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Unlocking the Puzzle of Authoritarian Persistence in Belarus: the Role of the EU and Russia

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Unlocking the Puzzle of Authoritarian Persistence in Belarus: the Role of the EU and Russia

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Abstract:

With the help of the concept of linkage and leverage, this paper aims at exploring how the relative influence of international actors (namely the European Union (EU) and Russia) can explain the persistence of the authoritarian regime in Belarus. The findings suggest that in the background of the great power competition that has played out in Belarus, EU's efforts to expand different types of linkages have not resulted in their sufficient levels to create leverage capable of neutralizing a significant Russian influence. Apart from the absence of substantial linkages between Belarus and the EU, such factors as Russia being a “countervailing power” providing the Belarusian regime with all sorts of support needed to sustain the autocratic rule; the absence of EU membership perspective; and diverging geopolitical interests of the EU member states leading to the absence of a coherent policy in relation to Belarus also negatively affect the strength and effectiveness of EU's leverage.

Keywords: Authoritarian persistence, Belarus, Democratization, Linkage and Leverage, Social contract

JEL codes: F51, F59, P27

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1. Introduction

It was expected by many that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, all newly independent countries would inevitably develop toward becoming liberal democracies and market economies. However, it was not always the case, proven by a vivid example of Belarus, a country which, having once been named “the last remaining true dictatorship in the heart of Europe” by Condoleezza Rice (2005), the then-US Secretary of State, has remained authoritarian for almost three decades.

According to the annual report published by the Economist Intelligence Unit, the democracy index in Belarus in 2022 amounted to 2.41 points out of ten: the lowest score since the launch of the index 16 years ago (EIU, 2022). At the same time, Freedom House’s 2022 “Freedom in the World” report assessing political rights and civil liberties gave Belarus 8 out of 100 points: the worst result in the history of the state which places Belarus in the group of “not free” regimes (Freedom House, 2022).

Despite the predictions of many political analysts, the Belarusian regime survived the unprecedented mass protests which shook the country in 2020 following the frauded presidential election, the result of which was not recognized by the European Union (EU) (Council of the European Union, 2020a). The violent crackdown on protests resulted in at least nine people killed, most NGOs in the country closed and thousands of people imprisoned, including Lukashenka’s main political opponents. Around 1,500 people in Belarus are considered political prisoners as of the June 2023 (Viasna Human Rights Centre, 2023).

These developments have forced many to question the effectiveness of EU policy instruments in relation to such authoritarian regimes as the one in Belarus, in particular the policies of democratization and Europeanization, claiming that they do not work in practice. Especially with the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine and the role played by Belarus in it, concerns about Russia’s increasingly aggressive politics in its direct neighborhood and the effectiveness of EU’s external democratization policies are growing. The renewed security challenge the Belarusian regime is currently posing to the

EU makes it necessary to explore the reasons behind the authoritarian persistence in Belarus.

Belarus can therefore serve as an interesting case study in an attempt to understand why some authoritarian regimes are resilient to external democratization efforts. As Belarus is geographically located between two regional hegemonies, Russia and the European Union, representing an autocratic and a democratic force respectively, it is of particular interest to analyze the influence of these two actors on the political regime in the country.

Domestic factors, such as Lukashenka's preemptive policies and institutional reforms that strengthened executive power (Silitski, 2005, p.85), highly repressive measures used against the opposition (Marples, 2006, p.356), large-scale co-optation (Trantidis, 2022, p.128), as well as extensive social and welfare policies (Pranevičiūtė-Neliupšienė and Maksimiuk, 2012, p.106), certainly strongly affect the authoritarian persistence in Belarus. Nevertheless, this country represents the case where it would be wrong to underestimate and ignore the role of international actors in the regime's survival. Specifically, two actors, the EU and Russia, have been playing a key part in this process, being Belarus's direct neighbors and traditionally main trade partners (WTO, 2022). Moreover, it is often argued by researchers and political scientists that Belarus, due to a variety of factors, not least due to its specific geographical position being locked between authoritarian Russia and democratic EU, has always found itself in the geopolitical dilemma between these two actors. While the EU is traditionally regarded as a promoter of the Western democratic values in its neighborhood, Russia is seen as a geopolitical player interested in the preservation of authoritarian regimes in its near abroad. This crucially affects the foreign policy strategies and instruments these actors use in relation to Belarus.

Therefore, even though consideration of both internal and external factors is crucial for understanding the survival of different political regimes, including the Lukashenka regime in Belarus, this paper will explore the role played by external actors, such as the EU and Russia, in the persistence of the authoritarian rule in Belarus.

By applying the concept of linkage and leverage (Levitsky and Way, 2005; Levitsky and Way, 2006) to explore the relevance of external factors in the phenomenon of authoritarian persistence in the case-study analysis of Belarus, I will argue that the relative

influence of Russia and the EU, as well as the ways in which these actors exercise this influence can serve as an explanation (at least a partial one) of authoritarian persistence in Belarus.

2. Theoretical framework: authoritarian persistence and its international component

2.1. Existing academic research on the phenomenon of authoritarian persistence

The amount of literature on the topic of authoritarianism is enormous in its scale. One specific strand of research which is of particular interest in the framework of this paper is the one focusing on explanations of non-democratic regimes' survival. The theories which emerged can be divided into two subcategories: the ones focusing on internal or endogenous factors which can explain why certain authoritarian regimes persist, and the ones which consider external influence as an explanation for regime survival.

The studies focusing on internal dimension of regime survival name such factors as the strength of parties in power (Magaloni, 2008), repression (Wintrobe, 1998) and institutional organization of the political system (Geddes, 1999) as the ones affecting authoritarian regimes' persistence. Gerschewski's (2013) research focuses on legitimization strategies as another factor influencing the durability of authoritarian regimes. His explanation of autocratic survival is based on three pillars: repression, co-optation and legitimacy, the presence of which is crucial for the preservation of an autocratic regime.

A very close field of research aims at explaining domestic strategies used by authoritarian governments in order to secure their rule and the resulting types of political regimes. Here, authoritarian consolidation is an important concept and can be understood as an intentional strategy chosen by political elites in order to safeguard their rule. Studies on authoritarian consolidation seek to explain the maturation (dynamics) of authoritarian rule within the state and the mechanisms of this process (Akçay, 2021, p.81; Ambrosio, 2014, p.473). According to the theory of authoritarian consolidation, the longevity of an authoritarian regime increases when ruling elites succeed in replacing coercion with governance through organization, regulation and management of discourses (Göbel,

2011, p.176). The “quality” of the authoritarian regime is therefore measured by the degree and scope of discursive and infrastructural power the regime has managed to obtain (ibid., p.186).

At the same time, autocratic regimes’ survival cannot be separated from the international environment, since external factors influence the incentives and capacities of internal actors to a decisive extent (Tansey, 2016, p.1). Especially in the aftermath of the color revolutions of the early 2000s in the former Soviet republics, scholars turned their attention to an external dimension of regime survival.

