

THE CONDITIONAL IMPACT OF DEMOCRACY CONDITIONS. HOW THE EUROPEAN UNION INTERACTS WITH POLITICAL COMPETITION IN EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES

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Abstract:

In the debate about the European Neighbourhood Policy, two positions may be distinguished: those who propose a stricter and more consistent use of democratic conditionality, prioritizing democracy over other EU objectives - and those who refuse to set compliance with democratic standards as a precondition for support, expecting democracy to emerge from closer linkages. The paper argues that both positions do not sufficiently recognize the selective effectiveness of EU conditionality. Democracy conditions can become effective if (1) dense societal, economic and cultural ties with the EU support their domestic acceptance and (2) ruling political elites are faced with a competitive opposition.

While the EU can not generate or reinforce domestic political competition in Eastern Partnership countries, its democracy conditions can become effective in competitive constellations by helping domestic political actors to agree on institutional constraints to executive authority or on mechanisms of executive accountability. The EU's democracy conditions remain ineffective in less competitive political systems, because their ruling political elites lack incentives to cooperate with the opposition.

Keywords: Europeanization, democratic conditionality, European neighbourhood, Eastern Partnership

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Introduction

The European Union has offered privileged relations to the three western and the three Caucasian successor states of the former Soviet Union - Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia - in the framework of its so-called Eastern Partnership. This Partnership was initiated by the EU at a meeting with the heads of government and state from these states in May 2009. The European Commission views the Eastern Partnership as a dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), complementing the Mediterranean Union that was launched already in 2007. Since 2003, the ENP exists as a political framework to shape the relations with the eastern and southern neighbor states of the EU.¹

The concept of neighborhood underlying this policy does not only contain the intuitive meaning of geographical proximity, but is also conceived as a political status assignment: "neighbors" are those states that currently do not have a prospect of accession, but are envisaged for a "special relationship" which the EU is to develop according to article 8 of the EU treaty. The EU's neighborhood policy includes an association and elements from the accession process, such as action plans or monitoring reports published by the Commission. Association Agreements were signed with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova on 21 March and 27 June 2014.

The Agreements with Georgia and Moldova entered into force on 1 July 2016.

Following the upheavals and democracy movements in several Arab countries, support for democratization became a more important concern for the EU. In May 2011, the European Commission and the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy defined a "deep democracy" in their review of the ENP. According to their joint communication, this kind of democracy "lasts because the right to vote is accompanied by rights to exercise free speech, form competing political parties, receive impartial justice from independent judges, security from accountable police and army forces, access to a competent and non-corrupt

¹ Cf., for example: Sieglinde Gstöhl (ed.) *The European Neighbourhood Policy in a Comparative Perspective: Models, Challenges, Lessons*, London, New York: Routledge, 2016; Valentin Naumescu (ed.) *The European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood Today. Politics, Dynamics, Perspectives*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publ., 2015.

civil service — and other civil and human rights that many Europeans take for granted, such as the freedom of thought, conscience and religion."²

If neighboring states took efforts to establish such a "deep democracy", the EU committed itself to provide more financial support, to grant access to its market and to facilitate the mobility of their citizens. This democratic conditionality, the associated greater differentiation of EU assistance and rewards to, and the "mutual accountability" between the neighboring state and the EU represented core elements of the renewed ENP.

Whether the EU would consistently apply this democratic conditionality in practice, has been doubted in the political debate about this reorientation. For example, some authors called upon the EU to "reconditionalize" its neighborhood policy, that is, to apply its democratic conditionality more consistently in all related policy areas and programs.³

In contrast, other authors criticized what they considered a futile and counterproductive attempt of making democracy a precondition rather than a goal of cooperation with transition countries.⁴

The state of democracy in the six Eastern Partnership (EaP) states may be assessed using composite indicators such as the "voice and accountability" indicator of Kaufmann et al. (Figure 1) or the Freedom House rating on political rights and civil liberties.⁵ These measures show that the quality of democracy has improved in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine between since the beginning of ENP in 2004. In contrast, developments in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus indicate a deterioration or stagnation with regard to elections, political freedoms and civil rights.

