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# **DOORS UNLOCK AND OPEN? HYBRID REGIMES AND FOREIGN INTERFERENCES IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD**



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## BACKGROUND PAPER

# DOORS UNLOCK AND OPEN? HYBRID REGIMES AND FOREIGN INTERFERENCES IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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## SUMMARY

This paper examines the dynamics of hybrid regimes in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, focusing on their susceptibility to foreign interference amidst geopolitical tensions. It explores how these regimes, characterized by a mix of democratic and authoritarian practices, create fertile grounds for external actors like Russia, China, and Turkey to exert influence. By leveraging economic dependencies, media manipulation, and soft power tools, these actors challenge EU democracy promotion efforts. The study highlights the interplay between entrenched domestic elites, external pressures, and societal polarization, emphasizing the role of informal power structures. It also investigates civic resistance and the implications for resilience and state sovereignty. Ultimately, the analysis offers insights into the challenges and strategies for bolstering democratic resilience in the Eastern Neighbourhood.



## Introduction

The post-independence trajectories of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine toward the consolidation of hybrid regimes have oscillated between democratic and authoritarian practices. Rather than transitioning toward fully-fledged liberal democracies, these regimes represent a distinct type of governance characterized by hybridity—a multifaceted phenomenon arising from the coexistence of new and former incumbent and extra-incumbent elites within a stable yet enduring status quo (Bolkvadze, Gueudet, Machavariani, Petrov, Putinã, Sniadanko, Strazzari, & Teosa, 2024). This hybridity has led to the concentration of power in extralegal political and economic structures and the emergence of interconnected nexuses linking business and politics, media and politics, and organized crime and politics.

Building on the defining characteristics of hybrid regimes, the current paper seeks to examine the extent to which regime hybridity shapes the responsiveness, vulnerabilities, and resilience of our case study countries to foreign interference from external actors identified by Daniel et al. as the EU's competitors in the region (2024). In a context of global (geo)political fragmentation, war, and ruthless strategic competition, the Eastern Neighbourhood has become a coveted region. Understanding the competing agendas, strategies, and toolkits of Russia, China, and, to a lesser extent, Turkey is crucial for the EU. Drawing on insights from our colleagues' paper on "External Actors' Engagement in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe," this paper aims to assess the negative influence exerted by "black knights" (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 41) on democratic systems—or, in this case, on systems characterized by persistent authoritarian tendencies rather than full democratization.

Also referred to as "autocracy promoters" or "negative external actors" (Ambrosio, 2009; Tolstrup, 2009, 2014), these actors engage—often covertly—in disruptive activities that undermine the democratization process or democratic governance in targeted countries, thereby playing a key role in sustaining authoritarianism (Tolstrup, 2015). While authoritarian powers like Russia are typically seen as the primary actors in strengthening authoritarianism and regressing democracy in their neighborhood, democratic external actors can also act as black knights. In regions where autocratic incumbents serve their interests, these actors may engage in practices ranging from counter-insurgency support (Ladwig, 2017) to imposed regime changes (Downes, 2021), election meddling (Tolstrup, 2014), and patron-client relationships (Scott, 1972).

This paper covers countries whose strategies and toolkits for engagement may obstruct or disrupt EU democracy promotion efforts in the Eastern Neighbourhood. It explores how the engagement of negative external actors—Russia, China, Turkey, and, to some extent, the United States, given its potential for unilateral and confrontational foreign policy—has generated dynamics of linkage and leverage. These dynamics profoundly impact the political trajectories of target countries, contingent on the compliance or resistance of gatekeeper elites. As Tolstrup (2013) argues, external actors risk becoming mere spectators unless incumbent and extra-incumbent elites are willing to cooperate.

We argue that, given the hybrid nature of political regimes in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the receptiveness of incumbent and extra-incumbent elites to external actions designed to undermine democratization is significant. This receptiveness creates easy inroads for black knights, enabled by pre-existing power structures and nexuses. Moreover, our previous background paper highlighted the highly polarized political arenas and the poor quality of state-society relations in these countries, leading to low vertical trust and weak social cohesion. As such, the resilience of both societies and states against negative external actions is much lower than in fully-fledged democratic systems, which require high levels of social trust, legitimate state and non-state actors, and effective, inclusive government institutions (Stollenwerk, Börzel, & Risse, 2021). Without sufficient horizontal and vertical trust, hybrid regimes in our case studies lack the resilience to shield themselves from negative external influences, as hypothesized by RE-ENGAGE (Giske et al., 2014).

Ultimately, this paper seeks to determine how hybrid regimes provide fertile ground for competing foreign powers to deploy their strategies and toolkits and how these efforts affect the EU's democracy promotion. First, we examine the elements of hybridity that facilitate foreign interference in domestic politics. These elements include the transboundary networks of state and non-state actors that penetrate extralegal political and economic structures. Next, we analyze the polarized perceptions and varied receptions of negative external actors and their policies among gatekeeper elites, their opponents, and society at large. This analysis allows us to assess whether these dynamics structure partisan debates and lead to mobilization, either in favor of or against these actors. Finally, we evaluate the levels of linkage and leverage established by these actors in our case study countries and their transformative power. This assessment will illuminate the resilience and counteractions available to these countries, as well as the challenges posed to EU democracy promotion efforts.

## **Hybrid regimes and their linkages to negative external actors**

Negative external actors generate, through their engagement with the targeted countries, influences that may impede or reverse democratic developments (Lebanidze, 2014). In Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, political power is concentrated into hybrid power s born from the collusion between incumbent and extra-incumbent elites. Combined with the extremely degraded state of relations between public authorities and societies, it has given way to those negative external actors to establish strong linkages in key political and economic sectors, as well as within targeted segments of society.

## **Patrimonialism, lack of party institutionalization and receptivity of the elites**

Among the post-communist legacies that have shaped the current political systems of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the logics of patrimonialism are alive and well. As Henry Hale (2011) observes, political processes in the hybrid regimes of post-Soviet Eurasia are often dominated not by institutionalized parties but by competing patrimonial networks in which political loyalty is traded off for personal or financial gain. Patrimonial networks supersede formal institutions in determining political outcomes and external negative

actors, and first and foremost Russia, have been capitalizing on those hybrid power structures to infiltrate the political system. The influential elites resilient to regime changes and democratic transformations prove easy to co-opt.

In the case of Georgia, patrimonialism has been a key feature of the three post-independence administrations, and increasingly so under Georgian Dream (GD) whose internal organization and practice of power is a textbook example of the oligarchisation of politics in the post-Soviet space and of the patron-client ramifications that help consolidate an hybrid regime. For years, Russia has been capitalizing on Georgia's patrimonial structures by fostering alliances with key Georgian elites, factions, and individuals who benefit from maintaining the status-quo. The phenomenon has intensified since 2012, when Bidzina Ivanishvili, GD founder and former PM has started weighting as a major force in Georgia's politics and economy and has played the role of a strong extra-incumbent actor over government and its decisions, through informal control over the system of governance. A significant portion of incumbent officials have in the past worked in companies associated with Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose companies are considered the "forge of public officials" under GD administration (II Georgia, 2015). Ivanishvili personal and business links to the Kremlin are instrumental in shaping GD's position toward Russia, and the political of appeasement toward Russia as well as other strategic policy decisions involving Georgian foreign relations have been conditioned by the business interests held by the Georgian ruling elite in Russia. Transparency International shed light in 2022 on the channels through which Ivanishvili and his clique still operate in Russia, despite his commitment in 2011 to liquidate all his assets there: offshore companies, familial patrimonial networks and appointment of representatives punctually mandated to manage his unofficial assets. Interestingly, among the latest category fall Irakli Gharibashvili, current Prime Minister and Irakli Karseladze, previously Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure (Transparency International, 2022). Obviously, the entanglement of the GD's politics-business nexus within Russia's own politics-business nexus has dramatically increased the receptivity of the country's authorities to the Kremlin's influence over domestic politics and the gradual yet accelerating moves toward an authoritarian consolidation, as have proven the exportation of the Foreign Agent law and the support of the Kremlin to the regime despite the large-scale rigging of the 2024 Parliamentary elections.

Similar logics are observable in Moldova, with the specificity that the combination of the lack of party institutionalization and the structural dynamics of state capture have generated steadfast rivalries between patrimonial networks in which Russia has in many occurrences played the part of the external patron. That was the case under the presidency of Dodon who after his election campaigned under the slogan 'Moldova's future is with a strong Russia' worked actively to tighten the ties with the Kremlin. The frequency of the meetings of Igor Dodon with Putin,

with members of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, politicians, statesmen, representatives of large entrepreneurships, business environment and the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church testified of the intensification of the Kremlin's influence over Moldovan politics and governance and placed Dodon in an obvious position of client. Yet, Dodon was also embedded in another patrimonial system with the powerful oligarch Vlad Plahotniuc, deemed at the time the “de facto leader” of Moldova. Infiltrated in all sectors of politics, the economy (industry, energy, real estate) and the media, Plahotniuc has in all opacity and through the use of proxies, gained an unprecedented power and control over Moldova's party politics and policymaking process (Knott and Popsoi, 2016). He was the one to enthrone Dodon against the pro-European coalition led by Maia Sandu and used his media empire (composed of six television channels, four of them with countrywide coverage, and two radio channels) to target and discredit Sandu's and her allies (Socor, 2016). Once Dodon took office, he had to govern with Plahotniuc's Democratic Party in a system referred to as a “political cartel”, each party and leader willing to overpower the other (Socor, 2018). When the relations between the President and the oligarch soured in 2019, the Kremlin urged Dodon to form a situational coalition with the pro-Western bloc in order to oust the DP from government and undermine Plahotniuc's grip. Short-lived, the coalition was three months later topped by a minority government entirely formed of Dodon's Socialists, which dramatically increased Russia's linkages among Moldovan's incumbent and extra-incumbent elites.

