

The good, the bad, and the ambitious: democracy and autocracy promoters competing in Belarus

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How do China, Russia, and the European Union (EU) facilitate or hinder political liberalization in Belarus? In this paper, using the qualitative case study method, I primarily highlight the competition that the EU faces with the Russian active autocracy promotion in Belarus. The EU provides aid only in exchange for promise of democratic and economic reforms, which might be very costly and danger the persistence of ruling elites. Russia, at the same time, offers economic and diplomatic support to Belarus, which is, however, conditioned by privatization of the Belarusian strategic assets in favor of Russian stakeholders. I also claim that China, with growing international ambitions, passively supports autocracy in Belarus, by providing financial aid without interfering with internal political affairs. For Belarus, whose leadership still enjoys legitimation by a large part of the population due to the economic stability, losing major state enterprises might weaken sovereignty. Thus, diversification of economic partners is of crucial importance for Belarus. I argue that Belarusian ruling elites may have found an escape away from democratic and autocratic pushes from the EU and Russia, respectively, by increasing linkages with China. To promote effectively democracy in its neighborhood, the EU ought to reconsider interactions with external non-democratic actors. The paper concludes by providing some policy recommendations for the EU.

Keywords: European Union (EU); Russia; China; democracy promotion; autocracy promotion

Introduction

The international context of democratization has been attracting growing scholarly attention since the end of the Cold War (e.g. Carothers, 1999, 2004; Burnell, 2004, 2006; McFaul, 2004). There has also been an upsurge of interest among scholars toward the European Union (EU) as a democracy promoter (e.g. Pinder, 1997; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2011). Scholars agree on the existence of a link between the democracy-promotion capacity of the EU and the accession incentives that it has offered to countries of Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008). Projects such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP), which do not offer an accession perspective, have been less successful in promoting democratic and economic reforms beyond European borders.

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Belarus has been especially resistant to EU democracy-promotion strategies.¹ Local conditions such as the unwillingness of Belarusian state authorities to cooperate, uncoordinated opposition parties, and the weak civil society are limiting factors for a successful democracy transfer. Moreover, the current political regime still has support of a large part of the population (Korosteleva, 2012). However, external factors are also likely to account for the shortcomings of EU democracy promotion.² This paper aims to analyze whether and how autocratically ruled countries hinder the EU attempts to promote democratic forms of rule in its neighborhood. In doing so, I analyze the ineffectiveness of EU democracy promotion in Belarus, by looking at the alternative political actors in the region that have been identified as the main suspects for *autocracy* promotion, namely Russia and China (e.g. Burnell, 2010b). Specifically, with this study, I aim to examine the following research question: how do China, Russia, and the EU facilitate or hinder political liberalization in Belarus? In the theoretical framework, I conceptualize active and passive autocracy promotion. I also illustrate, with a simple model, interaction effects between active and passive autocracy promoters, on the one hand, and democracy promoters and stabilizers, on the other hand. Then, I use Belarus as a case study to test the explanatory power of the developed model. I do not argue that autocracy promotion is the sole factor of the regime outcome in Belarus. However, in the case of Belarus the role of autocratically ruled third countries cannot be underestimated. Although the discussion of Russia as an *active* autocracy promoter is not new, and has already been researched extensively,³ this paper is the first to examine China's role as a *passive* autocracy promoter and its growing influence in Belarus.

Belarus shares common borders with three EU members, and is therefore expected to be one of the building blocks for the EU's *ring of friends*, namely neighbors sharing similar values to the EU.⁴ At the same time, Moscow largely subsidizes Belarus, and provides it with political support. Hence, the EU and Russia are in a *direct competition* over influence in Belarus: the EU would like to be surrounded by democratic neighbors (see footnote 4), whereas Russia is interested in preserving the current Belarusian regime. The influences toward Belarus come not

¹ A rare study addressing the issue of democracy promotion in Belarus is Babayev (2014). The author applies Carothers's (2009) theoretical categorization for democracy-promotion approaches (i.e. developmental and political ones). Babayev (2014) analyzes the different approaches of Germany (as a proxy for the EU Eastern policy) and the United States towards Belarus. On the US democracy promotion in Belarus see also, for example, Carothers (2007: 10, 14, 22) and van Hüllen and Stahn (2007).

² There obviously also exist endogenous reasons for the EU's failure to improve the liberal performance of Belarus. To disentangle these reasons and to control for the possible impact of other factors are challenging tasks, which go beyond the scope of this paper.

³ See, for example, Ambrosio (2009) and Vanderhill (2012) for the Belarusian case.

⁴ Commission of the European Communities. Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with Our Eastern and Southern Neighbours, Brussels, 3 November 2003. COM(2003) 104 final, p. 4. Retrieved 16 September 2014 from http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/com03_104_en.pdf.

only from its eastern neighbor, but from China, too, which has recently increased its economic and political ties with Belarus. Chinese presence in Belarus illustrates the recent trend of its overall 'increased international activism' (Goldstein, 2005: 119) and ambitions to become a great power. Indeed, China's involvement has shifted toward regions that once were only marginal to its interests (Medeiros, 2009). The recent large Chinese loans and investments in Belarus are not conditioned by democratic reforms, thus making China an interesting economic partner for Belarus. Hence, China is likely to put, *indirectly*, a competitive pressure on both the EU's and Russia's objectives in Belarus.

The recent rise of non-democratic and resource-rich regional powers is acknowledged (e.g. Gat, 2007; Tolstrup, 2009; Youngs, 2010), and scholars have started to address, increasingly, autocracy promotion (e.g. Ambrosio, 2009, 2010; Bader *et al.*, 2010; Burnell, 2010b; Burnell and Schlumberger, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Melnykovska *et al.*, 2012; Vanderhill, 2012; Bader, 2013). Some scholars have analyzed and compared autocracy-promotion strategies of Russia and China in Central Asia (e.g. Bader *et al.*, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Melnykovska *et al.*, 2012). Unlike these studies, by relying on the qualitative case study method (e.g. Yin, 1989), I analyze Belarus as a country where the democracy promotion of the EU is counterbalanced by the autocracy promotion efforts of China and Russia. Among the post-Soviet countries China is more present in Central Asia than in Belarus. This fact obviously makes Central Asian countries the most likely cases where EU democracy promotion competes with autocracy promotion of both Russia and China. However, Belarus is an interesting case. First, the Chinese presence in the country is not yet consolidated as in Central Asia. Nevertheless, both countries have been recently increasing economic and political ties. Second, the fact that EU democracy promotion faces difficulties in Central Asia is unquestionable, due to, for example, geographical distance and a few cultural ties. It is, instead, less clear why EU democracy promotion comes to a standstill in a country that shares, not only borders in Eastern Europe, but considerable cultural ties, too. Last, Belarus also has many cultural, historical, and economic ties with Russia, which openly acknowledges the existing competition between itself and other centers of power.⁵ This last evidence motivates why this paper does not only focus on China and the EU. Taking into consideration the Russian role is important, as it allows examining the competition and interaction effects between two different (active and passive) autocracy promoters, as well as how a democracy promoter (the EU) competes and interacts with two different autocratic actors.

This paper continues as follows. In the next section, I provide some motivating evidence. In the third section, I introduce the theoretical framework, by conceptualizing the key actors in play: democracy promoters as well as active and passive autocracy promoters. Then, I build a simple model, providing the

⁵ See, for example, Vladimir Putin Delivered the Annual Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, 12 December 2013. Retrieved 16 September 2014 from <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6402>.

hypothesis of democracy–autocracy competition. In the fourth section, I empirically test the explanatory power of the model. In this respect, first, I analyze the EU’s attempts for democracy promotion in Belarus and the roles played by Russia and China; second, I highlight the competition between the different contrasting political pushes. In the fifth section, I conclude and provide some policy recommendations.

Motivating evidence

The EU democracy promotion

The European Council stresses that promotion of both democracy and respect for human rights is ‘one of the cornerstones of European cooperation as well as of relations between the Community and its Member States and other countries’.⁶ Since 1995, the democracy clause is included in all cooperation and trade agreements of the EU with third countries (Knodt and Jünemann, 2007). The European Commission gives a fairly broad definition of democracy promotion as ‘all measures designed to facilitate democratic development’ (cited in Knodt and Jünemann, 2007: 16). EU’s role as a democracy promoter has been significantly strengthened after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The perceived wealth of the EU attracted countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and a credible membership incentive was strong enough to support democratization processes in these countries. In that time, the EU developed a number of strategies and instruments for external democratization in third countries that turned out to be effective.⁷ It is widely recognized that democratic countries secure peace and foster peaceful inter-governmental relations (Geddes, 2009). They have reliable political systems with market-based economic structures suitable for durable cooperation. Hence, the EU is ready to provide assistance for building up democratic orders in its neighboring countries, thereby securing its own political and economic stability.

