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Spoiler or facilitator of democratization?: Russia's role in Georgia and Ukraine

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In the post-Soviet space, Georgia and Ukraine are broadly perceived as exceptions to the growing authoritarianism in the region owing to the far-reaching political changes triggered by the so-called Colour Revolutions a decade ago. This article examines Russia's reaction to political changes in Georgia and Ukraine in light of the interplay between the democracy-promotion policies implemented by the EU and US and domestic patterns of democratization. We argue that despite the relatively weak impact of EU and US policies vis-à-vis domestic structures, Russia has responded harshly to (what it perceives as) a Western expansionist agenda in pursuit of reasserting its own hegemonic position in the post-Soviet space. However, coercive pressure from Russia has also unintended, counterproductive effects. We argue that the pressure has actually made Georgia and Ukraine more determined to pursue their pro-Western orientation and has spawned democratization, thereby supporting the objectives of the Western democracy promoters.

Keywords: democracy promotion; European Union; Eastern Partnership; United States; Georgia; Ukraine; Russia

Introduction

Ukraine and Georgia are two countries that illustrate the effects of Western democracy promotion in the domestic contestation against a backdrop of a powerful illiberal actor. They shed a new light on the role of external actors in shaping political developments in target countries. The influence of both democracy promoters and illiberal regional powers ("democracy challengers") is interwoven because their respective actions interact with each other while contending with diverse and shifting domestic contexts. Our article examines the effects of Russia's counteracting strategies on democratization processes in Georgia and Ukraine, in light of the intricate set of relations between the democracy-promotion policies pursued by

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the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) and domestic receptivity to external influences. Thereby, we focus on one of the key themes of this special issue: how do the policies of non-democratic regional powers affect domestic outcomes and democracy promotion efforts by the US and EU in target countries?

While the collapse of the Soviet Union initially raised hopes for a sustainable democratic transition, political developments in the former Soviet Union since the late 1990s have dealt a death knell to the transition paradigm.¹ Even though pursuing different reform paths, most post-Soviet countries have entered a political grey zone between authoritarianism and democratization.² They have been depicted as “hybrid regimes” characterized by competitive authoritarianism, where “formal democratic institutions are viewed as a means of obtaining and exercising political authority”, yet “where incumbents violation of those rules means, that the regime fails to meet conventional minimum standards for democracy”.³

Georgia and Ukraine are relative exceptions due to the far-reaching political changes that started a decade ago as a result of the so-called Colour Revolutions (the Rose Revolution in 2003 in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in 2004 in Ukraine).⁴ The new elites came to power on the grounds of opposing authoritarianism and embracing democracy. The 2003–2004 revolutions also illustrated the role of external actors in domestic political changes: the public protests were supported by Western foundations mostly funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the EU member states.⁵ The emergence of elites seemingly pursuing democratization appeared to strengthen the role of external democracy promoters there.

However, political changes also triggered adverse reactions from a powerful external player – Russia. The backlash, which followed the Colour Revolutions, occurred first and foremost within Russia itself, with the imposition of controls over non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the de facto exclusion of the opposition from political life, and the shift toward the “sovereign democracy” model, indicating the fears of contagion.⁶ But, above all, the events in Ukraine and Georgia were interpreted in Moscow in terms of geopolitical contestation with the West. The Rose Revolution triggered Russian concern over a loss of influence in the post-Soviet space, while the Orange Revolution exacerbated Moscow’s fury at the perceived subversive role of “Western agents”. This fury then shaped Russia’s perception of the Maidan protests of 2013–2014, which in contrast to the earlier mass revolts, turned violent and which Russia blamed on the West.

Therefore, we argue that despite the primacy of domestic factors accounting for democratization with EU and US democracy promotion playing a secondary role, Russia primarily responds to (what it perceives as) a Western expansionist agenda in the post-Soviet space. And it is actually Russia’s reaction, rather than democracy promotion *per se*, that most strongly influences domestic developments in these countries. Paradoxically, it seems to have ushered political changes (even if limited and/or unsustainable) toward democratization and resulted in a concerted push away from Russia. At the same time, Russia’s reaction has also stimulated the US and EU’s responses in support of the countries in

question, thereby strengthening their engagement in promoting domestic change. Our argument is that Russia's coercive actions have diminished its own influence in some post-Soviet states as a "democracy spoiler" and strengthened the role of democracy promoters.

In the first section, we provide an overview of EU and US democracy promotion policies and their (limited) effects in Georgia and Ukraine. We then proceed to scrutinize when and how Russia has responded to – what it perceived as – EU and US interference in domestic affairs. Finally, we examine the paradoxical outcomes of Russia's countervailing actions and specify the conditions under which they influence democratization processes in Georgia and Ukraine. In the concluding section, we offer broader generalizations emerging from the two case studies.

Democratization – an externally-driven or a home-made process?

EU and US policies in Ukraine and Georgia: whither democracy promotion?

While in recent years the EU and the US have converged in their democracy promotion policies, the EU has been less inclined to make democracy promotion central to its strategy. This is a consequence of the EU's new emphasis on "good governance",⁷ especially since the launch of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009.