² European Commission, *A New Response to a Changing Neighborhood*, Brussels: European Commission, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication COM(2011) 303, 2011, p. 2.

³ Kai-Olaf Lang and Barbara Lippert, *The EU and its Neighbours. A Second Chance to Marry Democratisation and Stability* Berlin: SWP, Comments 2, 2012.

⁴ Expertengruppe Östliche Partnerschaft, *Deutsche Außenpolitik und Östliche Partnerschaft*, Berlin: DGAP, Standpunkt 1, 2012.

⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2012. The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012; Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Massimo Mastruzzi, *Governance Matters VIII: Aggregate and Individual Governance Indicators 1996-2008*, Washington: World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper 4978, 2009 [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1424591], 17 May 2017.

Whereas the prospect of “returning to Europe” provided a powerful normative orientation for domestic political actors in East-Central Europe and the Baltic states during the process of EU accession, the EU appears to have been less influential in EaP countries.

Scholars have sought to explain the limited impact of the EU by arguing that the absence of an accession prospect does not provide sufficiently attractive incentives for domestic democratic reforms.⁶ According to this view, breakthroughs in democratization, such as the reforms in Slovakia or Turkey in the late 1990-ies, would have been unlikely from the outset. Moreover, scholars have argued that by subordinating compliance with democratic conditions to stability and security concerns, the EU has undermined the credibility of its democratic conditionality.⁷

However, these arguments are difficult to reconcile with the unintended and unexpected effect of the EU association policy in Ukraine 2013/14, that is, for the so-called Euromaidan protests triggering the ouster of President Yanukovich. The government’s refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the EU in 2013 sparked a series of mass demonstrations, mobilizing several hundred thousands of citizens. Many protesters wanted to stop the corruption and cronyism of the ruling elites, associating European integration with better governance and prosperity. Many Ukrainians also viewed Ukraine as a future member of the EU.

The present contribution tries to solve this empirical puzzle of weak incentives and apparently coincidental path-changing effects in EaP countries, asking whether and when the renewed neighborhood policy was able to effectively support democratization processes in the six states. It is argued that the use of democratic conditionality may only be selectively effective, namely if (1) there are intense and dense relations between the partner state and the EU and (2) robust political competition exists in the partner country.

⁶Sandra Lavenex; Frank Schimmelfennig, "EU Democracy Promotion in the Neighborhood: From Leverage to Governance?", in *Democratization*, no. 4, 18, 2011, pp. 885-909.

⁷Richard Youngs, "Introduction. Idealism at Bay", in Richard Youngs(ed.), *The European Union and Democracy Promotion*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010, pp. 1-15.

Figure 1: Voice and accountability in Eastern Partnership states

Percentile rankings of countries.

Source: Worldwide Governance Indicators.⁸ Y-axis: higher values indicate a better quality of governance⁹

Following Levitsky and Way,¹⁰ the article contends that the impact of democratic conditionality depends on whether, firstly, dense societal, economic and cultural relations support the domestic acceptance of EU conditions and,

⁸ [<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#home>], 14 May 2017.

⁹ According to Kaufmann *et al*, the “Voice and Accountability” indicator captures “perceptions of the extent to which a country’s citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media.” Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi., p. 2.

¹⁰ Steven Levitsky; Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism. Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

secondly, whether ruling political elites are unable to dominate over opposition parties, the state apparatus and civil society.¹¹

Since the impact of conditionality is mediated by these conditions, neither the tightening, nor the loosening of conditionality constitutes an appropriate strategy to support democracy in Europe's neighborhood. This argument is developed in two steps. Firstly, it is shown that the erosion of democratic conditionality noted by critics of the ENP does not denote a deficit of strategic policymaking that might be remedied by formulating and implementing a better strategy. Secondly, the density of relations between the EU and the six Eastern partner countries as well as the political competition in these countries are compared.