Nevertheless, security, political, and economic factors in the neighboring countries are likely to influence the EU’s commitment to promote democracy, as these factors are of crucial importance for the security and well-being of the EU itself. Aiming to generalize the analysis, one has to consider the fact that the EU may tend to prioritize stability over democratization (e.g. Youngs, 2002; Jünemann, 2003; Bicchi and Martin, 2006; Jünemann and Knodt, 2008; Bicchi, 2010; Börzel *et al.*, 2013; Börzel and van Hüllen, 2014). Indeed, the EU has supported non-democratic regimes, for instance in its Southern neighborhood, and even officially apologized to the peoples

⁶ European Council. Resolution on Human Rights, Democracy and Development. 28 November, Bulletin of the European Communities, No. 11/1991, pp. 122–123. University of Pittsburgh’s Archive of European Integration. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://aei.pitt.edu/1802/1/democracy_declaration_1991.pdf.

⁷ For an overview on instruments and strategies for democracy promotion of the EU, see, for example, Schimmelfennig and Scholtz (2008), Knodt *et al.* (2011), and Lavenex and Schimmelfennig (2011).

of North Africa for having stood by the dictators.⁸ Hence, the assumption that external actors' political systems shape the goals to pursue in their external relations cannot be applied to all countries.⁹

Autocracy promotion

Freedom House reports that 2012 was the 7th consecutive year with more declines than gains in the democratic performance scores worldwide.¹⁰ Tolstrup (2009) suggests that autocracies have learned how to counterbalance democracy pushes and to resist them both at home and in their backyards. The issue of autocracy promotion is quite recent (e.g. Ambrosio, 2009, 2010; Bader *et al.*, 2010; Burnell, 2010b; Burnell and Schlumberger, 2010; Jackson, 2010; Melnykovska *et al.*, 2012; Vanderhill, 2012; Bader, 2013). However, in contrast with many countries and international organizations that promote democracy, autocracy promoters are only a handful, with Russia and China leading the list of suspects, along with regional organizations dominated by these countries (Ambrosio, 2008; Burnell, 2010a).¹¹

The existing literature on autocracy promotion highlights that both Russia and China mostly concentrate their autocracy-promotion efforts on countries in their geographic proximity. China is most likely to promote, actively, autocracy in countries such as Mongolia, Myanmar, Cambodia, and in Central Asia (e.g. Bader and Kästner, 2010; Bader *et al.*, 2010; Melnykovska *et al.*, 2012; Bader, 2013). Russia promotes autocracy in the post-Soviet space instead (Bader *et al.*, 2010; Bader, 2013). In this context, Eastern Europe (non-EU members) has already been called a field of 'integration competition' between the EU and Russia (e.g. Popescu and Wilson, 2009). Indeed, Russia has never hidden its aspirations to control the neighborhood and its dissatisfaction with EU integration initiatives in the *near abroad* (e.g. Bendiek, 2008; Popescu and Wilson, 2009).

Unlike Russia, China does not openly claim a sphere of interest in Eastern Europe. However, the Chinese silent financial support for repressive regimes, such as North Korea and Sudan, and the principle of non-interference in

⁸ Štefan Füle European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Speech on the Recent Events in North Africa Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), European Parliament Brussels, 28 February 2011. Retrieved 21 September 2014 from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-11-130_en.htm.

⁹ Scholars of the international context of authoritarian persistence highlight that national security concerns and geo-strategic interests influence preferences of democratic actors to support authoritarian status quo (e.g. Knodt and Jünemann, 2007; Ambrosio, 2014). See, for example, Börzel and van Hüllen (2014) for a theory of preferences for the EU. Future research should address these issues, by using quantitative analyses to disentangle key variables affecting external actors' preferences.

¹⁰ Freedom in the World 2013. Democratic Breakthroughs in the Balance. Selected Data from Freedom House's Annual Survey on Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FIW%202013%20Booklet.pdf>.

¹¹ Reasons motivating an external actor to undermine democratic performance in another country may vary. See, for example, Bader *et al.* (2010) for a political economy explanation.

internal political affairs of countries that China develops relations with, made China a *de facto* (or as better explained later, a *passive*) protecting power of dictatorial regimes (Bader and Kästner, 2010). Hence, China's potential influence in Eastern Europe is not to be underestimated, as Beijing is constantly increasing its presence in the regions that once were of only marginal importance for Chinese national interests (e.g. Medeiros, 2009). China might become an important actor on the EU's Eastern border, especially in the light of its ambitions to be a great power.

Theoretical framework

Key concepts

I build on the concept of democracy promotion and counter-promotion (Burnell, 2006) and on the theory of positive and negative external actors (Tolstrup, 2009). In line with Burnell (2006), I differentiate between active and passive democracy promotion, as well as active and passive autocracy promotion.

First, I conceptualize active democracy promotion (hereafter simply democracy promotion) as *deliberate actions undertaken with a view to strengthen another country's liberal performance, or to weaken the survival capacity of authoritarian rulers*.¹² An actor aiming to promote democracy in another country has specific strategies and approaches to achieve objectives seen as steps toward the democratic development, such as releasing of political prisoners.

Second, active autocracy promotion can be defined as *deliberate actions undertaken with a view to weaken another country's liberal performance, or to strengthen the survival capacity of authoritarian rulers*. Active autocracy promotion is characterized by intentionality, and might be driven by many reasons, such as economic interest or questions of national security.¹³

Last, I conceptualize *passive* autocracy promotion as a *support of an authoritarian regime through increasing economic and financial ties, and diplomatic support*, namely, when deliberate actions aimed to strengthen the authoritarian regime are not evident, but what matters are self-regarding motives only (e.g. economic and

¹² I rely on Tolstrup (2009) in using the term liberal performance instead of democratization, because some liberalization undertaken in a country does not mean that the country is on the way to democracy. Burnell (2006) also refers to *passive democracy promotion*, and underlines its unintentional character. In this type of democracy promotion, democratic impulses emerge as a result of demonstration effect or diffusion.

¹³ Bader *et al.* (2010) further argue that autocratic regimes can promote their developmental model either by example or by influence. Promoting autocracy by example does not foresee any intentional actions aimed to foster autocratic rule in a third country. Ambrosio (2010) refers to the same phenomena in dealing with the diffusion process, which may not only be valid for the spread of democratic ideas, as in the case of color revolutions in Eastern Europe, but for transmitting authoritarian forms of government, too. In the case of authoritarian diffusion, authoritarian regimes learn from each other and adopt similar policies to remain in power (Ambrosio, 2013). Promoting autocracy by influence implies intentional actions of the country aimed to foster the authoritarian ruler in another country.

		A	
		AAP	PAP
D	DP	direct competition (DC)	indirect competition (IC)
	S	complementarity (C)	C

		A	
		AAP	PAP
A	AAP	DC or C	IC or C
	PAP	IC or C	no competition

Figure 1 Outcomes of competition between democratic and autocratic external actors competing in a third non-democratic country. A democratic external actor (D) puts emphasis either on democracy promotion (DP) or on stability (S). An autocratic external actor (A) puts emphasis either on active autocracy promotion (AAP) or on passive autocracy promotion (PAP).

commercial opportunities). The regime outcome in this case is a side-effect of pursuing economic interests.

The basic model

Here I build a simple model, by considering the motivating evidence discussed so far, as well as the key concepts presented above. This step helps to clarify the key concepts and to systematize the discussion of the empirical analysis in the next section. This should also allow applying and extending the arguments put forward to other cases where different external actors compete for influence.

I share with other scholars (e.g. Bader *et al.*, 2010) the opinion that an autocracy would not deliberately promote democracy.¹⁴ For symmetry and simplicity, I assume that a democracy would not deliberately promote (strengthen) autocracy in another country, though it can prioritize stability guaranteed by authoritarian rulers in a given period.

Figure 1 shows all possible cases of competition.¹⁵ The (D-A) panel shows four cases. If a democracy prioritizes democracy promotion, then the democracy and autocracy will compete, either directly or indirectly. *Indirect competition* can be defined as a situation in which country A, with its actions in country B, undermines

¹⁴ The real competition framework might be more complex though than the one depicted in a stylized model. For example, Ademmer and Börzel (2013) highlighted that here there might exist policy-specific externalities when negative incentives of an external actor (Russia) provide a stimulus to the recipient of the policy to move towards closer integration with another external actor (the EU). Yet, if Russia is not treated as an unitary actor, looking at specific trade-related policy sectors (the less politicized ones), then Russia’s approach towards its near abroad is more differentiated than the one relying on autocracy promotion only. If Russian economic actors obtain benefits when the recipient complies with the market rules requested by the EU, then they have an incentive to empower domestic reform coalitions (Langbein, 2013). As the present paper deals with Russia as an unitary actor, I do not account for variations in such sector-specific policies.

¹⁵ The D-D paradigm is not developed as it is not relevant for this paper’s case study.

interests of country C in country B, without the intentionality to do so. Hence, what discriminates the indirect competition from the *direct* one, is the lack of intentionality in the former, with respect to the latter. If a democracy prioritizes stability instead, then the democracy and autocracy complement each other, the recipient country being an autocracy.