The EU's policy in Eastern neighbouring countries highlights a paradox in terms of democracy promotion. Since 2011 the EU has become more vocal about promoting "deep democracy".⁸ Along with existing instruments such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), it has introduced new tools for this purpose (for example, the European Endowment for Democracy). These complement the instruments created under the EaP's multilateral track in 2009 to support democracy, for example, the Civil Society Forum. Yet, since its launch in 2004, democracy promotion has not been the primary objective of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP);⁹ security and stability are. In particular, the EaP has prioritized regulatory convergence with a view toward improving good governance in the Eastern neighbourhood. Upon the EaP, the EU adopted explicit conditionality based on benchmarks only with regard to specific sectors viewed as priority areas prior to opening negotiations on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs), as well as negotiations related to visa liberalization. Some argue that functional cooperation reflects a shift in the EU's approach to democracy promotion, complementing the traditional "linkage" and "leverage" strategies.¹⁰ This is because EU sectoral policies include strongly codified democratic governance provisions.¹¹ Thus, while the "democratic governance approach"¹² does not target core political institutions, it indirectly promotes democracy through embedding democratic principles (transparency, accountability, participation) in sectoral cooperation and thus diffuses them in partner countries' practices.

Closer scrutiny of EU conditions under key sectoral policies reveals that the EU has only occasionally fostered the “incorporation of democratic principles into administrative rules and practices” at the sectoral level.¹³ Instead, the EU has sought to export those norms guaranteeing the quality and safety of products to be traded under DCFTAs as well as anti-monopoly regulation, intellectual property rights, and so on. Likewise, under the visa liberalization process it has prioritized security-related rules at the expenses of human rights-related provisions. Furthermore, when launching the EaP, the EU accepted the political *status quo* in the partner countries (with the exception of Belarus) without making explicit political changes a precondition for closer ties, despite concerns over, for example, Azerbaijan. Democracy promotion was thus decoupled from functional aspects of integration in the neighbourhood.¹⁴

In Georgia, the EU has been consistent in its approach in terms of democracy promotion, as evidenced in the Country Strategy Paper. Despite significant progress in democratization since the Rose Revolution, subsequent developments highlighted its fragility. In the EU’s view, the domination of the executive branch of power has prevented Georgian democracy from consolidating. Therefore, the EU has included support for democratic development as a priority in its assistance documents.¹⁵ It has mobilized a wide range of assistance mechanisms to promote democracy in Georgia and combined different types of support, for example, support for core political institutions (for example, the parliament) under the Rapid Reaction Mechanism and Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), as well as support for grass-roots organizations under the EIDHR and the Non-State Actors Local Authorities Program.

At the same time, the EU has placed a greater emphasis on good governance and institution-building under the EaP’s bilateral track. Starting in 2010, the Association Agreement together with a DCFTA emerged as an overarching priority in Georgia-EU relations.¹⁶ While the Association Agreement includes references to democracy and values,¹⁷ during the negotiations, the overarching focus has been on legal approximation with trade-related *acquis*.

In Ukraine, continuity rather than change characterized the EU’s approach to democracy promotion during 2005–2011, despite the persistent nature of the many problems facing Ukraine. The lack of political will and capacity of the Ukrainian authorities to initiate and sustain a comprehensive reform process meant that the initial reform momentum developed in the wake of the Orange Revolution was lost by 2009–2010. While articulating its assistance priorities under the EaP, the EU did not acknowledge this deterioration sufficiently and only belatedly reacted through democratic conditionality in 2011–2013.

In terms of assistance, a shift away from democracy promotion was evident. The assistance agenda for 2011–2013 did not mention democracy as a key reform priority and focussed on constitutional reform, the rule of law, combating corruption, and improving the business and investment climate. Overall, there was a shift toward good governance in more threat-oriented areas such as justice, freedom and security, “integrated border management”, and disarmament.

The EU's assistance suffered from lax benchmarking and lacked explicit connection to democratic reforms. This indicated that Ukraine was perceived as a source of threat and instability, accounting for the EU's weakened role in democracy promotion in Ukraine until 2012.

Nevertheless, the EU still conducted extensive democracy-related activities in its bilateral assistance to both countries. The EU also outsourced democracy promotion to other organizations such as the Council of Europe.¹⁸ Importantly, two Council of Europe bodies – the Parliamentary Assembly and the Venice Commission, which provide monitoring, expertise, and advice to the government on elections, rule of law, and judiciary¹⁹ – act as prominent external “watchdogs” premised on Ukraine's and Georgia's membership commitments. In Ukraine, Europe has remained an important source of funding for civil society and the media, a powerful role-model, and a reference point for the pro-democratic forces.

Regarding the US, democracy assistance programmes designed in the 1990s had more modest goals than suspected by Russia (that is, regime change).²⁰ When the Rose Revolution happened, USAID programmes concentrated on free elections, functioning political institutions, and support to civil society. However, in the years following the revolution, US assistance shifted toward supporting the government and the new authorities' priorities.²¹ This led to prioritizing support for pro-government NGOs and to the termination of USAID's biggest media programme in 2005.²² Nevertheless, the current USAID strategy for Georgia emphasizes democratic development by enhancing the government's accountability, as well as checks and balances.²³ While promoting good governance, current USAID activities are more focussed on democracy than the EU, with support for free and fair elections, independence of the media sector, and the development of civil society.²⁴

In the case of Ukraine, the US followed the pattern of the EU in terms of assuming the commitment to democracy and the rule of law after the Orange Revolution. So while in 2004–2005 US democracy assistance significantly increased, since 2006 the amount of USAID democracy assistance has dropped significantly. Also, US support to non-state actors decreased by 70% between 2004 and 2007, while assistance to the governmental sector increased.²⁵ Thus in 2013, in contrast to 2004, the US offered less support to civil society and the media and its role in regime change is less prominent than expected and claimed by Russia.