1. Fault lines in the design of the European Neighborhood Policy

The neighborhood policy of the EU in several respects constitutes a "composite policy" that represents different interests, aims at incongruent objectives and reflects different cause-effect logics.¹²

Firstly, the policy objectives linked to the Eastern Partnership are incongruent and may thus suggest different priorities.¹³ Through its neighborhood policy the EU inter alia intended to create a "ring of friends" surrounding its territory, stabilize the newly independent states in the post-Soviet region, support their economic development, diversify the EU energy supplies, protect the EU's external border more effectively, control immigration and reduce transnational environmental risks. These legitimate and important objectives tend to compete with the new focus on democratic conditionality.¹⁴

¹¹ For a similar argument, see: Gwendolyn Sasse, "Linkages and the Promotion of Democracy: The EU's Eastern Neighbourhood", in *Democratization*, no. 4, 20, 2013, pp. 553-91.

¹² Dimitar Bechev; Kalypto Nicolaidis, "From Policy to Polity: Can the EU's Special Relations with Its 'Neighbourhood' Be Decentred?", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, no. 3, 48, 2010, pp. 475-500; Gstöhl 2016 *op. cit.*

¹³ Geoffrey Edwards, "The Construction of Ambiguity and the Limits of Attraction: Europe and its Neighbourhood Policy", in *Journal of European Integration*, no. 1, 30, 2008, pp. 45-62; Andrea Gawrich; Inna Melnykovska; Rainer Schweickert, "Neighbourhood Europeanization through ENP: The Case of Ukraine", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, no. 5, 48, 2010, pp. 1209-35; Gstöhl 2016, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Richard Youngs, "Democracy Promotion as External Governance?", in *Journal of European Public Policy*, no. 6, 16, 2009, pp. 895-915, p. 897.

Problems and progress in individual policy areas may occur independently of each other and irrespective of an existing political conditionality relationship. Blockades in policy areas with strong sectoral interest groups may jeopardize the implementation of strategic political goals. The Ukrainian crisis has increased the incongruence among policy objectives and underlying interests of member states which is, for example, manifested in the disagreements over the continuation and extent of economic sanctions.¹⁵

Secondly, homogenizing assignments of a “partner”, “neighbor” or “association” status do not take into consideration the different ambitions of EaP states.¹⁶ While Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine seek accession to the EU, political elites in the other three states do not pursue this aim or do not consider it a priority.

Thirdly, a conflictual relationship exists between the bilateral and multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership. The principle of differentiation is primarily tailored to the bilateral relations between the EU and individual states, and its application will lead to a greater divergence between the six partner states. The multilateral projects and institutions, however, require including all partner states. This applies to the four so-called “thematic platforms”: democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies; energy security; contacts between peoples.¹⁷ Moreover, the envisaged “flagship initiatives”, inter alia on a regional electricity market, depend on the inclusion of partner states, even if a state has fallen back in the bilateral dimension.

Fourthly, coupling expanded financial aid to the creation of deep democracy exacerbates the tension between conditionality and the desired domestic “ownership” of reforms. It is doubtful whether the ideas of non-hierarchical governance proposed by the European Commission, such as “joint ownership” and “mutual accountability” will induce the governments of Eastern partner states to adopt the goals of reforms advocated by the EU.

¹⁵ Serena Giusti, “The EU’s Transformative Power Challenged in Ukraine”, in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, no. 2, 21, 2016, pp. 165-84.

¹⁶ Elena A. Korosteleva, *Eastern Partnership. A New Opportunity for the Neighbours?*, London [u.a.]: Routledge, 2012.

¹⁷ Laure Delcour, *The Institutional Functioning of the Eastern Partnership: An Early Assessment*, Tallinn: Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership, Eastern Partnership Review 1, 2011.

Reforms of the ENP did not fully resolve the trade-offs and ambiguities resulting from these tensions. Rather, it will cause their re-balancing at best, but may also partially increase contradictions. The effectiveness of democratic conditionality is therefore likely to be limited.

2. Density of relations

This effectiveness, however, will not only be determined by the structural conditions and conflicts of the EU system. It is also necessary to investigate in more detail the extent to which the Eastern partner countries have already been “Europeanized”, that is, have developed societal, cultural and economic links to EU member states. The closer and the more intense these linkages, the more likely will domestic actors accept the conditions of the EU as guiding norms for themselves and articulate an interest in closer political cooperation.