The (A-A) panel shows three cases. The (AAP, AAP) case represents either direct competition or complementarity; the discriminant between the two could be the type of conditionality attached to the autocracy promotion. The (PAP, PAP) case highlights no competition as the two autocratic actors are doing ‘business as usual’. The third case, the (AAP, PAP) case [and (PAP, AAP) case by symmetry] shows either indirect competition or complementarity, with the type of conditionality that could affect the outcome.

The presented model is a stylized one. In general, there exists no strict dichotomy in the choice. Instead, the preference is on the emphasis (weights) in favor of democracy promotion or authoritarian stability, considering the characteristics of the recipient in a given period (e.g. Youngs, 2004: 424–425). One could consider more complex specifications, but this task goes beyond the needs of this paper, which aims to crystallize the intuition of competition between different actors in play, and to test it empirically.

Empirical analysis

Here I analyze to what extent the EU is a democracy promoter or stabilizer, and Russia and China are active or passive autocracy promoters. Then, after having fledged a clear picture about the three competing actors, I investigate the outcome for Belarus.

The EU

The initial rather positive paradigm in the relations between the EU and Belarus finished in 1994, when the newly elected president started to build up an authoritarian political regime through the constitution changes with the referenda in 1995 and 1996.¹⁶ To protest against the autocratic developments in Belarus, all of the EU members and associated countries froze intergovernmental contacts with Minsk. Although the EU lacked a common strategy toward Belarus, it employed negative conditionality, seeking to change the authoritarian course (Bosse, 2012a).¹⁷ As an answer to the policy of isolation, Minsk initiated a diplomatic conflict, by obliging

¹⁶ Belarus and the EU signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and the Interim Agreement in 1995. However, a questionable legitimacy of the 1995 and 1996 referenda as well as numerous registered violations of human rights were the reasons for the suspension of ratification of both PCA and the Interim Agreement (Bosse and Korosteleva, 2009).

¹⁷ In contrast to positive conditionality (viz., promising of benefits if a country complies with given conditions), the negative one is used in response to the failure to meet certain requirements, or to a violation

European diplomats to leave immediately their residences, using the arguments of a necessary reconstruction of the buildings. The EU reacted with the introduction of entry sanctions for the Belarusian president and hundreds of state officials.¹⁸ The entry sanctions were suspended in 1999 after an agreement on the diplomatic residences was signed.¹⁹ Belarus, however, remained *de facto* politically isolated at the European level.

The policy of isolation did not bring any results but a further deterioration of relations. Hence, the EU revised its policy, by introducing a ‘step-by-step’ approach, which intended a ‘gradual resumption of dialogue with the Belarusian government and broader assistance, ending with full normalisation of relations’.²⁰ Normalization of the relations and the European (financial) assistance would have come, however, only after *clearly identified steps toward democratization* (see footnote 20). The EU policy was significantly supported by the Organization for Co-operation and Security in Europe (OSCE), which obtained permission to establish the Advisory and Monitoring Group and started to operate in Minsk.

As a result of the cooperation between the EU, the Council of Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the American NGO ‘International Foundation for Election System’, the ‘Technical Assessment Mission’ was created for the parliamentary elections in 2000.²¹ Despite three technical conferences, the parliamentary elections did not meet the OSCE standards. The ‘European Troika’ decided to suspend the decision on normalizing relations until an improvement of democratic institutions would have occurred (see footnote 21). The ‘step-by-step’ approach proved to be ineffective.

The EU launched the ENP in 2004, and decided to include Belarus under the condition of conducting free and fair elections.²² Nevertheless, Belarus has never become a full participant of ENP, and no ENP Action Plan for Belarus is in force.²³

of conditions. Negative conditionality involves imposing of sanctions, and suspending or terminating of financial and technical assistance. On this point see, for example, Smith (1998).

¹⁸ Council of the European Union. 98/448/CFSP: Common Position of 9 July 1998 defined by the Council on the basis of Article J.2 of the Treaty on European Union, concerning Belarus. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:31998E0448:EN:HTML>

¹⁹ Drozdy Dispute. Unprecedented Violation of Vienna Convention. Embassy of the United States in Belarus. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from http://minsk.usembassy.gov/drozdy_dispute.html.

²⁰ European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument. Belarus. Country Strategy Paper 2007–2013 and National Indicative Programme 2007–2011, p. 7. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/documents/eu_belarus/enpi_csp_nip_belarus_en.pdf.

²¹ OSCE. Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus. Background and Mandate. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from http://www.jus.umu.se/digitalAssets/12/12638_osce_in_belarus.pdf.

²² Commission of the European Communities. Communication from the Commission. European Neighbourhood Policy. Strategy Paper. Brussels, 12 May 2004. COM(2004) 373 final. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52004DC0373&from=EN>.

²³ ENP Package – Belarus. 15 May 2012, Brussels. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-12-332_en.htm.

Hence, the EU turned to a two-track approach (see footnote 20). On the official track, the EU has continued to use ‘sticks and carrots’, in which a full participation of Belarus in neighborhood projects and more financial assistance have been promised as rewards for democratic reforms. ‘Sticks’, however, have been applied more often, mainly in the form of open critics and suspension of official contacts. On the other track, the European Union has actively supported civil society initiatives (Van Elsuwege, 2010).

A further deterioration in bilateral relations came after the announcement of a referendum in 2004 that changed the constitution and allowed the possibility to run for the presidential office for an unlimited number of times. After the non-democratic presidential elections in 2006, the EU imposed visa sanctions for the president and government officials, and froze their economic resources in Europe.²⁴

Since 2007, EU-Belarus relations have improved (e.g. Dura, 2008). This fact coincided with the crisis in Belarus–Russia relations. The Belarusian regime, which for years obtained subventions from Russia in the form of cheap energy resources, had to face a significant increase in the gas price.²⁵ The decision to increase the gas price for Belarus, and to bring it close to the European market price was an unexpected one, which obliged Belarus to reconsider its relations with the EU (e.g. Silitski and Jarabik, 2009). Following the Belarus–Russia energy dispute, bilateral trade relations also significantly deteriorated, and Belarus was constrained to turn its foreign policy vector westwards. Belarus also distanced itself politically from Russia, by not supporting the Russia–Georgia war in 2008, and not recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent republics. Pleased about positive developments in Belarus, culminated in the release of political prisoners, the EU suspended visa sanctions for high-ranked officials and the president for 6 months.²⁶ An EU delegation was opened in Minsk in 2008. On the wave of this apparent liberalization, Belarus was included into the EaP. Despite the lack of democratic progress, the EU demonstrated once again its readiness to cooperate, by extending the suspension of the application of the travel restrictions.²⁷ Inclusion of

²⁴ Council Regulations (EC) No. 765/2006 of 18 May 2006 concerning restrictive measures against President Lukashenko and certain officials of Belarus. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:134:0001:0011:EN:PDF>.

²⁵ For a historical overview on Belarus–Russia gas disputes see, for example, Yafimava (2012).

²⁶ Council of the European Union. Council Conclusions on Belarus. 2897th External Relations Council Meeting, Luxembourg, 13 October 2008. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/gena/103299.pdf. As a further example, Belarus received an IMF stand-by loan of about US\$3.5bn in 2009–2010, when the regime was most vulnerable in the wake of the withdrawal of Russian subsidies and world economic crisis. Indeed, the European Commission urged ‘Member States to consider providing bilateral macro-economic assistance to ENP countries, similarly coordinated with the IMF[.]’ (Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. COM(2009) 188/3, Brussels, 23 April 2009. Retrieved 28 September 2014 from http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/progress2009/com09_188_en.pdf.

²⁷ Council of the European Union. Council Conclusions on Belarus. 2974th External Relations Council Meeting, Brussels, 17 November 2009. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/gena/111243.pdf.

Belarus into the EaP did not have the expected impact on political developments, and in 2010 the foreign policy vector of Belarus turned to its traditional direction, toward Russia. Indeed, the gas and oil ‘war’ between Russia and Belarus was over, and the preparation for a Customs Union (CU) between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan was ongoing.

The EU continued to underline that the execution of free and fair elections was a condition for future bilateral relations. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Poland and Germany, Radoslaw Sikorski, and Guido Westerwelle, visited Belarus before the presidential elections in 2010, and promised assistance with €3bn in the case where the elections would respect EU expectations.²⁸ Indeed, the electoral campaign was relatively free, with many oppositional candidates approved for candidacy. However, the day of the elections was marked by a mass protest that was brutally cracked-down. As a response to human rights violations, the EU designated to almost 250 individuals a visa-ban and assets freeze (the number of individuals targeted by sanctions was broadened in January 2012). Assets of 32 Belarusian companies (regarded as funding sponsors of the regime) were also frozen, along with the imposing of an arms embargo (Bosse, 2012b).

Summing up, the EU has mainly relied on (positive and negative) conditionality, political isolation and economic sanctions as the main ‘top-down’ instruments of *active* democracy promotion in Belarus. The EU has demonstrated that it keeps its door open for a constructive and mutually beneficial dialog with Belarusian authorities.²⁹ To date, however, the benefits of remaining in power are too high for the Belarusian regime with respect to what the EU can offer.