Nevertheless, Western support for Ukraine's media and civil society remained important because, with a few exceptions, there is no local funding for these actors. Independent media, especially new media, which played a crucial role on the Maidan, is a sector where donor support was perceived as most valuable.²⁶

Overall, both in Georgia and Ukraine, the EaP marked the EU's prioritization of good governance and institution-building, in contrast to the US, which pursued a more traditional approach to democracy promotion, though less focussed on non-state actors. Despite considerable efforts and resources still committed to democracy promotion in the post-Soviet countries, since 2008 the US has been much less influential under Obama's administration due to broader changes in its foreign

policy, interpreted in Georgia and Ukraine as a withdrawal from the post-Soviet space.²⁷

Democratization in Georgia and Ukraine: limited impact of democracy promotion

Democracy promotion is only effective when there is a receptive domestic constituency. In this respect, Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate “the ability of external actors to deal with changing local context”,²⁸ and adjust to specific domestic conditions in each country. Despite shared Soviet-era legacies and the experience of “electoral revolutions”, Georgia and Ukraine have differed in terms of democratization agendas and actors, including veto players. Yet, both the US and EU have been relatively inattentive to the domestic dynamics, reacting hesitantly and belatedly to events, despite their proclaimed aims in the region.

In Georgia, both the EU and the US have (at least initially) assumed that the Rose Revolution would be an irreversible shift toward democratization. Yet, as captured in the literature,²⁹ while improving in terms of governance, the country failed to build representative institutions and to ensure the participation of civil society in the policy dialogue. The wide-ranging reform process which developed after the Rose Revolution actually concentrated power in the president’s hands. External democracy promoters continued to support those individuals and organizations they had supported before 2004, thus failing to fully take domestic developments into account.³⁰ Under Saakashvili, the EU was more outspoken on democratic setbacks and placed a greater emphasis on the need for checks and balances than the US.³¹ Despite shortcomings in the democratization process, the US has unconditionally supported the Georgian president for geopolitical purposes.³² The bulk of US assistance to Georgia was focussed on economic and military support rather than democracy promotion.³³ However, even if belatedly, the current USAID country strategy for Georgia acknowledges both the shortcomings in the democratization process under Saakashvili and the politicized use of US assistance in Georgia.³⁴

More recent domestic developments in Georgia highlight persisting dilemmas for external democracy promoters. In the October 2012 parliamentary elections, President Saakashvili’s United National Movement lost to the Georgian Dream of Bidzina Ivanishvili. This was welcomed by both the EU and the US as the first democratic transfer of power in Georgia in free and fair elections. Both Brussels and Washington exerted strong pressure on the president and the new prime minister to ensure a smooth transition. However, the growing polarization of political life again exacerbated tensions in the run-up to the 2013 presidential elections. In addition, the imprisonment of key political figures of the Saakashvili period (including former Prime Minister Merabishvili), the arrest of the former mayor of Tbilisi Gigi Ugulava, and the filing of criminal charges against the former president raised Western actors’ concerns about the use of the judiciary as a political tool. On several occasions, EU leaders warned Georgia against

selective justice. However, the EU was mainly driven by the desire to turn the EaP into a success story prior to the Vilnius Summit in November 2013. Georgia is one of the three countries which signed the Association Agreement/DCFTA and, despite concerns over the political use of the judiciary, the new authorities have been performing quite well in terms of regulatory alignment with EU *acquis*. While they significantly built upon the progress made under Saakashvili, they have also moved away from the previous authorities' liberal agenda for deregulation, something that underpinned resistance to some EU regulations.³⁵ Hence, EU leaders (with the exception of members of the European Parliament and some EU member states) have refrained from overly criticizing domestic developments in Georgia.

In marked contrast, in Ukraine, the deteriorating political context under President Yanukovich (2010–2014) forced the EU, even if hesitantly, to resort to democratic conditionality in the process of concluding a new legal framework for relations. In late 2011, the EU adopted a bolder position and postponed signing the Association Agreement – the only tool at its disposal – to pressure the Ukrainian authorities to address the deterioration of democratic standards. The signing of the agreement was initially put on hold owing to political prosecutions of opposition figures, with the former prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, being the most prominent. Moreover, the conduct of the 2012 parliamentary elections as well as harassment of the political opposition and independent media during 2012–2013 led to objections in the EU to signing the agreement. However, the EU overestimated its power of persuasion vis-à-vis the non-democratic actors and misread the domestic context in Ukraine. For example, the preoccupation with the Tymoshenko case did not resonate widely with the Ukrainian public, since many saw her as a highly populist, opportunistic figure ready to sacrifice democratization in pursuit of political power.

The EU formulated a more comprehensive list of democratic conditions in December 2012, including adoption of anti-corruption measures and reforms of the electoral code and the judicial system, for signing the Association Agreement. Symptomatically, this list failed to galvanize the ruling elites, that is, President Yanukovich and the Party of Regions, into action. Making economic integration contingent on upholding democratic standards entailed significant political costs for the Ukrainian authorities. This is because meeting EU conditions affected the prospects of remaining in power for the ruling elites, which sought to consolidate their power by rendering ineffective any domestic challenge to their rule. Therefore, with explicit political conditionality, the pursuit of association with the EU carried direct political risks for President Yanukovich and the ruling Party of Regions in the context of preparations for the 2015 presidential elections. This was recognized with the EU and democratic conditions were made more flexible in the run up to the Vilnius Summit, as the EU became concerned over “losing” Ukraine and a “Vilnius failure”.³⁶

Overall, at the political level, there was a palpable sense of disillusionment and fatigue in the EU and the US with Ukraine already prior to and, especially, under

President Yanukovich. The initial (and perhaps naïve) hope was that Yanukovich would actually bring stability and improvement to the chaotic “orange” regime.³⁷ Both the US and the EU were fatigued by Ukraine.³⁸ Yet while the EU’s highly technocratic approach with its focus on rule-based functional cooperation helped it retain credibility as a partner, it simultaneously created a distinct perception of the EU as a disinterested and detached democracy promoter. The US had a secondary role during Yanukovich’s rule with little, if any, leverage over domestic developments.