In this regard, it is important to point out that external influence on the authoritarian regime can find its expression in two different forms. The first one comes mainly from Western democratic countries by means of conditionality or democracy assistance, and is meant to have a democratizing impact on receiving states. This process can be called an “international dimension” of democratization.

It is essential to note that the process of democratization, be it caused by internal or external factors, is opposite to the phenomenon of authoritarian persistence. Therefore, one needs to consider the persistence of an authoritarian regime as an absence of democratic transition or, in other words, a “failed” democratization, in the context of the present paper – an external one.

At the same time, external influence on the domestic political regime which is totally opposite in its effect can come from other authoritarian regimes. Scholars examining this aspect of external dimension of authoritarian persistence concentrated their attention on the way how autocratic leaders help each other resist the onslaught of democratization from abroad (Tolstrup, 2015) and how the effect of intra-regional autocratic linkages on regime stability might look like (Schmotz and Tansey, 2018).

2.2. Linkage and leverage as determinants of both democratization and authoritarian persistence

A number of researchers have focused their attention on the importance of linkage and leverage in explaining either success or failure of democratization efforts of the Western countries. Originally developed and framed by Levitsky and Way (2005; 2006), the

concept of linkage and leverage has served as a basis to explain possibilities and obstacles as well as successes and failures of the Western democratization efforts by assessing Western leverage on the country in question on the one hand and its linkage to the West on the other.

Leverage is defined as “vulnerability of authoritarian governments to external democratizing pressure” (Levitsky and Way, 2005, p.21). It covers both the bargaining power of regimes in relation to the West, i.e., their ability to avoid punitive and/or democratizing actions, and the impact of such actions on these regimes.

Leverage can be exercised with the help of different carrot-and-stick mechanisms: subjecting countries to political conditionality (in case of EU candidate countries accession to the Union is the ultimate reward), withdrawing financial assistance, deploying sanctions, putting diplomatic pressure or resorting to military intervention (Levitsky and Way, 2006, p.382). The level of leverage depends on a number of factors: the size and military power of the targeted country; the presence of competing objectives on the Western foreign policy agenda in relation to the targeted country; the presence of alternative power in the region which can provide military, diplomatic or economic support (Levitsky and Way, 2005, pp.21-22).

Levitsky and Way emphasize the importance of a structural basis for external influence, arguing that leverage alone is not sufficient to cause democratic change (Levitsky and Way, 2005, p.33). Even though external pressure can be effectively used for “one-time” measures, it is far less effective at safeguarding main pillars of democracy, such as civil rights and the rule of law (Way and Levitsky, 2007, p.52). Therefore, the impact of leverage is limited in the absence of linkage, which works as a transmitter of external influence.

Linkage increases the effectiveness of leverage and intensity of international democratizing pressure and, in its turn, refers to the intensity of ties and cross-border flows between the country and the Western world. There are five dimensions in which linkage can be measured: economic, geopolitical (or intergovernmental), communication (or information), social and the one of civil society.

Economic linkage can be assessed by trade and investment volumes, credit and aid flows. Geopolitical linkage includes participation in joint alliances, treaties and organizations, as well as bilateral diplomatic and military ties. Information linkage assesses the flow of information across borders, including cross-border telecommunication and the degree of foreign radio and television penetration and coverage. Social linkage can be measured by the flow of people across borders: migrants, tourists, refugees, and diaspora communities, as well as the number of students and academic staff participating in academic exchange. Finally, civil society linkage includes ties to foreign NGOs, party organizations and other networks, as well as foreign funding for civil society (ibid, p.53).

In contrast to leverage mechanisms, the effect of linkage is more subtle as it generates “soft power” or the ability to “shape preferences” by exerting decentralized pressure on a number of non-governmental actors (Levitsky and Way, 2006, p.385). It increases the probability that (potential) punitive action by the West will generate widespread domestic opposition among different groups of population which find international isolation costly (ibid., p.386).

All in all, an increase in linkage strengthens capacities to exert leverage. It happens as the linkage contributes to raising the awareness in the West of the abuses of an authoritarian government, increasing the possibility of an international reaction, creating groups of population within the country interested in complying with democratic standards (to protect their reputation or economic interests) and overall strengthening of domestic democratic forces (Levitsky and Way, 2005, p.23). Therefore, it also affects the domestic situation and has an influence on internal factors of authoritarian persistence.

Initially, the framework of linkage and leverage was developed to assess Western democracy promotion efforts: it was argued that democratizing pressure is the biggest in the countries where the levels of both linkage and leverage are high (Levitsky and Way, 2006, p.388). In their works, Levitsky and Way do not take into account the fact that linkage and leverage can be used not only by democratic forces such as the Western countries, but by other authoritarian regimes as well.

To cover this gap, the concept of linkage and leverage has recently been used by scholars to explain the phenomenon of autocracy promotion and to assess external influence felt by countries finding themselves near regional autocratic hegemons (Tolstrup, 2015).

The conclusion has been that the higher the level of autocratic linkage and leverage, the lower the risk of collapse of the authoritarian regime (Tansey et. al., 2017, p.1254). Political, social, economic and other ties between autocratic regimes affect the emergence of domestic groups interested in the continuation of authoritarianism and counteract democratizing pressure (Schmotz and Tansey, 2018, p.662).

Being used to study the effectiveness of both democracy and autocracy promotion, the concept of linkage and leverage offers a useful framework to analyze external influence on political regimes in the countries finding themselves between competing geopolitical blocks. Therefore, the concept of linkage and leverage was chosen as a theoretical framework to describe the EU's and Russia's influence on authoritarian persistence in Belarus.

It is important to note that in the context of the present paper I am referring to the absence of democratization in Belarus only as regards its institutional side and namely the presence of an authoritarian leader in power. Whether and to which extent the EU's policies and actions have contributed to the "mental" democratization of the society in Belarus is a separate and equally important issue and should therefore be subject to further research.

3. Exploring the Belarusian political regime between 1991 and 2022: the case of Belarusian adaptive authoritarianism?

In order to explore the external influence on the political regime in Belarus, it is necessary to take a look at how the political system in the country has changed since Aliaksandr Lukashenka came to power in 1994.

The consolidation of the autocratic regime in Belarus happened between 1996 and the early 2000s (BISS, 2022, p.14). The referendum of 1996 and subsequent constitutional changes can be regarded as a turning point in the authoritarian consolidation with the major expansion of the president's powers and the transformation of the republic from a parliamentary-presidential to a presidential one (Frear, 2018, p.29). It marked the completed institutionalization of personalist authoritarian rule in the country (Silitski, 2005, p.88). The referendum allowed Lukashenka to strengthen his rule at the expense of other branches of power, putting the executive and judicial powers, the Central Election

Commission, local executive committees, security and law enforcement agencies, trade unions and TV channels under president's direct control (Shraibman, 2018, p.4).