Russia

Belarus and Russia are closely connected through numerous agreements, such as the Union State, CIS, and the CU, which eventually represents the first viable post-Soviet integration initiative (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2012). Inspired by the example of the European integration, or as Cameron and Orenstein (2012: 32) put it, ‘mimicking the EU’, the CU has far-reaching plans for the inauguration of a full-fledged Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, and elements of a *competition* with the EU are evident.

²⁸ Andrew Rettman: Poland Puts €3 Billion Price Tag on Democracy in Belarus. EUobserver.com, 4 November 2010. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from <http://euobserver.com/foreign/31203>.

²⁹ The behavior of the EU resembles a highly effective and well-known strategy in game theory: the ‘tit-for-tat’ strategy (e.g. Osborne, 2003). In a ‘tit-for-tat’ context, the EU continues to collaborate with Belarus as long as the latter collaborates, otherwise the EU punishes Belarus until it will not revert its behavior towards a new collaboration. In the long run, the ‘tit-for-tat’ strategy should result in a mutual collaboration, in which Belarus understands that the benefits to defect in the short run are smaller than the sum of future benefits emerging from a long-lasting collaboration with the EU. However, the determination of such a time horizon remains an open question. Indeed, high pecuniary costs for the implementation of democracy promotion by the EU are (partially) observable (e.g. Börzel and Risse, 2004). Yet, other types of resources are also at stake for the EU. Future research should develop a full-fledged cost–benefit analysis for EU democracy promotion.

The integration process started to develop dynamically in October 2007,³⁰ setting up the CU only 3 years after the launching of the ENP. For Russia, the project of Eurasian Union is of crucial importance, as it was launched with ambitions to be an attractive alternative to European integration (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2012). The CU is also an interesting alternative for Belarusian leadership, who is unwilling to accept the EU democratic conditionality. Belarus and Russia are also military allies. Both countries regularly conduct joint military exercises, and Belarusian service members are regularly trained in the military schools of Russia's Defence Ministry.³¹ Although the Union State of Belarus and Russia has remained mostly declarative, their integration in the military sector has advanced a lot, making the Union State look like a military alliance (e.g. Deyermond, 2004).³² Participation in the Common Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – a military alliance dominated by Russia – gives Belarus an additional source of regime legitimation. It is acknowledged that military organizations might be a source of ideas and norms promotion (e.g. Ambrosio, 2008; Melnykovska *et al.*, 2012). It is difficult to estimate the actual or potential impact of the CSTO on the regime outcome of the participant states, however, no CSTO member is democratically ruled.³³

Russian leadership rhetorically supports Belarus on numerous occasions, for example by praising the quality and outcomes of parliamentary and presidential elections. An institutionalized tool for assessing the elections in the post-Soviet region is the Commonwealth of the Independent States-Election Monitoring Organization (CIS-EMO), which was founded in 2003 and boosted by Russian authorities (Popescu, 2006). Elections in Belarus have been subsequently approved and legitimized by the CIS-EMO, although they have been never recognized as free and fair according to OSCE standards (e.g. Fawn, 2006).

Besides political support, Belarus is largely subsidized by Moscow. The long-lasting relations between Belarus and Russia created a strong economic interdependence between both countries, though with an evident asymmetry in favor of Russia.

³⁰ The Russian–Belarusian transit dispute was already over since August 2007. For further details, see Yafimava and Stern (2007).

³¹ Ministry of Defence. Republic of Belarus. Cooperation with Russian Armed Forces. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from http://www.mil.by/en/military_policy/cooperation_RF/#uchebe.

³² An external attack on one member of the Union State would be treated as an attack against the Union as whole, and Russia would 'carry out retaliatory measures'. The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation Approved by Russian Federation Presidential Edict on 5 February 2010. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from http://carnegieendowment.org/files/2010russia_military_doctrine.pdf.

³³ Current CSTO members are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. According to Freedom House data for 2013, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are ranked as 'partly free', whereas Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Tajikistan are 'not free'. The text of the CSTO Charter does not mention democratic forms of government as a prerequisite of candidacy. On the contrary, NATO enlargement and, in particular, democratic conditionality for the applicant states are considered important factors for stabilizing and consolidating democratic regimes in the post-Soviet region. See, for example, Gibler and Sewell (2006), Boonstra (2007), and Melnykovska and Schweickert (2011).

Russia's main economic levers over Belarus are favorable subsidies (mainly low prices for Russian gas and inexpensive duty-free crude oil) and loans (Tolstrup, 2009). In 2012 Russian subsidies accounted for about 16% of the Belarusian GDP, which is about US\$10bn.³⁴ Thanks to the Russian subsidies, the Belarusian president was able to secure a stable, though relatively low, well-being in the country, immunizing himself from Western pressures. However, Russia's economic support is not unconditioned. Kremlin has often used the Belarusian dependence on Russian cheap natural resources as a tool for influencing the ruling elites and their political course. For example, three big gas disputes between Russia and Belarus took place in 2004, 2007, and 2010, with transit interruptions in 2004 and 2007, and supply shortening in 2010. Taking advantage of Belarusian political and economic isolation after the presidential elections in 2010, and a heavy economic crisis that hit the country in 2011, Russia's state-owned natural gas extractor company Gazprom took over Beltransgaz, the Belarusian pipeline operator.³⁵ In exchange, Belarus received a US\$3bn stabilization loan from the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC).³⁶ Further loan tranches, however, were conditioned by the privatization of Belarusian major assets.³⁷ Such conditionality threatens the public legitimacy of the regime. Selling major Belarusian assets to Russian businessmen would weaken the sovereignty, on which Belarusian leadership has largely built up its foreign strategy discourse (Korosteleva, 2011). Losing assets (and future financial flows from the sold stocks) also means that the current authorities would not anymore be able to control the economy as they do, and consequently to rule the country. Indeed, the Belarusian system is founded on neopatrimonialistic practices and is characterized by the fact that the economy is embedded into political practices (e.g. Pikulik, 2012).³⁸

China

Due to few historical and cultural ties, Belarus and China do not have a long history of bilateral political relations, even though diplomatic relations were established already in 1992.³⁹ China's policy toward Belarus is explainable by the concept of

³⁴ Dzianis Melyantsou: How Much Does the European Integration Cost? Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from <http://belinstitute.eu/ru/node/1227> (in Belarusian).

³⁵ Gazprom was already the owner of 50% of Beltransgaz since 2007.

³⁶ EurAsEC Anti-Crisis Fund (ACF). Decisions of the ACF Council. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from http://acf.eabr.org/e/Decisions_acf_eng/.

³⁷ Ministry of Finance of the Russian Federation. Statements of Deputy Head of the Government of the Russian Federation – Finance Minister of the Russian Federation A. Kudrin, 6 June 2011. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from http://www.minfin.ru/en/pressoffice/quotes/index.php?id_4=13060.

³⁸ I thank a referee for having pointed out this aspect.

³⁹ In the same year China opened its embassy in Minsk, 1 year later the Belarusian embassy started to operate in Beijing. Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the People's Republic of China. On Political Relations Between Belarus and China. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://china.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral_relations/political/ (in Russian).

‘charm offensive’, which is soft power in broader sense, including *not only popular culture and public diplomacy but also more coercive economic and diplomatic levers like aid and investment and participation in multilateral organizations* (Kurlantzik, 2007: 6). As the Chinese role in Belarus is relatively new, here I aim to compare Chinese economic involvement with those of the EU and Russia. Russia is the largest trade partner of Belarus, followed by the EU. However, Belarus–China economic relations are growing.

The Belarusian bilateral trade with the EU and Russia generally has a positive trend over time (Figure 2).⁴⁰ Trade with China has only a marginal role instead, given the large geographical distance between both countries and the low competitiveness of Belarusian products for the Chinese market. This (relatively) marginal role is further strengthened by the peculiar geographical position of Belarus as a transit country for the Russian gas, and a reseller of oil products produced from Russian oil. However, although exports to China remained low since 2000s, there is an evident rise in imports from China (Figure 3), given the conditionality of Chinese loans to buy Chinese products. This type of conditionality, together with the important recent loans, are likely to imply a fast growth of bilateral trade (mainly Belarusian imports of Chinese products).

China has started to increase its economic ties with Belarus in the last decade, by increasing investments in the Belarusian economy.⁴¹ Figure 4 shows, as already highlighted for bilateral trade, that China is a minor investor when compared with Russia and the EU.⁴² However, the relatively fast growth of Chinese direct investments is evident. Moreover, many important projects with the Chinese capital are planned for the near future, as described below.

Korniyenko and Sakatsume (2009: 16–17) conclude that China invests in transition regions for five motives: (i) to seek foreign markets, (ii) to seek efficiency (lower-cost labor and lower-cost locations), (iii) to seek resources, (iv) to seek

⁴⁰ The drop in 2008–2009 in bilateral trade with Russia and the EU is due to the global financial crisis. The drop in 2013 for imports from Russia is due to the cut of deliveries of Russian crude oil to Belarusian refineries; this cut also negatively influenced exports to the EU, mainly based on refined oil products. See Kamil Klynski. Negative Trends in Belarusian Foreign Trade. 12 June 2013. Centre for Eastern Studies. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2013-06-12/negative-trends-belarusian-foreign-trade>.