Therefore, both external actors were hardly prepared to respond to the political crisis in Ukraine when it erupted in November 2013 as a result of Yanukovich’s refusal to sign the Association Agreement. There is no evidence that the EU or the US were involved in any way in instigating the mass protests or providing any material or organizational support. During the protests, the EU limited itself to welcoming the expression of support for Ukraine’s European orientation and calling for a peaceful resolution to the crisis, punctuated by periodic visits by officials from EU institutions and member states. While during the protests on the *Maidan* the EU appeared passive, the US was stronger on rhetoric (and outraged with EU passivity).

Overall, in Ukraine neither the US nor the EU played a strong role, whether during the 2013–2014 protests or prior to them. In Georgia, while the EU has been more vocal on the setbacks of the democratization process (whether under Saakashvili or after), neither the EU nor the US have used political conditionality to effectively pressure the incumbent authorities. This is not unusual, especially considering the Western responses to the Arab Spring. However, the EU’s initial passivity and lack of strategy vis-à-vis the protests in Ukraine have weakened its standing as a committed democracy promoter. As such, the Ukrainian protesters expressed strong support for European values – democracy, human rights, and the rule of law – rather than the policies of the EU. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 also elicited strong condemnation but tepid and much-delayed sanctions from the EU and US.³⁹ In Georgia, however, it was the credibility of the US which was most weakened in the wake of its passivity during the 2008 conflict with Russia.

Therefore, our overall contention is that neither the US nor the EU has pursued democracy promotion vigorously in Ukraine and Georgia. Democratization – even if patchy and reversible – can be attributed to domestic factors, especially societal mobilization against authoritarian leaders. However, its corollary has been a pro-Western orientation of the countries, something which in turn triggered a powerful backlash from Russia.

Russia’s counteracting strategies in Georgia and Ukraine

For sustained democratization, there should be no major power in the region opposing democracy, as argued by Whitehead.⁴⁰ Russia is a vivid example of such a counteracting power in the post-Soviet space, hostile to democracy promotion by Western

actors in the region. We argue that the key factor triggering Russia's reaction to Western policies is its perception of partner countries' degree of integration with Western organizations such as the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), that is, the institutionalization of the pro-Western orientation.

The introduction to this special issue highlights two conditions under which illiberal powers are likely to react to Western democracy promotion policies: the perception of a threat to their own regime survival and to their geostrategic interests. In the case of Russia, these two conditions are intertwined as, in historical terms, Russia is a successor state to empires (both the Tsarist empire and the USSR) in which the political regime and geopolitical expansion were closely linked. The literature has identified the fear of democratic contagion as instrumental in Russia's opposition to democratization in neighbouring countries.⁴¹ Indeed, after each of three revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, out of fear of contagion, Russian authorities strengthened their control over elections, limited the freedom of expression and assembly, and circumscribed the role of foreign countries in supporting civil society.

However, while the mechanisms and effects of Russia's actions have been extensively studied, less attention has been paid to the drivers behind them. We hypothesize that Russia is driven not so much by a sense of feeling threatened by democratization taking place in neighbouring countries *per se*, but rather the Western influence which it believes underlies it (and leading to a decrease in Russia's influence). This is despite the fact that, as argued above, democratization primarily occurred as a result of domestic factors rather than as a consequence of external democracy promotion. The elites who gained power in the wake of mass protests have also been strongly pro-Western. Therefore, besides being a threat to Russia's own regime stability, democratization in Ukraine and Georgia has been deemed to undermine Russia's hegemonic position in the post-Soviet space.

In essence, for Russia democracy-promotion policies are a smokescreen for expanding the Western sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. Democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space is therefore seen by Russia as a geopolitical tool used by the West *in contestation with* Russia. Relations of neighbouring states with NATO have long been viewed with suspicion in Russia and so has increasingly the EU's EaP, much to the EU's surprise. This is because the Association Agreements run counter to Russia's plans for close economic reintegration of the post-Soviet countries through the Eurasian Economic Union, one of the key instruments for Russia's assertion of regional hegemony.⁴²

Therefore, we hypothesize that the major driver behind Russia's responses is its objection to fostering closer ties between the post-Soviet states and the West. A corollary of this is that the more advanced, wide-ranging, and tangible integration is in institutional terms, the more threatening it will be perceived as by Russia, leading to stronger countervailing responses. The Russian government can more easily and rapidly utilize a broader array of instruments (economic, political, or military) than the West,⁴³ and demonstrated its readiness to do so, that is, to resort to hard power and coercion to achieve its aim of containing the Western influence.

In Georgia, relations with Russia significantly worsened immediately after the Rose Revolution. Russia actually viewed the political changes that led to the ousting of President Shevardnadze as a *coup d'état*. The pro-Western orientation of President Saakashvili only exacerbated Russia's irritation, triggering increasingly harsher reactions as Georgia got closer to NATO. Between 2004 and 2008 Russia scaled up pressure on Georgian authorities to hinder integration with Western structures. For example, to undermine Georgia's territorial integrity, Russian passports were offered (*pasportizatsiya*) to citizens of the two breakaway regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2006, when relations between Georgia and Russia abruptly deteriorated, trade and migration flows were disrupted. Georgia was also subjected to Russian trade embargos, with Georgian wines, water, and vegetables being banned and transport connections between Moscow and Tbilisi being suspended. Following the autumn 2006 espionage controversy, Russian authorities strengthened administrative controls over Georgian migrants living in Russia and deported a significant number of Georgians. Ultimately, Russia intervened militarily a few months after the NATO Bucharest Summit agreed that Georgia would become a NATO member (even though no actual mechanism for realizing this prospect was outlined).