In subsequent years, the practice of appointing legislative and judicial officials directly by the president has been established (Trantidis, 2022, p.127). Moreover, the referendum of 2004 resulted in the abolishment of the presidential term limits, suggesting further authoritarian consolidation (Frear, 2018, p.31).

These processes were accompanied by the marginalization of the opposition and the gradual narrowing of the field of activity of civil society and independent media. Since 2008, however, the screws were loosened from time to time, specifically when it was necessary for geopolitical maneuvering. That said, it is crucial to mention that only the behavior of the authorities was changing in such cases. The laws and institutions of authoritarianism remained intact or were even tightened, giving the state the opportunity to quickly return to the desired degree of repressiveness if needed (Shraibman, 2018, p.4).

Performance legitimacy played a decisive role in the Belarusian model of authoritarianism (Frear, 2018, p.184). A crucial aspect of performance legitimacy is the existence of a social contract between the government and the population, which initially implied that the state provided a gradual improvement in living standards in exchange for political consent from citizens (Balmaceda, 2014, p.86).

During the first decade of the 21st century, the Belarusian model of authoritarianism had a strong monetary trump card in its relations with the society. The social contract was based on the "authoritarian bargain", an implicit agreement between the authorities and the public, according to which citizens gave up political liberties in exchange for government spending in the form of economic and social benefits (Pranevičiūtė-Neliupšienė and Maksimiuk, 2012, p.111). This was possible due to the growth of the Belarusian economy: between 2001 and 2008, Belarus's GDP grew almost fivefold (World Bank, 2022).

The Belarusian economic model is based on re-export of highly subsidized Russian natural resources (Ambrosio, 2013, p.200). At the beginning of 2007, the oil and gas prices paid by Belarus were significantly lower than the prices paid by other countries in the region, which enabled both to maintain low energy prices domestically and to generate

significant incomes through re-export of petroleum products to Western Europe. Thus, cheap Russian natural resources secured the competitive advantage of many Belarusian state enterprises, creating a significant resource for ensuring the functioning of the social contract and at the same time making the regime extremely dependent on Russia and its policies (Pranevičiūtė-Neliupšienė and Maksimiuk, 2012, pp.121-122).

The effects of the global financial crisis and deterioration of the Russian economy due to the sanctions after the occupation of Crimea significantly impacted the domestic socio-economic situation in Belarus, and consequently the ability of the government to ensure the previous level of welfare and financial stability for the population.

The first turbulences in 2009 forced the social contract to be reconfigured as the government no longer had enough financial resources to sustain the vast social and welfare policies laying in its core and was forced to allow partial privatization and liberalization of business life (Silitski, 2009, pp.4-6).

The economic downturn of 2015-2016 hit the country severely: real incomes of the population have fallen significantly, with a growing number of households being classified as low-income and pension payments stagnating in comparison with inflation. This situation induced a complete revision of the social contract. While its main part, well-being, has stayed the same, the way of its realization has changed. The former principle of the government providing citizens with welfare benefits has turned into letting the citizens take care of their own wellbeing. Liberalization of business life, reduction of the degree of the government's interference in economic activities, rapprochement with the Western countries, and the betterment of the country's international image which resulted in increased investment prospects, offered great opportunities for the people to become economically self-sufficient (BISS, 2022, p.14). It seemed as if the social contract had been successfully transformed to the satisfaction of both sides.

However, the renewed framing of the social contract had a significant byproduct, which can be described as “mental democratization”. As Belarusians became more and more economically independent, their philosophy of life was also undergoing transformation. Dependence on the state and a so-called “learned helplessness” was replaced by the faith in one's own abilities, a feeling of autonomy from the state, whereas a fear of competition

evolved into an increased demand for clear and transparent rules creating fair competitive environment. Consequently, since the mid-2010s, Belarus has undergone a “mental democratization” which resulted in an unprecedented political mobilization in 2020 (BISS, 2022, p.15).

The contradictory domestic policies of the Belarusian leadership in 2017-2020, the accumulation of dysfunctions and imbalances in both the economy and politics (Tsarik, 2020, p.145), as well as the government’s inadequate response to the COVID-19 crisis (Bedford, 2021, p.812) were the main reasons of the political crisis of 2020. The unprecedented mass protests which followed the frauded presidential elections of 2020 have shown that the old model, in which the majority of the population exchanged political apathy for social stability, was not working anymore. The regime was forced to reorganize itself, making repression against political disagreement its main pillar, with selective punishment turning into clear totalitarian tendencies (Kazharski, 2021, p.3).

4. EU’s linkage and leverage vis-à-vis Belarus

After the end of the Cold War, the EU became the main force in the process of democratization in Eastern Europe (Tungul et. al., 2022, p.11), with promotion of democracy becoming an integral part of its foreign policy. The relations between the EU and Belarus have experienced periods of ups and downs, with the conduct of elections usually predetermining their dynamics. The latest period in relations is influenced by the frauded presidential elections of 2020 followed by mass repressions of the activists and civil society (Przetacznik and Russell, 2021, p.2). The brutal suppression of mass protests put an end to the period of rapprochement with the West started in 2015 and plunged the regime into isolation as rounds of sanctions packages targeting individuals and entities involved in mass repressions followed (Kazharski, 2021, p.3).

4.1. Economic linkage

All in all, there has been seen a growth in the total amount of trade between Belarus and the EU in the recent years. Over the past 10 years (between 2011 and 2021), the volumes of bilateral trade in goods increased by 13.3% (European Commission, 2022b). In 2021, the EU was the second main trade partner of Belarus, with the volume of bilateral trade

in goods reaching €12.9 billion, which accounts for roughly 20% of the country's total trade in goods. Bilateral trade in services amounted to €4.2 billion, with the EU being the main trade partner of Belarus in service sector, accounting for 31% of total trade in services turnover (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2022).

The EU has also provided Belarus with financial assistance in the form of grants aimed at strengthening the country's economy, improving governance and connectivity. The annual grant assistance has seen the growth from €30 million in 2016 to €135 million in 2020 (European Commission, 2022a). The European Investment Bank (EIB) alone has allocated €530 million to support the private sector and SMEs, key infrastructure and climate change projects between 2014 and 2020 (Council of the European Union, 2020b). At the same time, direct investments on a net basis from EU countries into Belarus in 2021 amounted to roughly €0.5 billion (Embassy of Belarus in Belgium, 2022). Thus, investments from the EU countries represented around 30% of the total volume of investments into Belarus (Белстат, 2022, p.65), compared to 24% in 2018.

Thus, Belarus's economic linkage to the EU continued to develop despite its authoritarian shift and consolidation. However, it should be noted that the situation in 2022 is expected to change significantly with the sectoral economic sanctions against Belarus introduced by the EU in 2021 coming into effect. Currently, bilateral trade is severely limited by both import and export restrictions, and the entire trade-related bilateral dialogue with Belarus as well as any moves toward closer economic cooperation has been suspended in response to the recent human rights violations.