⁴¹ The phenomenon of Beijing’s ‘competitive pressure’ is already well known from the African continent, where China has become a substantial donor. However, in contrast to Western donors, China does not apply international commitments (e.g. good governance promotion) to its developmental aid. On this point see, for example, Hackenesch (2013).

⁴² Russia is the main foreign investor in Belarus as well as the main destination for Belarusian investments. Although the EU seems to be an important player for FDI in Belarus, one should bear in mind that over the period 2009–2012, about 40–47% of the EU FDI came from Cyprus. It is likely that these financial flows to Belarus have a Russian origin. Indeed, over the same time span Russian FDI to Cyprus were about 34–42% of the total Russian FDI. This phenomenon is due to the favorable Cypriot tax regime (which only recently has become more restrictive). For the same reason, if one also considers Russian FDI outflows to the Netherlands and Belarusian FDI inflows from the Netherlands, then this supposition is strengthened. Data from IMF, Coordinated Direct Investment Survey (<http://cdi.imf.org>). Author’s own calculations.

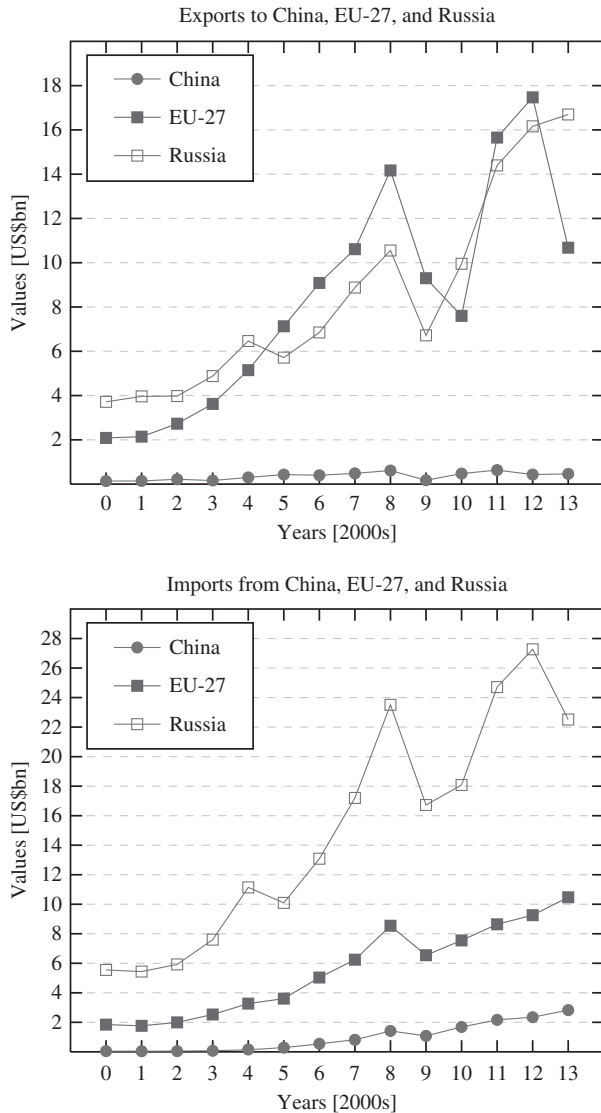


Figure 2 Bilateral trade flows between Belarus and the three competing actors (China, EU-27, and Russia).

Source: UN ComTrade database (<http://comtrade.un.org/db>).

Note: annual data; values in US\$ billions; harmonized system (HS) as reported; all commodities; values for EU-27 as the sum of bilateral trade flows between Belarus and EU-27 member countries; Belarus as reporting country.

strategic assets (brand names and new technologies), and (v) to diversify. New markets and diversification could be important factors in driving Chinese economic rationale when investing in Belarus. Indeed, Belarus hopes to attract Chinese investments through ‘highly qualified and relatively low-cost labor force,

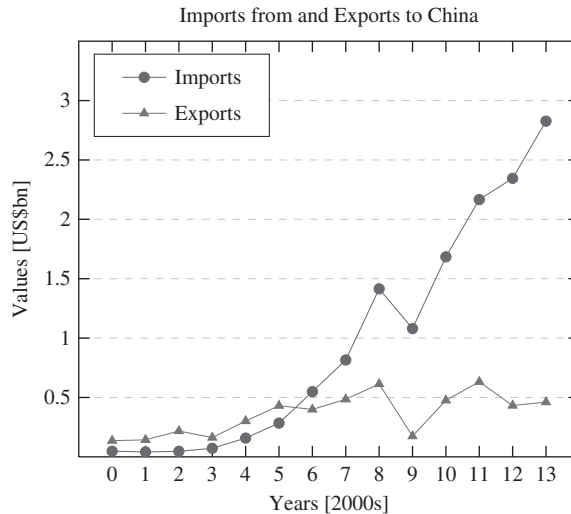


Figure 3 Bilateral trade flows between Belarus and China. *Source:* UN *ComTrade* database (<http://comtrade.un.org/db>).

Note: annual data; values in US\$ billions; harmonized system (HS) as reported; all commodities; Belarus as reporting country.

advantageous geographical position',⁴³ and membership in CU, opening the entrance to Russian and Kazakhstan markets. Chinese capital is more than welcome in Belarus, which is looking for resources to restore its economy and to modernize industrial sectors.

The financial crisis has intensified the relations between both autocracies. Belarusian president proclaimed: 'We will always remember that our Chinese friends stretched out a helping hand to us in times of crisis'.⁴⁴ Indeed, in 2011, when Belarus was affected by the heaviest financial crisis since its independence, and was refused an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, China provided Belarus with loans worth about US\$1.5bn for implementation of joint projects. It happened against the background of deteriorating relations with Russia, after Belarusian refusal to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia,⁴⁵ that led to an overall tension in relations with Moscow.

Table 1 shows that Russia is the main creditor of Belarus (besides relevant energy subsidies). The Russian role in financing Belarus is strengthened by the financial

⁴³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus. *China–Belarus Industrial Park*, online booklet, p. 5. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://mfa.gov.by/en/publications/review/infoprojects/e7707a176160fe53.html>.

⁴⁴ China is Best Friend of Belarus, 9 October 2010. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/indepth/2010-10/09/c_13549124.htm.

⁴⁵ For further details, see Belarusian Telegraph Agency. Belarus President downplays recognition of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, 11 October 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://eng.belta.by/all-news/president/i_23853.html.

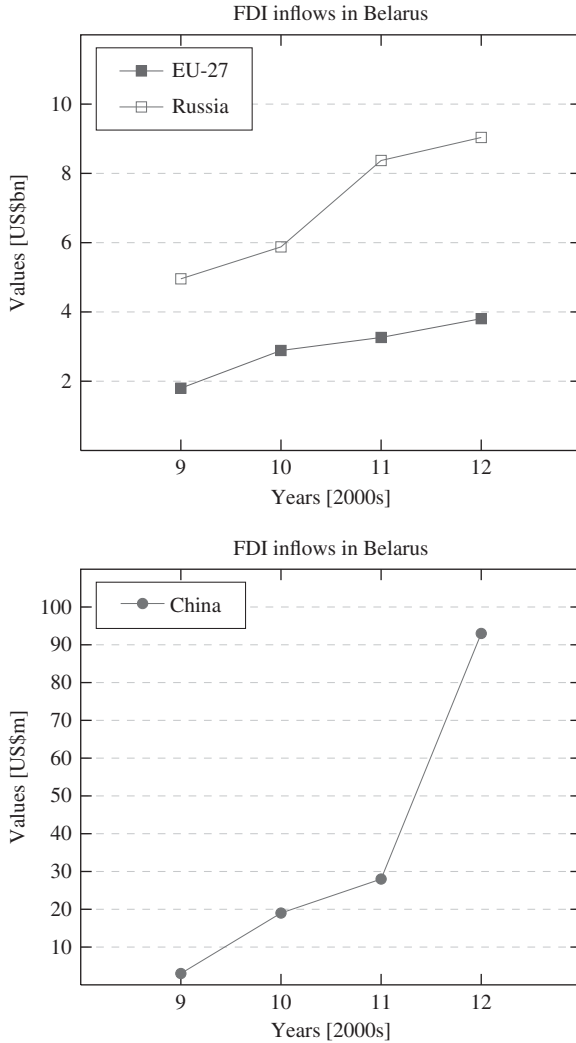


Figure 4 Foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows in Belarus from the three competing actors (China, EU-27, and Russia).

Source: IMF, Coordinated Direct Investment Survey (<http://cdis.imf.org>).

Note: annual data; values in US\$ billions for EU-27 (sum of FDI inflows from EU-27 member countries) and Russia, and in US\$ millions for China; time span restricted to the availability of data; Belarus as reporting country.

help of the EurAsEC ACF, in which Russia contributes with over 88% of total capital.⁴⁶ Other relevant, though minor, loans come from two important Russian banks (Sberbank of Russia and VTB Bank) and the Eurasian Development Bank.