While Russia initially claimed it was using its prerogatives as a peacekeeper under the Dagomys agreement to intervene in South Ossetia, the fact that the Russian army went significantly beyond the breakaway regions and into Georgian territory indicated its stance on the prospect of NATO's accession.⁴⁴ The recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence in August 2008 created a "point of no return" in Georgian-Russian relations. While trade flows and transport connections had already stopped since 2006, Russia's move put an end to the diplomatic relations between the two countries – while also triggering a break in Georgia's rapprochement with NATO. Therefore, since 2008 Russia has primarily tried to influence Georgia indirectly, for example, through supporting, including militarily, the breakaway regions.

Like in Georgia, Russia's role in Ukraine has been multi-faceted and highly adaptive to a rapidly changing context. First, the strategy centred on short-term cross-conditionality to undermine the attractiveness of the EU and responsiveness to EU's democratic conditionality. In doing so, Russia exploited the weaknesses of the EU strategy in the context of growing authoritarian tendencies and the resulting isolation of the Ukrainian authorities during Yanukovich's presidency. The EU's approach has been premised mostly on the long-term benefits of functional integration into the single market. However, this emphasis on long-term benefits required lengthening time horizons of the political class in the neighbouring countries. Enlargement created a favourable framework for lengthening time horizons of the political elites in the accession countries: the prospect of EU membership stretched the time framework for decision-making on ambitious, comprehensive, and costly reforms in East-Central Europe.⁴⁵ But the EU lacks similar leverage under the neighbourhood policy.

This dearth becomes especially significant in the context of Russia's role in the region: In late 2013, the economic crisis and high energy prices proved highly

conducive to a shortening of time horizons for the Ukrainian ruling elites under Yanukovich. Faced with Russia's economic and political pressure combined with significant incentives, Yanukovich did not sign the Association Agreement during the Vilnius Summit in November 2013.⁴⁶ Shortly after, he accepted the Russian offer of a financial bailout of 15 billion dollars, in the context of a growing fiscal crisis in Ukraine and the forthcoming presidential elections of 2015. Providing economic support to authoritarian leaders who become increasingly isolated from the West is a noted Russian strategy.⁴⁷ By providing immediate, large-scale economic support to Yanukovich, vastly exceeding anything the Western institutions were willing to offer, Russia offered a lifeline to his increasingly authoritarian regime.

Following the regime change (as a result of violent clashes and Yanukovich's escape), Russia responded to the coming to power of pro-Western leaders in Ukraine with a punitive, hard-power reaction. In addition to economic and energy-related pressure, Russia has sought to undermine Ukrainian statehood. This was most dramatically evidenced in the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Then, in the second phase, Russia's strategy centred on repeating a similar scenario in south-eastern Ukraine, a region with historical links to Russia (labelled "Novorossiya" even though the name has little resonance and hence low mobilizing potential in Ukraine itself).⁴⁸ But it only succeeded in Donbass, where Russia supported separatist forces, depicting them as part of a bottom-up local rebellion, denying any involvement. This "hybrid warfare" deliberately blurs the boundaries between state-controlled regular armed forces and the rogue local and mercenary forces. It is effective owing to the porous border between the Donbass region and Russia (the demarcation of the Ukrainian-Russian border has long been opposed by Russia), easy transportation routes, and ready volunteers within and from beyond Ukraine. This subterfuge has failed and the conflict transformed into a Ukrainian-Russian war.⁴⁹ This is because with a new impetus provided by the election of President Poroshenko in May 2014, the growing success of the Ukrainian armed forces against the separatists during the summer prompted Russia to provide more explicit support to the separatists, including weaponry and personnel.⁵⁰ At the same time, Russia's policy vis-à-vis Ukraine has been wrapped up in a historical narrative whereby Ukraine has been re-conceptualized as forming an "integral" part of Russia owing to linguistic, historical, cultural, and religious ties, thereby justifying Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine's sovereignty.⁵¹

Our analysis indicates that the greater the perception of threat by Russia, the harsher its response has been. Russia tends not to explicitly counteract Western efforts at democracy promotion *per se* but, rather, at first, promotes and supports pro-Russian actors whenever possible inside the countries, and, failing that, moves to undermine the capacity of the "target countries" to pursue integration with the West. However, in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia's role as a spoiler comes at different times in terms of both domestic political changes and the integration with Western structures. The differences in timing result in diverse consequences for democratization and also trigger diverse reactions from the West.

The effects of Russia's response: spoiling or unintentionally favouring democratization?

In this section we examine the outcomes of Russia's counteracting policies and specify the conditions under which they influence democratization processes in Georgia and Ukraine. In doing so we confirm the assumptions presented in the introduction to this special issue, yet also bring important nuances. The introduction posits that the outcome of external actors' policies depends upon their influence on the domestic balance of power between liberal and illiberal elites and citizens, which is in turn conditioned by economic and security linkages and by the leverage which the external actors have over domestic forces.

In both countries, by posing a major security threat and promoting challenges to territorial integrity, Russia could be seen as just taking attention away from domestic reforms, including democratization. Yet, having failed to sway the countries by peaceful means, Russia has challenged their statehood in order to jeopardize the linked processes of democratization and integration with the Western organizations. This is because the territorial integrity of the state, control over means of coercion, and secure/stable borders are essential prerequisites to democratization. Tolstrup has shown how Russia is able to affect the neighbouring countries' "effective power to rule", by using economic leverages or supporting secessionist entities.⁵² Yet, by showing how Russian attempts at destabilizing partner countries subvert their democratization, the literature focuses exclusively on Russia's role as a negative (and effective) actor. By emphasizing the spoiling effects, the literature omits the positive (though unintended) effect of Russia's actions on strengthening democracy in the "contested neighbourhood".