In May 2021, a comprehensive plan of economic support for democratic Belarus amounting to €3 billion was presented by the European Commission (Przetacznik and Russell, 2021, p.6). It includes grants and loans aimed at supporting economic stabilization and institutional reforms in the country, in particular in the transport and digital sectors, as well as those aimed at green transformation (European Commission, 2021). However, the financial support is conditional and should only be activated following the beginning of the democratic transition in the country, with its concrete indicators not specified by the Commission.

4.2. Geopolitical linkage

For the EU, democratization in Belarus has served as a precondition for deepening bilateral partnership. As Belarus had not been able to fulfil conditions set by the EU in the areas of human rights and the rule of law, it remained the only country in EU's neighbourhood without an adequate comprehensive cooperation agreement, which is intended to lead to deeper economic integration with the EU (Cameron and Orenstein, 2012, p.4). Instead, bilateral cooperation has been regulated through separate sectoral dialogues: on energy, environment, trade, economic and financial issues, customs issues, etc. (Terzyan, 2020, pp.13-14). As the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Belarus and the EU has never been ratified due to the constitutional conflict of 1996, despite being signed back in 1995 (Gira and Dambrauskaitė, 2010, p.10), it resulted in the lack of institutional ties between Belarus and the EU.

In 2009, Belarus became one of the six countries that were to be brought closer to the EU as part of the Eastern Partnership initiative. Against the background of the global financial and economic crisis of 2008-2009 and given the deep conflict of interest in the political and economic relations with Russia, the admission of Belarus to the Eastern Partnership opened up the prospect of the European vector in the Belarusian foreign policy (Wieck, 2011, p.9). Especially between 2015 and 2020, the profile of the EU in Belarus seemed to be considerably higher than before. The presidential elections of 2020 and subsequent rounds of sanctions, including suspension of Belarus's guest status at the Council of Europe, changed this picture. With another round of sanctions against Belarus imposed after a forced landing of a Ryanair airplane with the Belarusian opposition blogger onboard, the official Minsk decided to unilaterally suspend its participation in the Eastern Partnership initiative (Przetacznik and Russell, 2021, p.2).

There is currently no EU Ambassador to Belarus after in October 2022 the Belarusian authorities refused to prolong the then-Ambassador Dirk Schuebel's visa and accreditation, forcing him to leave the country (Zeit Online, 2022).

4.3. Social linkage

Social linkage between Belarus and the EU is limited by the existence of the visa regime. Only in July 2020, the EU visa facilitation and readmission agreement with Belarus has

finally entered into force after having been negotiated since 2014 (European Commission, 2020). According to the poll conducted in August 2022, only 5% of the urban population in Belarus with access to Internet had a valid Schengen visa, which means that the real percentage of Belarusians with visas is even lower (Chatham House, 2022).

The EU has actively supported academic and cultural exchange programs like Erasmus+ and Mobility Scheme for Targeted People-to-People-Contacts (MOST), which offered short-term exchange visits for Belarusian professionals to the EU (European Commission, 2022a). Since 2009, at least 3,000 students and university staff from Belarus have had the opportunity to study or teach in the EU as part of the academic exchange programs. At the same time, 3,400 youth workers from Belarus have been involved in joint exchanges and trainings in the EU since 2014, and 5,500 people participated in short-term professional exchanges in the framework of the MOST program (Council of the European Union, 2020b). Today, academic contacts are limited as previous cooperation projects with state universities and the National Academy of Sciences of Belarus have been put on hold (Tungul et al., 2022, p.38). However, the aid packages for civil society allocated by the EU in the aftermath of 2020 include scholarships for repressed young Belarusians to study in the EU.

The share of Belarusian tourists going to the EU countries has been gradually shrinking from 46.1% in 2015 (Belstat, 2020, p.14) to 35.5% in 2017 and just 4.1% in 2021. Same can be said about EU citizens visiting Belarus: if in 2017 their share in the total number of tourists coming to Belarus was around 25% and in 2019 already 40.8% (ibid., p.13). In 2021, only 3% of all tourists who came to Belarus were EU citizens (Belstat, 2022, pp.13-14).

The official scale of labor migration from Belarus to the EU according to the Belarusian Ministry of the Interior seems to be underestimated. According to expert estimates, as of the end of 2017, the number of labor migrants from Belarus residing in the EU could have reached 100,000 people, whereas according to official data of the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs, less than 4,000 Belarusians were working in the EU in 2017 (CASE Belarus, 2019). In recent years, largely due to the economic recession in Belarus and Russia, the number of migrants from Belarus to the EU has been growing (Полетаев, 2019).

All in all, around 70, 000 Belarusian citizens were granted EU residence permits in 2019, and in 2021 this figure has reached 149, 000 (Eurostat, 2022). However, according to the methodology adopted by Eurostat, national visas issued by EU countries automatically fall under the category of “residence permits”. This means that the actual number of Belarusians moving to the EU is much lower. At the same time, EU citizens represented just over 4% of foreigners permanently residing in Belarus in 2019 (Belstat, 2019). The number of EU nationals receiving education in Belarus is relatively insignificant.

4.4. Communication linkage

Supporting the independent media has always been one of the key priorities of the European Union in Belarus. For instance, in 2016-2019, the EU implemented the “Media for a Democratic Belarus” program aimed at improving editorial standards and management practices of independent media in the country (Przetacznik and Tothova, 2022, p.7).

At the same time, media licensing, accreditation and registration in Belarus has remained unfair, and independent media has regularly been subjected to raids and imprisonment of journalists and reporters from the side of the authorities (ibid., 2022, p.2). European, international, as well as Belarusian independent media outlets are regularly denied registration as well as dissemination licenses to officially operate in the country.

Therefore, European broadcasters such as Deutsche Welle or Radio France Internationale operate in Belarus via special correspondents (IREX, 2019, p.10), while a number of independent Belarusian media outlets, e.g. Euroradio or Radio Liberty, as well as Belsat, a Polish TV channel aimed at Belarus, are based in the EU.

4.5. Civil society linkage

Out of all linkage types, Belarus-EU civil society linkage is probably the most well-developed one. Based on the assumption that NGOs play a crucial role in creating an institutional framework for challenging regimes after elections (Ambrosio, 2014, p.473), the EU has always been the biggest supporter of the civil society in Belarus, with a large part of its grant assistance being directed to this area.

The policy of critical engagement with Belarus, pursued by the EU since 2016, implied both cooperation with the state authorities and support of the non-governmental actors. Between 2016 and 2019, EU financial aid, which in total amounted to €105 million, was mainly directed to support central and local authorities, and to a lower degree non-governmental sector. Only 13.5% of total financial aid went directly to NGOs and around 6% to private companies and entities (Kaca, 2020).

Civil society had a limited access to financial assistance programs such as the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument and later the European Neighborhood Instrument. Under the EU internal rules, only legally registered organizations can participate in assistance programs, which significantly limited access to funds for independent Belarusian civil society organizations (CSOs), as they were often denied official registration for political reasons. Therefore, the main sources of funding for Belarusian civil society were the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and the European Endowment for Democracy.