⁴⁶ EurAsEC ACF. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://acf.eabr.org/e/about_acf_eng/Resources_acf_e/.

Table 1. Foreign providers of main loans to Belarus over the recent years

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Multilateral loans (commitments by year >10 m; US\$ millions)								
IMF				3518				
IBRD	50		75	325	223			90
IFC					17	45	45	20
EBRD	25	80	40	15	76	73	50	210
EDB						263		141
EurAsEC ACF						3000		
Bilateral loans (commitments by year >10 m; US\$ millions)								
Russia		1500	2000					436
VTB Bank								440
Sberbank of Russia						900		
Exim Bank of China	235	43	527		1793	1058	1785	1008
China Development Bank						539	348	
Venezuela			500					
Azerbaijan						300		

Source: IMF = International Monetary Fund: <http://goo.gl/6v3jTd>; IBRD = International Bank for Reconstruction and Development: <http://goo.gl/NFISCL>; IFC = International Finance Corporation: <http://goo.gl/ivuezD>; EBRD = European Bank for Reconstruction and Development: <http://goo.gl/ivuezD>; EDB = Eurasian Development Bank: <http://goo.gl/jgIuqY>; EurAsEC ACF = Eurasian Economic Community Anti-Crisis Fund: <http://goo.gl/QRvtxh>; Russia (<http://goo.gl/aX62nI>, <http://goo.gl/s8PyF0>), VTB Bank (<http://goo.gl/aX62nI>) Sberbank of Russia (<http://goo.gl/eYikJn>), China (<http://goo.gl/aX62nI>, <http://goo.gl/wKb0Rg>, <http://goo.gl/K4IHDp>, <http://goo.gl/Gu3VB8>, <http://goo.gl/5472kH>, <http://goo.gl/2qPVoe>, <http://goo.gl/x0FohR>, <http://goo.gl/31vpS1>, <http://goo.gl/Nq4Ldt>, <http://goo.gl/lbYgug>, <http://goo.gl/MLIOXB>, <http://goo.gl/WD5Xy9>, <http://goo.gl/YYsnQE>, <http://goo.gl/gyaZns>), Venezuela (<http://goo.gl/eTDGAe>), Azerbaijan (<http://goo.gl/EFSRqE>).

Note: annual data; values in US\$ millions; medium- and long-term public and publicly guaranteed external debts; author's own calculations.

Financing from Western donors is of small magnitude, instead (the major Western loan in the recent years is the one worth US\$3.5bn by the IMF). The recent Chinese loans, provided by two institutional banks in China, are comparable, in magnitude, to the Russian ones.⁴⁷

In 2013, the two countries signed a joint declaration establishing an all-round strategic partnership.⁴⁸ In July 2013, when the Belarusian president visited China, a package of documents on the implementation of projects in energy, construction,

⁴⁷ Table 1 shows two other aspects. On the one hand, Belarus borrowed money from Venezuela in 2008 and from Azerbaijan in 2011, highlighting that the government seeks to diversify financial sources. On the other hand, Belarus loan dependence has grown after the recent financial crisis.

⁴⁸ Belarusian Telegraph Agency. Belarus, China to Establish Strategic Partnership, 16 July 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://eng.belta.by/all_news/president/i_23635.html.

industry, and road transport infrastructure were signed, worth US\$3.5bn.⁴⁹ China will also invest US\$5bn in a joint Belarus–Chinese industrial park in a strategic geographical location (near the Minsk international airport) occupying an area of about 80 square kilometers.⁵⁰ In this park investors can benefit, for example, from low personal and corporate income taxes, exemption from customs duties and VAT, and a free customs zone within the CU.

Chinese loans are with low-interest rates. However, most of them are tied to projects for buying Chinese goods and hiring Chinese contractors (see footnote 50). For example, China participates in the construction of the first Belarusian nuclear power plant, which should, at least partially, reduce the energy, though not the economic, dependence on Russia.⁵¹ The Export–Import Bank of China granted \$323.817m preferential-rate loan for the construction of the power grid linkup for 2013–2018. North China Power Engineering Company was chosen at the restricted participation tender among Chinese companies as the general contractor for this project.⁵²

To date, economic ties between both nations evidently prevail over political ones.⁵³ This fact is convenient for Belarus, which does not plan to voluntarily conduct any political liberalization that might threaten the current regime. The Belarusian president paid official visits to China in 1995, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2010, and 2013. Chinese high-ranked delegations officially visited Belarus in 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2011.⁵⁴ The then Belarusian Prime Minister Myasnikovich claimed in a meeting with the Chinese ambassador: ‘Our bilateral relations have gained scope. [...] We feel the support of Great China

⁴⁹ Belarus Values Relations with China: President, 5 December 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2013-12/05/c_125814920.htm.

⁵⁰ Financial Times. Jan Cienski: Belarus Looks to China for Investment in Infrastructure, 22 July 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/82589a6e-ef98-11e2-8229-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2mzMuBC25> and The Official Website of the Industrial Park. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://www.industrialpark.by/en/investor/advantages/Geographical/>.

⁵¹ The Russian state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom is the general contractor of the Belarusian nuclear power plant, with Russia being the main creditor of the project. Belarusian Telegraph Agency. Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant Project: Timeline, 11 February 2014. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://atom.belta.by/en/dosie_en/view/belarusian-nuclear-power-plant-project-ntimeline-208/.

⁵² Belarusian Telegraph Agency. Construction of Power Grid Linkup for Belarusian Nuclear Station Begins, 3 March 2014. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://atom.belta.by/en/belaes_en/view/construction-of-power-grid-linkup-for-belarusian-nuclear-station-begins-2412/.

⁵³ There are also ideological ties between Belarus and China. For example, the Belarusian president explicitly sympathizes with the so-called Chinese ‘market socialism’, considered as a benchmark (e.g. Medvedev, 2010). Both countries also closely cooperate in education. See, for example, The Belarusian–Chinese Committee on Trade and Economic Cooperation. Belarus–China Cooperation in Education Advancing Fast, 18 October 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://www.belaruschina.by/en/news/2013/October/18October-1273.html>.

⁵⁴ Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the People’s Republic of China. On Political Relations Between Belarus and China. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://china.mfa.gov.by/ru/bilateral_relations/ (in Russian), and Presidents of Belarus, China meeting in Beijing, 16 July 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://www.belaruschina.by/en/news/2013/July/16July-1188.html>.

on the international arena'.⁵⁵ After the presidential elections in 2010, and the brutal crack-down of protests, China was one of the few countries that congratulated Belarusian leader for the re-election.⁵⁶ An additional proof of increasing political ties is the fact that Belarus joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a dialog partner in 2010.⁵⁷ Belarus is the only European country with a dialog partner status in this Asia-dominated security organization, which is already actively supporting authoritarian stability among its members (Ambrosio, 2008). This status provides Belarusian authorities with an additional source of legitimation.

Belarus and China are also constantly augmenting military and military-technical cooperation. Joint Belarusian–Chinese military exercises were held in 2011 in Belarus and in 2012 in China.⁵⁸ Both countries regularly organize training for military staff. Moreover, China donated over two dozen cargo carrier trucks to the Belarusian armed forces. In October 2013, the Belarus–China agreement on army exercises was ratified.⁵⁹ Whereas Belarus has similar agreements with the CSTO members, it does not have such a kind of agreement with NATO, even though Belarus takes part in its Partnership for Peace Program. Observing the current trends in Belarus–China relations, one can assume that the bilateral relations will strengthen in the future, giving China even more levers in Belarus.

China's approach toward Belarus, as in other countries, relies on non-interference in internal political affairs.⁶⁰ A possible explanation for this Chinese approach might be that Beijing aims to prevent external pressures against its own critical internal issues (e.g. human rights and territorial disputes). Moreover, Belarus and China have agreed that no one may interfere in the internal political affairs of states using the human rights issue.⁶¹ A joint declaration states that 'the universal principle of human rights should be reconciled with the specific circumstances of each state. Each country is entitled to its own vision of human rights that

⁵⁵ Belarusian Telegraph Agency. Myasnikovich Welcomes Progress in Belarus-China Relations, 5 December 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://eng.belta.by/all_news/economics/Myasnikovich-welcomes-progress-in-Belarus-China-relations_i_67723.html.

⁵⁶ China Daily. Hu Congratulates Lukashenko on Reelection, 24 December 2010. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-12/24/content_11753361.htm.

⁵⁷ Sergei Martynov: Belarus Becomes SCO's First Country-Partner, 28 April 2010. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://www.belarus.by/en/press-center/news/belarus-gains-sco-dialogue-partner-status_i_1024.html.

⁵⁸ MPs to Discuss Belarus-China Agreement on Joint Military Exercises on 2 October. 1 October 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://www.belaruschina.by/en/news/2013/October/01October-1344.html>.

⁵⁹ National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus. Belarus-China Agreement on Army Exercises Ratified, 2 October 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://law.by/main.aspx?guid=133173>.