The most important indicator of economic integration is the volume of trade with the EU. A comparison of trade with the EU as a share of each state’s total foreign trade shows that EU exports and imports account for more than 70 percent of Azerbaijan’s foreign trade which is due to its large oil and gas exports. Moldova ranks second, followed by Ukraine and Georgia. Ukraine’s trade with the EU reached about 30 bn Euros in 2016, approximately three times as high as Azerbaijan’s trade. The share of Belarusian trade with the EU is relatively low although the country is much closer to the EU than the Caucasian states, mainly because the Belarusian economy continues to be closely linked with Russia.

Moldova is most closely linked with the EU if indicators of linkages between societies are considered, such as the estimated number of migrant workers in the EU compared to its total population. Remittances from migrant workers also constitute a significant share of Moldova’s gross domestic product. These indicators show an intermediate level of integration for Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia, with Ukraine exceeding all other EaP countries in absolute terms. Azerbaijan appears to be the society that is most weakly linked to the EU. In 2015, Moldova already benefitted from the EU’s decision to exempt Moldovan nationals from visa requirements. In October 2016 the EU approved visa-free travel for Georgia, and in May 2017 Ukrainian citizens were granted visa-free access to the EU.

The relative strength of these societal and economic linkages may be summarized by assigning ranks to the individual states. If these ranks are aggregated, Moldova emerges as the EaP country with the strongest linkages to the EU, followed by Ukraine, Belarus and Georgia.

Table 1: Socioeconomic relations

		ARM	AZE	BLR	GEO	MDA	UKR
EU share in total commodity trade (mean)	2014-16	21	73	18	27	61	43
Estimated remittances from EU (% of GDP)	2014	1.3	0.1	0.2	1.5	7.2	1.0
Estimated migrant stock in EU (% of population)	2013	2.2	0.4	3.3	2.8	7.9	2.4
Schengen visas issued in % of population	2015	1.7	0.7	7.9	2.3		2.6
RANK		5	6	3.5	4	1	3

Sources: World Development Indicators; European Commission; World Bank Remittances data base.¹⁸ Aggregate ranks are the medians of a country's ranks for individual indicators.

To assess the intensity of cultural linkages, scholars have studied foreign language skills, mutual attention and perceptions in the mass media, shared trends in popular culture or shared value orientations.¹⁹ Opinion surveys provide an accessible basis of empirical data to study perceptions and attitudes held by people in EaP countries. One of these surveys, the EU Neighbourhood Barometer in 2014 asked citizens in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine whether they perceived cultural affinities with Russian or European culture.²⁰ Among the Ukrainian respondents 46 percent declared an affinity

¹⁸ Schengen visa data are from: <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com>, 17 May 2017

¹⁹ Jeffrey T. Checkel; Peter J. Katzenstein (eds.), *European Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; David D. Laitin, "Culture and National Identity: 'The East' and European Integration", in Peter Mair; Jan Zielonka(eds.), *The Enlarged European Union. Diversity and Adaptation*, London: Frank Cass, 2002, 55-80; Stefanie Sifft *et al.*, "Segmented Europeanization: Exploring the Legitimacy of the European Union from a Public Discourse Perspective", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, no. 1, 45, 2008, pp. 127-55.

²⁰ TNS Opinion, *European Neighbourhood Barometer Eastern Partnership*, Brussels: TNS Opinion, 2014.

with European culture, whereas the shares of Euro-affine respondents were 34 and 26 percent in Moldova and Georgia, respectively. However, the share of citizens stating an affinity with Russian culture was higher in Moldova (68%) than in Ukraine (61%) and Georgia (38%). Thus, the survey shows that the perceived links with Russian culture were stronger than the European cultural links in all three countries.

Admittedly, the survey did not attempt to further explore to what extent respondents considered Russian culture as a part of or opposed to European culture.

What cultural affinity with Europe means can be interpreted and operationalized with data from the European Values Study. This survey for the first time provides comparable data to study subjective value orientations in the EU and Eastern Partnership countries.²¹ Drawing on a cross-national comparison of political culture in the EU,²² the table below lists several questions that refer to key values of the EU: equal rights of women and men; a market economy not controlled by the state; economic competition; the separation of religion and politics.