We argue that such effects occur because Russia's initiatives to undermine both countries' statehood actually weaken linkages and reduce the regional power's leverage over domestic elites and societies.⁵³ In fact, Russia's actions have united the national elites and population (outside the "breakaway" regions) around sovereignty, democracy, and integration with the West.

In the case of Georgia, for example, there was little Russia could do in 2009–2012 to hinder Georgia's progress toward EU integration, since breakaway regions were de facto occupied and Georgia had diversified its trade flows as a result of the Russian 2006 embargo. Following the 2012 elections in Georgia, the new authorities have sought to normalize ties between the two countries and have adopted a less confrontational stance vis-à-vis Moscow.⁵⁴ This new approach provided Russia with renewed leverage over the country.

On the one hand, Russia has continued to exploit breakaway regions as its main instrument of pressure, for example, through promoting "borderization" (that is, the construction of barricades along the administrative borderline of South Ossetia and actually expanding the territory of the breakaway region) and strongly influencing the selection of leaders there (for example, the ousting of the Abkhaz de facto President Aleksandr Ankvab, who resisted Russian pressure on several occasions and adopted a softer stance vis-à-vis the

Georgian population in Abkhazia).⁵⁵ Russia's proposed "alliance and integration" treaty to Abkhazia, however, goes beyond the destabilization tactics which had been used since 2008 and envisages a merger of military forces, coordination of police, and an alignment with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union.⁵⁶ It is perhaps unsurprising that the proposal was tabled in a context of enhanced contacts between Georgia and NATO.

On the other hand, the re-opening of trade flows, in particular, has triggered new expectations in Georgia vis-à-vis the Russian market. While this has resulted in increased trade flows between the two, this increases the number of trade instruments, including embargos that Russia can utilize. It is perhaps unsurprising that the trade leverage was soon used again after the EU-Georgia Association Agreement was signed, when Russia drafted a decree suspending the Russian-Georgian Free Trade Agreement signed in February 1994.⁵⁷

Yet, Russia's behaviour has so far yielded opposite effects from those intended in both cases. By threatening the sovereignty and existence of Georgia and Ukraine, Russia's policies induced both countries to make substantial efforts in terms of democratization, in compliance with US and especially EU recommendations and requirements.

Despite polarization in Georgian domestic politics, a broad consensus on integration with Western structures has so far persisted. There are very few actors that Russia can mobilize to divert the country's geopolitical orientation away from the EU and NATO. For instance, only two small political parties oppose EU integration while advocating closer links with Russia.⁵⁸ True, the Georgian Orthodox Church strongly opposes some of the measures (for example, anti-discrimination legislation) demanded by the EU as part of the visa liberalization process – it is not however challenging integration. However, even if prompted by the sharply deteriorating political climate inside the ruling coalition rather than inspired by Russia, the dismissal and resignation of key ministers in charge of defence, foreign affairs, and Euro-Atlantic integration in November 2014 may affect the country's actual integration with both the EU and NATO.

In Ukraine, Russia succeeded in exerting pressure on illiberal elites by dissuading President Yanukovich from signing the Association Agreement. Yet mass protests ensued. Even though very few protestors were actually familiar with the content of the Association Agreement, for them Europe symbolized democracy, human rights, and the rule of law – precisely the principles sorely lacking in Ukraine under Yanukovich.⁵⁹ For the protesters, moving closer to Russia offered more of the same: deteriorating democratic standards and governance, suppression of the opposition, media, civil society, and corruption. While Russia would work effectively with the "pliant", self-interested, and short-thinking elites, it had no similar purchase over the public, as indicated by a Maidan slogan "we won't sell our freedom for gas".

Inadvertently, Russia's policies have actually facilitated compliance with EU demands. By propping up authoritarian leaders in Ukraine and then engaging in a military conflict in Ukraine and Georgia, Russia has given a powerful push to

the pro-Western orientation not only at the elite but also societal levels. As former president of Poland, Aleksander Kwasniewski, who acted as an emissary of the European Parliament to Ukraine during 2012–2013, put it in July 2014:

[Putin] can fail because of societal attitudes. There never has been such a high level of anti-Russian feelings in Ukraine. It could turn out that even when faced with an economic catastrophe, the Ukrainian people will proclaim that our dignity and sovereignty are more important than pacts with Putin. Russia still believes that destabilisation, pressure, propaganda and money will turn Ukraine back to Moscow.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, it can also be hypothesized that by undermining both countries' statehood and territorial integrity, Russia has also made democratization more difficult. Since the shift of power at the end of 2012, Russia has indirectly fuelled the growing polarization of political life in Georgia.⁶¹ Despite a broad consensus on the prioritization of Euro-Atlantic integration, Russia has emerged as a divisive issue in the domestic political debate. The then Prime Minister Ivanishvili has repeatedly criticized the former authorities on their strategy vis-à-vis Russia and, conversely, the normalization sought with Moscow has been fiercely opposed by the former president's allies. Since 2012, the policy shift toward Russia has remained rhetorical rather than substantive, yet Russia's growing presence in the political discourse has contributed to increasing tensions between the authorities and the opposition (as shown, for instance, by the reactions to Ivanishvili's statement on the need for Georgia to consider the Eurasian option).⁶² The break-up of the Georgian Dream coalition in November 2014 does not only add political instability to the sharply polarized political climate. It also makes Euro-Atlantic integration more complex (especially the implementation of the Association Agreement and DCFTA) and offers new opportunities for Russia to manipulate domestic politics.