Exiled oligarch Ilan Shor even took clientelism to Russia further by launching prior to the 2024 Parliamentary elections his anti-EU and anti-PAS bloc “Victory” straight from a hotel in Moscow, where he's found shelter after his conviction to 15 years' imprisonment following his involvement in Moldova's “Grand Theft”. Shor's ties to the Kremlin are well-documented and following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine he's been a kingpin in the organization, through his own companies, of business networks meant to bypass international sanctions imposed on Russia. The “Shor network” is considered instrumental in the massive operation of elections-meddling that took place during the 2024 Presidential elections and referendum on the EU integration. The agents who took part in it have been suspected of having “agitated citizens to protests, collected their personal data and opened accounts in Russian banks” and moved close to 25 millions of euros from Russia to Moldova on the eve of the elections (Ukrainska Pravda, 2024). Shor and his domestic networks secured for Moscow a much needed inroad to Moldovan politics and systems of governance to counter the attempts by Sandu's government to diminish Russian sway over politics, and which represents an asset to be mobilized by each Moldovan during key political moments, such as elections.

In Ukraine, competing patronal networks which «constitute a competitive-democratic landscape of capturing different state institutions and patrimonializing them for their own interests» (Fisun and Movchan, 2023, 122) have also favored the retaining by Russia of significant economic and political influence and have themselves become engaged into patron-client relationship with the Kremlin. The prevalence of patronal “vertical of power” based on oligarchic structures of governance at different levels—local, regional, and national, have propelled a direct inroad for an enduring Russian influence and constituted one of the main linkages of the Kremlin to the Ukrainian state. Oligarchisation has over the years dramatically undermined the possibilities of structural reforms and the diverse political powerhouses in national, regional and local politics acted as facilitators of Russian penetration into the country’s domestic politics. One of the most striking example of that phenomenon is to be found under the term of Yanukovich and his Party of Regions and the \$15 billion loan and energy subsidies offered as incentives for President Yanukovich to pivot away from the EU and decline the signing an EU Association Agreement. Yanukovich’s compliance to the its Russian patron not only reinforced Ukraine’s dependency on Russia but also highlighted the patron’s ability to use political, financial and economic incentives as inroads into the country’s domestic politics through its hybrid power structures. The penetration by Russia of in-house patronal networks is facilitated by the enduring legacies of the Soviet rule, for many officials in Ukraine's public sector today were educated or began their careers during the Soviet period, adopting administrative practices and networks that facilitated Russian influence. These connections have perpetuated a level of informal collaboration, with some officials acting as enablers for Russian interests. Even after independence, Russian intelligence services and diplomatic missions actively cultivated relationships within Ukraine’s bureaucracy. The persistence of these ties was evident in the early stages of the conflict in Donbas, where pro-Russian collaborators within Ukrainian institutions undermined national security efforts. Addressing these entrenched networks remains a critical challenge for Ukraine's governance reform and European integration.

## Business-politics nexuses, transnational economic networks and rent-distributions

By embedding themselves within these patronal networks and exploiting their resistance to institutional reforms, negative external actors have increasingly managed to entrench their presence in critical sectors of the Georgian, Moldovan and Ukrainian economies, such as banking, connectivity and transportation, and already located at the core of the informal economic structure and politics-business nexus that contribute to reinforce hybridity. Incumbent and extra-incumbent elites often benefit from maintaining close ties with foreign businesses and policymakers, as such relationships secure their economic



rents and consolidate their power. The Russian vector is again the most active of all. As an example, trade relations have been instrumental in shaping Georgia's economic vulnerabilities to Russian influence. Russia remains one of Georgia's largest trading partners, enabling it to manipulate these economic ties for political leverage. Periodic bans on Georgian exports—often justified under claims of quality issues—have been used as tools of coercion to pressure Georgian policymakers and align elite interests with Moscow. These measures disproportionately affect rural economies, small-scale producers, and vulnerable export-dependent sectors, reinforcing Georgia's economic reliance on Russia ([Gobbat 2022](#)). Although the 2006 wine embargo initially encouraged diversification toward EU and global markets, the lifting of restrictions in 2013 led to a resurgence of exports to Russia, leaving Georgia exposed once again to economic blackmail ([Bakradze 2022](#)). China has recently entered the mix, and the focus of China's strategy of power projection on economic operations facilitates and accelerates its penetration within the rent-economies of the three countries and their critical sectors.

Russian companies and oligarchs have been documented to use proxies, shell companies, and informal agreements to bypass scrutiny, acquiring stakes in Georgian industries without triggering regulatory oversight. Moreover, leaked documents from the "Panama Papers" implicated Russian entities in using Georgian banks to funnel funds into international markets, effectively utilizing Georgia as a financial corridor (see also [OCCRP 2024](#); [Transparency International 2022](#)). In banking, Russian oligarchs have established indirect ownership in Georgian financial institutions through shell companies and proxies. For example, entities linked to Russian oligarchs have been reported to hold significant stakes in regional banks, bypassing direct regulatory scrutiny. These financial connections ensure the circulation of capital tied to Russian interests, often blurring the lines between legitimate economic activity and political leverage ([Bechev, 2017](#)). This integration of Russian-linked financial assets into Georgia's banking system has been argued to undermine transparency and align local economic elites with Moscow's geopolitical goals. Likewise, Ukraine's banking system has historically been a tool for foreign influence. During the 2000s, Russian banks such as "Sberbank" and "VTB" maintained significant operations in Ukraine, facilitating capital flows that support informal networks aligned with Russian geopolitical interests. ([Bechev, 2017](#)). Additionally, Ukrainian financial institutions faced heightened risks from cyberattacks targeting critical systems, as highlighted in Ukraine's Cybersecurity Strategy 2023. These attacks, often attributed to Russian actors, aim to destabilize Ukraine's economy and disrupt international aid mechanisms. In addition, cybersecurity remains a contested domain where Chinese-linked actors have conducted significant operations. Ukrainian intelligence attributed major cyberattacks targeting government and military infrastructure to Chinese operatives in early 2022, just before Russia's full-scale invasion. These attacks aimed to steal sensitive data and disrupt critical systems, exemplifying the coordinated efforts of authoritarian states to destabilize Ukraine.

Connectivity, and the relevant infrastructures it depends on, play also an important role in the operations of foreign influence led by Russia and China. In Georgia, recent developments surrounding the Anaklia Deep Sea Port project underscore how Russian-backed actors have undermined Georgia's attempts to strengthen its connectivity with Western markets. Designed as a critical link for Eurasian trade bypassing

Russian influence, the port faced significant challenges attributed to political and financial maneuvering. According to Avdaliani (2020), regional geopolitics, including direct opposition from actors tied to Russian interests, stalled progress. One of the members of the supervisory board, openly suggested “that the Georgian government might be linked to Russia and was under pressure from the Kremlin. Independent experts also believed that the real reason was geopolitical — Russia was opposed to American investments” (JamNews 2024). Western interest in the port was underscored by high-level endorsements, including former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld highlighting its importance in 2016 and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urging Georgia to complete the project without succumbing to Russian or Chinese influence. However, despite these calls, Georgia recently signed a strategic partnership with China, entrusting the construction of the Anaklia port to a Chinese consortium” (JamNews 2024). As Kakachia (2024) notes, the Anaklia project's failure leaves Georgia vulnerable to Russian and Chinese economic leverage, limiting its ability to act independently on the global stage. In that perspective, China's interest in Georgia's connectivity has expanded considerably over the past decade, positioning the country as a strategic link in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This initiative aims to establish Georgia as a pivotal transit hub between Europe and Asia, leveraging the country's geographic location. Chinese investments have targeted critical infrastructure projects, including the East-West Highway and the modernization of rail links that connect Georgia to Central Asia and Europe. The proposed Anaklia Deep Sea Port, although currently stalled, underscores China's interest in enhancing Georgia's logistics capabilities, enabling the seamless flow of goods along the BRI corridor.

Economically, China's involvement is characterized by substantial financial windfalls, either under the form of loans or direct investments that have secured Chinese firms a foothold into eminently strategic sectors of the economy and defence and security. Short of mechanisms of check and balance and short of transparency in the agreement-making process, the opacity of Chinese projection is often criticized for its opacity and suspected collusion with informal economic structures. For example, Chinese firms, such as the China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC), have secured contracts in infrastructure development, dominating Georgia's construction and transport sectors. Critics argue that these projects frequently prioritize Chinese labor, materials, and technology, sidelining domestic firms and EU-based alternatives. Furthermore, the lack of compliance with EU environmental and governance standards raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of these developments, potentially complicating Georgia's integration into European structures (Popkhadze 2023). The same goes for Ukraine where, China exploited structural economic vulnerabilities to deepen its foothold in critical sectors like transport, and logistics. Under the BRI framework, China signed agreements with Ukraine in 2015 and 2017 to develop infrastructure projects, including transport corridors and agricultural cooperation, including building a port in Crimea). These projects aimed to integrate Ukraine into the Asia-Europe trade route, offering mutual economic benefits but suffer from the same opacity and lack of accountability mechanisms, due to the informal economic structures and nexuses that constituted their entry doors. One notable instance was its involvement with Ukraine's airplane engine factory “Motor Sych” in 2021, where Chinese investors attempted to secure control over the high technology leader in Ukraine. This initiative, blocked by Ukrainian

authorities (under the US pressure), marked a turning point as Ukraine prioritized national security over economic opportunities. China's subsequent arbitration a \$3.5 billion claims underscored its readiness to leverage economic dependencies to influence Ukraine's leadership.

It goes without saying that energy remains another critical avenue through which to exert a negative influence, despite each country's significant diversification efforts. This strategy aligns with the concept of geopolitics of self-interest, where authoritarian regimes use economic dependencies to maintain influence over neighbouring states (Kolstø, 2021). Russia's energy policy has been a cornerstone of its power projection since the 2000s and Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine had grown extremely dependent over Russia's gas and oil, offering an incomparable lever to the Kremlin. Historically, Georgia relied heavily on Russia for natural gas and energy imports, a dependency that became evident during the 2006 energy crisis. This prompted Georgia to shift toward Azerbaijan, which now supplies over 80% of Georgia's natural gas and a substantial portion of its oil, reducing reliance on Moscow in key sectors.