⁶⁰ For example, China supported the Belarusian president after the referendum in 1996, which was criticized by the Western community. China also took the side of Belarus in 1999, during the diplomatic conflict (Drozdys dispute) between Belarus and Western embassies (Babak, 2001).

⁶¹ Belarus, China Condemn Interference in States' Internal Affairs Using Human Rights Agenda. Belarusian Telegraph Agency. 16 July 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://eng.belta.by/all_news/president/i_23636.html.

agrees with the domestic situation and a country's historical and cultural traditions' (see footnote 61). In exchange, Belarus supports Beijing in the One-China policy, by considering Taiwan as 'an inalienable part of China's territory'.⁶²

The competition in play in Belarus

Here I summarize the outcomes for Belarus. I have focused on two types of external support: economic and political ones, which are important for domestic ruling elites. Economic support such as trade, foreign investment, and loans are crucial for keeping the economy stable. For Belarus, which for many years has had a growing economy among post-Soviet countries, the economic factors were key for legitimacy of the regime. Political support is participation in international economic and military organizations, and overall rhetoric support on crucial political issues.

The EU, as a positive external actor, deliberately tries to achieve liberal performance in Belarus and to counter Russian influence there. European financial assistance is important for Belarus, however, it cannot outweigh the size of Russian subsidies and Chinese loans, which are not conditioned by democratic reforms. Accepting the conditions in the current formulations, and conducting democratic reforms would threaten the persistence of the leading elites. An elite-ruled democratization is the least likely scenario. Neither, signs of any possible popular uprising are not evident. Nevertheless, Belarus has often declared its readiness to cooperate in sectors of mutual interests. One possible strategy for the EU might be to transfer norms of democratic governance through sectoral cooperation that would contribute to democratization (Freyburg *et al.*, 2009).⁶³

Russia and China are negative actors instead, who are strengthening the survival capacities of the Belarusian regime, though in different ways. I argue, in line with Vanderhill (2012), that Russia intentionally supports the status quo in Belarus, promoting autocracy in an active way (i.e. in *direct competition* with the EU). Russia's interest in preserving the status quo in Belarus is explained by the preoccupations about the possible diffusion effect, which may spread from neighboring countries to the Russian territory, in case they become more democratic (e.g. Ambrosio, 2009). Moscow also connects democratic neighbors with their NATO membership, and would not like to see military bases close to its borders (e.g. Vanderhill, 2012).

For Moscow it is important to show progress in its integration initiative, the CU. The default of the Belarusian economy would damage the image of a successful economic union, which was launched in opposition to the European integration and

⁶² Belarus Backs One China Policy, Beijing Promises Support to Defend Sovereignty, 16 July 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://www.belaruschina.by/en/news/2013/July/16July-1194.html>.

⁶³ In a comparative study of Moldova, Morocco, and Ukraine, Freyburg *et al.* (2009) demonstrated that the EU is capable of transferring policy-specific democratic governance provisions without an accession conditionality framework. Although these findings cannot be generalized to all ENP countries without further empirical research, they are promising.

the EU neighborhood projects. As Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, noticed, for Russia under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, ‘international relations are first and foremost about competition’.⁶⁴ Indeed, in his annual address to the Federal Assembly in 2013, Putin pointed out the growing military, political, economic, and informational competition with ‘other power centers’ (see footnote 5). All of the aforementioned factors are to some extent important in shaping Russia’s activities in supporting and strengthening authoritarian leaders in its vicinity.

Russia offers aid in return for access to state-controlled strategic and profitable assets, which are crucial to the regime’s capacity of ensuring economic stability, on which the regime’s legitimacy hinges. Hence, the careful reader might wonder that Russia is undermining rather than supporting the Belarusian regime, by demanding access to such assets that guarantee the regime’s survival. Indeed, this line of reasoning is correct. What one should bear in mind, however, is the difference between the short-run effect of autocracy promotion and its long-run feedback effect. The benefits of Russian aid (conditioned by privatization of assets in favor of Russian stakeholders) for the Belarusian elites are concentrated in the short run and tangibly evident (viz., the remaining in power). However, the plausible and consequent future costs for the Belarusian current authorities of losing the control over the economy, as a result of being supported by Russia, are spread out over time. This dynamic process (*ceteris paribus*) of autocracy promotion relying on (Russian) ‘bad’ conditionality can be represented as a J-shaped curve, showing the likelihood that the legitimacy of Belarusian elites, which receive support from Russia, is weakened over time.⁶⁵ After a first rise in legitimacy, the feedback effect begins, due to the selling of national assets. Given that at a certain point there are fewer assets than the ones before support, legitimacy should decrease to a new level, lower than the original one. After a first complete loop, taking into account feedback effects, one can draw another J-shaped curve. For reaching again the original legitimacy level, stronger support should therefore be needed. Hence, this type of autocracy promotion creates a sort of dependence and addiction. Notice additionally that Russia might even unintentionally facilitate, in the long run, the EU’s attempts to democratize Belarus.

In the annual speeches addressed to the nation, Lukashenko has increasingly highlighted the importance of Belarusian sovereignty, multi-vector foreign policy, and diversification of energy resources and economic partners.⁶⁶ On the one hand, Belarus cannot significantly diversify economic relations with the EU due to the

⁶⁴ Dmitri Trenin. Analysis: Russia’s Carrot-and-Stick Battle for Ukraine, 17 December 2013. Retrieved 19 September 2014 from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25401179>.

⁶⁵ Additionally, in the model developed earlier, the D-A and A-A paradigms focus on the short and medium run (where the competition is evident), and therefore do not take into consideration feedback (J-shaped) effects in the long run. A more complex framework, which could consider dynamic effects, is left for future research.

⁶⁶ For more details on the sovereignty discourse, see Korosteleva (2011).

democratic conditionality. On the other hand, it still avoids a complete dependence on Russia. Against this backdrop, strengthening ties with China might be an escape for Belarus from the EU-Russia dilemma. In the case of Belarus, China does not have any intention to export to Belarus any model of a particular form of rule or to shape its political system. Nevertheless, China is supporting the Belarusian regime, by offering loans and investments on favorable conditions, as well as providing diplomatic support, without any strings attached that could be perceived by the Belarusian elites as harmful. Beijing does not openly articulate its position on the political regime in Belarus, and even supports Belarus on politically controversial issues. Hence, China is doing passive autocracy promotion, by non-interfering in internal political affairs, and supporting both economically and politically the Belarusian regime.⁶⁷ This implies that China is in *indirect competition* not only with the EU, but with Russia, too. Indeed, Russia has already voiced its concerns about Chinese involvement in Belarus on some occasions. For example, against the backdrop of a Belarusian–Chinese joint venture assembling Chinese cars, the Russian ambassador to Belarus, Aleksandr Surikov, has declared that Russia would not welcome the assembly of Chinese automobiles in Belarus.⁶⁸ China is increasing its economic levers in Belarus. Even when investments in the Belarusian economy will not bring an immediate profit, China has far-reaching plans in securing its own economic interest in Europe. Belarus might become a launch pad into the EU market for Chinese products and a manufacturing springboard between the EU and Russia.⁶⁹ Having Belarus as a partner, China secures its own geopolitical and economic position on the European continent where it was rather under-represented, because it previously focused on other developing regions. It appears clear that China is an advantageous partner for Belarus, and adds an important dimension to the EU-Russia competition issues. Unlike the EU, it does not bind

⁶⁷ China also promotes the principle of non-interference in international forums. This helps to protect undemocratic or illiberal governments from democracy support efforts of the West. See, for example, ‘China’s Foreign Minister stresses principle of non-interference at UN debate’, 27 September 2012. Retrieved 21 September 2014 from <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43101>. See also footnote 55. However, the regime effect is an accidental consequence of upholding the principle of sovereignty. This regime effect might be of no concern to China; and in some cases may even be a consequence that does not serve China’s interests well. In these latter cases, China is torn between, on the one hand, breaching its own championing of the general principle of non-interference, so as to pursue its own interests and, on the other hand, being seen to maintain the non-interference principle while watching its own interests suffer. China’s diplomatic maneuvering in Sudan and now in South Sudan, where China has significant oil interests, offer a potentially useful insight on this aspect. I thank a referee for having highlighted this further aspect.

⁶⁸ Russia is Unhappy with Plans for Assembly of Chinese cars in Belarus, Ambassador Says, 6 June 2012. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from http://en.belapan.by/archive/2012/06/06/en_media_surikov_v1/. On the Russian–Chinese competition in Belarus see also Iacob Koch-Weser: ‘Lenders Of Last Resort’: Sino-Russian Rivalry In Belarus? 30 November 2011. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://goo.gl/f6Rj5L>.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Aliaksandr Kudrytski: China Builds EU Beachhead With \$5 Billion City in Belarus. Bloomberg, 26 May 2013. Retrieved 20 September 2014 from <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-05-26/china-builds-eu-beachhead-with-5-billion-city-in-belarus.html>.