The table shows the extent to which the survey results for individual Eastern partner states deviate from the median of the EU member states. The first two questions try to measure whether respondents are ready to assign a prerogative for paid employment to men or to assess paid employment as a key feature of women's personal independence. In other words, the questions seek to assess the prevalence of traditional versus modern understandings of gender roles. Attitudes in Azerbaijan deviate most strongly from the EU median and are also located outside the range defined by the 27 EU member states, while attitudes in Belarus and Ukraine approximate the EU median.

Among the attitudes regarding economic culture, the mean scores for Moldova correspond to the EU median most closely, whereas the Azerbaijani scores differ most widely. Azerbaijani respondents favor free entrepreneurship and economic competition more strongly. Whereas the

²¹ EVS, *European Values Study 2008. 4th Wave. Integrated Dataset*, Cologne: GESIS Data Archive, ZA4800 Data File Version 2.0.0 (2010-11-30), 2010 doi:10.4232/1.10188, 17 May 2017.

²² Jürgen Gerhards; Michael Hölscher (cooperation), *Kulturelle Unterschiede in der Europäischen Union. Ein Vergleich zwischen Mitgliedsländern, Beitrittskandidaten und der Türkei*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006.

Georgian and Belarusian scores deviate more towards a liberal market economy with more entrepreneurial freedoms, the Armenian and Ukrainian scores lean towards a regulated market economy with more state control over firms. All scores on the economic items are within the range of attitudes observable in EU member states.

Asked whether religious belief constitutes a criterion for holding public office, the three Caucasian states differ most clearly from the EU median, favoring a notion of politics that conceives religiosity as an important criterion of political qualification. The percentage shares for all three countries are outside the EU range.

If these observable attitudes on religion and politics, gender relations and economic culture are viewed together, Belarus appears to be the country where attitude patterns most closely match the EU median. Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine lie mostly within the range of attitudes observable in EU member states. Azerbaijan, in contrast, appears to be the country with the most dissimilar attitudes on the five, necessarily exemplary questions selected here.

Table 2: Cultural similarities

Distance from EU-27 median in scores or percentage points	ARM	AZE	BLR	GEO	MDA	UKR	EU-27
When jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women (% agree)	+34	+62	+7	+22	+22	+12	18
Having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person (% agree)	-9	-34	+3	+5	+1	+0	82
Politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office (% agree)	+38	+47	+14	+65	+28	+24	16
The state should control firms more effectively (1-10=max)	+0.8	-1.9	-1.0	-1.1	+0.3	+1.4	5.5
Competition is good (10-1=max)	+0.3	+2.2	-0.2	-0.8	-0.2	+0.7	4.1
RANK	3	4	1	3	3	2	

Source: European Values Study.²³ Bold values represent the largest deviation from the EU median. Aggregate ranks are the medians of a country's ranks for individual indicators.

²³ European Values Study, *op. cit.*

3. Political competition

The previous section can be summarized by stating that the differences in economic, societal and cultural linkages with the EU correspond relatively well to the higher quality of democracy in Moldova on the one hand, the lower democracy scores and the downward trend in Azerbaijan on the other. However, the observable densities of linkages contradict the low democracy scores of Belarus (Figure 1) and do not well account for the difference between Armenia and Georgia or for the high democracy scores of Ukraine. Thus, it appears necessary to investigate how the Eastern partner states differ with respect to the intensity of political competition.

Studies on East-Central European countries have shown that a robust party competition provides an effective public accountability of ruling political elites and prevents them from capturing the state through rent seeking and patronage.²⁴ Governing political parties that reckon on their de-selection have incentives to agree with the opposition on institutions limiting executive authority because after a change of government such institutions are likely to prevent the new government from exploiting the state and to protect the new opposition from repression. Faced with a credible threat of replacement, governing political elites will thus be more ready to accept and advocate EU conditions that support public accountability and the rule of law. In addition, by incorporating criticism from the EU and promoting it during electoral campaigns, opposition parties generate expectations they will have to accommodate after a change of government.