The emergence of Russia as a direct security threat to Ukraine since 2014 has served to consolidate Ukraine's pro-Western orientation, underpinned by a strong commitment to democracy amongst civil society and the political elites that came to power in 2014. Russia's undeclared war against Ukraine diminished the influence it was able to exert through language, culture, and religion, even in Russian-speaking south-eastern Ukraine. However, Ukraine's ability to pursue wide-ranging democratization, including institution-building, has so far been severely circumscribed by the crippling conflict in eastern Ukraine and a prioritization of security issues amidst a deep economic crisis. Contrary to Russia's discourse, the country is not a "failed state": if anything, the conflict in Donbass has galvanized society and state structures (which became notoriously weak) in the face of unprecedented external threats providing the push for reforms. However, a sense of insecurity and vulnerability also fuels frustration and impatience with formal political processes and carries the risk of growing populism and radicalization.

In sum, Russia has endeavoured to destabilize Ukraine and Georgia by jeopardizing their territorial integrity. Yet, by undermining their statehood, Russian actions has consolidated the political and foreign policy courses in both countries.

So far this is clearly the most direct and unintended effect of Russia's policies. At the same time, by supporting breakaway regions, Russia has also undermined Ukraine's and Georgia's "effective power to rule",⁶³ thereby indirectly affecting their capacity to conduct reforms, including democratization.

Conclusions

In both Georgia and Ukraine political developments have been far from linear, illustrating the complex political trajectories of even the most pro-Western countries in the post-Soviet space. The push for democracy came from domestic actors: the Rose Revolution, the Orange Revolution, and the Maidan were not so much the result of the efforts of the EU and US, but rather combined bottom-up and intra-elites' pressures to oust the incumbent regimes. Yet, oblivious to domestic demands for democracy, Russia regards these domestic changes as resulting from "Western interventions" which aimed to promote pro-Western geopolitical realignment in the post-Soviet space. In response to such a perceived Western "plot", Russia felt compelled to simultaneously "punish" the countries and prevent their integration with the West.

For the West, almost six years after the conflict in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war in eastern Ukraine turned out to be a rude awakening regarding Russia's ends and means. The EU and the US neglected Russian sensitivities and interpretations of their motives and actions, let alone the multiple dependencies that Russia could exploit vis-à-vis the target countries. Thus, the EU and US failed to grasp Russia's sheer determination to prevent a pro-Western orientation of the neighbouring countries and they have not been able (and willing) to promptly respond with adequate countermeasures to shore up democracy and sovereignty of those countries.

However, (so far) Russia has not prevailed: the influence of the EU and US has arguably increased as a result of Russia's actions. Russia's biggest strengths – economic pressure and military might – have been utilized in a way counterproductive to Russia's proclaimed interests. Instead of bringing Ukraine and Georgia back in to the fold, the use of force made them ever more mindful of the threat presented by Russia and, as a result, ever more determined to integrate with Western structures. Thus, the biggest paradox from the Russian perspective is that its policies have inadvertently imbued the EU and the US with disproportionate levels of influence.

Four broader conclusions can be drawn.

The first one relates to the drivers behind illiberal powers' actions and confirms one of the assumptions presented in the introduction to this special issue: geopolitical interests (rather than fear of democratic contagion) drive illiberal power's objections to any developments that are perceived as weakening its leverage over the "target countries". Our article points to the correlation between, on the one hand, Georgia and Ukraine's increased linkages and integration with Western structures, and, on the other hand, Russia's countervailing responses.

Second, as noted in the introduction, the West's agenda of democracy promotion does not correspond to actual policies toward individual countries. Nevertheless, even when democracy promotion is weak and/or ineffective, illiberal powers can blame Western democracy promotion for democratic changes in target countries. This means that democratic breakthroughs that occur in countries targeted by democracy promotion (even when they do not necessarily result from democracy promotion as such) can be interpreted by illiberal powers as "meddling" and "intervention" and trigger reaction from illiberal powers to counteract geopolitical implications of such "interventions".

The third conclusion focuses on the mechanisms used by illiberal powers to counter democracy promotion. As suggested in the introduction to this special issue, illiberal powers countervail democracy promotion through empowering illiberal groups in neighbouring countries. Supporting authoritarian incumbent elites through political, economic, and security means is indeed the simplest and most effective way to secure loyalty. However, when the authoritarian elites are replaced by pro-Western leaders, as has been the case in Georgia and Ukraine, illiberal powers can no longer rely upon non-democratic domestic players inside the countries. Yet, with few domestic constraints, illiberal powers are free to activate a broad array of tools, ranging from political and economic ones to coercion and force, and are able to deploy them at will. This readiness has been an unwelcome surprise for democracy promoters.

Finally, the effects of the actions by illiberal powers on domestic democratization deserve closer scrutiny. By undermining their statehood and violating their territorial integrity, illiberal powers inadvertently push the target countries toward the West, increasing the influence of democracy promoters and thereby strengthening the prospects for democratization. However, at the time of writing, this democratization outcome is not certain, especially with regard to Ukraine. Russia's actions are likely to provide further evidence not only on the extent to which illiberal powers can affect the capacity to conduct reforms, including democratization in the target countries, but also how far democracy promoters are willing to shore up democratization when faced with a belligerent illiberal power.