However, Russia's influence endures indirectly. For instance, Georgia's electricity grid remains interconnected with Russia, allowing Moscow to manipulate electricity transit and supply stability when necessary. Additionally, Russia maintains control over energy infrastructure located in Georgia's Russian-occupied territories, such as sections of the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline, which is strategically important for regional energy security (CSIS 2021). These structural dependencies allow Moscow to maintain influence over Georgia's energy stability and strategic policy decisions (Kakachia & Lebanidze 2017). In Ukraine, the 2009 gas crisis, in which Russia halted supplies to Ukraine over pricing disputes, demonstrated how Moscow leveraged energy as a tool of coercion. However, the ongoing conflict has brought new challenges to this sector. Russian attacks on critical energy infrastructure in 2022 and 2023 disrupted Ukraine's electricity grid and heating supply, leaving millions vulnerable during winter. Reports from the International Energy Agency (IEA) emphasize how these attacks aim to weaken Ukraine's resilience and undermine its economy. In response, Ukraine has accelerated partnerships with the EU to integrate into European energy markets and diversify its energy sources. However, the Russian army has not damaged the "Druzhba" gas pipeline that connects the Kursk region and Eastern European EU Member States via the Ukrainian territory and serves as only remaining gas pipeline from Russia to the EU.

Moldova also took decisive measures to reduce its dependency on Russian energy subsidy. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldova was one of Europe's most dependent countries on Russian energy. Since Moldova's independence in 1992 and until 2022, the majority of Moldovan gas has come from Russia. Moldova's energy policies and the search for independence from Russia are complicated by the "gas subsidy" Moscow has sponsored in

Transnistria via Gazprom, which supplies gas free-of-charge to the Russian-owned Cuciurgan electricity plant in Transnistria. This electricity is then sold to Moldova, making up around 70 per cent of the country's power supply. Moldova's efforts toward energy diversification, if not full energy independence, have gone the way of so many Moldovan reform efforts-progressing in fits and starts and plagued by corruption and bureaucratic missteps. In 2014, the Iasi-Ungheni gas interconnector between Romania and Moldova was commissioned, becoming nationally operational in 2015. However, the entire pipeline was not finished, including connecting Ungheni to Chisinau, until 2021. Moreover, gas did not even begin to flow through this pipeline until 2022. The 2021 negotiations centered around three main challenges that have long plagued Moldova's energy industry. The first involves the debt that Chisinau supposedly owes and the repayment schedule, both of which are contested. The second is the pricing model and its flexibility, as well as Russia's commitment to supply. The third challenge involves the restructuring of the energy sector, including the unbundling that Moldova has committed to as a part of the European Union Third Energy Package. While progress has been made on each of these challenges since 2021, none has yet been resolved. The 2021 deal and the overall lack of progress in the energy sector since independence left Moldova still largely dependent on Russia for energy when Russia invaded Ukraine. Russia's invasion and continued attacks on infrastructure meant that Ukraine was no longer able to supply Moldova with electricity, a gap which Romania stepped in to fill. Most likely in response, Russia announced it was reducing gas supplies to Moldova – including to Transnistria – by 30%. Tiraspol then announced cuts of over 50% in the amount of electricity it could supply to Chisinau. Combined, this left Moldova with the worst energy crisis since its independence. With Sandu coming to power, Moldova has managed to achieve full independence from Russian gas, develop alternative supply routes, unbundle the energy market, and disprove its debt to Russian majority state-owned gas company, Gazprom. These manoeuvres have foiled Russia's 'gas blackmail' efforts in all but one region, Transnistria.

## Media-politics nexuses, disinformation campaigns and the propagation of polarizing narratives

The hybrid nature of Georgia, Moldova and Ukrainian regimes, where regulatory institutions are often weak or politically biased, has provided fertile ground for the false narratives to proliferate. Hybrid regimes are susceptible to disinformation campaigns by foreign actors as they lack the robust institutional checks and media transparency found in consolidated democracies and hence, show an extreme porosity to media manipulation and disinformation. Polarizing narratives aimed at deepening the already poor state-society relations and the rather low social cohesion are therefore actively channeling polarizing narratives based notably on a "shared geopolitical culture", to damage the representations of the EU and pro-EU governments among the public opinion.

Compared to other negative external actors, Russia has over the last three decades gotten ahead, thanks to with a well-oiled strategy of infiltrating the domestic media-politics nexuses resulting from the capture of media ownership by extra-incumbent elites. In Georgia, the government often exhibits selective enforcement of media regulations, allowing pro-Russian and other fringe media outlets to flourish relatively unchecked while sometimes repressing media critical of the government itself. This asymmetry in media governance has enabled pro-Russian disinformation to reach wide audiences, especially in rural and low-income areas where Russian media narratives often go unchallenged (Kintsurashvili, [2019](#); Buziashvili [2024](#)). A notable instance of this permissiveness occurred during the 2020 parliamentary elections. Pro-Russian media outlets such as Obiektivi TV, which is known to have connections with the Russian-funded Alliance of Patriots party, spread unfounded claims about alleged interference by Western powers in Georgian politics. These outlets frequently portrayed the United States and EU as meddling in Georgia's sovereignty, suggesting that they were trying to impose liberal values incompatible with Georgian Orthodoxy and traditions (Transparency International Georgia, 2021). The government took little action against Obiektivi and other similar outlets and allowed these narratives to proliferate.

As Pomerantsev and Weiss ([2014](#)) note, Russian disinformation in post-Soviet states is structured around the concept of “weaponized information”—the deliberate spread of falsehoods to destabilize societies and create divisions within them. In Georgia, this disinformation often centers on themes like Georgian cultural identity, Orthodoxy, and fears of Western cultural influence, resonating strongly within the country's conservative factions. Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia operate through a variety of media, including social networks, pro-Russian television channels, and websites that pose as independent Georgian news outlets. For instance, according to a report by the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (2021), Russian state-sponsored news agencies like Sputnik and RT actively produce content in Georgian, targeting local audiences with narratives that criticize Western policies, EU, and the NATO. In addition to these formal outlets, Russia has developed a network of covert social media profiles and groups that disseminate misinformation on platforms like Facebook, often sharing incendiary content designed to polarize Georgian society and even engage in direct election meddling (Buziashvili [2024](#); Atlantic Council [2024](#)).

Ukraine is no stranger to this phenomenon, as “Kremlin-friendly networks” have long prevailed in the media landscape. The ownership of the main national, regional and local channels, concentrated within the hands of few oligarchs, not only impairs media freedom but also gives avenue to Russian propaganda. The pro-Kremlin Opposition Platform — For Life constitutes an enlightening example of how an oligarch with well-documented ties to Russia, Viktor Medvedchuk, a friend of Vladimir Putin and former head of Leonid Kuchma's presidential administration has managed to take control of three news TV channels and winning enough media coverage to place his party second in the 2019 elections thanks to relentless broadcasting of pro-Kremlin propaganda. Despite Medvedchuk's TV channels being shut down in 2021 and Zelensky's resolution to curtail the influence of Russian-affiliated outlets through a legislation media transparency disinformation, other networks also affiliated to oligarch still operate, demonstrating the resilience of the media-politics nexus to attempted reforms. Russia has intensified its disinformation

campaigns since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, leveraging “tabloid storyline” narratives to justify its actions and undermine Western support for Ukraine. These narratives, often rooted in historical grievances and cultural references, emphasize themes such as the protection of the Russian-speaking population and the alleged “Nazification” of Ukraine. Reports by the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (2023) highlight the role of state-controlled media, such as RT and Sputnik, in disseminating these narratives both domestically and internationally. Since cable and satellite broadcasting of Russian state TV channels is banned in Ukraine most of media influence take place via internet and social networks.

In Moldova, where the media landscape is characterized by excessive ownership concentration and a lack of transparency regarding financial sponsorship, there is a clear division between pro-Western and pro-Russian factions, due to the oligarchic influence of two main characters who, as mentioned above, have represented key political players within Moldovan crisis-prone domestic politics. Ilan Shor owns a media empire built by companies linked to Shor has been weakened following the suspension of the licenses of six channels, including TV6 and Orizont TV, in December 2022 and November 2023. Similarly, the licenses of four channels linked to Vladimir Plahotniuc, were suspended in November 2023. Despite these measures, the content of these outlets has migrated online, continuing to operate via websites and social media platforms (Press Freedom Index, 2024). Both political leaders exert significant influence over editorial stances. Disinformation, particularly disseminated by Russian-language media outlets, remains a serious issue. Topics targeted by disinformation include the energy crisis, Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine, minority rights, the LGBTQ+ community, religious values, electoral campaigns, and foreign affairs. The linguistic factor is not to be overlooked in the case of Moldova, as Russian-language mass media have been a perfect tool for the exertion of the Russian socio-cultural influence, especially since some of them are affiliated with Russian outlet (NTV, PRIME channel, RTR Moldova). The same popularity is observed in the print media – two most popular newspapers Komsomolskaia Pravda v Moldove and Argumenty i fakty v Moldove are local branches of Russian publications. On the internet among social media can be identified Facebook, Odnoklassniki.ru, Telegram, V Kontakte and as internet information platform – mail.ru, sputnik.md, point.md. If we take into consideration how effective and quickly one can change and form different visions today this popularity of foreign media outlets demonstrates how dangerously vulnerable Moldova actually is to disinformation. The Moldovan authorities, have repeatedly been trying to minimize the presence of Russian-language content, adopting pieces of legislation that limit the broadcasting of Russian television and radio on the territory of Moldova. In 2018, a ban on retransmission was imposed in Moldova, information, information-analytical, political and military broadcasts from countries that have not ratified the European Convention on transfrontier Television, which includes Russia (Efremov, V. 2019) Parliament of the Republic of Moldova December 16, 20 repealed this law [Moldova Parliament, 2020]. Nonetheless on June 22 of this year, the Law on Amendments to the Code on Audiovisual Media Services came into force, prohibiting the broadcasting of Russian news, information and analytical programs and films of military content on the territory of the republic (Law of RM, 2022). The exceptions are movies, and entertainment programs that do not contain militaristic content. The law provides for the introduction of strict sanctions for the spread of

disinformation. In December 2022, the license and broadcasting of six channels disseminating incorrect information when covering events in the country and the war in Ukraine were suspended. In 2023 the National Centre for Information Defense and Combating Propaganda was established. On October 24, 2023, the Information and Security Service of the Republic reported blocking access to more than 20 Internet Resources of Russian media. At the same time, we should note that in the republic there are two regions where the media remains under the control of local authorities. Thus, the implementation of the undertaken bans remains in question in the regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia.