To compare the competitiveness of the political systems, the analysis in this section will be limited to election results and changes of government. Presidential elections in Armenia (2013) Georgia (2013), Moldova (2016) Ukraine (2014) have been characterized by relatively narrow majorities of votes. Moldova reintroduced direct presidential elections in 2016, leading to a tight race between the two most popular candidates, Igor Dodon and Maia Sandu. In contrast, incumbent presidents in Belarus and Azerbaijan

²⁴ Anna Grzymała-Buse, *Rebuilding Leviathan. Party Competition and State Exploitation in Post-Communist Democracies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Conor O'Dwyer, *Runaway State-Building. Patronage Politics and Democratic Development*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

regularly achieved high shares of votes through manipulated elections designed to confirm their tenure.

Comparing the mandate shares of pro-presidential parties in legislatures, it may be noted that Ukraine has been characterized by a particularly weak and unstable parliamentary basis of the presidents prior and after the “Orange Revolution” of 2004 and the “Euromaidan” revolution in 2014. In 2004 and 2010, incumbent presidents had to resign after lost elections, and the Prime Minister was exchanged several times until 2010. Between 2010 and 2014, President Yanukovich relied on a relative majority of deputies belonging to the Party of Regions that was supported by affiliated independent deputies. Since 2014 a coalition led by the Bloc Petro Poroshenko has ensured legislative majorities for President Poroshenko. In Moldova, three opposition parties were able to overcome the dominance of communists in 2009 and to form a government. Narrow political majorities have persisted since then.

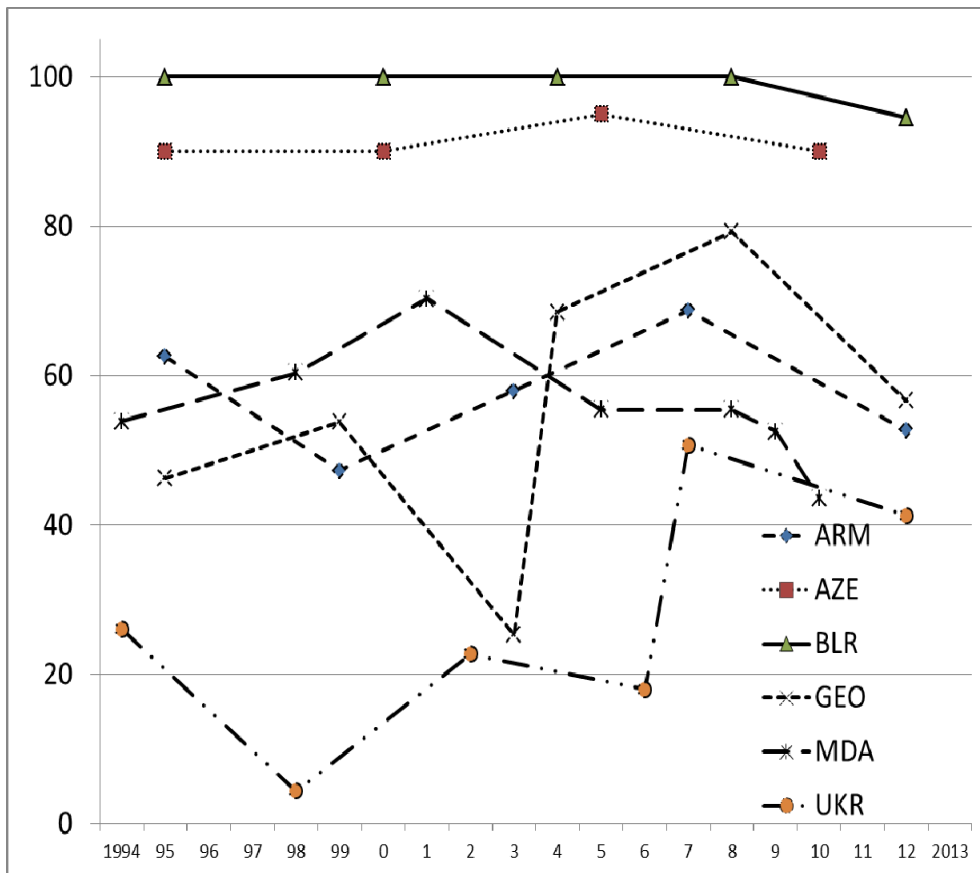
Governing parties in Armenia and Georgia expanded their parliamentary basis to more than three fourths of the seats in 2007 and 2008. Georgia’s president resigned in 2004 after public protests against the manipulated legislative elections, ceding the presidential office and the government to the opposition movement. In contrast, Armenia’s president was able to install his protégé as his successor in 2008. Protests against electoral fraud remained without success. In Armenia the Republican Party has continued to dominate the legislature and successive governments, winning 44 and 49 percent of the votes in the 2012 and 2017 parliamentary elections. In Georgia, the United National Movement lost the 2012 parliamentary election against the Georgian Dream electoral alliance. Georgian Dream won 55 and 49 percent of the votes in 2012 and 2016. In Azerbaijan and Belarus, opposition parties and de-facto independent deputies are not or only marginally represented in parliaments.²⁵