Another difficulty in directly supporting NGOs was that the EU had to comply with the restrictive law on registration of foreign aid introduced by the Belarusian authorities, which resulted in delays and even refusals to register external financial support. Therefore, the EU often resorted to supporting joint projects between NGOs and local authorities as it was easier to obtain registration approval that way. Despite all these limitations, the EU has created opportunities for the civil society to network and agree on joint projects, and EU officials have also encouraged the government to be more open to dialogue with civil society.

2020 marked the beginning of the brutal crackdown on civil society with the majority of independent civil society organizations being shut down and activists being jailed or forced into exile, which pushed the EU to reshape the established approach. Since 2020, the Union has stopped its cooperation with official Minsk and reoriented financial support toward boosting the assistance provided directly to the civil society (ibid.).

In late 2020, the European Commission adopted an EU4Belarus aid package worth €24 million and aimed at NGOs, youth and SMEs, in addition to the €3.7 million emergency aid that the EU previously allocated to support independent media and the victims of repression (European Commission, 2022a). In December 2021, the EU decided to allocate

another €30 million to strengthen the civil society in Belarus, with priority areas including independent media, youth and development of culture (Przetacznik and Tothova, 2022, p.7).

4.6. Leverage

Minsk has never declared a clear political orientation toward the EU. The latter, however, has never regarded Belarus as its possible future member. The absence of membership perspective significantly decreased EU's leverage toward Belarus. This has inevitably made it difficult to effectively transfer EU democratic standards to the country, thus negatively affecting EU's ability to influence the direction of Belarus's political system (Ambrosio, 2013, p.209).

Sanctions have been the most commonly used instrument of leverage which the EU has used repeatedly in response to human rights violations in Belarus. Nevertheless, their effects have been subject of debate among scholars and political analysts since they were first introduced.

External actors can actively resist and block international sanctions efforts. In the case of Belarus, Russia is considered as such an actor. For instance, once the EU sanctions against Belarus were tightened after serious irregularities in the 2006 presidential election, Russia has openly announced its determination to help the Belarusian regime counteract the effects of restrictive measures and has provided its continuous support in the following years (Tansey, 2016, p.98).

After the forced landing of a Ryanair flight in summer 2021, the EU imposed financial and targeted economic sanctions, restrictions on access to EU capital markets, as well as cessation of all planned payments from the European Investment Bank to Belarus. However, the effect of financial sanctions is expected to be softened by strong financial support from Russia, including a credit worth \$1.5 billion agreed in 2020 (Bosse, 2021, pp.203-205).

Moreover, as noted by Levitsky and Way, the effects of leverage can be limited by diverging geopolitical interests of the EU member states as well as domestic actors inside the EU. Thus, even though the EU did not recognize the results of the 2020 presidential

elections, it took the Union almost two months to agree on sanctions against Belarus. The talks were blocked by Cyprus, which threatened to impose a veto on restrictive measures against Belarus in order to force the EU to introduce sanctions against Turkey in connection with its gas drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean (ibid., p.203).

The EU has enabled lobbying efforts to weaken its restrictive measures, allowing certain businesses and sectors to be exempted from sanctions. The recent example is the EU agricultural lobby preventing the imposition of significant sanctions on the export of potash fertilizers from Belarus: one of the main export products, potash with 60% potassium content, is still not covered by economic sanctions. Moreover, some EU companies that in one way or another helped the regime to suppress protests in 2020, e.g. by granting access to protesters' mobile phone data to the intelligence services or blocking bank accounts of opposition activists, still have profitable branches operating in Belarus (ibid., pp.204-206). It proves that the EU can also act as a pragmatic political player that can close its eyes to the insufficient level of democracy in its interactions with other actors, when "more important" (in this case – economic) interests are at stake (Cop and Kılıçdaroğlu, 2021, p.9)

Furthermore, sanctions have become such a commonly used instrument in the EU foreign policy toolkit, being almost automatically introduced in situations which the EU considers to be the ones breaching the international law or democratic values, that every next case of their application has a reduced impact. Living under EU sanctions therefore becomes "the norm" for some countries, which undertake further wrongdoings a priori expecting restrictive measures to be adopted. As a result, the exceptional character of this policy instrument and its ability to cause a desired change in behavior of the targeted actor are lost (Miadzvetskaya and Challet, 2022, p.19).

5. Russia's linkage and leverage vis-à-vis Belarus

Autocracy promotion is a commonly used strategy in Russia's foreign policy, especially toward the countries of the former USSR, with Belarus being one of its primary targets. Russia does not have any interest in having strengthened democracies in neighboring countries, as it fears for it to become a "bad signal" for its own citizens, and is instead committed to promoting and supporting authoritarian regimes there (Manaev, 2015, p.81). The Russian Federation is therefore playing a role of the "black knight" (Schmotz

and Tansey, 2018, p.662): an external sponsor seeking to strengthen the autocratic rule in the neighboring states via various mechanisms of economic, diplomatic and military support.

5.1. Economic linkage

Russia is traditionally Belarus's main trade partner, accounting for 49% of Belarus's total trade in goods in 2021 (European Commission, 2022c), making the country's economy critically dependent on Russia. What is more, Belarus is fully dependent on Russian gas, and Belarusian oil refineries are completely dependent on the imports of Russian oil (Shraibman, 2018, p.28).

The Belarusian economic model is based on extracting rent from relations with the Russian Federation and distributing it to maintain the economy. Until 2020, the sale of Russian gas and crude oil to Belarus was not subject to export duties, allowing Minsk to buy them at a discounted price and receive significant export earnings from refined oil products (Przetacznik and Russell, 2021, p.7). Energy subsidies represented the most significant part of Russian financial aid to Belarus: between 2012 and 2019, they amounted to roughly \$45 billion (Titova, 2020).

Between 2001 and 2007, during the period of rent growth, this model ensured an increase in the living standards of the population. Official propaganda used the Belarusian economic model to create a narrative about Belarus's socially oriented economy. In 2015, in addition to oil and gas rents, Belarus started to extract a "sanctions rent" related to circumventing Russia's counter-sanctions against EU countries.

The policy of unilateral orientation towards Russia has gradually strengthened the structural dependence of Belarus on its eastern neighbor as a monopoly supplier of energy resources and the only serious market for industrial products (Silitski, 2011, p.18).

Russia is not only Belarus's leading trade partner, but also the main investor into the Belarusian economy: between 2018 and 2021 Russian investments represented around 38-42% of the total volume of investments in Belarus (Белстат, 2022, p.65). Furthermore, it is Belarus's main creditor: in March 2020, the total amount of loans provided to Belarus

by Russia reached almost \$8 billion (Stonis, 2022). Among the most recent ones is the loan worth \$1.5 billion agreed in September 2020, with an additional sum of \$630 million agreed in 2021 (Przetacznik and Russell, 2021, p.7).