However, the media sector alone does not constitute the only channel for propaganda in the three countries. Public diplomacy of negative external actors has gained momentum through the implantation of several structures aimed at propagating politically and ideologically loaded narratives that come across the European prospects of the countries. For instance, Russia is actively promoting the concept of *Russkiy Mir* on the territory of Moldova. Since 2002, a representative office of *Rossotrudnichestvo* has been operating in Moldova, whose activity is to develop cultural, educational, scientific and informational ties between countries. It provides consulting services in the field of civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights. (Rotaru V., Iarovoi A, 2019). Englobing Moldovan within the Russian world presupposes the maintenance and development of Russian cultural and spiritual bounds including not only “compatriots living abroad, but also all foreign citizens who speak, learn and teach Russian and “have taken the cultural and spiritual component of this world as their own” (Rotaru V., 2018). *Russkiy Mir* Foundation has encouraged the use of the Russian language as the language of inter-ethnic communication and has actively engaged in the education system organizing Russian language courses for experts and teachers. (Kubica, L., 2024).

In Ukraine and Georgia, public diplomacy is a tool used by China to propel its soft power initiatives. Georgian universities constitute the entry doors of Chinese public diplomacy, with Institutions like Tbilisi State University and the Georgian Technical University collaborating with Chinese counterparts to establish Confucius Institutes and promote Chinese language and cultural studies. These initiatives have fostered educational ties, but they also illustrate China’s soft power strategy, which critics see as a way to shape narratives and influence public opinion in favor of Beijing’s policies. Chinese scholarships for Georgian students and academic partnerships in fields like engineering and technology further deepen the relationship. However, these academic connections are not without controversy. Observers warn that they may inadvertently bolster China’s ability to promote its political agenda and economic model within Georgian society (Bakradze 2021). The Confucius Institutes and other cultural and educational initiatives, which aimed to strengthen economic and cultural ties by teaching the Chinese language and promoting cultural exchange. These initiatives aligned with Beijing's strategy of presenting itself as a neutral global partner, particularly in pre-2022 Ukraine. However, the absence of robust Chinese cultural engagement during the ongoing war has weakened its image. Moreover, China’s focus on trade and infrastructure projects rather than cultural narratives limits its ability to compete with the US and the EU or counter Russian influence in shaping Ukraine’s geopolitical culture, especially since Moscow has been capitalizing on the legacies of the Soviet Union to encourage centrifugal educative policies in East and Southeast Ukraine, where Soviet-educated populations are more prevalent. Efforts such as the distribution of Russian-

language textbooks and scholarships for Ukrainian students to study in Russia further solidify this soft power. However, Ukraine has taken significant steps to counteract these influences, including reforms to prioritize Ukrainian language and history in schools and align educational policies with European standards.

In all countries, the Orthodox Churches and their links to Russia are cornerstones in the promotion of Russian propaganda. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) plays a significant role in shaping geopolitical attitudes in both Moldova and Ukraine. Historically aligned with the Kremlin, the ROC has actively supported Russia's narratives about the war, framing it as a defence of traditional Christian values against Western secularism. This alignment has deepened divisions within Ukraine's religious communities, particularly after the establishment of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2018, which broke away from the Moscow Patriarchate and was official recognised and supported by Ecumenical Constantinople Patriarchate and other orthodox autocephalous churches. The Moldovan Orthodox Church is extremely receptive to the ROC too. As one of the most trusted institution shaping the views of Moldovans not only in the religious sphere, but in social and political ones, it cultivates traditional values strongly opposing any changes endangering them: anti-discrimination law, the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating influence against women and domestic influence, the change of the official name of the state language including some structural reforms associated with EU accession (Kubica, L., 2024). Russia's promotion of a 'shared Christian identity' and emphasis on religious solidarity with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) are central to its soft power strategy in Georgia. Russian leaders, including Vladimir Putin, frequently invoke Orthodoxy as a core component of Russian identity and as a unifying force for Slavic and Orthodox nations (Richters, 2019). This rhetoric aims to resonate with conservative elements of Georgian society, portraying Russia as a natural ally of the GOC in defending Christian and traditional family values (Korkelia, 2020). Statements by Russian officials often highlight the "special responsibility" of Orthodox nations to counter Western secularism (Toal, 2017). Russian Orthodox seminaries and theological institutes host Georgian clerics and students, exposing them to Russian religious and cultural perspectives and fostering networks of clergy with ties to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Scholarships and exchange programs funded by Russian religious organizations deepen these connections (Gordadze, 2014). Additionally, Russian-affiliated organizations, such as the World Congress of Families, collaborate with GOC representatives to promote traditional family values through conferences, public campaigns, and educational initiatives aligned with Russian narratives of Orthodox unity (Sherr, 2013).

The GOC plays a complex and pivotal role in enabling Russia's influence under the guise of a "common geopolitical culture." While the GOC asserts its autonomy and a strong nationalist identity, certain internal dynamics inadvertently—or sometimes deliberately—support Russian objectives (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2021). Some GOC clergy explicitly propagate narratives aligning with the ROC, presenting Russia as a spiritual and cultural ally (Richters, 2019). Sermons frequently highlight the perils of "Western cultural imperialism." The GOC has also visibly opposed liberal social policies, such as anti-discrimination measures and LGBTQ+ rights events (Korkelia, 2020). For instance, the Church denounced EU-sponsored anti-discrimination laws in 2014, framing them as threats to Georgian national and religious identity



(Cornell, 2017). These mobilizations often intersect with broader Russian narratives positioning Moscow as the defender of traditional family and religious values (Sherr, 2013). Certain high-ranking clerics exhibit pro-Russian leanings, stemming from ideological alignment or personal ties with Russian Orthodox counterparts (Gordadze, 2014). Clerics in rural or conservative areas are particularly likely to propagate anti-Western and pro-Russian rhetoric. Notably, the GOC seldom takes strong positions against Russian political or military actions in Georgia, such as the 2008 war or the ongoing occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This neutrality—or silence—is sometimes interpreted by segments of the population as tacit approval, indirectly validating Russian narratives that blame Georgia for the 2008 conflict (Toal & O'Loughlin, 2012). The GOC's significant moral authority within Georgian society allows it to shape public opinion on cultural and political issues. By resisting Western cultural and political initiatives, the GOC inadvertently fosters an environment where Russian-backed narratives gain traction among certain conservative and religious segments of the population (Kakachia et al., 2017).

## Breakaway entities and separatist movements

Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine share a common issue that deeply threaten their sovereignty and territorial integrity: breakaway regions that do not the control of the central government and separatist movements that act as centrifugal forces, both having long served as focal points for foreign influence operations against the parent state. Through its “de facto state playbook” (Malaryenko and Wolff, 2022), Russia has embraced the role of a patron-state for Transnistria, Abkhazia, South-Ossetia and before their annexation in September 2022, the so-called “People Republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk. «Short of perennial and viable mechanisms of conflict resolution, remaining stalled on a precarious but long-lasting status quo» (Gueudet 2024, p. 5), those entities almost entirely depend on Russia for their survival and thanks to the resources provided by the patron, have even managed to gain some degree of statehood. Needless to say, that the patron-client relations with breakaway entities have given Russia serious levers over Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia's military presence in breakaway regions has intensified. Donetsk and Luhansk, declared “independent” by Russia in early 2022, have been heavily militarized, with Russian troops and mercenaries from groups like “Wagner” establishing control. The incorporation of these territories into Russian administrative structures following the 2022 annexation referenda—widely condemned as illegitimate—further institutionalized their role as launchpads for Russian military operations. Russian-installed administrations have fortified territorial boundaries to assert control and hinder Ukrainian counter-offensives. These tactics align with the concept of the concept of “borderisation” (Toal, 2016), where patrons use military and administrative control to prolong conflicts and maintain influence over contested regions.

South-Ossetia and Abkhazia also offer key 'harder' tools or 'launchpads' for Russia to advance its geopolitical agenda in the country. Since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, these territories have become de facto Russian protectorates, heavily dependent on Moscow for military, financial, and political support. This dependence has allowed Russia to use the regions as leverage to undermine Georgian sovereignty and to exert influence over the country's foreign policy aspirations to join NATO and the European Union. One prominent strategy employed by Russia is borderization, a process by which it unilaterally shifts or reinforces boundaries in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian forces have constructed fences, trenches, and other barriers along the administrative boundary lines (ABLs), often encroaching on Georgian-controlled territory. This "creeping occupation" not only alters the physical landscape but also disrupts the lives of local populations, cutting off access to farmland, water sources, and critical infrastructure. For example, villages such as Gugutiantkari and Chorchana have seen residents lose their livelihoods and homes due to sudden shifts in the ABL, causing significant economic and humanitarian consequences (Gotfredsen 2023). In addition to physical encroachment, Russia uses these regions for propaganda and military posturing. Russian-backed authorities promote anti-Georgian narratives, framing Moscow as a protector while delegitimizing Tbilisi. Military exercises and the establishment of advanced infrastructure in Abkhazia and South Ossetia further consolidate Russian dominance while intimidating Georgia and deterring its Euro-Atlantic ambitions. These actions ensure the breakaway regions remain both launchpads for interference and persistent sources of tension.