Taken together, it may be noted that differences in political competitiveness levels and trends largely correspond to different levels and trends in the quality of democracy (Figure 1). The political system of Ukraine has experienced the most intense political competition. Political competition among rival parties and presidential candidates has also increased in Georgia and Moldova. In Armenia, the constellation of political parties is less

²⁵ Michael Emerson; Richard Youngs, *Democracy’s Plight in the European Neighbourhood: Struggling Transitions and Proliferating Dynasties*, Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies [u.a.], 2009.

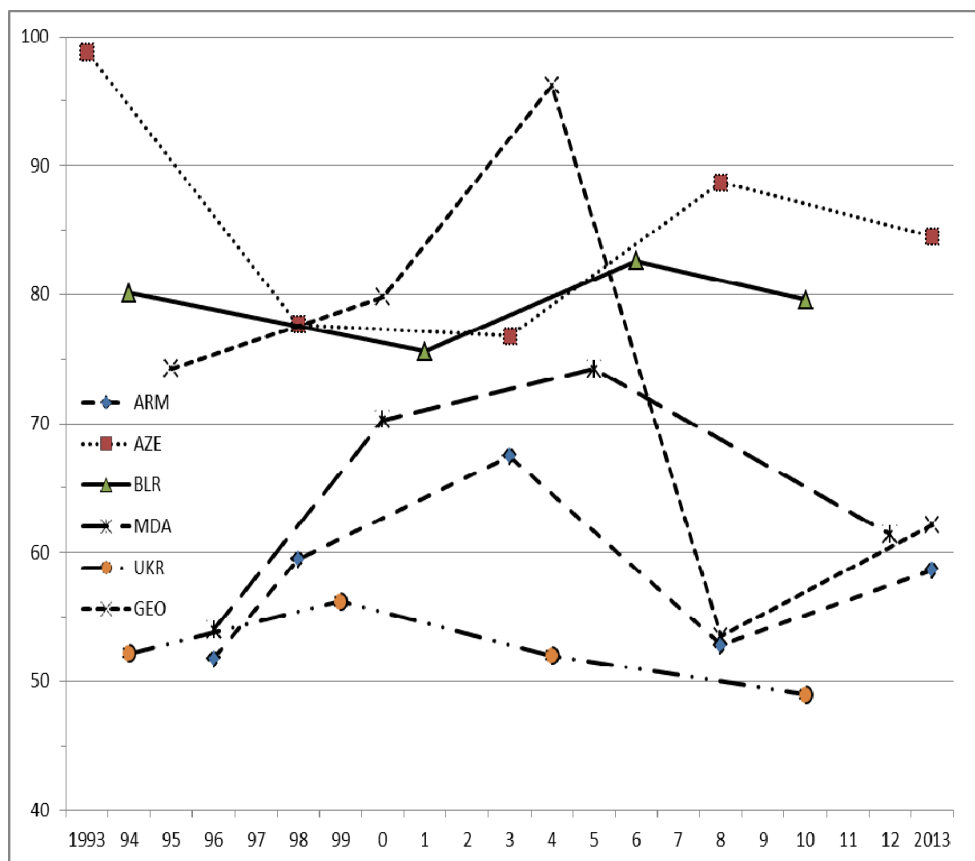
competitive. While Armenia and Georgia have experienced periods of hegemonic party rule, Georgia can be considered much more competitive due to its changes of government in 2004 and 2012. Azerbaijan and Belarus lack competitive elections and can be described as closed authoritarian regimes, although both have enabled opposition parties to gain a few seats in the legislature.