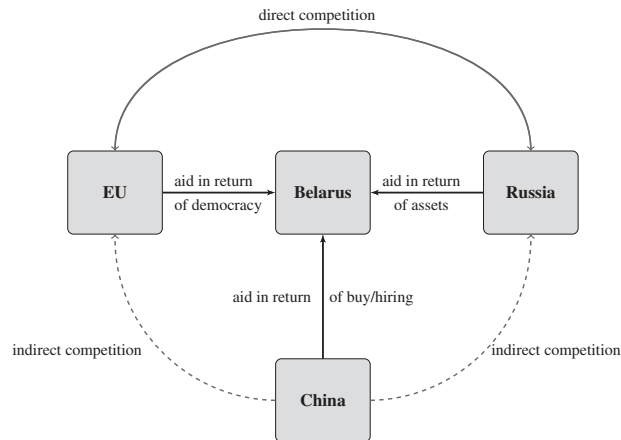


Figure 5 The good, the bad, and the ambitious compete in Belarus.

financial aid on democratic conditionality. Neither does it pretend to own Belarusian strategic assets as Russia does. Hence, China *indirectly* competes not only with the EU's but also with Russia's aims in Belarus.

What has been described as the EU vs. Russia and the EU vs. China competition in Belarus are examples of the *(DP, AAP)* and *(DP, PAP)* cases of the developed model, respectively.⁷⁰ Yet, the Russia vs. China competition is an example of the *(AAP, PAP)* case.

To sum up, the EU provides aid only in exchange for the promise of democratic and economic reforms, which might be very costly and danger the persistence of ruling elites. Russia, at the same time, offers economic and diplomatic support to Belarus, which is, however, conditioned by privatization of the Belarusian strategic assets *in favor of Russian stakeholders*.⁷¹ For Belarus, whose leadership still enjoys legitimacy by a large part of the population due to the economic stability, losing major state enterprises might weaken sovereignty and, in turn, public legitimation, which is still important to them. Thus, diversification of economic partners is of crucial importance for Belarus. I have argued that Belarusian ruling elites have found an escape way from the cross-conditionality of the EU and Russia, by increasing linkages with China, though the majority of Chinese loans are tied on

⁷⁰ Is the EU a force of good in Belarus? Or does the EU contribute to regime stabilization as it has done, for example, in the Southern Caucasus and Northern Africa? From the sources analyzed so far, there is no relevant evidence that the EU is a stabilizer of the Belarusian regime. An example in this sense is provided in footnote 26. Future research could address whether there exist evident cases in which the EU may have acted as a stabilizer in Belarus. As suggested by a referee, one could also explore whether there is qualitative difference between complementarity as a result of the interaction effects between (i) an active autocracy promoter and a stabilizer and (ii) a passive autocracy promoter and a stabilizer.

⁷¹ As pointed out by a referee, this kind of conditionality (i.e. Russia's demand for privatization of Belarusian state assets) stands out from the one relying on the usual Washington Consensus.

projects with Chinese goods and contractors. Hence, Chinese investments and loans help to keep the economy stable and to guarantee the sustainability of the regime. Figure 5 resumes, in a stylized way, both economic and political relations among the four actors in play.

Concluding remarks and policy recommendations

The EU democracy-promotion capacity has been decreasing after the Eastern enlargement. For many Soviet Bloc countries, the EU was an important center of gravitation. Having the EU accession perspective on the horizon, many countries of Central and Eastern Europe have undergone a process of peaceful democratic transition and joined the EU ‘club of democracies’. However, Belarus had a different developmental path, never articulating its ambitions for a possible EU membership, therefore remaining a special case among Eastern European countries. For Belarusian authoritarian elites, the incentives offered by the EU are scarce. Punishments, such as sanctions or political isolation, have not achieved significant positive changes, or more openness from Belarusian authorities. Political conditionality does not work in Belarus due to the high adoption costs for the political regime. Nevertheless, the EU remains committed to promote democratic forms of rule in Belarus. The perspective for democratization in Belarus is further complicated by the growing importance of China and Russia. The influence exercised by these countries has been captured by the concepts of active and passive autocracy promotion, which might represent an important competition factor for the EU in its Eastern neighborhood.

I do not claim that external autocracy promotion is the only factor responsible for the authoritarian regime outcome in Belarus. Preemptive measures taken by the regime to hinder bottom-up democratization, as well as the absence of a strong opposition, are undoubtedly important factors accounting for the authoritarian persistence. However, as Geddes (1999: 125) stresses, ‘even very coercive regimes cannot survive without some support’. In cases like Belarus, where the political regime is still supported by a large part of the population, additional legitimization from great powers makes it much less vulnerable to the democratic pushes of Brussels. On the one hand, taking into consideration the economic wealth and geopolitical ambitions of both Russia and China, one might suggest that their support for authoritarian countries is not likely to cease in the near future. On the other hand, the EU relies on normative instruments in its foreign policy, which are strongly related to democratic performance. For Belarus, which is not willing to comply with the EU democratic conditionality, the normative dimension of the bilateral cooperation is not appealing.

Hence, the EU policy makers ought to reconsider their strategies of democracy promotion in Belarus. A better knowledge of the exact strategies of autocracy promoters would help the EU to develop more tailor-made strategies for every country in order to counterbalance the existing autocratic pushes from outside.

In the light of the afore-described current situation of political competition in Belarus among the EU, Russia, and China, one could offer some possible policy recommendations. I believe that if the EU seriously aims to prevail over Russia's and China's autocracy support, then it should consider what Belarusian elites like of Russia's and China's support. At the same time, the EU should refrain from calling for what Belarusian elites do not like (i.e. a very stringent conditionality). More explicitly, (i) the EU should offer aid of a more consistent magnitude, as Russia does; and (ii) the EU should not link aid to *comprehensive* democratic and liberal reforms, whose accomplishment is rather unrealistic under current circumstances (viz., the lack of stringent conditionality is what makes China appealing to Belarusian elites).⁷² After all, it is Europe that aims to export democracy in Belarus, not Belarusian current elites that are keen on importing it.

The EU democracy promotion is rhetorically ambitious. However, the EU lacks capabilities to shape the Belarusian regime, without an internal democratization process in progress. Democratic reforms, by definition, would undermine the Belarusian regime. Hence, the approach of the EU does not have to frighten Belarusian elites, who might fend against the direct overtures of the EU. This means that the EU should, in some way, imitate what China is doing: providing consistent aid in exchange for developing further economic relations. A more promising way to proceed could be increasing investments (to modernize infrastructure, too) in Belarus and joint ventures with Belarusian enterprises. Increased sectoral cooperation would raise linkages on which the EU could lever in the future, even after the regime change. This 'Trojan horse' process is more time-consuming and needs more patience, but may be more effective than the one pursued thus far. There will be few differences with China in the short run, with the EU paradoxically bolstering the regime, though indirectly only (e.g. backing Belarusian enterprises). In the long run, however, when the EU understands that the linkages with Belarus are mature and ready to be used as leverages, it can start to call for liberal reforms (i.e. stimulating but not provoking the regime). The EU has to put Belarusian enterprises on a path in which they will find it advantageous to liberalize the country in the future (i.e. the need for liberalization should endogenously emerge in the country). Yet, given the neopatrimonialist nature of the Belarusian regime, this (economic bottom-up) approach will be able to raise not only economic ties, but political ones, too. This approach should also involve lower trade tariffs, visa liberalization, and stronger support for the civil society. The EU might also take advantage of the already established economic ties of China with Belarus as a launch pad. Therefore, the EU should try to develop economic and commercial ventures with China in Belarus, pushing for its own rules of the game, to counter Russia's attempts to

⁷² On this point see, for example, 'What the Eastern Partnership Should Bring to Belarus', 2009. Policy Paper, Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies. Retrieved 17 September 2014 from <http://belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/pp012009en.pdf>.

influence Belarus.⁷³ After all, the proverb ‘if you cannot beat them, join them’ is not so unfitting in this competitive context, at least to avoid that the direct competitor, Russia, will beat the EU to the punch. These policy recommendations might sound as provocative, but I hope that they will encourage more research and debate over this topic.

The model developed in the theoretical framework is stylized and general. These characteristics allow going beyond the single analyzed case of Belarus, as well as applying and extending the analysis to other democracy and autocracy promoters. There are other countries worth studying with regard to democracy–autocracy competition (e.g. countries covered by the EaP). Moreover, it would be interesting to explore different autocracy promoters such as Iran, and other democracy promoters such as the United States. In addition, in the theoretical framework I have limited the model to the democracy–autocracy and autocracy–autocracy paradigms. However, one cannot exclude that a democracy could also compete with another democracy. Hence, it could be interesting to explore this additional paradigm, and to test its explanatory power by using other countries as case studies. These extensions go beyond the scope of this paper, leaving avenues for future research.

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⁷³ Notice that Russia needs to reconsider its strategies for autocracy promotion, too. Not only for what concerns its approach towards Belarus, as highlighted earlier on the J-shaped effect of autocracy promotion relying on ‘bad’ conditionality, if its vision goes over the short and medium run, but towards its Chinese competitor, too.

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