In the case of Transnistria "Russian control over leadership and population is limitless having security, political, economic and cultural dimensions". (Deen, B., Zweers, W. 8, 2022). Russian patron-policies are multidimensional in Transnistria. First, Moscow is a third party to the conflict resolution mechanisms, with the opportunity to shape its own variation of peace-building founded on an illiberal approach to conflict management, in clear opposition with globally promoted norms and practices.<sup>9</sup> In Transnistria, in addition to a negotiated tripartite Joint Control Commission (JCC) with Romania and Moldova, Russia stationed the remains of its 14th Army, whose some soldiers "defected" to fight alongside Transnistrian armed forces in 1992, even though the presence of this Operational Group (OGRF for Operational Group of Russian Forces in Transnistria) is not part of the ceasefire plan (Ootter, 2022). Until today, the deployment of the OGRF is highly criticised by Moldovan authorities for operating without a mandate, illegally monitoring a massive depot that houses approximately 20,000 tons of munition in Cobasna and running unauthorised training exercises in the security zone defined by the ceasefire (Gueudet, 2024). Moscow's also uses energy politics to gain some levers on Chisinau, based on arrangement like the "gas subsidy" provided to Transnistria, which generates a fair share of the entity's outcomes through the sale of gas supplied "for free!\_by Gasprom on the domestic market, while the debt remains formally accumulated by Moldova, as Russia never granted recognition to its client (Comai, 2024). Russia also organizes the kleptocratic management and capture of the entity resources, as shown by the example of Sheriff Enterprises, a company owned by ex-KGB agent Viktor Gushan. Not only does the company and its affiliates control 60% of the entity's\_economy, it also grants Gushan with enormous leverage in domestic politics, notably backing up incumbent Vadim Krasnoselsky, a former Russian police general and former

Sheriff executive, in the last two presidential campaigns (Balkan Insight, 2021). Educational programs are largely consistent with the educational policies of the Russian Federation including entire chunks of Russia's curriculum. "Russian universities have cooperation agreements with Transnistrian 'State University' of Tiraspol recognize Transnistrian high school diplomas and provide subsidized places for Transnistrian students. (Deen, B., Zweers, W. 8, 2022). It is worth also noting the prevalence of Russian media in the region. Journalists and media outlets are strictly controlled by local security forces. State media and private television channels broadcast the same point of view on all issues. ...At the same time, any initiative or journalist defending the right to freedom of speech is subject to restrictive measures. (Rosha V., 2022)].

The autonomous region of Gagauzia, reintegrated in Moldova through a negotiated settlement and a law its the special legal status in December 1994, has in the last few years seen a revival of separatism. Gagauzia is embedded in a double system of patron-client relations. First, Russia has been keen to expand its de facto playbook there. In Gagauzia the Russian socio-cultural influence is rooted in historically forged attitudes towards "protective Russia". The years of the Russian empire and later the period of the Soviet Union have made the Gagauz identify themselves with the "Russian world". Language and educative policies reflect the Russian-leaning position of the local authorities. The Gagauz study primarily in Russian having limited or no knowledge of Romanian. (CIVIS Centre, 2020). Comrat University has educational agreements with universities in Russia and with Tiraspol to offer the possibilities to continue studies in this language. (Deen B., Sweers W., 2022) Embassy and other organizations constantly provide literature in the Russian language, quotas for students from Gagauzia, reconstruction and repair of social institutions, acquisition equipment. A large number of cultural, humanitarian and social projects are being carried out in the autonomy with the support of Russian partner regions. The governments of St. Petersburg and the Moscow region provided specialized equipment, as well as fiction and specialized literature. Every year, since 2015, the best students of Gagauzia attend the alumni festival "Alie Parusa" in St. Petersburg. At the same time, special relations are being built with the Turkic-speaking region of the Russian Federation - the Republic of Tatarstan, which donated musical instruments and equipment. In 2018, Tatarstan also allocated 212 monocomputers and 2000 tonometers (VlahV.,2020). The predominant use of the Russian language in the region increases pro-Russian attitudes, since "media consumed comprises mostly rebroadcast Russian programs, as well as locally produced Russian-language TV". (Deen B., Sweers W., 2022) "73% of respondents who identify as ethnic Gagauz consume media from the Russian Federation" (Ethnobarometer, 2020) Media space in Gagauzia is regulated independently from the entire Moldovan space and, as it was mentioned above, the bans limiting the broadcast of Russian content are not valid on the territory of the region. Consequently, it continues to be under the direct influence of Russian narratives and anti-European sentiment is widely spread here.

In addition, Russia has direct access to the local authorities and has proven adamant to back them in the revived disputes with Chisinau about the region's. The current Başkan Evghenia Guțul is not recognized by the authorities of Chișinău. The President Maia Sandu is delaying the signing of the decree making her a member of the government, the parliament speaker Igor Grosu called her "a member of criminal gang". Evghenia Guțul is the former member of the most pro-Russian and for the moment banned

as “unconstitutional” party “Şor” she is insistently developing the relations of the region with Russia transforming it in the eyes of Chişinău government into a “Russian proxy”. Unfortunately, this conflict is not easy to overcome and as it is pointed out by some experts “negative scenarios are very likely”. (Oskolkov., 2023)

Yet, for once, Russia is not the only player in the mix. Turkey’s influence in Gagauzia reflects a strategic, multi-dimensional approach to fostering soft power in the region. By leveraging cultural, linguistic, and historical ties, Turkey has established itself as a key partner to the autonomous region while respecting Moldova’s broader geopolitical orientation toward European integration. Initiatives such as promoting the Gagauz language, infrastructure development, and educational projects . (Tsibenko, 2022; Bitkova, 2015) underscore Turkey’s intent to build long-term goodwill and strengthen kinship bonds. This strategy aligns with Turkey’s overarching goal of expanding its influence in Turkic-speaking communities while maintaining a cooperative stance within Moldova’s pro-European aspirations. Despite these efforts, Turkey’s influence remains secondary to Russia’s entrenched socio-political and cultural dominance in Gagauzia. Referendum results in 2014 and 2024 highlight the Gagauz population’s continued preference for alignment with Russia, reflecting deep historical and socio-economic ties. Unlike Russia, however, Turkey’s involvement is neither disruptive nor antagonistic. Instead, it adopts a complementary approach that avoids conflict, further enhancing its credibility as a partner. Turkey’s strategy serves as a compelling example of soft power diplomacy in a region marked by geopolitical competition, offering a sharp contrast to Russia’s more assertive and polarizing tactics.

## **Divided and divisive perceptions and contrasted receptions of foreign interferences among political elites and societies**

Hybrid regimes are characterized by damaged state-societies relations imputable to the lack of trust into political elites, the logics of state-capture, corruption and crony capitalism, and violations and/or obstructions of the rule of law. Given the role of the incumbent and extra-incumbent elites in facilitating the penetration of negative external actors into domestic politics through the interconnected hybrid power structures they partake in, resistance either from the opposition, from civil society or civic movements does not have much space to manifest. Yet, despite those constraints, the presence and influence of external actors has turned, especially in Georgia and Ukraine, into a partisan divide as well as into a matter of public interest and the subject of high-scale mobilization within the societies.

## A divided and polarized political arena

In recent years, foreign interference has become an increasingly critical issue in Georgian politics. The topic gained even greater prominence following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, emerging as a defining factor that has shaped party identities, platforms, policy decisions, public discourse, and voter alignments within Georgia's evolving political landscape. This divide has been especially prominent in the lead-up to the October 2024 parliamentary elections, driven by allegations of foreign interference primarily from Russia further increasing political polarization. While both the government and the opposition have framed the election campaign as a referendum on Georgia's future, the dividing line between the two remains their contrasting positions vis-à-vis Russia. For the pro-Western opposition, the alignment with the EU is a matter of Georgia's security, sovereignty, and democratic development. Partnerships with the Western institution have been seen as essential for countering Russian influence, strengthening regional security and upholding democratic values, overall framing the October elections as a choice between Euro-Atlantic integration and subordination to Russian hegemony. In contrast, the Georgian government, represented by the ruling party "Georgian Dream," has been promoting more cautious policy, claiming that alignment with the EU could provoke Russia and thus lead to conflict, which would undermine Georgia's sovereignty. The pre-electoral platform of Georgian Dream particularly underlined a reduction of antagonism toward Russia by positioning itself as a stabilizing force capable of mitigating tensions and preventing further escalation into war.

In addition, the Georgian government has also shown indirect support for Russia and other external actors in ways that could potentially hamper Georgia's democratic development. This support is reflected in the adoption of policies and legislation clearly inspired by Russian practices. One of the most outstanding examples is the so-called "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence," also referred to as the "Russian-style law." Similarly, the government's endorsement of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, widely seen as aligned with conservative and anti-Western ideologies. The Georgian government's foreign policy decisions further illustrate its pivot toward authoritarian-leaning states. A strategic partnership signed with China is one of the vivid examples. While fostering economic ties with China might be framed as part of Georgia's broader diversification strategy, this again signifies an alignment with anti-European forces. These moves have collectively placed Georgia closer to an authoritarian orbit, putting into serious question the current government's commitment to democratic principles and long-term alignment with Western values.

The result is a deeply polarized political landscape where foreign influence emerges as a central issue, that forces choices between two competing visions of Georgia's future: one calling for closer alignment with Western institutions and another emphasizing caution towards foreign entanglements as a means to ensure regional stability. Divisions over external actors, either through direct influence from Russia or by partnerships with the West, underlines the complex challenges Georgia is confronted with while working through its geopolitical and domestic priorities. (Nodia [2024](#)).

The hybrid nature of Ukraine’s political system has historically allowed foreign powers, particularly Russia and the EU, to assert influence in ways that both unify and polarize domestic political forces. While, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there is broader consensus across the political spectrum on resisting Russian aggression, divergences persist regarding the pace, scope, and implications of Western alignment, particularly in terms of the EU and NATO membership requirements for Ukraine, judicial reforms, and economic liberalization. Recent parliamentary debates highlight the dichotomy in perceptions of foreign actors’ roles. On one side, pro-European political forces, such as the “Servant of the People” party (founded by V. Zelenskyy), emphasize the necessity of EU and NATO integration as crucial for Ukraine’s sovereignty and security. On the other hand, smaller opposition factions, including some remnants of previously pro-Russian parties, raise concerns about overreliance on Western aid and the potential erosion of Ukraine’s sovereignty. While these factions hold limited influence post-2022 due to widespread anti-Russian sentiment, their narratives resonate with segments of the population wary of foreign conditionalities attached to Western assistance. Electoral campaigns in Ukraine often reveal the underlying tensions surrounding foreign influence takes. For example, during the 2019 presidential election, Volodymyr Zelenskyy campaigned on a platform of reducing corruption and enhancing ties with the West, positioning himself as a reformist candidate. His opponent, Petro Poroshenko, also emphasized pro-Western policies but faced criticism for failing to deliver tangible anti-corruption outcomes during his tenure. Since 2022, electoral rhetoric has shifted to focus more on national resilience and resistance against Russian aggression. However, debates persist on issues such as the economic costs of integration, the pace of judicial reforms, and the role of foreign advisors in shaping domestic policy.