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Notes

1. Carothers, "The End of the Transition Paradigm."
2. *Ibid.*, 9.
3. Way and Levitsky, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," 52.
4. The Colour Revolutions are also called "electoral revolutions." See Bunce and Wolchik, "Favorable Conditions." In both countries they are intrinsically associated with democratization for two reasons. First, free and fair elections were a core demand of protesters in Tbilisi and Kyiv, where movements developed in the wake of elections (parliamentary in Georgia, presidential in Ukraine) marred by electoral fraud. Second, in both countries the protests resulted in a change of power that spurred democratic reforms.
5. Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, "Georgia's Ongoing Struggle"; Stewart, "The Interplay of Domestic Contexts and External Democracy Promotion."
6. Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash*; Horvath, "Putin's 'Preventive Counter-Revolution'"; Carothers, "The Backlash against Democracy Promotion."
7. Good governance is more concerned with the effectiveness of government than its legitimacy. Stewart, "The Interplay of Domestic Contexts and External Democracy Promotion."
8. According to the EU's High Representative, together with free election, "deep democracy" includes: respect for the rule of law and human rights, freedom of speech, an independent judiciary, and impartial administration. Speech on main aspects and basic choices of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy, Strasbourg, 11 May 2011. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-11-326_en.htm
9. Ghazaryan, *The European Neighbourhood Policy*.
10. Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, "EU Democracy Promotion," 887.
11. Freyburg et al., "Democracy Promotion."
12. Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, "EU Democracy Promotion."
13. Freyburg et al., "Democracy Promotion."
14. Ghazaryan, *The European Neighbourhood Policy*.
15. European Commission, ENPI Country Strategy Paper for Georgia, 2007–2013, Brussels, 2006; ENPI National Indicative Programme for Georgia, 2011–2013, Brussels, 2010.
16. This required strengthening key institutions, primarily those involved in the negotiation and the implementation of the future agreement, for example, the Office of the State Ministry for Euro-Atlantic Integration.
17. The Preamble refers to the "common values on which the European Union is built – democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law," and indicates that these values are shared by Georgia. EU-Georgia Association Agreement, http://eeas.europa.eu/georgia/assoagreement/pdf/ge-aa-preamble_en.pdf.
18. Some EU democracy funds are implemented through an EU–Council of Europe (CoE) Joint Programme financed up to 90% by the EU. For example, the CoE run joint projects on media, judiciary, women's and children's rights, and anti-corruption.
19. Shapovalova, "Assessing Democracy Assistance: Ukraine."
20. Mitchell, *Uncertain Democracy*, 1.
21. *Ibid.*, 129.
22. Lazarus, "Neoliberal State Building," 19.
23. USAID, *Country Development Strategy, Georgia*.
24. USAID, "Democracy, Human Rights and Good Governance," <http://www.usaid.gov/georgia/democracy-human-rights-and-governance>.
25. Shapovalova, "Assessing Democracy Assistance: Ukraine."
26. *Ibid.*; and Stewart, "Power Relations."

27. Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, 9.
28. Stewart, "The Interplay of Domestic Contexts and External Democracy Promotion," 804.
29. Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, "Georgia's Ongoing Struggle"; Siroky and Aprasidze, "Guns, Roses and Democratization."
30. Stewart, "Democracy Promotion," 650.
31. The EU provided support to those institutions which may counterbalance the executive branch of power, for example, the parliament and the judiciary.
32. Mitchell, "Democracy in Georgia."
33. See Sasse, "Linkages and the Promotion of Democracy," 589.
34. USAID, *Country Development Strategy, Georgia*, 8–9.
35. Delcour, "Meandering Europeanisation."
36. Interviews with EU officials, Kyiv, September 2013 and June 2014.
37. Authors' interviews with EU officials in Brussels and Kyiv, December 2009 and January 2011.
38. Delcour and Wolczuk, "Eurasian Economic Integration."
39. MacShane, "Eurosphere has lost Ukraine."
40. Whitehead, *The International Dimensions of Democratization*.
41. Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash*; Horvath, "Putin's 'Preventive Counter-Revolution'"; Carothers, "The Backlash against Democracy Promotion."
42. Dragneva and Wolczuk, *Eurasian Economic Integration*.
43. Tolstrup, "Negative External Actor," 929.
44. Cornell and Starr, *The Guns of August 2008*.
45. Jacoby, "Inspiration, Coalition, and Substitution," 623.
46. In the summer of 2013, Russia started the so-called "trade war" by imposing an embargo on Ukrainian goods and lengthy customs checks in order to persuade Ukraine to join the Customs Union and dissuade Ukraine from concluding the Association Agreement.
47. Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash*.
48. Hava, "IstoriaNovorossiyyi ta EtnichnohoSkladu XIX Stolittia." See also Halyshko, "Malorossiya: KrainaYaka Ne Vidbulasia."
49. Wilk and Konończuk, "Ukrainian-Russian War."
50. Wolczuk, "How-Far-Were-Russias-Little-Green-Men-Involved."
51. Menkiszak, "The Putin Doctrine."
52. Tolstrup, "Negative External Actor," 936.
53. Levitsky and Way, "Linkage versus Leverage."
54. Gordadze, "Georgia."
55. Ibid.
56. "Russia to Pocket Abkhazia?," <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/7048>, 16 October 2014.
57. RFE/RL, "Russia Hits Back At Georgia Over Trade Agreement With European Union," 2 August 2014.
58. Kapanadze, "Georgia's Vulnerability."
59. Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis*, Chapter 3.
60. "Interview with Aleksander Kwaśniewski: jest ryzyko wygranej Kaczyńskiego," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 6 August 2014.
61. Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, "Georgia's Ongoing Struggle"; Siroky and Aprasidze, "Guns, Roses and Democratization."
62. Rettman, "Georgia PM says 'Why Not?' on Eurasian Union."
63. Tolstrup, "Negative External Actor," 932.

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