5.2. Geopolitical linkage

In their analyses of the international positioning of the country, some analysts point to the historically justified predominance of Russia in the foreign political orientation of Belarus (Wieck, 2011, p.8) and to the fact that relations with Russia are central not only to the Belarusian economy, but also to the reproduction of Lukashenka's political regime. This role has remained relevant throughout the history of Belarus-Russia relations since the establishment of "special relations" between two countries (Tsarik, 2020, p.138).

The period of the formation of the model of "special relations" between Belarus and Russia between 1994 and 2000 was characterized by institution building at the interstate level and the rapid growth in the significance of these relations for the viability of Belarus's political and economic system. It was during this period, when the Belarusian leadership took advantage of the weakness of the federal authorities in Russia and began to extract "integration rent" from these relations in exchange for the demonstration of geopolitical loyalty and support for the Russian leadership (Tsarik, 2020, p.138).

Shortly after Aliaksandr Lukashenka became president of Belarus, a number of bilateral cooperation agreements were signed: Treaty on the Union of Russia and Belarus (1997), Treaty on Military Cooperation between Russian and Belarus (1997), Agreement on Joint Guarantee of Regional Security between Russia and Belarus (1998) and Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus (1999) (Terzyan, 2020, p.7). All in all, under Lukashenka, Belarus has bound itself to Russia with multiple bilateral agreements covering almost all spheres of interstate relations, resulting in Russia's relations with Belarus being closer than with any other country of the former USSR.

In 1999, the Union State of Belarus and Russia was established with the aim of creating a political union with the common head of state and constitution. The negotiations and the real process of integration have so far been slow. However, 28 integration programs

were signed in 2021, envisaging a common taxation, banking, industrial and energy policies, including the creation of a single gas market, as well as coordinated macroeconomic policy (Przetacznik and Russell, 2021, p.7).

Belarus is a member of such Russia-led regional organizations as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The membership in these organizations does not provide Minsk with tangible economic benefits, but instead serves as a sign of geopolitical loyalty to Moscow (Manaeu, 2015, p.81).

Belarus is militarily and strategically important for Russia, which resulted in the country being gradually turned into Russia's military outpost (Ambrosio, 2013, p.197). This has become even more vivid in 2022, when Russian troops used Belarusian territory for their military intervention in Ukraine. Cooperation between Russia and Belarus in the military sphere covers both multilateral (within the framework of the CSTO and CIS) and bilateral (within the framework of the Union State) dimensions. Even though there is still no fully-fledged Russian military base in Belarus, Russia owns two military installations, namely radar and naval communication stations, on Belarusian territory (Rącz, 2022, p.2). Moreover, the two countries established a joint military unit (air defense and combat training center) in Belarus in 2021, adopted a common military doctrine and regularly hold joint military exercises (Przetacznik and Russell, 2021, p.7).

Even despite the fact that there have been periods of political tensions and disagreements, Lukashenka is used to enjoying strong diplomatic support from Russia. The Russian president visits the country regularly, offering his support to the Belarusian regime (Tansey, 2016, p.98). Being aware of his dependence on Russia, Lukashenka continuously sacrifices pieces of Belarus's geopolitical sovereignty in exchange for economic and diplomatic support from Russia. One example is an agreement on the creation of Belarus-Russia unified regional air defense system signed in 2009 in exchange for another Russian loan. Russia is therefore not shying away from using Lukashenka's vulnerability and his focus on remaining in power to expand its regional influence (Tungul et al., 2022, p.40).

5.3. Social linkage

The visa-free regime between Russia and Belarus serves as a key factor explaining dense social linkages. Russia is the main tourist destination for Belarusian citizens, with almost 85% of all Belarusian tourists choosing it in 2021 (Belstat, 2022, p.9). In 2017, this figure was at 45.5% (ibid., p.14) and in 2015 at 17.7% (Belstat, 2020, p.14). At the same time, Russian tourists have been the biggest group to visit Belarus in 2021, representing almost 73% of the total number of tourists. In 2017, this figure was close to 68% (Belstat, 2022, p.13). However, due to the visa-free regime between the countries, it is possible only to count the number of tourists buying organised tours, and the real figures are therefore much higher.

Among all the countries of the former USSR, the size of the Russian minority in Belarus remains the most stable since the fall of the Soviet Union (Hedenskog and Larsson, 2007, p.32). According to the 2019 census, there were around 707,000 ethnic Russians residing in Belarus, making up 7.5% of the country's population. At the same time, Russian citizens represented 9.5% of foreigners permanently residing in Belarus in 2019 (Belstat, 2019). Russians also represent a large group of foreign students in Belarus: in 2021, they accounted for 7.4% of all foreign students (Belstat, 2021, p.33).

Russia remains the most popular destination for migrants from Belarus. Belarusian citizens can freely enter, live and work on the territory of the Russian Federation without any restrictions, only having to register with the migration service within 90 days of entry. Since Belarusians do not need a residence permit or visa to live and work in Russia, the number of Belarusian citizens residing in Russia varies depending on the source. Moreover, the number of Belarusians that are on the migration registry is much higher than the ones with residence permits.

The total number of Belarusians on the migration register in Russia was 538,204 people in 2019; 299,617 people in 2020 (due to the coronavirus pandemic); whereas this figure amounted to more than 466,000 (people) in 2021. A total of 32,500 Belarusians held valid Russian residence permits at the end of 2021 (МВД РФ, 2022). All in all, more than 650,000 Belarusians were officially registered (both on the migration register and with residence permits) in Russia in the beginning of 2019.

When comparing Russian and Belarusian data on migrant workers from Belarus in Russia, serious discrepancies in the figures can be observed: while in 2017 the Russian figures were 20 times higher than the Belarusian ones, in 2020 the data differed already by 60 times. This significant discrepancy is a consequence of visa-free travel between the countries, which leads to the fact that statistics in Belarus take into account only those Belarusian labor migrants who went to work abroad with the assistance of legal entities and individual entrepreneurs who have a special license. Those labor migrants who found employment abroad on their own are not included in these statistics. According to official Russian data, the flow of labor migration from Belarus amounted to 124,500 people in 2017 and 86,000 in 2020. Belarusian data put these figures at 6,000 and 1,500 respectively (Полетаев, 2021).

Dense social linkages between Belarus and Russia are also proven by the fact that among more than half of Belarusians that have relatives living abroad, in 70% of cases these relatives reside in Russia (Chatham House, 2022).

5.4. Communication linkage

Television has traditionally been the main channel of influence of Russian media on the Belarusian audience: this sector is dominated by news content of Russian origins. To circumvent the legal requirement that foreigners cannot own more than a 20% stake in private media companies in Belarus, the main Russian state TV channels open editorial offices in Belarus registering them as local entities (IREX, 2019, pp.9-10). Out of nine TV channels forming the publicly available package in Belarus, three are Russia-owned (Tsarik, 2019). Russia-controlled channels and Russian media in general serve as a source of aggressive anti-Western narrative as well as positively neutral coverage of the situation in Belarus.

