though it was not indicated as a potential candidate country, NATO and Ukraine established a "Distinctive Partnership" in 1997, in which the democratisation agenda was mentioned a number of times, together with an emphasis on regional stability (NATO 1997). A more substantial cooperation in the regard had only started after 2002 and the signature of the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan. The document clearly sets democratic objectives for Ukraine, which, among other issues, include a strive for creation of democratic and electoral institutions, ensuring democratic control over the military, rule of law, fundamental rights and freedoms, strengthening civil society and good governance. (NATO 2002) Since 2002 annual target plans were drafted for Ukraine, where all the aspects of democracy mentioned above were supposed to be strengthened. These were however (with the exception of civilian and democratic control over the armed forces) signified as an "internal actions", which should be taken by Ukraine, and not in partnership with NATO (NATO 2003).

The very first critical juncture in the NATO-Ukraine relationship regarding democracy support was the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit, when Ukraine's (and Georgia's) accession aspirations were confirmed. Despite this green light given by NATO, neither Ukraine, nor Georgia have received the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is conducive towards triggering democratic reforms, as it sets out detailed criteria for membership. These (among others) include:

- Conform[ity] to basic principles embodied in the Washington Treaty such as democracy, individual liberty and other relevant provisions set out in its Preamble,
- Commitment to the rule of law and human rights,
- Appropriate democratic and civilian control of their armed forces,
- Commitment to promoting stability and well-being by economic liberty, social justice and environmental responsibility, (NATO 1999).

In 2010, due to political changes in Ukraine, the tone of the Alliance has somewhat changed. In the 2010 Lisbon Summit Declaration Ukraine's democratic transition is no longer mentioned (NATO 2010). However in 2012 Chicago Summit Declaration these issues are back on the agenda, although in a different context – NATO starts to express concerns about Ukraine's democratic backsliding, particularly with regard to "*selective application of justice and what appear to be politically motivated prosecutions*". The Alliance also "*encourage[s] Ukraine to ensure free, fair and inclusive Parliamentary elections this autumn*" (NATO 2012). This discourse intensifies during the 2013/2014 Maidan revolution and further into the Russian annexation of Crimea, when NATO criticises the conduct of the "*illegal and illegitimate*" referendum (NATO 2014). The pro-Western transition of power in Ukraine post-2014 brings about the discourse similar to the one that started in the mid-1990s, in which democratic transition features strongly, together with issues connected to security and stability (NATO 2018).

Lastly, there is the 2022 Russia's aggression on Ukraine and NATO's response. Democracy support has not been at the forefront of Alliance's assistance to Kyiv. Already in 2016 NATO and Ukraine agreed on the Comprehensive Assistance Package (CAP), which was mainly about boosting Ukraine's security and defence capabilities. Democracy has only been mentioned in relation to "*strengthening democratic oversight, including a strengthened role of Parliament and*

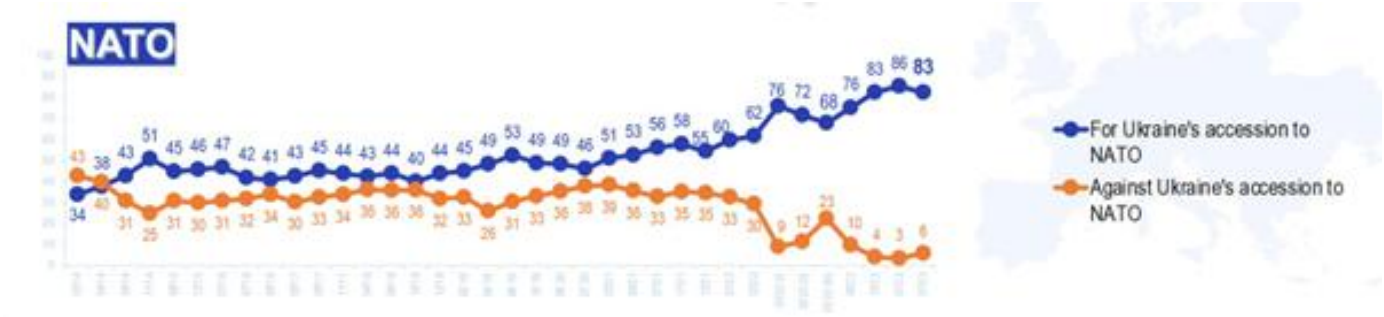
civil society". In the aftermath of the invasion the CAP instrument has been boosted and transformed into a multiannual program for assistance. It seems that the qualitative change regarding NATO's democracy support should rather be connected with the possibility of Ukraine joining the Alliance, although during the NATO 2023 NATO summit it has been stated that Kiev's aspirations 'moved beyond the need for the Membership Action Plan' (NATO 2023). It is unclear whether it means that Ukraine has already fulfilled the democratic criteria outlined in a MAP, or that these criteria will not fully apply and will be overshadowed by security considerations.

Democracy undoubtedly feature strongly in NATO-Ukraine relations is present through various programs and initiatives. Perhaps the biggest problem and obstacle for NATO to be a significant agent of democratic change in Ukraine was its ambiguity towards Ukraine's membership in the Alliance. Since 2008 there has been no clear roadmap for accession and Ukraine remained in a 'grey zone' between Russia and the 'West', which was not conducive towards democracy (Moore, p. 380)(R.R. Moore, Ukraine's Bid to Join NATO: Re-evaluating Enlargement in a New Strategic Context in: "Evaluating NATO Enlargement From Cold War Victory to the Russia-Ukraine War", Palgrave McMillan 2023, p. 380).

Ukrainians' attitude towards NATO in general and Ukraine's membership in it has been steadily growing positive for the past ten years. Moreover, if in autumn 2013, prior to the Revolution of Dignity, only about 20% said they see NATO as a positive or rather positive organisation and 60% as (partially) negative one, then in the beginning of 2024 these two numbers were 77% and 14%, respectively (Razumkov Centre 2024a). Similarly, 69% of respondents tend to trust NATO, while only 11% tend not to (Regional Communication Programme for the Eastern Neighbourhood 2023b, p. 7).

As for Ukraine's membership, in August 2024, 77% of respondents stated that if a referendum on joining NATO was held, they would vote in favour, and only 5% would vote against it. The level of support for Ukraine's NATO membership rose drastically twice over the last 10 years: first after the Maidan and annexation and occupation of Crimea by Russia in February-March 2014, and then even more after Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine in February 2022 (see the diagram below (Sociological Group "Rating" 2023, p. 5)).

Support for international unions: survey in Ukraine and Europe (July 4-10, 2023)



In an NDI's survey from July-August 2024, 84% of Ukrainians said that they would like their country to join NATO before 2030, and 71% expect this to happen (out of them, 41% think that it will happen in two to five years (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024b, 24–26).

A course towards NATO membership has become a key security and sovereignty issue for many citizens. For instance, in the same survey, 71% stated that they would deem unacceptable Ukraine's abandonment of its goal to join NATO as the price for ending the war and establishing peace (Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2024b, p. 22). At the same time, the recapture of the occupied territories is more important: only 5% of respondents said Ukraine should definitely

accept membership in exchange for giving up the land, while 71% disagree (Krastev and Leonard 2024). Still, 39% of Ukrainians mentioned NATO accession as one of the things Ukraine needs in order to defend itself and win the war which is the second most popular option after weapons sent by allies (Krastev and Leonard 2024).

Thus, most Ukrainians perceive NATO as a vital ally and assign great importance to it both in terms of security guarantees and as a symbol of their country's sovereign geopolitical choices.

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