Figure 2: Legislative elections: vote shares of pro-presidential parties



Source: OSCE, P. Stykow.²⁶

²⁶ Petra Stykow, "Wahlen in Autoritären Regimen: Die Postsowjetischen Länder Im Vergleich", in *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* no. Sonderheft, 47, 2013, pp. 237-71.

Figure 3: Presidential elections: vote shares of winning candidates

Source: OSCE, P. Stykow.²⁷

Conclusion

The three most competitive political regimes are situated in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine - those states whose political elites aspire to accede to the EU and where particularly the challengers of the old elites have committed themselves to the aim of accession. This correlation is neither coincidental, nor likely to originate from EU interventions. Rather, it is

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

political competition that generates incentives to constrain executive authority, for example by an independent judiciary. A comparative assessment of judicial independence in the six Eastern partner states has found that professional, depoliticized appointment, promotion and dismissal procedures of judges, the institutional independence, powers, accountability and transparency of judicial systems are most developed in the three most competitive states.²⁸

Political competition has also led challenger party elites to appeal to positive expectations and associations linked with "Europe" in the electorate. Party elites have explored and effectively used references to Europe as means to portray themselves and their policies as an alternative to the Soviet Union and state socialism that are framed as the dominance of Moscow / the Kremlin and the economic hardship of the past.

These constellations of robust political competition provided opportunities for EU norms of democracy to become orientations for domestic political struggles. Domestic actors began to refer to these norms in order to justify their positions and criticize opponents. The EU can make a genuine contribution to this process. Moreover, one could argue that its true strength as an external democracy promoter may be in the consensual creation of public accountability mechanisms and procedures. In competitive constellations, the EU may perform the functions of an external stability anchor or a point of normative reference, particularly if dense linkages support a broad popular acceptance of the EU in the partner state. EU-standards and expectations can help domestic political actors to agree on institutional constraints to executive authority or on mechanisms of executive accountability.

In closed autocracies like Azerbaijan or Belarus, however, the ruling elites lack sufficient incentives to fulfill the democracy conditions posed by the EU. While Azerbaijan's political elites strongly rely on revenues from exports of natural resources to stabilize their rule, the monopoly of political rule in Belarus is mainly based on the state-owned sector of the economy that is subsidized by Russia. In the three Caucasian states, hegemonial political elites legitimate their claim to rule with defending national interests in the region's ethno-political conflicts. The EU is not able to constrain these political authority resources effectively. Given the composite nature of its neighborhood policy, it

²⁸ International Renaissance Foundation, *European Integration Index for Eastern Partnership Countries*, Kiev: K.I.S. Publishing, 2012.

has only limited capacities to intervene in non-competitive regimes, identify domestic opposition actors and back them in their mobilization efforts against authoritarian rulers.

As long as ruling elites repress political competition effectively, the EU may support a liberalization primarily indirectly by intensifying its economic, societal and cultural relations with these states. Denser relations foster the domestic acceptance of EU norms in the hybrid regimes and defective democracies among the Eastern partner states, facilitating the formation of pro-European advocacy coalitions. Since multiple linkages appear to be the only instrument of democracy promotion in closed authoritarian regimes that is likely to have a mid- or longterm impact, linkage-building should be established as a separate strategic policy objective.

The EU has taken a step into this direction with its 2015 Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy and its 2016 Foreign Policy Strategy.²⁹ Both documents place more emphasis on the “stabilisation” and “resilience” of states and societies. However, these broad aims also represent labels under which different ambitions and priorities can be grouped and reshuffled over time. While democratic governance figures as one of the objectives in the revised ENP, the strategy documents try to balance and reconcile different objectives. It remains to be seen whether the EU will be able to use future opportunities given by democratic openings in EaP countries to tip the balance in favour of pro-democratic political actors and to facilitate agreements on institutional constraints.

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²⁹ European Commission, *Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, Brussels: European Commission, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Communication JOIN(2015) 50, 2015; European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, Brussels: European Union, 2016.

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