The content initially prepared by Russian media for domestic audience also forms the basis of the content for several Belarusian TV channels. All in all, 60% of programs broadcast on Belarusian TV channels show content produced in Russia (Bulek et al., 2018, p.25).

Belarusian state TV channels not only broadcast a lot of elements of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda, which has intensified since 2020, but also often invite Russian

commentators with radical anti-Western views. In the aftermath of the frauded elections of 2020, when the journalists of the Belarusian state TV expressed their support for the protesters and opposition leaders, Russian propogandists and media workers were specifically sent to the country to replace them (Przetacznik and Tothova, 2022, p.3).

The two Russian newspapers *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Arguments and Facts* operate in Belarus under the same scheme as the Russian TV channels, namely via local editorial offices, and are the most popular among Belarusian readers according to surveys. The same can be observed in relation to online media: the websites of the Belarusian versions of Russian media outlets are among the top-visited Belarusian media sites. Furthermore, in 2019, half of the dozen most popular websites in Belarus were Russian or Russia-linked (Tsarik, 2019).

5.5. Civil society linkage

Over the years, Belarusian non-governmental and non-profit organizations have generally been overlooked by Russia, which has benefited from a passive civil society in Belarus, as it was seen as something that could play an important role in strengthening social cohesion and shielding the country from Russian influence.

Pro-Russian CSOs in Belarus, which however remain rather marginal and unorganized in nature, are used to mask propaganda and provide a civic platform to enhance Russia's legitimacy in the eyes of the general public (Bulek et al., 2018, p.28). Through Rossotrudnichestvo – a federal government agency responsible for managing cultural exchange and civilian foreign aid – the Russian Foreign Ministry oversees this network of pro-Russian associations and CSOs; some of these operate under the auspices of “Russian Houses” in regional centers. Along with other public diplomacy organizations (such as the Russian Council on International Affairs and the Alexander Gorchakov Foundation for Public Diplomacy), Rossotrudnichestvo holds seminars, trainings, meetings and festivals in Belarus and distributes grants to support projects that promote Russian narratives. Since 2020, after the authorities of Belarus began a crackdown on NGOs in the country, their niche is being occupied by units of Rossotrudnichestvo, which already has three representative offices in Belarus (Burakov, 2022).

The Russian Orthodox Church is a powerful channel for Kremlin propaganda, and its head is authorized to appoint the metropolitan of the Belarusian Orthodox Church. Representatives and members of the Russian Orthodox Church tend to spread anti-Western rhetoric on issues that artificially divide society. They also welcome and endorse Russia's aggressive foreign policy toward Ukraine (Bulek et al., 2018, p.29).

5.6. Leverage

Russia is a country providing Belarus, a small and aid-dependent economy, with financial aid, which increases its leverage and makes Belarus more dependent and therefore vulnerable to the pressure from Russia's side when the latter threatens with trade sanctions and aid withdrawal. It is therefore not surprising that regular periods of deteriorating relations with Russia naturally result in political and economic crises in Belarus.

There were certain periods in the history of bilateral relations when the volume of the received rent decreased due to revision of the conditions of Belarus-Russia cooperation on the Russian side (Tsarik, 2020, p.134). In 2007, Russia refused to subsidize the Belarusian economy to the previous extent and was trying to move relations with Belarus to a more pragmatic track, where the main interest was participation of Russian capital in privatization of major Belarusian enterprises and keeping Belarus as a strategic launching pad for the Russian armed forces (Silitski, 2011, p.18). Russia's new policy toward Belarus and the post-Soviet space as a whole has forced the Belarusian authorities to think about the danger of unilateral orientation toward Moscow (ibid., p.19).

However, in the end of 2007, in order to keep Belarus in its orbit and disincentivize Belarusian leadership from seeking alternative geopolitical and economic support, Russia offered the Belarusian regime a stabilization loan worth \$1.5 billion on highly preferential terms and promised to give a second one worth \$2 billion by mid-2008. This strategy had eventually worked, depriving Minsk of the incentives to engage with the EU (Silitski, 2009, pp.7-8).

Between the second half of 2018 and May 2020, immediately preceding the 2020 political crisis in Belarus, there was a sharp deterioration in Belarus-Russia relations. Most importantly, in the economic sphere, Russian authorities took measures to drastically

reduce both oil and gas “integration rents”, ending subsidies provided to Belarus by a tax reform. As a result, Belarus has turned from a recipient of Russian subsidies into a donor of the Russian economy (Tsarik, 2020, p.141). Furthermore, throughout 2019-2020, the Russian authorities took numerous steps to prevent the re-export through Belarus of products from countries that have been targeted by Russian counter-sanctions. The Belarusian leadership faced a lack of “integration rent” and information support from Russia, entering the presidential election campaign in a state of public confrontation with Moscow. With Moscow depriving Minsk of all key instruments of support by the start of the 2020 election campaign, a political crisis was inevitable (ibid., p.145).

Therefore, the complication of relations with the Russian Federation played an important role in the development of the political situation in Belarus in 2020 (ibid., p.134). However, due to a number of reasons, the Russian authorities took the side of Lukashenka during the 2020 protests and continued to support the regime later on, helping it to resist the pressure of the Western sanctions with new loans having been issued.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This paper applied the concept of linkage and leverage to explain an external influence on the authoritarian persistence in Belarus, exploring how the promotion of democracy by the EU has been challenged by autocracy promotion by Russia and highlighting the importance of international factors for understanding regime outcomes in Belarus.

The analysis of Russia-Belarus and EU-Belarus linkages has shown that Belarus’s linkages to Russia have prevailed over the ones with the EU in almost all spheres identified by Levitsky and Way. The growing intensity of Belarus’s linkage to the EU between 2015 and 2020 could not compensate for the remarkably vast ties to Russia.

Economic linkage with Russia lies at the core of the Belarusian economic model, which at the strategic level can be explained by structural dependence that was inherited after the collapse of the USSR (Hedenskog and Larsson, 2007, p.10). Since the 1990s, friendly relations with Moscow have not only provided Minsk with “integration rent”, which made the Belarusian economic model possible, but also ensured Moscow’s political support (Tsarik, 2020, p.133). The Belarusian economy is therefore vitally dependent on heavy

Russian subsidies: loans and reduced prices of natural resources, as well as the preferential access to Russian market.

Even though the EU's economic linkages with Belarus have gradually increased since 1990s in absolute terms, their levels have not come close to the ones of Russia: even though Belarus has received a growing flow of foreign investments from the EU, the key assets belonged to Russian stakeholders; even though trade with the EU has expanded, the Russian market remained the most important one.

In terms of geopolitical linkage, there is an obvious lack of institutional ties between Belarus and the EU. Being a part of five major geopolitical, economic and military-strategic projects dominated by Russia (Union State of Belarus and Russia, CIS, CSTO, Customs Union of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, and Eurasian Economic Union), it has only limited political contacts with the EU, with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the two sides still not being ratified.