## Among the society, sharp divergences in the perceptions of foreign actors

The influence of foreign actors in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine has profoundly shaped societal perceptions, deepening existing divisions and fostering contrasting visions of the country’s political, cultural, and geopolitical trajectory. A persistent and defining issue is the sharp divide within the society between those who support closer ties with Russia and those who strongly oppose such foreign policy direction. The narrative of rapprochement with the European Union has increasingly become a lens through which this divide is viewed, reflecting tensions that have been deeply embedded the post-independence societies.

In Georgia, Russia’s influence is particularly strong and deeply rooted at the regional level, outside the capital, Tbilisi. Recent elections have demonstrated that issues concerning relations with Russia can effectively mobilize voters who would typically abstain or disengage from the political process. This trend challenges the predominantly pro-European rhetoric that dominates discussions in Tbilisi and among political elites, revealing a more divided society than is often acknowledged. (Anjaparidze [2024](#)). Linguistic

divides also shape public perceptions of foreign actors. Linguistic identities intersect with socio-economic status, as urban population tend to favor Western alignment for its promise of development and access to global markets. In contrast, rural and lower-income populations, often economically dependent on Russia and influenced by Russian media, are more susceptible to pro-Russian narratives. Russian-speaking populations in Azeri and Armenian populate regions often feel a cultural affinity with Russia, making them more inclined toward stronger ties with Moscow. Ethnic minorities in Georgia, particularly those in Azeri and Armenian-populated regions, often feel disconnected from the broader national aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. These groups may align with foreign powers that address their immediate local concerns, reinforcing feelings of marginalization within national policy debates. In Ukraine, ethno-territorial and linguistic factors are also extremely significantly influential in shaping the perceptions of foreign actors. Historically, Russian-speaking populations in eastern and southern Ukraine have been more receptive to Russian narratives, viewing Russia as a cultural and economic partner. However, events such as the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas have shifted these perceptions. Many in these regions now support Ukraine's orientation toward the West, though linguistic and cultural ties to Russia remain influential. The [report](#) by the Atlantic Council noted that even in traditionally Russian-leaning regions like Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia, public opinion has shifted toward supporting EU integration following the invasion. In addition, in Ukraine, religious affiliations play a [significant role](#) in shaping attitudes toward foreign actors. The division between the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) mirrors broader geopolitical alignments. The ROC, closely aligned with the Kremlin, has propagated narratives framing the conflict as a defence of traditional Christian values against Western secularism. In contrast, the OCU generally supports Western integration and democratic reforms. In that, Ukraine significantly differs from Georgia, where the GOC plays a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes, often advocating for traditional values and viewing Western influence as a threat to Georgia's cultural and religious identity. Social policies associated with Westernization are particularly contentious within the Church's rhetoric.

Generational differences further exacerbate these divides. Younger Georgians, who associate integration with the EU with economic opportunity, modernization, and global inclusion, generally lean toward pro-Western stances. Conversely, older generations, shaped by their experiences during the Soviet era, often view Russia more favorably, perceiving Western influence as a potential threat to Georgia's traditional values and stability. Generational divides significantly influence attitudes toward foreign actors. Younger Ukrainians, particularly those who matured after the Soviet era, tend to favour integration with Western institutions like the EU and NATO. This demographic views Western alignment as a pathway to modernization and democratic governance. In contrast, older generations, especially those with lived experiences during the Soviet period, may exhibit scepticism toward Western influence, often due to historical ties with Russia and memories of past geopolitical tensions. A recent [survey](#) by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) found that 84% of Ukrainians aged 18–35 support EU membership, compared to 61% of those over 60. This generational gap underscores differing historical experiences and exposure to democratic ideals. Interestingly, in Ukraine gender dynamics also come into

play, as women, particularly those active in civil society, have been prominent advocates for democratic reforms and closer ties with Western institutions. During the Euromaidan protests, women-led initiatives highlighted the EU's role in promoting human rights and gender equality. Conversely, narratives emphasizing traditional values, often propagated by Russian-backed media, resonate more with conservative male demographics, framing Western influence as a threat to societal norms. As an example, the Razumkov Centre's [report](#) indicates that women are more likely than men to view EU integration as beneficial for social progress, while men may express concerns about economic implications and national sovereignty.

The same logics apply to Moldova, where the reception of foreign actors in Moldova is deeply influenced by the regional divide between urban and rural areas. Urban regions, situated in municipality of Chişinău and in the center part of the country, tend to favor European integration, driven by aspirations for improved governance, economic opportunities, and alignment with EU standards. In contrast, rural areas, where access to information is limited, are more susceptible to pro-Russian narratives, often amplified by local elites and media with ties to Moscow. This divergence in reception complicates national consensus on Moldova's foreign policy direction. While the government under pro-European leadership seeks to solidify ties with the West, pro-Russian forces exploit the divisions to stoke political instability and undermine democratic processes. The resulting fragmentation of public opinion not only weakens Moldova's geopolitical stance but also perpetuates its vulnerability to external interference. In conclusion, the complex interplay of generational, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic factors not only reflects internal divisions but also amplifies them, making foreign influence a defining element of the country's socio-political landscape (Democracy Research Institute [2024](#)).

## Civic mobilizations against foreign influence

In Georgia and Ukraine, have emerged fracture lines between incumbent elites and the citizens on the matter of foreign influence and interferences, linking it to principles of sovereignty, democracy, backsliding and state capture. As a matter of fact, civic mobilisations have been instrumental in opposing the penetration of negative external actors, the first of which being Russia, into the state and societies, contrary to the either constrained or timid, and even sometimes reluctant, ruling elites. However, that phenomenon is much more present in Georgia and Ukraine, which is coherent with the conclusions of our previous background paper that underlined the active traditions of civic activism in those two countries (Bolkvadze, Gueudet, Machavariani, Petrov, Putină, Sniadanko, Strazzari, & Teosa 2024).

In Georgia, grassroots mobilizations against foreign influence have intensified in recent years, reflecting widespread public dissatisfaction with the perceived erosion of democratic processes and state capture by the pro-Russian Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. These mobilizations are often aimed at resisting external interference, particularly from Russia, underscoring the population's deep concerns over the country's autonomy and political future. Public dissent frequently targets the ruling elites, who are accused



by many citizens of failing to uphold democratic principles when engaging with foreign actors. Grassroots movements have specifically critiqued Russian-style oligarchic control, arguing that it bypasses and undermines local democratic mechanisms. This discontent has galvanized citizens into action, with mass protests emerging as a powerful response to policies perceived as compromising Georgia's democratic path and aligning closely with Russian interests. One of the most significant instances of mobilization occurred in March 2023, when the government introduced the Russian-style "Law on Foreign Influence," widely seen as an attack on civil society and a mechanism for stifling dissent. This draft law prompted immediate backlash, with large-scale protests erupting across the country. The situation escalated further in May 2024 when the government reintroduced and ultimately adopted the law, sparking another wave of mass demonstrations. The October 2024 parliamentary elections, along with allegations of electoral manipulation by the ruling party, further intensified public discontent and sparked mass demonstrations. Under the slogan "Yes to Europe, No to Russian Law," the streets of Tbilisi became the epicenter of resistance. These protests were notable for their spontaneity, with many rallies emerging organically. The intensity and persistence of these protests signal a critical juncture in Georgia's political landscape and highlights the deep societal divide between the government's policies and the population's aspirations. These mobilizations reflect a profound mistrust of the ruling elites and a determination among ordinary citizens to protect their country's democratic future from perceived backsliding and state capture.

In Ukraine, grassroots mobilizations have often served as critical responses to foreign interference. These movements emerge from widespread public dissatisfaction with elite complicity in external manipulation, as well as a desire to protect sovereignty, democracy, and state institutions. Mobilizations from below highlight the fracture lines between incumbent elites and the public, especially concerning issues of state capture and democratic backsliding. The Euromaidan protests of 2013–2014, which were triggered by then-President Yanukovich's decision to reject the EU Association Agreement in favour of closer ties with Russia, exemplify the public's rejection of elite-driven foreign interference. The Orange Revolution of 2004 further illustrates this dynamic, as widespread protests against electoral fraud were fueled by public frustration with Russian interference in Ukraine's political processes. The influence of past shared networks extends beyond individual sectors, creating systemic vulnerabilities in Ukraine's efforts to resist Russian interference. The experience of occupied territories, such as Donetsk and Luhansk, demonstrates how Russia leverages these historical ties to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. Collaborators within public administration facilitated the establishment of Russian-backed administrations in these regions, highlighting the long-term impact of Soviet-era integration. These dynamics underscore the importance of addressing both systemic and cultural legacies to build resilience against foreign influence. Since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, public mobilization against Russian influence has intensified, with grassroots movements playing an active role in defending Ukraine's sovereignty. Volunteer battalions, civil society organizations, and local resistance networks have risen to counter both direct military aggression and the broader implications of Russian geopolitical interference. For example, grassroots organizations like Come Back Alive have facilitated the flow of resources to Ukrainian soldiers and displaced civilians, bypassing state mechanisms to ensure transparency and efficiency. Civil society has

also been pivotal in combating disinformation and exposing corruption tied to foreign interests. Initiatives like [StopFake](#) have worked to dismantle Russian propaganda narratives, [empowering](#) citizens to recognize and reject external manipulation. These efforts underscore the resilience of Ukraine's grassroots movements in safeguarding democracy. The recent [report](#) by Transparency International on Ukraine highlights public discontent with elite corruption, particularly in sectors like defence procurement, where ties to Russian or other foreign actors have historically undermined state integrity. Grassroots movements have played a key role in exposing these practices, demanding greater accountability and transparency.

## Autocratic linkage and leverage, and the consequences for the EU democracy promotion

Hybridity and hybrid regimes in the Eastern Neighbourhood in a time of war and increased geopolitical tension (Bolkvadze, Gueudet, Machavariani, Petrov, Putină, Sniadanko, Strazzari, & Teosa 2024) explores the domestic vectors of hybridity in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This paper, on the other hand, has so far unpacked the inroads that hybrid regimes offer to negative external actors and how it has become an object of contestation and resistance for advocates of democratization among political elites and civic movements. In the last step of our analysis, we interrogate the role of external foreign actors represent external vectors of hybridity, and whether the linkages established with autocratic states like Russia and China hinder the democratization processes in the three countries, help consolidate hybridity and hybrid structures of power and governance, or even diffuse their models of authoritarianism.

### The leveraging tools

The influence of competing autocratic foreign actors, mainly Russia, China, and to some lesser extent Turkey to some extent translates into the introduction and use of leveraging tools to impact Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine's political and economic trajectories and potentially drift them away from the prospect of EU integration. Each actor engages through distinct strategies, leveraging various tools to promote their interests and influence the countries' alignment. While the EU and the USA emphasize democratic development, governance and institutional reforms, and economic integration, Russia and China adopt approaches rooted in economic levers and cultural connections to provide a counterbalance against Western influence.

While Russia's influence is coercive, relying on energy and other trade levers that seek to ensure continuing influence over the three countries and its strategic orientation. The energy dependence, particularly in natural gas supply is where Russia wields significant control over Georgian politics and economy. In 2023, Georgia increased its natural gas imports from Russia by 16.5%, strengthening Russia's ability to exert pressure on the Georgian government's policies (GeoStat [2024](#)). In contrast, the EU has sought primarily to support energy diversification and renewable energy projects in Georgia, aiming to reduce Russian dependency and strengthen Georgia's energy autonomy within a Euro-Atlantic framework.

The coercive character of Russian influence in Ukraine, especially in relations with energy, has been illustrated by the 2009 gas crisis highlighted with Russia halting gas supplies during the winter. Recently, Moscow has used direct attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure to deepen economic instability and increase reliance on Western aid. Yet, coercion has started to backfire, since in response, Ukraine has diversified its energy sources, establishing partnerships with the EU to integrate into its energy market. Nevertheless, Russia continues to exploit its remaining energy ties, such as control over gas transit routes and the nuclear plant in Zaporizhzhia, as leverage in ongoing negotiations.

Russia's aggressive use of its levers in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine is also indicated by its recurrent attempts at economic retorsion, leveraging the legacies of its past predominance as a trade partner. In Ukraine, it manifests through the systemic resorts to sanctions and the informal then formal control over key industries in occupied territories that continues to disrupt Ukraine's economy, particularly in metallurgy and agriculture. The regime of occupation imposed by Russia in Ukraine entails a deliberate targeting of Ukraine's infrastructure and agriculture to hinder the country's resilience. As a countermeasure, the Ukrainian authorities have resolutely worked to reduce Russia's grip over the economy and the steady expansion of the trade partnerships with the EU since 2014, making it Ukraine's largest trading partner. Recent statistics from the European Commission (2023) show that over 40% of Ukraine's exports now go to the EU, reflecting a clear shift away from Russia. While the current relations between Tbilisi and Moscow are set fair under Georgian Dream, Russia benefits from economic path-dependencies that constrain Georgia's economic autonomy and leave it vulnerable to political manipulation if need be. This entanglement undermines Georgia's further harmonization with EU markets. Trade with Russia often bypasses the regulatory and quality standards demanded by the EU, limiting investments in higher-value exports and compliance with EU frameworks, such as the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Furthermore, Russia's influence promotes informal governance and rent-seeking practices, which conflict with the formal, rules-based systems needed for deeper European integration. As a result, Georgia's economic and political reforms remain constrained by these dual dependencies on Russian markets and informal economic networks (Gobbat 2022).

Yet, Turkey's prime position as trade partner might help mitigate the negative influence of Russia in the energy sector by forming both a transit hub and an essential market for Georgia's energy export. Collaborative efforts on projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline exemplify the interdependence between the two countries. For the time being, these projects enhance the energy security of Georgia while supporting the ambitions of Turkey to establish itself as the central energy hub connecting Europe and Asia. This policy is coherent with Ankara's objective to counter Moscow's influence in the region while not standing out as an aggressive ideological alternative to the EU and the West more largely but rather as a player exploiting regional opportunities created by shared identitarian links and disillusionment with the EU (Daniel and al, 2024). Given the authoritarian nature of the Turkish and growing authoritarian character of the Turkish regime, the perspective to see it use this lever aggressively is not to be excluded, though it would hardly fit its agenda to become a trans-Eurasian connector (Pizzolo, 2023).

The activation of multidimensional levers acquired by China through economic investments and financial windfalls, apparently with no strings attached is, on the contrary, to be considered seriously. Surely, China has been offering an alternative to ruling elites interested in diversification of their partnerships but it does come with strings attached. China has increasingly used infrastructure investments particularly under its Belt and Road Initiative to expand its presence in Georgia. Through investments in transportation and logistics, China thereby gains economic influence that positions Georgia as a strategic transit point; this diversifies Georgia's international partnerships but also brings concerns about debt dependency, especially after the worrying precedent of Montenegro, which could offer Beijing an incomparable and unprecedented lever over the Georgian authorities and overpower most of other external actors, especially the EU and the US. Ukraine has also enjoyed the short-term benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, cyber intrusions attributed to Chinese-linked actors targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure in 2022 highlight a more covert and concerning influence. These operations aimed to destabilize critical systems and demonstrate a shared tactic with authoritarian regimes like Russia.

## Authoritarian diffusion and hybridity promotion

Negative external actors are categorized as such precisely because of the altering results of their engagement for democracy and democratization (Tolstrup, 2009). What is the receptivity of hybrid regimes in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to external incentives and pressures for hybrid consolidation or shift towards full-blown authoritarianism? Let's recall that, throughout the "third wave of autocratization", which operates gradually rather than through the brutal overthrowing of a democratic regime, aspiring authoritarian leaders "have managed to subvert key dimensions of democratic institutions while keeping their democratic façade intact (Lührmann and Lindberg 2018). External support for authoritarianism and autocracy therefore translates into "internally autocrats (who) attack democratic institutions and values while externally authoritarian powers provide support to authoritarian political elites in other countries (Marcellino, 2022)". How does that apply for the hybrid regimes in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine?

Despite competing influences, the hybrid nature of Georgia's political system has rendered it particularly vulnerable to the diffusion of authoritarian norms. This duality—where democratic institutions coexist with entrenched patronage networks and institutional weaknesses—creates a permissive environment for the export of autocratic practices (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Russia's approach exemplifies this trend, employing a multifaceted strategy that includes financial support for pro-Russian political and religious elites, disinformation campaigns, election interference, and the promotion of cultural affinities tied to conservative and nationalist ideologies (Toal, 2017). Allegations of Russian meddling in Georgia's electoral processes, particularly during critical parliamentary elections, underscore Moscow's efforts to disrupt democratic consolidation (Buziashvili, 2024). Reports indicate that Russian-backed entities have manipulated election outcomes (Dougherty, 2024), provided financial resources to pro-Russian parties, and

orchestrated disinformation campaigns aimed at undermining opposition candidates and amplifying pro-Moscow narratives (Walker, 2021). These actions exacerbate the challenges facing Georgia's democratic institutions, which already struggle with issues such as state capture and the absence of robust checks and balances (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2021). Such practices directly undermine Georgia's democratic trajectory by encouraging governance models that prioritize centralized power and elite patronage over institutional accountability (Freedom House, 2023). Through its support of Georgian Dream's policy stances and legislative initiatives, Russia reinforces an environment where democratic norms are perceived as secondary to stability and geopolitical pragmatism (Civil.ge, 2023). The controversial "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence," discussed earlier, is emblematic of this authoritarian diffusion, drawing direct inspiration from Russia's restrictive foreign agent laws, which aim to suppress civil society (Kornbluh & Pomerantsev, 2023). These legislative initiatives reflect a broader pattern of authoritarian diffusion, where normative practices are exported to undermine political plurality and limit dissent.

Hybrid political dynamics also contribute to the emergence and entrenchment of rent-based economic models. In Georgia, this trend is particularly noticeable in sectors influenced by external actors such as Russia and China. These actors often prioritize bilateral, opaque economic agreements that bypass democratic accountability mechanisms, fostering environments ripe for rent-seeking behavior. Russia's control over Georgia's energy supply, for instance, consolidates economic dependence while discouraging market liberalization. Similarly, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects emphasize state-to-state agreements that embed practices favoring top-down economic control. The absence of transparency in these agreements undermines competitive market practices, creating an economic landscape that benefits elites tied to foreign interests while exacerbating inequalities and stifling inclusive economic development.

Georgia exemplifies how the balancing act of multivector policies, coupled with authoritarian exportation, results in a regime that is perpetually destabilized by external pressures and internal contradictions (Kakachia et al., 2017). The same logics have been observable in Ukraine prior to 2014 and the reforms undertaken in order to curtail Russia's inroads into the country's domestic politics, and in Moldova following Sandu's first term and the resolve in anchoring the country's on the path toward EU integration, which implies reducing Russia's capacities to divert the country from that path. Yet, in both countries, path-dependencies impede radical changes in that regard, and the linkages that Moscow has established by capitalizing on the internal vectors of hybridity not only subsist but also pave the way for other negative external actors to interfere, even in a less coercive manner. In Moldova, Transnistria remains a frozen conflict zone that serves as both a physical and symbolic representation of Moldova's vulnerability to external manipulation. The presence of Russian troops and unregulated military stockpiles in the region exacerbates security risks, making Moldova susceptible to escalations that could destabilize the entire region. This insecurity hinders Moldova's ability to fully integrate into Western institutions such as NATO, as unresolved territorial disputes often act as a barrier to accession. It also diverts critical resources toward conflict management rather than state-building or development initiatives. The deep divide between pro-European and pro-Russian forces fragments Moldova's political landscape, impeding governance and the implementation of coherent policies. This polarization results in frequent shifts in government priorities,

as each political faction seeks to align with its preferred geopolitical partner. Consequently, long-term reform efforts, especially those required for European integration, often stall or are reversed depending on the ruling coalition. The ongoing political instability weakens public trust in democratic institutions, creating an environment ripe for populism and external interference. Pro-Russian factions, supported by Moscow's influence operations, capitalize on governance failures to bolster their narratives, further deepening societal divides. Moldovan society remains deeply fragmented, with significant portions of the population identifying either with European or Russian cultural and political values. These divisions manifest in competing narratives that permeate media, education, and public discourse. Pro-European narratives emphasize modernization, rule of law, and economic prosperity, while pro-Russian rhetoric appeals to nostalgia for Soviet-era stability and cultural kinship with Russia. Such fragmentation weakens national identity and social cohesion, creating barriers to achieving consensus on critical issues like foreign policy, economic reforms, and anti-corruption measures. It also perpetuates vulnerabilities to disinformation campaigns that exploit these divides to maintain societal tension.