Intensive involvement of Belarus into Russia-led integration projects and financial support of Belarus with preferential gas and oil prices and loans are driven by political rather than economic motives, and Russia's economic, political and military conditionality increasingly call into question the Belarusian statehood and sovereignty (Gira and Dambrauskaitė, 2010, p.12).

When it comes to communication linkage, the influence of independent and Western media is countered by an incomparably stronger presence of Russian narratives in television, printed and online media. The existence of the visa-free regime between Belarus and the EU presupposes much stronger social linkage: (labor) migration, tourism and academic exchange.

The only sphere that stands out is the civil society linkage. Civil society support has always been a prominent topic in the EU's discourse. However, a large proportion of funding went to joint projects with public institutions, and not to NGOs directly. Against the background of increased suppression of the civic activities, Russia is beginning to occupy this niche with its pro-government organizations.

In the case of Belarus, EU's leverage is limited not only by the lack of linkage, but also by a number of other factors described by Levitsky and Way. First of all, a number of European countries have their own economic interests in Belarus, the protection of which results in the reduced effectiveness of EU democratizing efforts. The strategically important role Minsk was playing in the context of Ukraine peace talks known as Minsk Agreements resulted in the EU putting little democratizing pressure on the Belarusian regime. The fact that Belarus has never been offered a potential European Union membership has also significantly reduced Western leverage over Belarus by decreasing the impact of potential actions of the European Union on the state.

What is more, over the past decades, EU's policy in relation to Belarus has been mostly reactive. There has never been a comprehensive long-term strategy toward Belarus, except that the support of an independent civil society has always played an important role in the official rhetoric of the EU. The Union was interacting with the Belarusian regime when human rights violations seemed to have decreased in scale and was instead applying restrictive measures every time the authorities tried to brutally eliminate any sign of public discontent (Bosse, 2021, p.206).

It can be argued that the EU's conditionality approach toward Belarus has not worked for two reasons: the "carrot" proposed to the Belarusian regime was way less important than the desire to keep total control within the country, while the "stick" used to enforce the policies, namely the leverage, was largely absent (Silitsky, 2009, p.7).

In addition, Russia has been acting as a "countervailing power" (Way and Levitsky, 2007, p.51) providing the Belarusian regime with all sorts of support (economic, military, diplomatic, etc.) needed to sustain the autocratic rule. In spite of the fact that there have been various discrepancies and periods of tensions between the governments during the history of Belarus-Russia relations, both sides were interested in preserving bilateral cooperation. From the point of view of the Russian leadership, the cost of financially and diplomatically supporting the regime in Belarus have always been lower than the cost of keeping Belarus in its orbit if internal turmoil occurs there after the reduction of Russian support (Shraibman, 2018, p.9). The Belarus-Russia relations have thus mitigated the influence and the (potential) threat of EU's punitive measures and democratizing pressure, as trade volumes between Russia and Belarus and Russian financial aid protect Belarus from the possible effects of trade sanctions from the EU (Terzyan, 2020, p.7).

Applying Levitsky and Way's concept to authoritarian persistence in Belarus, it can be concluded that the external factor of enhanced relations with the autocratic regional hegemon, Russia, resulting in extensive ties between the two, has impeded democratization and contributed significantly to the preservation of the authoritarian regime, despite countermeasures from the side of the external democratic actor – the EU. Thus, low levels of EU's linkage, leading to insufficient leverage, together with vast linkages between Belarus and Russia, which strengthened Russia's leverage, has contributed to the persistence of the authoritarianism in Belarus and undermined democratization efforts.

This conclusion proves that integration into global economy in itself does not necessarily lead to democratization of the state. Instead, the international community can either assist the development of democracy or facilitate authoritarianism.

Admitting that linkage is a structural variable heavily dependent on geography and historical factors, and less affected by short-term foreign policy actions, Levitsky and Way nevertheless agree that EU's sustainable long-term integration and involvement policies have far more significant democratizing effects than an isolation and sanctions policy (Levitsky and Way, 2005, p.33). According to the theory of linkage and leverage, the more you engage with authoritarian countries, creating interdependencies, the more chance that they will be democratized in the long run. In relation to Belarus that means that increased contacts between the West and Belarus in all spheres could contribute to democratization.

However, such a conclusion raises the issue of engaging into dialogue with an autocratic regime, which has indeed proven to be an ever-present dilemma in all discussions about EU-Belarus relations. It has now become clear that as the regime's only objective is its own survival and all external democratizing pressure is seen as a direct threat, any democratic change can only come from the inside. However, there are two different views on the ways in which the EU as a democratic actor can contribute to this change, strengthening its own leverage vis-à-vis Belarus.

One side is arguing that the EU violates its own values by cooperating with the state actors, merely normalizing Lukashenka's position. Therefore, the only possible approach that is consistent with the EU core democratic values is to explicitly isolate the regime.

This does not, however, imply that cooperation with non-state actors should also be stopped. The question is whether it is possible to deepen and widen the linkage without engaging into broader cooperation with the regime in Belarus and working solely with non-state actors instead. For example, in the economic dimension, this could be achieved by deepening cooperation with private entities in specific areas providing access to know-how and technology. In the civil society dimension, it means providing even more financial and organizational support to activists and NGOs, even if in the current circumstances, the majority of them are based outside the country. The linkages in the social dimension could be strengthened by providing scholarships for Belarusian students and teachers without involvement of Belarusian educational institutions, the majority of which are public, or, for instance, unilateral easing of visa procedures.

However, geopolitical and communication linkage, in particular, seem to be impossible to broaden without cooperation with the government in question, making it necessary to look at the approach proposed by the other side. It claims that isolating the Belarusian regime pushes it further into Russia's hands, which makes it essential to continue and enhance high-level bilateral dialogue in all possible areas. Such dialogue in the economic dimension might presuppose continuation of financial aid to the country for developmental goals under strict monitoring conditions. One can as well argue that economic cooperation (even with the state actors) in innovative areas such as "green" transition might contribute to democratization: offering the country economic benefits might incentivize it to implement institutional reforms that improve economic governance. Such reforms might have a spill-over effect to other areas, contributing to increased transparency and the rule of law. Social linkages, for example in the academia, are also easier to create with governmental institutions, covering a higher number of beneficiaries. The civil society dimension seems to be the most sensitive as such approach means continuing joint projects with the state, which under the current political conditions appears to be unfeasible.

It should be noted that both views are consistent with Levitsky and Way's theory as the authors do not specify how (and with which actors) the linkages should be developed. The main goal is to strengthen the interest of domestic actors in democracy and increase the probability that (potential) punitive action by the West will generate a widespread

domestic opposition among the groups of population which find international isolation costly. The difference is only in the way of achieving it.

Finally, one should not forget about domestic variables which work in tandem with international factors to explain authoritarian persistence and which should undoubtedly be subject to further research. Uncovering the interaction between external and domestic factors is also an important area of research, which should be explored in future studies. Moreover, it needs to be further examined how domestic actors might influence the density of linkages by either constraining or strengthening them, be it intentionally or unintentionally.

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