While the government may pursue European integration, its efforts are often counterbalanced by domestic and regional forces aligned with Moscow. This dynamic leaves Moldova in a state of geopolitical limbo, where progress toward EU accession is slow and fraught with challenges. Moreover, Moldova's reliance on external aid from both the EU and Russia creates a paradoxical dependency, where neither partner fully addresses the root causes of its challenges. This dependence perpetuates a cycle of vulnerability, as Moldova remains unable to assert full agency over its political and economic future. In that regard, Ukraine's track record of reforms is more convincing, though to be attributed to the systemic shocks of the annexation of Crimea, conflict in the Donbas and the full-scale invasion, which have prompted the authorities to tackle head-on the matter of Russian interference, and to be more cautious about the entry of other potentially negative actors like China. Beijing's pressure on Ukraine to withdraw support for UN human rights statements highlighted its ability to exploit economic dependencies to challenge Western-aligned policies. Additionally, China's focus on trade and infrastructure has often sidelined democratic principles, prioritizing economic cooperation over governance reforms. Overall, Ukraine did not risk entering into open political debate on democracy and human rights with China on regional, international and UN levels.

In the post-independence trajectory of the three countries, the bottom-line remains that the cumulative effect is a hybrid regime caught in a cycle of geopolitical dependency and domestic fragility, undermining both its democratic aspirations and its ability to achieve meaningful reform (Bader, 2015).

## Preliminary reflections on the impact of negative external actors for democracy promotion

To navigate the complex and multidimensional dynamics of interference from negative foreign actors in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the European Union must recalibrate its democracy promotion strategies to align with the realities of hybrid regimes while addressing external pressures from Russia and China, whose policy agenda directly compete with the EU's especially when it comes to democratisation. To remain effective, the EU must integrate economic engagement, soft power, and strategic alliances into its democracy promotion efforts. This recalibrated strategy should address immediate challenges while fostering long-term alignment with European values.

The example of Ukraine illustrates what challenges the EU faces when promoting its democracy promotion in a hybrid regime with strong pro-European aspirations, and what shortcomings its previous modalities of engagement in that field have failed to curb foreign interference in the country. The EU's prioritization of military and humanitarian aid since 2022 has, in some instances, overshadowed long-term governance reforms. While necessary for Ukraine's survival, this security focus risks delaying critical democratic initiatives. The EU has also failed to address the challenges raised from Russia's cultural and geopolitical narratives, rooted in shared history and linguistic ties, which continue to undermine the EU's efforts to promote democratic norms. For example, Russian propaganda has framed EU-driven reforms as threats to Ukrainian sovereignty, particularly in regions with significant Russian-speaking populations. These narratives have gained traction in occupied territories, where access to alternative information is limited. In addition, corruption and weak institutional capacity remain significant obstacles to implementing EU-driven reforms. While progress has been made in curbing elite capture, grassroots scepticism about the EU's role persists, particularly in rural and economically marginalized areas. Addressing these concerns will require a more inclusive approach to development assistance and governance reform, ensuring that benefits reach all segments of society.

This is why, to adapt its strategy of countering competing external actors in hybrid regimes, the EU should:

Rethink conditionality: Traditional EU conditionality, which ties benefits to governance reforms, has waned in effectiveness. A "smart conditionality" approach is needed, emphasizing positive incentives like sectoral integration into EU programs for partial reforms. This could potentially provide tangible benefits to Georgian citizens, sustaining grassroots support for EU alignment. At the same time, discreet engagement with reform-minded actors within Georgia's government could yield progress without provoking resistance.

Moreover, rather than focusing solely on top-down reforms, the EU should invest in community-level democracy initiatives. Supporting civil society organizations that address local concerns—such as rural development or public service delivery—can build grassroots support for democratic values and reduce the appeal of authoritarian alternatives.

Compete Economically. The EU's Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have laid the groundwork for regulatory alignment with European standards, but its potential remains underutilized. Strengthening capacity-building initiatives for Georgian businesses to meet EU export requirements can deepen economic integration and reduce the appeal of less regulated Russian and Chinese markets. One of the EU's major challenges in Georgia is the competition posed by authoritarian-led economic initiatives. To counteract this, the EU should increase funding for infrastructure projects and expand economic partnerships that prioritize transparency and align with European governance standards.

Enhance soft power and cultural Diplomacy. As described above, Russian disinformation campaigns thrive, where EU narratives are often less visible and where populations are the most receptive to polarizing dynamics. The EU should develop grassroots initiatives tailored to these regions, focusing on media literacy programs and civic education campaigns. Special attention should be given to engaging younger generations, who are more likely to embrace pro-European values, through scholarships, exchange programs, and digital platforms. Moreover, given the significant sway over public opinion by the Orthodox Churches, the EU should seek partnerships with moderate religious and cultural leaders to counter the portrayal of Western values as threats to national identity. Highlighting shared values such as social justice and community development could foster a more nuanced dialogue.

#### Support Civil Society and Independent Media.

The EU should enhance its support for civil society organizations (CSOs) focused on democracy, human rights, and governance accountability. The EU needs to find new ways to support grassroots organizations, independent journalism and fact-checking organizations that counter disinformation and bolster democratic resilience.

Work toward the resolution of territorial conflicts: Confidence-Building Measures and the encouragement of contacts in cultural, social and economic fields, the development of different cooperation platforms has been leading to the rapprochement of the Transnistrian population in values, attitudes, views with the citizens of the rest of Moldova and Europe. The EU should pursue in that direction and rethink to the specificities of the breakaway territories in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, where confidence-building appears stalled to bolster the same beneficial dynamics.



## Conclusions

The background paper has underpinned that what we had identified as internal vectors of hybridity in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine provide inroads for the influence and interferences of negative external actors, not only competing with each other but also with the European Union. Given the poor condition of state-society relations and social cohesion in hybrid regimes, the polarizing narratives propagated mainly by Russia have easily diffused within the society, and, given the prevalence of patrimonial networks over formal institutions, negative external actors could take advantage of the hybrid structures of economic and political governance to ensure direct entry into domestic politics and decision making. As a consequence, the main contenders of negative external interferences are to be found among the civic movements that deem those interferences incompatible, rather than among the incumbent elites and opposition parties. The current protests in Georgia against the rigged elections, the subjugation by the Kremlin of the Georgian Dream government and the importation of authoritarian lawfare and practices of government, testified of the great resolve of pro-EU supporters in opposing authoritarian promotion. In Ukraine, the roots of Euromaidan also laid in the rejection of elite-driven foreign interference and the collusion of Yanukovich's multilevel patrimonial networks with Russian incumbent and extra-incumbent elites that jeopardise the democratic future of the country and the exercise of its sovereignty. To the credits of Sandu and Zelensky's government, a whole set of reforms have been undertaken to dismantle the hybrid structures of power and governance that propelled foreign interferences, especially targeting corruption in the media sector, the energy sector, the banking sector and the judicial sector. Yet, as demonstrated in our previous background paper, they prove extremely resistant and resilient to either moderate or radical change from the top.

The negative external actors engage within each of the three countries with diverse tools and with diverse foreign policy objectives. Russia proves the most coercive of all, and the inroads that it benefits from are shaped by path-dependency. China focused on economic relations and trade partnerships in key developing sectors, providing apparently “no strings attached” windfalls under very opaque conditions that are likely to be used as future levers if its own policy objectives shift or if the countries get further integrated within the EU. Turkey, while leading an “autonomy-based” foreign policy that involves privileged trade relations with Georgia and kin-state policies with Gagauzia, does not directly compete with the EU in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (Daniel et al., 2024) and its initiatives for regional cooperation its few patron-client relationship with kin communities do not appear motivated by an agenda of autocracy export, despite the nature of the Turkish regime.

To conclude, the EU's ability to influence Georgia's, Moldova's and Ukraine's democratic paths is constrained by hybrid governance practices and competing influences from Russia and China. A recalibrated strategy focusing on economic engagement and citizen-centered diplomacy offers potential but faces significant challenges, including limited government cooperation and pervasive disinformation. Progress may be slow and incremental, with the EU's role centered on sustaining democratic footholds and supporting reform-minded actors until broader systemic change becomes possible. While uncertain, this

pragmatic approach remains crucial for maintaining EU relevance and fostering long-term alignment with European values.

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## ABOUT RE-ENGAGE

Russia's war against Ukraine has radically altered European security. Confronted by the direst security crisis in decades, EU policymakers are forced to fundamentally rethink their security policies. Europe has demonstrated unexpected unity and resolve, adopting a series of sanctions against Russia, increasing national defence spending, but also by deciding on a historic revival of the EU enlargement process.

Still, there is an urgent need to make sure that this process contributes to democratic, well-functioning and stable neighbourhood states, capable of countering external threats, particularly those posed by hybrid warfare. A thorough investigation is required to determine how this can be achieved without compromising the EU's values and security in the current context.

RE-ENGAGE's overarching ambition is to assist the EU in refining its foreign policy toolbox, including its enlargement and neighbourhood policies. This will enhance the Union's geopolitical leverage and provide better tools for democracy promotion in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, RE-ENGAGE will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries – three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine).