In the crosshairs of great powers? Competitive Influence-seeking in the contested EU-Russia Neighbourhood

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Abstract **(300 words)**
Taking as our starting point Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's analysis of how linkage and leverage have accounted for the success or failure of transitions to democracy in different regions of the world, we consider recent developments in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. These three countries have been pulled in different directions—east, towards Russia, and west, towards the EU—as a result of both the linkages that their societies have and the leverage that both Moscow and Brussels can exercise. Yet, at the same time, all three countries have also suffered, to varying degrees, from systemic crises of institutional weakness and internal divisions that are enabled by competing vectors of linkage and exacerbated by the exercise of great power leverage. The EU and Russia have both tried to pull these states into their respective orbits through similar policies: the Eastern Partnership and the Association Agreements with their various promises and the Eurasian (Customs) Union and its forerunners respectively. While Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine could simply be considered pawns in the larger game of these competing geopolitical projects, our argument is that domestic factors significantly shape eventual outcomes in these three countries and in turn influence the strategies and policies of Moscow and Brussels. Based on years of close observation, including interviews and focus groups with political leaders and civil society activists in the three countries concerned and with Western and (to a lesser extent) Russian policy makers and analysts, we use congruence methods and process tracing to map trends in trajectories of domestic politics in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in relation to the EU and Russian policies over the past decade. We further analyse the dynamic and co-constitutive relationship between linkage, leverage, and institutional weakness to explain patterns of crisis and relative stability in these three countries' protracted transition processes.

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Introduction

Almost two-and-a-half decades after the end of the Cold War, 2014 ushered in near-unprecedented change in Eastern Europe. In clear violation of international law, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula on 21 March, creating two new subjects of the Russian Federation—Crimea and Sevastopol. In parallel, and as a continuation and exacerbation of a period of civic unrest that had engulfed Ukraine since November 2013, triggered by a backlash of public anger against then President Viktor Yanukovych's decision not to sign an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, tensions in the two eastern-most provinces of Ukraine—Luhansk and Donetsk—turned increasingly violent and saw bands of armed separatists gradually take control of parts of both regions and embarking on a course of action that prompted fears of further Russian intervention. The Ukrainian state and its institutions appeared to retain less and less agency of their own, being at best reactive to external pressures brought to bear in an increasingly hostile geopolitical game, initially between the EU and Russia, but subsequently drawing in the U.S. and NATO, clearly reminiscent of the Cold War.

In neighbouring Moldova, a massive financial scandal has further destabilised an already weak country since 2015, which has led to a former prime minister being jailed for his role in the theft of $1bn (equivalent to one-eighth of the country's annual GDP), and provided the impetus for a large-scale popular movement against corruption. While parliamentary elections in November 2014 returned a majority for the previously ruling Alliance for European Integration (AEI), protracted coalition negotiations dragged on until early 2015, and the first of three prime ministers to be appointed that year assumed office on 18 February leading a minority government of Liberal Democrats and Democrats, which lasted until 12 June when the Prime Minister had to resign over allegations that he had falsified his diplomas. The next government, a restored AEI coalition, fell on 29 October amid the disintegration of the coalition. A subsequent realignment of parliamentary party politics, eventually, paved the way to the formation of yet another coalition government on 20 January 2016. Later that year, the pro-Russian Socialist Party candidate Igor Dodon beat his rival pro-European candidate Maia Sandu by a margin of 55.3% to 44.7%.

In Georgia, meanwhile, the situation seemed comparatively stable. After 8 years in power, the United National Movement, headed by Mikheil Saakashvili—the charismatic leader of the 2003 'Rose' Revolution, conceded power to billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili whose newly formed Georgian Dream coalition won parliamentary elections with clear majority in 2012. What followed was equally unprecedented for this region: the rival leaders—incoming Prime Minister Ivanishvili and incumbent President Saakashvili—managed to engage in political 'co-habitation'

until the Georgian Dream coalition's candidate won presidential elections in 2013. Questions regarding Ivanishvili's past and his business and political connections in and with Russia remain, however, even though he stepped down as prime minister in November 2013, leaving the post to his close associate Irakli Gharibashvili. Little over two years later, in December 2015, the latter also resigned and since then the post of the Prime Minister has been held by Giorgi Kvirikashvili. He led the Georgian Dream—Democratic Georgia party to a decisive victory in the 2016 parliamentary elections where it secured 115 seats (out of 150)—an increase of 67 seats (Central Election Commission of Georgia, 16 Nov. 2016).

What explains these different events and trajectories in the three countries? Our answer to this question starts with the observation that they are embedded in a longer story of geopolitical competition between Russia and the EU in the area of Eastern Europe/Western CIS and the South Caucasus. This competition has intensified as their rival projects—the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)/Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—have matured and taken on more concrete meaning. Yet, these projects do not only have an impact on domestic developments in the countries that they target but the degree to which they can be successful also depends to a significant extent on conditions in the target states.

We argue in our paper that the concepts of regime export and the associated notions of linkage and leverage, thus, offer a useful starting point for our analysis, but that we need to move beyond them in two ways. First, by re-considering the rationale that underpins EU and Russian policy in the contested neighbourhood, we develop and substantiate the idea that the EU and Russia are both driven by the logic of competitive influence-seeking that prioritises achieving friendly regimes in the countries of the neighbourhood, or at least preventing hostile ones. Second, we demonstrate that by systematically factoring in the domestic dynamics of the post-communist transition processes, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the outcomes that we can presently observe in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

We proceed as follows: initially we survey the relevant literature on regime export and consider links between the external promotion of either democracy or autocracy and the causes and effects of state fragility.[1] From this, we develop a set of hypotheses on expected outcomes of external influence in more or less fragile states in the context of competitive influence-seeking by rival great powers. We then offer some methodological reflections on our approach to investigating this question before proceeding to the comparative analysis of our three case studies. In our conclusion, we summarise our findings on the interaction between linkage, leverage, and state fragility, reflect on their theoretical implications, offer some cautious predictions on

[1]While we recognize the debate regarding the distinction between "exporting democracy" and "promoting democracy" (Diamond, 1992), we use the term "promotion" in relation to the relevant efforts of both democratic and autocratic regimes. See also Lowenthal (1991) and Carothers (1999).

future trajectories shaped by the logic of competitive influence-seeking in the contested EU-Russia neighbourhood, and identify a number of future research needs.

Competitive Influence-seeking: Theories of Democracy and Autocracy Promotion, and beyond

Systematically developed by Levitsky and Way (2005, 2006), the notions of linkage and leverage have formed the backbone of many explanations of the success and failure of democracy promotion, and have, more recently also been applied to cases of autocracy promotion. They, thus, offer a useful starting point for any discussion of regime exports.[2]

Levitsky and Way (2005, p.21) define Western leverage as "authoritarian governments' vulnerability to external democratising pressure". They argue that leverage can be exerted in various ways including political conditionality, punitive sanctions, diplomatic pressure and military intervention. The degree of leverage is determined by at least three factors: the raw size and military strength of the targeted state; whether there are any competing issues on the Western foreign policy agendas relating to this state/region; and whether there is another alternative (regional) power that provides political, economic or military support (Levitsky and Way, 2005, pp.21, 27).

Such leverage is most effective when combined with linkage. This is defined as primarily a structural variable, mostly a product of geography, of historical factors such as colonialism and geostrategic alliances, and of long-term processes of social and economic integration, manifesting itself in the extent of a regime's ties to the US, EU, and Western-dominated multilateral institutions. There are at least five dimensions of linkage: economic, geopolitical, social, communication and transnational civil society linkage. Linkage works by raising the cost of authoritarianism by increasing the salience of government abuse and the probability of international response and by creating domestic stakeholders in democracy and reshaping the domestic balance of power in favour of democracy (Levitsky and Way 2005).

Where linkage is extensive and where it combines with leverage, the cost of repression, large-scale electoral fraud and other violations of the democratic process decrease in their feasibility and utility to sustain authoritarian rule. Put differently, high leverage combined with low linkage is not sufficient to induce full democratisation. Thus, while full-scale authoritarianism may be more difficult to

[2] We acknowledge that there is some debate over the degree to which external factors can account for domestic regime change or consolidation, i.e., whether autocracy or democracy promotion have any causal effect. This debate is covered, among others, by Agné (2012), Bridoux and Russell (2013), Finkel, Pérez-Liñán, and Seligson (2006), Goldsmith (2001), Knack (2004), Lindberg (2006), Paxton and Morishima (2005), Przeworski et al. (2000), Teorell and Hadenius (2009), and Wahman (2012).

sustain in such cases, these states nonetheless fail to turn into democracies due to the absence of a strong domestic push for democracy. In other words, exerting leverage may be effective in deterring the worst authoritarian abuses, but it is far more likely to produce sustainable democratic outcomes in high-linkage cases (Levitsky and Way, 2005).

While the original concept of linkage and leverage were developed with a specific view to democracy-promoting foreign policy efforts of Western actors, they can be, and have been, applied to autocracy promotion as well. Burnell and Schlumberger (2010) were among the first to point out that the importance of international factors in national political regime development was well established in democratisation studies and that similarly relevant international factors were among the potentially crucial factors to explain the resilience and spread of non-democratic rule as well.[3]

One of the underlying logics of promoting the one or the other regime type is that of 'political survival': Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner (2010) argue that authoritarian regional powers have an interest in being surrounded by other autocratic regimes. Yet, equally, autocratic and democratic regimes have an overarching interest in stability. Thus, while there is a clear causal link between the rise of authoritarian powers, such as Russia, and the slowing down of democratisation (Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010, Diamond 2008, Kagan 2008, Puddington 2007), as long as a stable domestic environment prevails, high incentives exist for a presumptive regional or global hegemon to favour the continuation of the status quo, regardless of the prevailing regime type. Instability, by contrast, begets intervention that may be driven by a potential desire for change (Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner, 2010; Bader and Kaestner, 2010).[4]

Thus, the existing literatures on external regime promotion have focused primarily on why actors seek to influence other countries and on the conditions of successful regime change. Significantly less systematic research effort has been expended on explaining the diverse outcomes of what we call competitive influence-seeking, including in the geographic region of the contested EU-Russia neighbourhood that is the empirical focus of our interest here. Extrapolating from the existing literature covered above, two dynamics potentially overlap in this space: great powers' desire to be surrounded by friendly (and politically like-minded) but also stable regimes.[5]

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[3] See also Ambrosio (2010), Tolstrup (2009).

[4] Using the example of Egypt, Brownlee (2012) makes the point that otherwise democracy-promoting actors like the U.S. may at times also support autocratic regimes in order to maintain a level of stability in a given country that protects existing material and political investments that might be endangered by a new regime. See also Aidt and Albornoz (2011), Berger (2011) and Carothers (2004). Cf. also Diamond (1992), Meernik (1996), Peceny (1999), and Schultz (1998), who all argue that the U.S. pursues at times incompatible goals: promoting democracy on the one hand, while focusing on US national security interests, on the other.

[5] We use the term 'great power' in a loose sense to refer to the EU and Russia—relative to each other and to the states in the contested neighbourhood that are the targets of their competitive influence-seeking—without implying approximately matching hard and soft power capabilities. For a more

In analogy to the global competition argument that, during the Cold War, the U.S. and USSR "viewed the colonial and postcolonial world as a field of battle in which the competition had all the characteristics of a zero-sum game, in which even the slightest gain in presence or influence for one side was seen as transforming immediately into a comparable loss of presence or influence for the other" (Kanet 2006, p.334).[6] Russia and the EU should, thus, prioritise influence over stability. That is, Russian and EU policies should seek the establishment, restoration, and/or maintenance of regimes in the contested neighbourhood that are aligned to them, rather than to their respective opponent, in terms of both their foreign policy orientation and domestic political institutions.

Stability, we argue, is of secondary importance: an unstable regime that is not fully aligned to the perceived opponent is preferable to one that is stable but wholly influenced by the perceived opponent.[7] We refer to this overall dynamic as competitive influence-seeking. The outcome of this in each (country) case is not only a function of leverage and linkage but also one of the degree of the fragility or strength of domestic institutions. As instability is frequently a symptom of underlying state weakness, the leverage of external actors, i.e., the vulnerability of incumbent regimes to external pressure, is greater in unstable environments. Thus, it presents both an additional motive (stability-seeking on top of influence-seeking) and opportunity (leverage) for great power influence-seeking. At the same time, however, that very weakness of state institutions may limit the effectiveness of external interventions. Where institutions are weak, incumbent regimes may well be unable to resist external pressure—but they are also less able to deliver the kind of change required by their backers and detractors alike.[8]

This would suggest, then, that domestic factors co-determine the results of any attempt of influence and/or stability-seeking in two ways. Strong domestic institutions enable states to resist and/or align themselves decisively with external influence seekers. Linkages, on the other hand, i.e., the strength and alignment of domestic constituencies with external influence-seekers' agendas, can either push regimes into the direction of one or the other influence-seeker and keep them there, or paralyse and

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'technical' discussion on the distinction between super, large, medium, and small powers, see Cox and Jacobson (1973).

[6] In a study of military interventions conducted during the Cold War, Pearson, Baumann, and Pickering (1994) find that "major powers seemed more inclined to back existing clients and thereby preserve their spheres of influence when superpower competition threatened [them]".

[7] In a broader analysis of autocracy promotion efforts, Way (2016) highlights the national interest rather than ideology-driven efforts of major autocratic powers. Specifically, he notes "that autocrats care less about destroying democracy than about maintaining geopolitical power"(Way, 2016, p.74).

[8] Way and Levitsky (2006) use the concepts of cohesion and scope to explain the varying effectiveness of autocratic coercion (i.e., ability to resist domestic democratising or more generally regime-changing pressures).

destabilise institutions and create a situation of lasting fluidity lacking the characteristics of stable regimes.[9]

Our argument here is not about whether domestic factors are more important than external ones or vice versa in achieving regime change or not (Schmitter, 1996; Yilmaz, 2002), nor is it about when or why rival powers pursue competitive influence-seeking and with what means (Ambrosio, 2016; Simão, 2016; Ziegler, 2012). Rather, we see our contribution to the existing literature in terms of offering a more nuanced understanding of how the interaction between external and domestic factors shapes the longer-term results of Russian and EU competitive influence-seeking in their shared, but contested neighbourhood, i.e., under what conditions competitive influence-seeking leads to regime consolidation or regime instability.

Approach: Contingent Generalisations on the Basis of Comparative Case Studies

Guided by our empirically-triggered interest in explaining the diverse outcomes of competitive influence-seeking in three countries in the contested EU-Russia neighbourhood, we are engaged in what George and Bennett (2005) refer to as typological theorising, i.e., testing contingent generalisations by "examining cases within the specified domain of the theory to see if their processes and outcomes are as the theory predicts" (George and Bennett, 2005, p.117).

Our scope conditions are straightforward: for a country-case to be part of the specified domain of our theory of competitive influence-seeking in the contested EU-Russia neighbourhood, it needs to be geographically located in this neighbourhood (i.e., in the Western CIS or the South Caucasus) and it needs to have experienced attempts by both Russia and the EU to influence its domestic political process and foreign policy orientation. There is general consensus (Haukkala, 2016; Nilsson and Silander, 2016; Orenstein, 2015) in the literature that influence-seeking was pursued more strategically and with increasing intensity by both Russia and the EU from the early 2000s onwards, driven, in part, by the various 'coloured revolutions', including in Georgia and Ukraine (Silitski, 2010), and in part by the enlargement of the EU (2004 and 2007) and NATO (1999 and 2004) which brought both organisations either directly to the borders of Russia (Baltic and Black Sea regions) or, from a Russian perspective, critically diminished the existing buffer zone.[10] Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, thus, fulfil both of these conditions for the period under observation.[11]

[9] Way (2005a) discusses this in the context of unconsolidated autocracies in which pluralism emerges by default because of anti-incumbent strength and incumbent weakness. See also Way (2003) for a case study of Moldova, and Way (2005b) for a similar analysis of Ukraine.

[10] The accession of the Baltic States and Slovakia to NATO and the EU in 2004, and of Romania and Bulgaria to NATO in 2004 and to the EU in 2007 created a much different geopolitical view for the Kremlin which until then only had to contend with Turkey (since 1952) as its closest NATO-member neighbour and with Finland and Sweden (since 1995) as its closest EU-member neighbours.

[11] The geographical condition is difficult to dispute, and we offer detailed evidence of competitive influence-seeking in the following sections.

In order to test our general proposition that the outcome of competitive influence-seeking in the contested EU-Russia neighbourhood is co-determined by domestic and external factors and their interaction, we, first, need to operationalise our two dependent variables and thus, identify the expected observations of each outcome:

1. Regime consolidation: the legal and institutional codification and subsequent endurance over time of the shift in domestic institutional characteristics triggered by regime change (Freedom House Nations in Transit trends; legislation for and implementation of institutional reforms) and foreign policy orientation (treaties and agreements with Russia/EU and their domestic implementation).
2. Regime instability: absence of regime consolidation (as defined above), manifesting itself as repeated or incomplete regime change (change in government composition and/or change in domestic/foreign policy orientation).

Second, we need to consider how our independent variables of external and domestic factors interact in bringing about one of these outcomes. That is, we need to specify and elaborate the causal mechanisms and associated expected observations. In line with our assumptions about the logic of competitive influence-seeking we can expect:

1. Regime consolidation in the presence of strong institutions and if predominantly one-sided linkages remain stable and/or increase: strong institutions enable incumbent governments to deliver on the expectations of regime change; pre-existing linkages will ensure that governments are held accountable for their promises; as governments deliver, linkages will remain stable or grow stronger, thus creating further (electoral) incentives for incumbents to stay on course while limiting the appeal of future regime change and the traction that rival, externally-sponsored regime change projects might gain. At the same time, the 'successful' external actor can leverage these domestic trends by supporting institutional aspects of regime change through various forms of development aid (e.g., budget support, preferential trade arrangements, loans and loan guarantees, institutional capacity building) and consolidate and enhance linkages (e.g., civil society support, educational exchanges, capacity building in the private sector). The most striking example of this is Transnistria which will be discussed in more detail below.
2. Regime instability if institutions become or remain weak and linkages pull into opposite directions: weak institutions prevent governments from implementing critical aspects of regime change, increasing domestic and external pressure on them. Domestically, the regime change 'project' becomes discredited, creating a domestic and external opportunity for a rival project to get traction. Externally, incentives are replaced by pressure (e.g., reducing or withholding development aid), thus, further limiting incumbent government capacity to deliver. As a result, government support weakens, government composition is likely to change gradually/partially (further watering down the regime change project) or decisively/fundamentally (leading to government

replacement and consequent regime change into the opposite direction, but again without subsequent regime consolidation).

Third, we need to consider appropriate methods of data collection and analysis that will allow us to make and interpret relevant observations. On the one hand, collecting data on our dependent variable (the outcome of competitive influence-seeking in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) is reasonably straightforward in line with our operationalisation of these variables. We draw on the annual Freedom House Nations in Transit reports to illustrate snapshot assessments and longer-term developments. In relation to relevant domestic laws and their implementation, and relevant international treaties and their ratification and implementation, we draw on legislative databases in the three countries, in Russia, and the EU. Similarly, some elements of our hypothesised causal pathways can be verified by collecting relevant data, such as on the provision or withholding of development aid, election outcomes and the electoral performance of specific political parties. This will enable us to map observations against expectations in a descriptive way and to establish the extent to which our dependent and independent variables co-vary in line with our theoretical expectations.

The use of co-variation as one method of data analysis and interpretation is appropriate in our case as we are able to offer sufficiently concrete and differentiated assessments of variance in our dependent variable (George and Bennett, 2005, p.84). Based on the indicators we established, we can qualitatively clearly distinguish between our two possible outcomes of regime consolidation and regime instability. Co-variation allows us to assess the general plausibility of our hypothesis, but on its own it is not sufficient for the establishment of causality. Hence, we employ process tracing for a more in-depth investigation of our proposed underlying causal mechanisms, relying here on primary sources (e.g., statements by relevant key policy makers and government reports) as well as existing secondary literature. This allows us to tease out whether our proposed causal mechanisms do indeed offer an adequate explanation of the different outcomes of regime consolidation and instability that we observe in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Competitive Influence-seeking: Three Country Case Studies

There is general agreement in the literature on the post-Soviet region that most states there are weak by any number of indicators (Tsygankov, 2007; Williams, 2004; Shlapentokh, 2013; Way, 2005a) and that they have been subjected to various degrees and forms of external influence (Fedorov, 2013; Freyburg et al., 2011; Hagemann, 2013; Nilsson and Silander, 2016; Nitoiu 2016). In exploring the interaction, and combined impact, of both of these dynamics on the outcomes of competitive influence seeking by the EU and Russia in this region, we discuss three country cases—Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine—that we consider to fit the scope conditions for our typological theory. All three countries have undergone a prolonged and not fully conclusive transition process since gaining independence in the wake of the break-up

of the Soviet Union in 1991. To varying degrees over time and place, this process has been characterised by three mutually reinforcing dynamics: systemic social and political conflicts, economic stagnation and crisis, and incomplete state-building. As a result, the three countries are deeply divided, economically under-developed with significant levels of economic disparity along urban-rural, centre-periphery, and social divides, and have institutions with highly varied capacity (and willingness) to manage the resulting challenges.

It is against the background of multi-dimensional, albeit varied, state fragility, that the geopolitical competition between Russia and the West has evolved in the contested neighbourhood. This competitive influence-seeking through the promotion of by-and-large mutually exclusive visions of economic, political and social development and security alliances that underpins it (Lynch, 2007; Marcu, 2009) has been facilitated by different degrees of state fragility in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. While the extent to which each country has remained fragile over time is critical in understanding the different overall outcomes of competitive influence-seeking in each case.

As alluded to earlier, a particular interpretation of the logic of political survival—being surrounded by 'friendly' neighbours—provides at least part of the foundation upon which Russia and the West have formulated their respective policies of engaging with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Thus, the very nature of the EU's ENP is defined by its core objective "that the EU should aim to develop a zone of prosperity and a friendly neighbourhood—a 'ring of friends'—with whom the EU enjoys close, peaceful and co-operative relations" (European Commission, 2003). Notably, the ENP, in part, takes its cue from the 2003 European Security Strategy which determined one of the key tasks of the EU as making "a particular contribution to stability and good governance in our immediate neighbourhood [and] to promote a ring of well governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations" (Council of the European Union, 2003). This policy, in the words of Sasse (2008), manifests itself in a lighter form of conditionality than in the enlargement process, mainly because incentives and enforcement mechanisms are less clearly defined. Moreover, it is at least in part driven by internal EU security concerns (Freyburg et al., 2009; Lavenex, 2008; Lavenex and Wichmann, 2009). The ENP went through a review process in 2015 and in May 2017 Brussels issued a Joint Report on the implementation of the "Revised European Neighbourhood Policy: supporting stabilisation, resilience, security". According to Federica Mogherini**,** High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, "The European Union has been investing a lot in economic development, resilience, security, democracy and the rule of law in our Eastern and Southern neighbours. … A stronger partnership with our neighbours is key for the European Union, while we face many challenges within our borders and beyond. … This is precisely the purpose of the current review of the ENP which will promote our common values and interests, and will also engage partners in increased cooperation

in security matters" (European Commission - Press release, 18 Nov. 2015; 18 May 2017).

In the same way that the ENP seeks to promote democracy in pursuit of stability and security, Melnykovska, Plamper and Schweickert (2012) and Shapovalova and Zarembo (2010) argue that Russia strengthens autocracies and destabilises democratisation as long as the country's geopolitical interests and stability are not at risk. Tolstrup (2015) similarly argues that by using military, political and economic levers of influence, Russia has consistently strengthened autocratic regimes and destabilised democratising ones. This pattern of Russian foreign policy has played out consistently over the past decade and a half, and is linked with the rise to power of Vladimir Putin who has served uninterrupted as prime minister or president of Russia since 1999. In some contrast to Russian foreign policy in the 1990s (Lynch 2002), Russia has become increasingly assertive throughout this period in what it defines as a zone of vital or 'privileged interests' in the successor states of the Soviet Union (Rutland, 2012; Saltzman, 2012). This development is likened to a renewal in a Russian revanchism (Fedorov, 2013; Kuzio, 2012) that displays remarkable continuity over time and is linked to the notion of encirclement by hostile powers (Shlapentokh, 2009). As then President Dimitri Medvedev stated in September 2008, in the aftermath of the August war with Georgia, "[i]t is perfectly obvious that we [Russia] are interested in a stable situation with our neighbours, absolutely all of them, without exception, even those with whom we now have rather difficult relations. ... What does this mean? It means one simple but very important thing: our neighbours are without any doubt states that are traditionally close to us and they represent the traditional sphere of interests of the Russian Federation. And the Russian Federation is for them exactly the same sort of traditional sphere of interest. We are so close to each other that it is impossible to come between us: it is impossible to say that Russia would like things a certain way, and our neighbours another. It is not even a matter of belonging to this or that organisation, this or that bloc, but rather the common history and genetic connectedness of our economies and the very close kinship of our souls. Therefore, of course, our neighbours and good relations with them are our number one priority" (cited in GlobalSecurity.org; see also The Financial Times, 31 Aug. 2008).

Medvedev's announcement regarding Russia's spheres 'of privileged interest' in its immediate neighbourhood inevitably raised concerns in the West as many feared that Russia's re-newed geopolitical assertiveness would lead to a clash with EU policies, which although perhaps until recently less defined in the same zero-sum perspective the Kremlin has adopted, nonetheless competed with Russia over influence in the same geopolitical sphere. Combined with similarly volatile, but overall declining US-Russian relations under the pre-Donald Trump presidency (Braun, 2012; Nation, 2012), prevailing lack of trust between Russia and the West (Kazantsev and Sakwa, 2012), including over NATO's role in the region (Gibler and Sewell, 2006), this competition has since then become increasingly hostile, and on occasion violent (as

was the case in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine since 2013). In fact, some in the West have long warned, and even predicted the current East-West ‘stand-off’ in Ukraine. French Member of the European Parliament Bernard Poignant, for instance, argued in the 2008 *Le Monde* article “that the Georgian war represents a precedent for a Crimean war” and “that Moscow will continue to repeat the scenario of issuing Russian passports to the local population until these ‘Russian citizens’ issue a call to their Moscow brothers to come to the rescue" (cited in Euractive, 10 Sept. 2008).

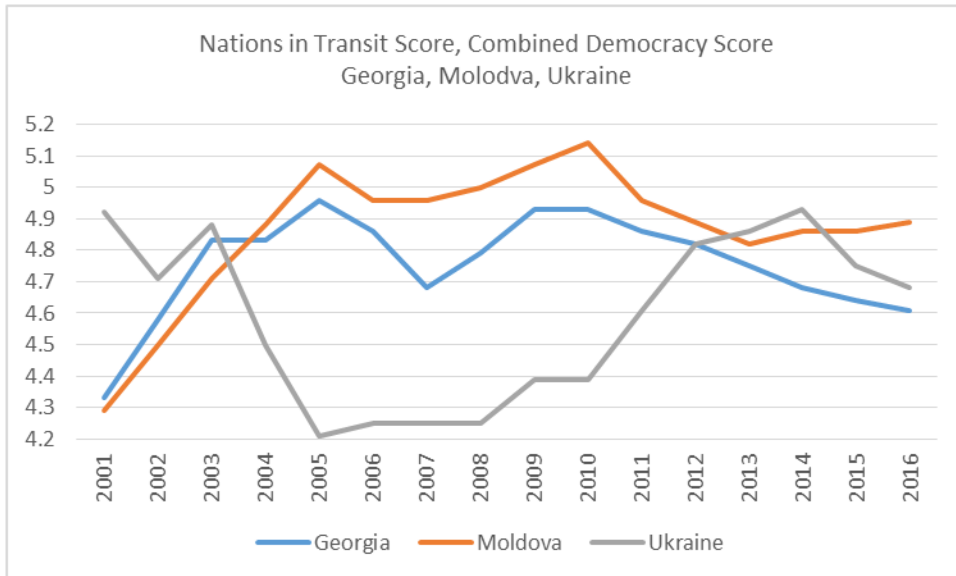
Comparative Perspectives

According to the latest Nations in Transit report by Freedom House (2016), none of the three case studies (countries) we examine here can be considered free. In fact, 25 years after independence, they are still considered ‘transitional governments or hybrid regimes’. While this may superficially indicate a state of regime instability in terms of our own terminology, it tells us little about change over the period we are considering. Trends for the orientation of domestic political institutions towards more democracy or autocracy across the period from 2000 to 2015 provide an interesting perspective.

With a view on the combined democracy score, Georgia and Moldova both had a more positive rating in 2000 than in 2015. Moldova experienced a decline in its democracy throughout Vladimir Voronin’s presidency (2001-2009), followed by slight improvements under the first AEI government, with annually worsening scores again since 2012. The picture for Georgia is somewhat similar with rapidly deteriorating scores in the late Eduard Shevardnadze period (until 2004), followed by some initial improvement under President Mikheil Saakashvili and then subsequent deterioration, followed again by a period of year-by-year improved scores from 2010 onwards. Ukraine offers almost a mirror image of the situation in the other two countries, seeing significant improvements in its democracy score after the so-called Orange Revolution in winter 2004-5. During this period the level of democracy was sustained (Viktor Yushchenko presidency—2005-10) before experiencing another decline under President Yanukovych (2010-14), followed by some moderate improvements in the post-Maidan era (since 2014).

The ups and downs of democracy scores and regularly changing governments to one side, in 2003—the year the ENP was inaugurated, all three countries have relatively similar scores, but they take a very different trajectory thereafter. 2008, the year in which the EU inaugurates its Eastern Partnership and with it the notion of greater differentiation between regions and countries across the ENP area as a whole, saw all three countries in very different positions, with Moldova now the worst performer and Ukraine the best.

Figure 1: Combined Democracy Scores, 2001-2016 (compiled by authors from Freedom House Nations in Transit Reports). NOTE: The ratings below are shown on the scale of 1-7 where 1 indicates the highest level of progress and 7 the lowest.



ЧЕРНОВИК

Figure 2: Timeline of Events

April 2001—Vladimir Voronin, the First Secretary of the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (PCRM), is elected the country's new President.
November 2003—'Rose' Revolution in Georgia.
January 2004—Mikheil Saakashvili is elected Georgia's new President after Eduard Shevardnadze steps down.
2004—The ENP is launched by the European Commission.
Winter 2004-5—'Orange' Revolution in Ukraine.
January 2005—Viktor Yushchenko is elected Ukraine's new President and Yulia Timoshenko becomes new Prime Minister.
February 2005—The ENP Action Plans are adopted by Ukraine and Moldova.
November 2005—The EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) is established in Moldova.
2005-6—Russia-Ukraine gas crisis.
Winter 2006—Russia-Georgia energy crisis.
Spring 2006—Russia bans import of Georgian and Moldovan wine and mineral water.
November 2006—The ENP Action Plan is adopted by Georgia.
February 2007—Vladimir Putin's 'Munich' Speech at Munich Security Conference.
August 2008—Russian-Georgian War; Russia recognises Georgia's two break away regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—as independent.
September 2008—The EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) is established in Georgia.
2009—The EaP is inaugurated; Russia-Ukraine gas crisis continues.
July 2009—Early parliamentary elections are won by the AEI in Moldova.
2010—The Eurasian Customs Union (EACU) is established by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.
February 2010—Victor Yanukovych becomes Ukraine's new President.
2012—The Eurasian (Single) Economic Space is established by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.
October 2012—Georgian Dream coalition wins parliamentary elections in Georgia.
November 2013— The EU initials Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova; start of the 'Euromaidan' protests in Kyiv..
February 2014—President Yanukovych flees Ukraine amidst Maidan protests in Kyiv.
March 2014—Russia annexes Crimea; Conflict in eastern Ukraine starts.
May 2014—Moldova gets visa-free travel regime with the Schengen area; The EEU is established between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan.
June 2014—Petro Poroshenko becomes Ukraine's new President; Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine sign the Association Agreements with the EU.
2014-15—The so-called Bank Fraud scandal unfolds in Moldova.
January 2016—The DCFTA enters into force in Moldova.
July 2016—The DCFTA enters into force in Georgia.
November 2016—Igor Dodon wins Presidential elections in Moldova.
March 2017—Georgia gets visa-free travel regime with the Schengen area.
June 2017—Ukraine gets visa-free travel regime with the Schengen area.

If we examine further (see Figures 3-5) and consider a number of selected indicators that we can take as reasonable proxies for commitments and sustainability to reform (Judicial Framework and Independence; Corruption) and a commitment to protecting individual liberties (Civil Society; Independent Media), we observe very few positive trends. With few exceptions (Georgia's early relatively successful efforts to curb corruption; Moldova's intermittent more permissive media environment; Ukraine's recent improvement of its judicial framework and independence), all other trends only show either at best marginal improvements on already bad scores or worsening performance by domestic political institutions.

Figure 3: Georgia Selected Democracy Indicators, 2001-2016 (compiled by authors from Freedom House Nations in Transit Reports). NOTE: 1=Highest; 7=Lowest.

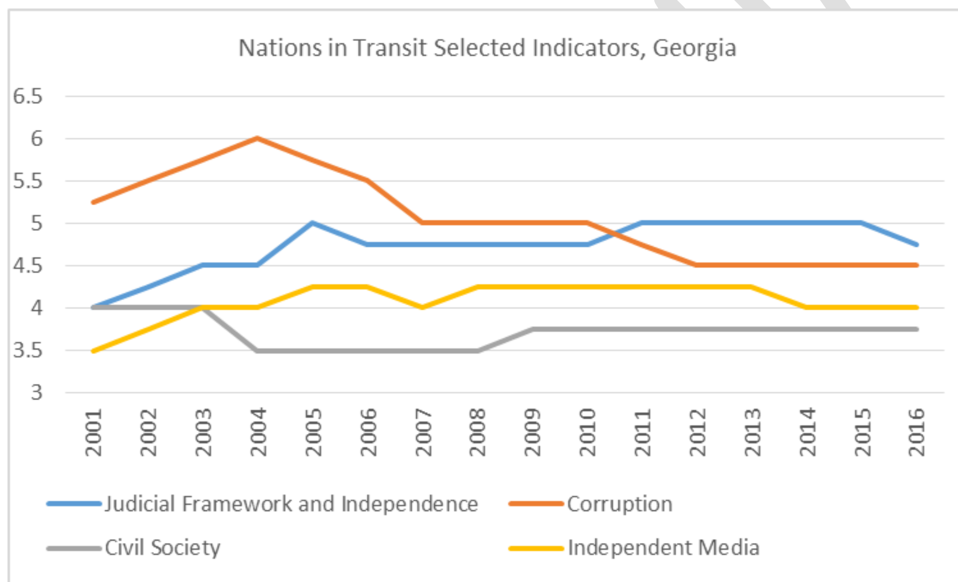


Figure 4: Moldova Selected Democracy Indicators, 2001-2016 (compiled by authors from Freedom House Nations in Transit Reports). NOTE: 1=Highest; 7=Lowest.

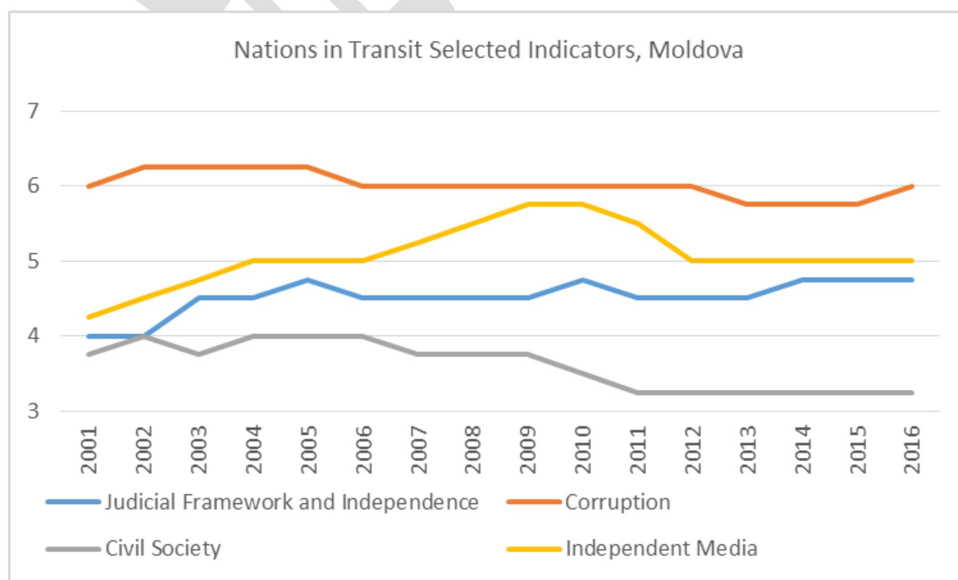
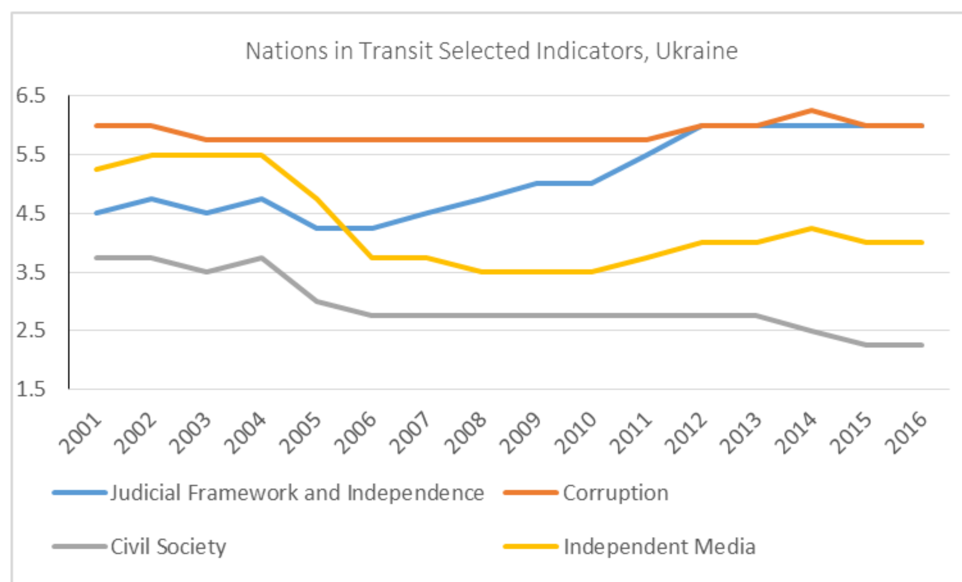


Figure 5: Ukraine Selected Democracy Indicators, 2001-2016 (compiled by authors from Freedom House Nations in Transit Reports).). NOTE: 1=Highest; 7=Lowest.



This does not, in our view, say all that much about the success or otherwise of promoting one regime type or another, but indicates certain domestic dynamics. Civil society and independent media can cut both ways in terms of which regime type and foreign policy orientation they may foster, and they are also easier 'concessions' to make than relinquishing political control over the judiciary and/or equipping the judicial process with effective tools for the enforcement of impartial justice. Thus, a free civil society (i.e., a space for non-governmental organisations to be active) and independent media (i.e., the existence of other than only state-controlled media) contribute to regime consolidation where one-sided linkages are strong (Georgia) and they contribute to perpetuating regime instability in cases where they are not (Moldova, and Ukraine until 2014).

Corruption, on the other hand, has a detrimental effect on institutional effectiveness (Moldova, Ukraine), but is also indicative of the commitment to institutional reform. Here, Georgia has clearly outperformed both Moldova and Ukraine, indicating more generally a positive institutional consolidation trajectory. Corruption, coupled with a poor judicial framework and questionable judicial independence as in Moldova and Ukraine, exacerbates institutional weakness and inhibits regime consolidation, enabling different political and business elites and their external backers to pursue their turf wars more effectively every time the electoral balance of power changes even slightly.

The consequent volatility of foreign policy orientation, and the litmus test of the success of influence-seeking, become clear when we consider that at least since the event of the EaP in 2008, all three countries have been on a similar trajectory and now have achieved Association Agreements with the EU, including visa liberalisation and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA).

Yet with the exception of Georgia, the sustainability of these gains, from an EU perspective, is in doubt, precisely because of the underpinning domestic weaknesses in terms of a lack of institutional consolidation and deep social and political divisions. In Moldova, the European 'project' has become increasingly discredited since the first AEI government in 2009, and the country's recently elected president has campaigned on a platform of scrapping it. In Ukraine, it seems increasingly difficult that a pro-European project could be sustained if the country were to reintegrate Donbas and Crimea. Put differently, for as long as competitive influence-seeking plays out in a context of regime instability with fragile institutions and divided publics, the dynamics of leverage and linkage will frustrate any external ambitions to make sustainable long-term gains. In turn, continuing competitive influence-seeking will sustain, and potentially exacerbate, underpinning institutional weaknesses and social and political divisions. Below we now turn to examining each of our case countries in more detail and greater depth.

Moldova

In Moldova, a landlocked country of less than 4 million people, GDP fell to around 30% of its pre-1990 value in the first decade after independence, a process that went hand-in-hand with an erosion of public service provision (Orlova and Ronnas, 1999). By the end of the second decade, a deep political crisis engulfed Moldova following contested and inconclusive parliamentary elections that further exacerbated existing social and political divisions in the country (Dressler, 2006; King, 2003; Kennedy, 2010; Korosteleva, 2010; March, 2007; March and Herd, 2006). This has manifested itself in successive institutional crises, including a prolonged paralysis of parliament and a loss of agency on the part of an increasingly fractious coalition government (Tsygankov, 2012). At the same time, the country remains territorially divided following a brief civil war in 1992 after which separatists on the left bank of the River Nistru established a *de-facto* state heavily dependent on Russian patronage, while relations with another territorial entity within the country—the autonomous area of Gagauzia—remain problematic. Both of these situations have remained below crisis level for the most part, but continue to exert a toll on the stability of the Moldovan polity and the country's economy (Beyer, 2010; Beyer and Wolff, 2016; Bobick, 2011; Isachenko, 2009; Protsyk, Volentir, and Bucătaru, 2007; Roper, 2001; Wolff, 2011, 2012).

Since 2013, Moldova has been shaken by an unprecedented financial scandal and its political fall-out: with six prime ministers in just over a year between parliamentary elections in late 2014 and the formation of the new government in early 2016 (Channel News Asia, 2016); the arrest and trial (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2016e) of a former prime minister Vlad Filat (2009-13); a persistent parliamentary and extra-parliamentary protest movement (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2016a; 2016b); and a concomitant surge in support for pro-Russian political parties (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2016d). Moldova has experienced a period of instability of hitherto

unknown proportions, including a worsening economic situation, further increasing corruption (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2016a) and widespread social resignation (BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 2016c).

The ‘disappearance’ of $1 billion, equalling one-eighth of Moldova's total annual economic output sparked a major political scandal and a widespread protest movement in Moldova in 2015 that blamed an ostensibly pro-EU political elite for complicity and complacency in this affair (Reuters, 14 Nov. 2016). As William Hill, a former head of the OSCE mission in Moldova, pointed out, “[l]ocal partisans of the West or EU have not only performed weakly but have performed perversely. ... And this has gone a long way to discrediting popular faith in the ideals of the West and the prescriptions of the EU or the U.S. as effective medicine for what ails their societies and their economies” (quoted in Reuters, 14 Nov. 2016). Andrei Galbur, Moldova’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration and Deputy Prime Minister has also admitted that “[p]revious governments have worn out the slogan of European integration. … The fact that the banner of the EU was used to conduct shady financial deals was extremely damaging. When we took over, it was politically dangerous to even mention that we were pro-European” (Foreign Policy, 26 Sept. 2016).

This growing dissatisfaction with the West was reflected in the opinion polls. In stark difference to the Georgian public, in October 2016, only 30.9% of Moldovans supported the idea of joining the EU. By contrast, according to Moldova's Institute for Public Policy survey, 44% were in favour of joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (Reuters, 14 Nov. 2016). In April 2016, an opinion poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) indicated that 83% of the people polled believed that the country was moving in the wrong direction (Foreign Policy, 26 Sept. 2016). Such negative attitudes towards the EU (and the West more generally) and against the political elite championing this foreign policy orientation had a direct impact on the November 2016 Presidential elections too which saw the pro-Russian candidate comfortably beat his pro-EU rival. Igor Dodon's Socialist Party campaigned for the re-building of political and economic ties with Russia and for scrapping the Association Agreement that Moldova signed with the EU in 2014 (Reuters, 14 Nov. 2016). The election of Dodon came at a time when relations between the EU and Moldova had been steadily growing in depth and breadth institutionally, but without resulting in the improved performance of the government that could have resulted in sustainable public support. On the contrary, domestic instability and external uncertainty have been a permanent characteristic of Moldova (Bosse, 2010; Hagemann, 2013; Korosteleva, 2010).

Institutional ties with the EU date back to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which entered into force in July 1998. Subsequently, the two sides negotiated an ENP Action Plan which was adopted in February 2005. The Action Plan is heavily focused on a particular model of EU-sponsored state building that aims at increasing capacity in key sectors from administration, to the regulatory framework, to judicial

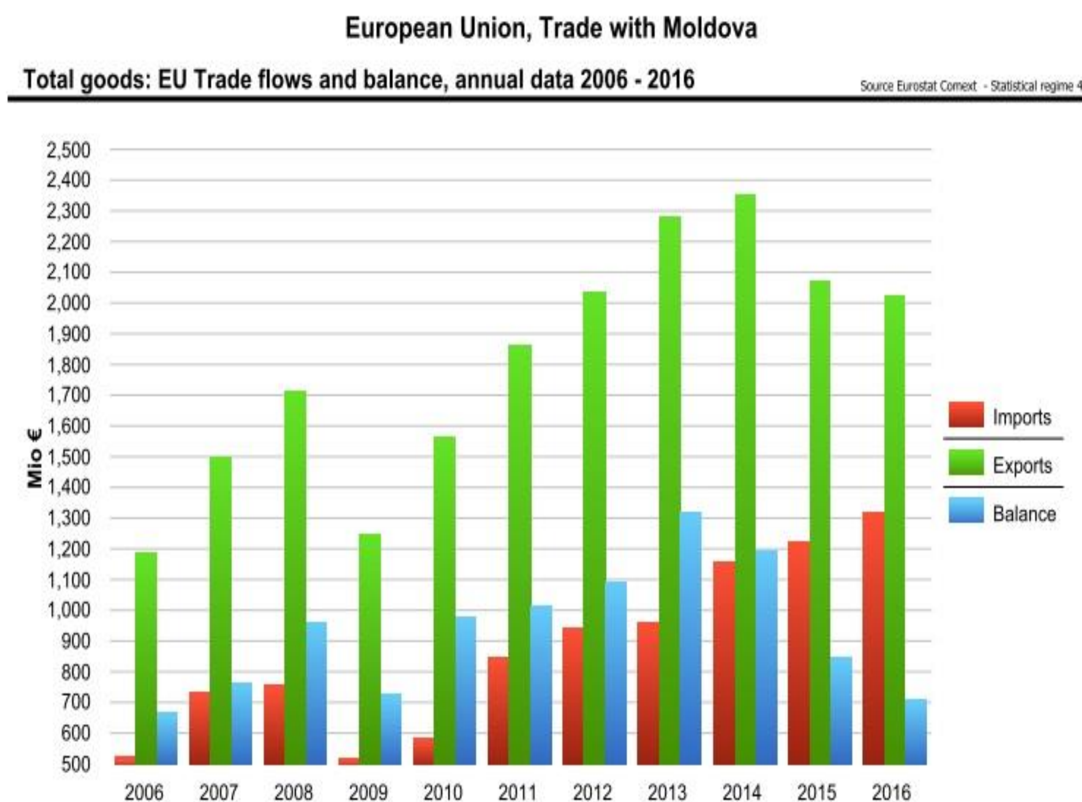
institutions, but also notes a range of security issues as priorities, including combating organised crime and the settlement of the Transnistria conflict. Since then, the EU has significantly increased its influence in Moldova and tried to anchor Chisinau more firmly in the European integration process, leading the two sides to initial an Association Agreement at the end of November 2013 and to sign it in late June 2014. This agreement is the closest that Moldova will get to formal EU membership for the time being, and it includes a visa-free travel regime (in force since May 2014) and a DCFTA in force since January 2016 (after a transition period).

However, this has not resulted in much progress on reforms in Moldova and there is an increasing sense of frustration within the EU, expressed by the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Policy, Johannes Hahn, before the European Parliament in January 2016, when he noted that "recent Moldovan governments have not implemented important reforms" and that the country urgently needed "stable leadership, with the determination and energy required to address a number of problematic issues including high-level corruption" (European Commission, 2016).

The closer relationships built with Moldova since 2007 (Crowther, 2007), and especially since the change in government in 2009, have also had ambiguous effects on the EU's ability to contribute to a settlement of the Transnistrian conflict. On the one hand, the EU established a border assistance mission—EUBAM, at the Ukrainian-Transnistrian border in November 2005 and has had observer status in the 5+2 negotiations on the Transnistrian conflict since 2005 as well. Yet, progress over the years has been limited at best and essentially consolidated a status quo that appears less and less sustainable, in particular, in light of the crisis in Ukraine (Wolff, 2012; Tudoroiu, 2012; Protsyk, 2012; Bobick, 2011; Sanchez, 2009).

As Russia has continued to use the conflict as leverage over Moldova (Beyer and Wolff, 2016; Kennedy, 2016), the EU has, nonetheless, been able to exercise some of its economic leverage in relation to the conflict settlement process, especially by focusing on trade as a confidence-building measure. This has included extending the Autonomous Trade Preferences (ATPs) granted to Moldova in 2007 to Transnistrian companies (provided they registered in Chisinau) and accepting Moldovan assurances to enforce relevant trade standards for Transnistrian goods so that the application of the DCFTA could be applied to all of Moldova's recognised territory as of 1 January 2016, i.e., enabling Transnistrian companies to benefit from continued preferential access to the EU market. As a result, already in 2015, for instance, Transnistria's exports to the EU were 30% (Kemoklidze and Wolff, 2016, p.20). In fact, according to some reports, by 2016 Transnistria's exports to the EU had overtaken its exports to Russia and the rest of the EEU countries (Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan). According to *de facto* authorities in Tiraspol, in the first quarter of 2016 alone, 58% of its exports went to the EU and only 6% to the EEU (Eurasianet, 4 May 2016; see also Kemoklidze and Wolff, 2016, p.21).

Figure 6:



Although positive in the sense that this implies some legal and regulatory changes in Transnistria that might bring the entity closer to Moldovan and European standards, it also contributes to stabilising an already entrenched status quo in which neither Chisinau nor Tiraspol have any significant incentives to make progress in the negotiations; nor does it create any such incentives for Russia either (Beyer and Wolff, 2016). While largely a casualty of the Ukrainian crisis since 2014, the complete absence of any formal talks in the official 5+2 negotiation format on the Transnistrian settlement process since spring 2014 also reflects the fact that both immediate conflict parties are generally comfortable with this stalemate.

Russia has predominantly used pressure to exert influence over Moldova, coupled with brief periods of offering incentives. Economically, Russia's leverage is related to Moldova's dependence on Russian oil and gas, the need, albeit decreasing, for access to Russia as a market, and the ability of Moldovans to work in Russia and send remittances back home. For example, Russia offered preferential energy deals to Moldova during the rule of the more pro-Russian regime of President Voronin and his PCRM in 2001-2009 and increased prices when ostensibly more pro-Western governments assumed power (the three coalition governments under Filat, Iurie Leanca (2013-15) and their successors since 2015).[12] In 2015, Russia was the second

[12] The use by Russia of its 'energy leverage' is explored in greater detail, among others, by Kropatcheva (2014), Mareš and Laryš (2012), Newnham (2011), Paltsev (2014), Spechler and

top export destination for Moldova with $263 million after Romania ($539M) (followed by Italy ($232M), Germany ($154M), and Belarus ($136M)). In terms of the top import origins, Russia was on the fifth place with $289 million after Romania ($583M), Ukraine ($508M), China ($365M), and Germany ($330M) (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

Politically, Russia has supported a range of political parties in Moldova. Normally backing more heavily those with whom there was apparently greater ideological or in a broader sense cultural affinity (such as the PCRM in Moldova, and more recently the Socialists). Moscow has also channelled support to other political forces in a complex game of hedging its bets (supporting, for example, Marian Lupu's Democratic Party of Moldova within the AEI and backing the candidate of the Renewal Movement for the Transnistrian presidency in 2011 against long-time ally and incumbent Igor Smirnov).

Militarily, and more broadly in the security sector, it has become clear that Russia is willing to apply military force in pursuit of its 'neighbourhood goals' as much as it did in the early 1990s, albeit in more delimited but also more strategic fashion (Saltzman, 2012).[13] Russia has exploited two ethno-territorial conflicts to its advantage—Transnistria and more recently Gagauzia. From Chisinau's perspective, as Deputy PM Galbur put it, "[w]e stopped flirting with Moscow, and stopped making promises we cannot keep. But we also stopped being embarrassed to talk about our issues. Russia plays an extremely important role in the settlement of the Transnistrian situation. On the one hand Russia is part of the ongoing multilateral 5+2 negotiations on Transnistria. It also has unfulfilled international commitments when it comes to withdrawing its military troops and ammunitions illegally present on the territory of my country" (CEU, 28 March 2017).

Despite these statements, however, building on widespread pro-Russian public sentiment, Moscow has been able to use the inability of successive Moldovan governments to manage these conflicts in a sustainably constructive way and sway, and retain both regions—Transnistria and Gagauzia—into its orbit. Direct Russian support to the Transnistrian pension system and significant subsidies to the region's energy sector as well as preferential trade arrangements, have maintained reasonable living standards and a degree of economic competitiveness that are still difficult to be matched by the limited 'offerings' Moldova and the EU have so far made.[14] Yet, this

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Spechler (2013), and Zabortseva (2012). For a comparison of the EU and Russia in the energy sector in the South Caucasus, see Pardo Sierra (2011).

[13] The Georgia-Russia war of 2008 was the earliest example of this, while the events surrounding the annexation of Crimea and the Kremlin-fomented instability in eastern Ukraine offer the most recent evidence of this trend (Orenstein, 2015). See further below.

[14] In fact, Transnistria is considered as "one of the most important centres of Russian language and culture abroad" and "a model for the Eurasian integration" (Rastoltsev, 2016, pp.2, 8). It receives high levels of direct humanitarian aid from Russia through various local and Russian 'humanitarian' organisations. In the past decade, in 2007-2010 alone, $55,5 million were allocated towards, among

has come at a significant price: the current Transnistrian regime is entirely dependent on Moscow and has lost whatever limited political agency it may have had prior to 2011, reducing further any prospects of constructive engagement between Tiraspol, on the one side, and Chisinau and Brussels, on the other—unless the Kremlin deems such engagement beneficial.

As a result of these policies, Moscow has been able to deepen and entrench existing cleavages in Moldova. Strong linkages on both banks of the Nistru combine with significant leverage over the Transnistrian authorities. Although to some extent offset by EU leverage, Moscow maintains rather strong linkages and significant leverage over the government in Chisinau too, especially since the most recent Presidential elections in November 2016 brought an openly pro-Kremlin candidate into power. The newly elected President Dodon wants to "restore friendly relations and a strategic partnership with Russia" (quoted in RFE/RL, 23 Jan. 2017). “We cannot live without the Russian market”, he has argued, “[the EU] needed a success story and chose us. But now everyone sees this was all an illusion” (quoted in The New York Times, 21 May 2015). According to him, “Moldova had not benefited ‘in the slightest’ from its European-integration policies of recent years” (quoted in RFE/RL, 23 Jan. 2017)—"We gained nothing from [the EU Association Agreement” (quoted in Reuters, 17 Jan. 2017). Thus, he has vowed to “work to secure for Moldova observer status in the [Eurasian Economic Union]” (quoted in RFE/RL, 23 Jan. 2017).

What conclusions can we draw in the case of Moldova? During the period under observation—from 2003 to 2016, Moldova has experienced continuing regime instability. The period of rule by the PCRM between 2001 and 2009 did not lead to a consolidation of domestic political institutions or foreign policy orientation of the country, and the loss of power by the communists in 2009 exacerbated this trend towards greater institutional fragility and more deeply entrenched rifts over the country’s foreign policy orientation. Russia and the EU both maintained some leverage over political actors and linkages into different sectors of society, but were unable to permanently and sustainably influence Moldova either institutionally or in terms of its foreign policy orientation. Moldova has remained a deeply divided and institutionally weak country in which both external actors merely exercise enough influence to prevent the respective other from drawing Chisinau permanently into its zone of influence. As the period since 2012, in particular, demonstrates, the competitive nature of EU and Russian influence-seeking has further weakened domestic institutional capacity by sustaining political leaders in government and opposition that pay lip service to their respective patrons’ agendas. However, these

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other things, supporting pensions of 137,000 residents of Transnistria. Since 2012, further $50 million was allocated through a non-profit organisation ‘Eurasian Integration’ towards construction of 14 hospitals, kindergartens, and schools. In 2013, $33 million was sent to the region to contribute towards purchasing new vehicles for emergency services. Since 2014, financial assistance has decreased due to the devaluation of the Russian Ruble. In 2014, for instance, the Transnistrian government received only $27 million and the number for 2015 was even lower—$15 (Rastoltsev, 2016, p.10).

leaders are primarily driven by self-interest and inter-personal rivalries, without the will or skill to build a viable state—democratic or otherwise—in the kind of challenging domestic and external environment that Moldova faces. This has led to a situation in which the consolidation of any regime in Chisinau remains unlikely, and especially and increasingly so that of a pro-Western regime.

Ukraine

The situation in Ukraine is largely similar, yet at the same time of a different scale given that the country has approximately ten times the population of Moldova and greater geopolitical significance. Two 'revolutions' in 2004-5 (Christensen, Rakhimkulov and Wise, 2005; Silitski, 2010) and 2013-14 (Molchanov, 2016; Onuch and Sasse, 2016) have done little to address the fundamental problems of Ukraine—weak state institutions undermined by predatory and corrupt elites (Gorobets, 2008; Way, 2005b); an east-west divide driven internally by conflicting identities with competing external allegiances (Katchanovski, 2016; Riabchuk, 2008; Shulman, 1999); and an economy with a weak regulatory framework where the most productive assets are under the control of a few powerful oligarchs while the rest remains largely uncompetitive and has yet to undergo modernisation (Gorobets, 2008; Kuzio, 2012). What has thus emerged in Ukraine is a largely dysfunctional and incomplete state (Kudelia, 2012; Kuzio, 2012) with an apathetic and divided society lacking sustainable and engaged civic organisations (Chudowsky and Kuzio, 2003; Gorobets, 2008; Korostelina, 2013a, 2013b).

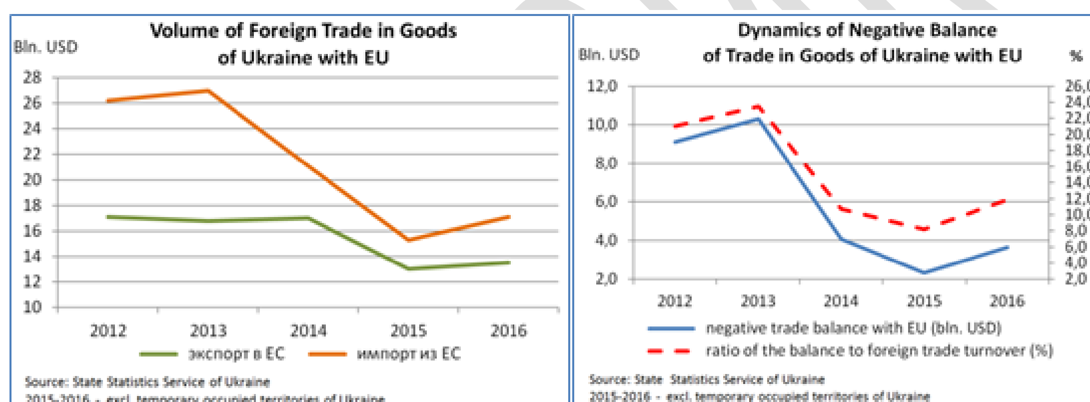
The dramatic events of the Euromaidan since November 2013 (Onuch and Sasse, 2016) have exposed these fundamental weaknesses in the Ukrainian state's inability to defend its territorial integrity in the face of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its failure to maintain its sovereignty at least on the mainland when challenged by Russia-backed separatists in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (Freedman, 2014). Subsequent instability in the political system, and an ongoing deep economic crisis, and a failure to carry out any significant reforms are further evidence of systemic institutional weaknesses of the Ukrainian state and the inability, and unwillingness, of its political elites to confront them (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016).

EU-Ukrainian relations developed along a similar pattern to Moldova, although in a less linear way (Nilsson and Silander, 2016; Wolczuk, 2009). Ukraine followed the same path from Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, to ENP Action Plan, to the negotiations of an Association Agreement. However, at an advanced stage of the negotiations, then President Yanukovych suspended all further preparations for the actual signing of this agreement in 2013, apparently under significant Russian pressure. This then triggered the events that led from peaceful protests against the president's decision at Kyiv's Maidan square to the violent escalation of tensions in the capital, the overthrow of Yanukovych, and Russian intervention that resulted in

the annexation of Crimea and high levels of instability and violence in the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Throughout this period, the EU and US supported pro-European/anti-Russian forces politically and financially. This has included a support for the approval of an €11 billion support package to be rolled out over several years, the immediate unilateral removal of custom duties for Ukrainian exports, and over €1 billion in medium-term loans. As Figure 7 suggests below, at the height of the political crisis in Ukraine (in 2013-15), "the volume of Ukraine's commodity trade with EU countries fell by 35.3%" amounting to some $15.5 billion. However, as a result of economic recovery in the country and the provisional introduction of the DCFTA, Ukrainian exports to the EU rose by 3.7% in 2016 while imports from the EU rose by 11.8% (UkrAgroConsult, 5 May 2017).

Figure 7:



The EU has also supported the interim government of Ukraine and its incoming president politically through various bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Russia. However, this and subsequent further support from the EU, US, World Bank and IMF, have yet to result in a serious reform effort in Ukraine, and the country's Western development partners have become increasingly wary of the lack of progress in Ukraine's economy and political and judicial systems. Thus, IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde noted her concern "about Ukraine's slow progress in improving governance and fighting corruption, and reducing the influence of vested interests in policymaking" in a statement in February 2016, adding that "[w]ithout a substantial new effort to invigorate governance reforms and fight corruption, it is hard to see how the IMF-supported program can continue and be successful" (International Monetary Fund, 2016).

Opinion polls also highlight the growing disillusionment and frustration of Ukrainians with their pro-Western government in Kiev and the general political and economic situation in the country. In the recent poll by the International Republican Institute (Sept.-Oct. 2016), 74% of the people surveyed disapproved of the activities of

President Petro Poroshenko (with only 20% approving), and 40% believed that the economic situation in the country had 'worsened a lot' during the past 12 months. Only 2% of the people polled thought their economic situation somewhat improved while 37% and 36% believed it had 'worsened somewhat' or 'worsened a lot' respectively. Moreover, 54% expected that the economic situation in the country would further worsen the following year. Corruption remained one of the most pressing issues for most people: 38% thought government corruption was the most important issue—only second to conflict in eastern Ukraine (53%) and 42% believed anti-corruption reform should be the priority for the government (IRI, Sept.-Oct. 2016).

Similar to Moldova, Russia has interchangeably used pressure and incentives to exert influence over Ukraine. Economically, Russia has made the most of Ukraine's oil and gas dependency—pushing for price increases in the wake of the 'Orange' Revolution and in the post-Maidan era, while offering special 'deals' during the Yanukovych period. In 2015 Russia was still the top export destination country for Ukraine (with $4.99 billion) as well as the top country of origin for its imports ($8.18B) (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).[15]

Politically, Russia has backed political parties in Ukraine with whom there was apparently greater ideological or in a broader sense cultural affinity (such as the Party of the Regions of then President Yanukovych). Russian ability and willingness to pursue its goals in the contested neighbourhood with military means has become apparent in the course of the Ukrainian crisis since late 2013, reaching a first climax in the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and continuing with the Kremlin-fomented instability in eastern Ukraine and the creation of a Moscow-backed de-facto state there (Orenstein, 2015).

Despite (growing) popular discontent with the current government in Kyiv, Russia's aggressive approach to Ukraine has, for the time being, consolidated the pro-Western foreign policy orientation of the country. In the most recent Presidential elections of May 2014, held in the aftermath of the so-called Euromaidan revolution, which culminated in the ousting of then President Yanukovych, decisive victory was achieved by pro-Western candidate Petro Poroshenko who won 54.7% of the vote. The second-placed candidate, former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, gained less than 13% of the popular vote. Given her equally pro-Western foreign policy outlook, more than two-thirds of the popular vote was cast for candidates campaigning on such a platform. This trend was further confirmed in early parliamentary elections in October that year in which the Bloc Petro Poroshenko secured the most seats (132 out

[15] Other top export destination countries for Ukraine were Egypt ($3.34B), Turkey ($2.89B), China ($2.48B), and Italy ($2.1B) with other top import origin countries being Germany ($4.07B), China ($3.77B), Poland ($2.77B), and Belarus ($2.53B) in 2015 (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

of 423[16]) with 21.81% of the vote, largely due to winning the majority of the single-seat constituencies contested under a plurality electoral system. The People's Front Party—also a pro-Western force—gained more popular votes (22.14%), but came second in the end with 82 seats, most of which it obtained under PR-List rules for nationwide contested seats (Interfax-Ukraine, 10 Nov. 2014; 27 Oct. 2014).

By September 2016, opinion polls showed that 51% of the people surveyed would vote for Ukraine joining the EU, whereas only 19% were in favour of joining the Eurasian Economic Union. This is in contrast to September 2012 when, for the last time since then, more respondents were in favour of joining the Eurasian Customs Union (42%)—predecessor of the Eurasian Economic Union—compared to those in favour of joining the EU (32%). Similarly, in September 2016, 43% declared they would vote for Ukraine joining NATO, while 29% were against it. In April 2014, the numbers were: 40% against joining NATO and 38% in favour of it (IRI, Sept.-Oct. 2016).

The pro-EU sentiments are likely to increase further after Ukraine received the green light on the long-awaited visa-free travel in the Schengen area in June 2017. In May the Netherlands "became the last country to ratify the [Association Agreement]" between Ukraine and the EU, which is expected to enter into force in autumn 2017 (The Weekly Standard, 1 June 2017; see also RFE/RL/30 May 2017). This comes a year later since 61.1% of the Dutch voters rejected the initial EU-Ukraine deal in April 2016 in the first referendum of its kind in the Netherlands where government is obliged "to call a public vote on any petition that gets the support of 300,000 people" (Politico, 7 April 2017). Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission praised the decision of the Dutch Senate to back the EU-Ukraine deal in May 2017 stating that it "sends an important signal from the Netherlands and the entire European Union to our Ukrainian friends: Ukraine's place is in Europe. Ukraine's future lies with Europe" (RFE/RL, 30 May 2017). In turn, President Poroshenko has called this treaty a "divorce from Russia" (The Weekly Standard, 1 June 2017). At the ceremony in Strasbourg earlier that month where a visa liberalisation document for Ukraine was officially signed, Poroshenko further declared: "Ukraine returns to the European family. Ukraine says a final farewell to the Soviet and Russian Empire" (RFE/RL, 17 May 2017).

While Ukraine's starting point at the beginning of our period of observation was opposite to that of Moldova—the 'Orange' Revolution in 2004-5 vs. the ascent to power of the PCRM in 2001 and its confirmation in 2005—by 2016, Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for the separatist project in Donbass has left Ukraine as deeply divided politically, socially, and territorially as Moldova. In contrast to Moldova, however, Russian influence remains comparatively more

[16] The Ukrainian Parliament (*Verkhovna Rada*) has 450 seats altogether but due to political situation in the country seats from Donbass and Crimea constituencies remain vacant.

contained to those areas where it has a physical or proxy presence, while EU (and US) leverage and linkages are much stronger in those areas fully controlled by the Ukrainian state. While it is too early to determine the outcome of EU and Russian influence-seeking in Ukraine, both external actors appear firmly entrenched, for the time being, in achieving a greater degree of institution-building and in consolidating their linkages across different sectors of society. This does not bode well for Ukraine's prospects of reintegration, but it increases the chances of pro-Western regime consolidation in Kyiv.[17]

Georgia

In contrast to the cases of Moldova and Ukraine, the situation in Georgia has evolved along a considerably different path, despite an arguably more difficult start into independent statehood there in 1991. In the course of only a few years from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Georgia turned from one of the more prosperous parts of the Soviet Union to one of the least successful post-Soviet states (Aves, 1996, p.167). It was the only republic in the former Soviet Union, where several military conflicts emerged simultaneously in different parts of the country in the early years of the transition period. Alongside military confrontations in the autonomous territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia faced a military *coup d'état* that ousted its first democratically elected President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and triggered a civil war between his supporters and opponents. One consequence of this was Georgia's international isolation and its much-delayed accession to the then Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (predecessor of the OSCE) and the United Nations, as the last of the former Soviet republics, on 31 July 1992. While the situation somewhat stabilised after Eduard Shevardnadze took over power in spring 1992, a decade later Georgia was still considered a highly fragile and fractured state.

The so-called Rose Revolution in November 2003, which started out as a protest movement in the context of fraudulent parliamentary elections, ushered in a new political era with the ascendance of a new political elite headed by Western-educated Mikheil Saakashvili, elected as the new President in January 2004. In 2012, Georgia's Parliamentary elections marked the first peaceful transition of power from one government to another when Saakashvili's ruling United National Movement lost its majority to the Georgian Dream Coalition. What followed was a year-long political 'cohabitation' between President Saakashvili and newly elected Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. However, Georgia's success throughout the decade was also marked by setbacks, most notably the Georgian-Russian war of August 2008 which resulted in Russia subsequently officially recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, further cementing their status as outside of Tbilisi's control where they had been since the early 1990s.

[17] This is indirectly borne out by the above-mentioned polling results; as polls conducted in 2012 and 2014 include respondents from areas now beyond government control.

Much like in Moldova and Ukraine, the early 2000s, thus, presented a markedly different domestic context in Georgia, prompting and facilitating more active engagement by Russia and the EU. Georgia's relations with the EU have gone through much of the same trajectory as the other two cases. Alongside Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia is one of six countries that became part of the ENP in 2003 and then the EaP in 2009. Together with Moldova, Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the EU on 27 June 2014. Having provisionally been applied since 1 September 2014, the agreement (which also includes the DCFTA), officially came into force on 1 July 2016 (Civil.ge, 14 July 2016). Since January 2014 Georgia had been part of the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) which gave it advantageous access to the EU market. This preferential treatment was in place until it was gradually substituted by the DCFTA (European Commission, 2016). As a result, "[t]he share of the EU in Georgia's foreign trade turnover has [been] increase[ing]"—it increased from 26% to 32% in a year in 2015: the volume of exported goods increased by 4% ($646 million) while the volume of imported goods increased by 6% ($2.5 billion) (Georgia Today, 20 Jan. 2016). There was "an opposite trend in the trade with the CIS countries", however, where the foreign trade turnover decreased by 22% in 2015: "[e]xports decreased by 43%, to $840 million, while imports decreased by 7%, to $1,968,000,000. The share of trade turnover with the CIS countries was reduced from 31% to 28%" (Georgia Today, 20 Jan. 2016) (for most recent numbers see Figures 8 and 9). Turkey still remained the largest trading partner of Georgia with Russia being in second place, exports decreasing by 41% ($163 million) in 2015 there while imports increasing by 9% ($626 million) (Georgia Today, 20 Jan. 2016).

Figure 8:

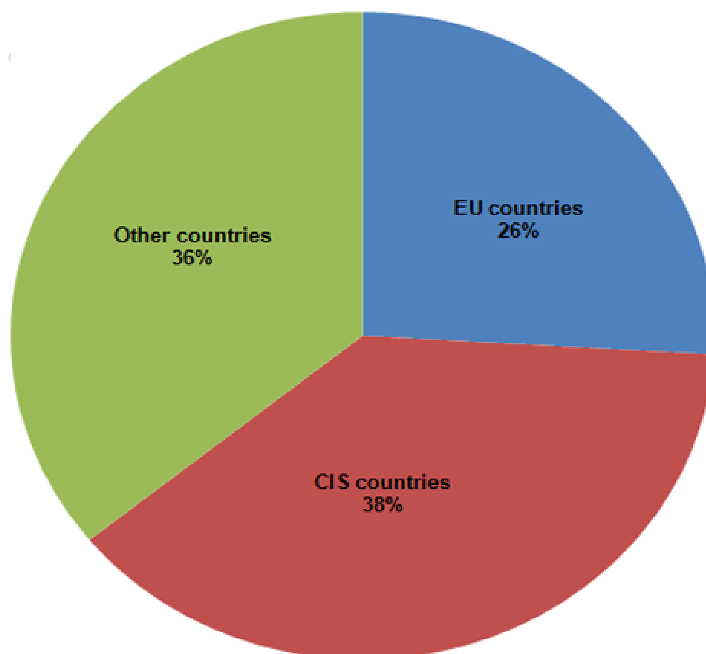
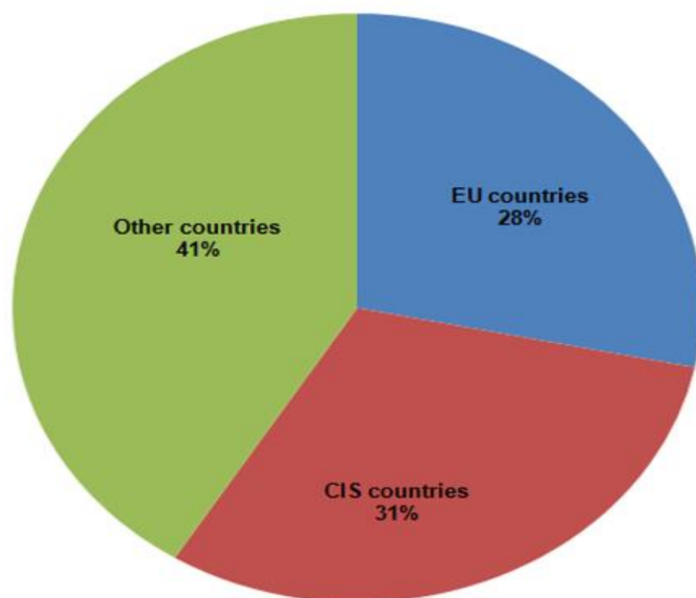


Figure 9:



Source: Geostat.ge (2017).

In addition to trade links with the EU countries, as of March 2017, Georgian citizens also have the right to visa-free travel within the Schengen area which is expected to further strengthen and increase linkages between Georgia and the EU (RFE/RL, 28 March 2017; see also European External Action Service, 2016; Civil.ge, 2 Feb. 2017).

In contrast to Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia's state-building process for the past decade or so has been less protracted, if not quite fully conclusive. With over 200 officially registered parties, Georgia's political scene remains 'vibrant' even if 'deeply fractured' at the same time (The New York Times, 7 Oct. 2016). Despite significant difficulties, the country managed to create and sustain state institutions largely able (and willing) to manage the challenges of transition. Georgia has also been the most (consistently) Western-oriented country in the former Soviet Union (excluding the Baltic states). Even after Saakashvili's overtly pro-Western party lost power and was substituted by the more moderate (and eclectic) Georgian Dream coalition that has often been accused by the opposition of having a softer stance on the Russia question, there was no fundamental re-orientation of the country's foreign policy orientation. In fact, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili has continuously pointed out that "[t]he only way forward for Georgia is to make the country a full member of the Western family" (The New York Times, 7 Oct. 2016).

Despite ‘a modest softening’ of the support of the West, Georgian public has also consistently maintained its preference for the Euro-Atlantic orientation (The New York Times, 7 Oct. 2016). According to recent polls conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI, 2016), 79% of the people surveyed support Georgia joining the NATO and 85% support it joining the EU. This sentiment has been further manifested in the outcome of Georgia's most recent parliamentary elections on 8 October 2016 in which the incumbent Georgian Dream coalition (with 48.65% of the vote) and the opposition United National Movement (27.12%)—both of which have openly Western-foreign policy orientations—between them shared three-quarters of the vote. By contrast, the only other party that managed to overcome the mandatory 5% threshold (with just 5.01% of the vote)—the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia—has remained sceptical of the country's pro-Western foreign policy choices and advocated closer ties to Russia. However, as the votes received suggests, this party does not represent a mainstream public view in Georgia. In fact, the question of ‘whether Georgia should tilt toward the West or toward Russia’ that has often dominated Georgian public discourse in previous decades was ‘almost absent from political discourse ahead of [the October] elections’ (The New York Times, 7 Oct. 2016).

Even those who have openly expressed their reservations against Georgia’s closer ties to the West and have backed engagement with Russia instead, seem uncomfortable with being labelled ‘pro-Russian’. Nino Bujanadze, former Speaker of Parliament during the Shevardnadze and Saakashvi presidencies and currently leader of the Democratic Movement–United Georgia party, for instance, concedes that this can be politically detrimental in Georgia. “I tell the Russians this: ‘There is no chance that any pro-Russian is going to get and keep power in Georgia. It is a mistake to support people who wave Russian flags’”, states Burjanadze (The New York Times, 7 Oct. 2016). She had previously met with the Russian President several times and has called “the Kremlin a compatible partner and Vladimir Putin a man of his word” (RFE/RL, 22 Feb. 2016), which has made her ‘deeply unpopular’ among the Georgian public and has resulted in her party winning zero seats in the parliament (The New York Times, 7 Oct. 2016). Some have argued, however, that this almost universal ‘rejection by Georgia’s political elite of any open affiliation with Russia’ is meant to shift attention from “the unpopular leanings of various parties”. According to Giorgi Bokeria, at the time one of the leaders of the United National Movement, “[o]f course they all say they are not pro-Russian; nobody can be pro-Russian in Georgia” (The New York Times, 7 Oct. 2016).

So what explains such a seemingly different outcome in the case of Georgia? For more than a decade now (consistently since 2004) Georgia has maintained high levels of linkage to the political West, as well as being subject to significant western leverage. Saakashvili, whose extensive educational and professional links to the West, especially to the US, also symbolised a new generation of Georgians who did not have similar links with Russia. In the post-Soviet period, Georgians were more likely

to take up the opportunities to study abroad in the West rather than in Russia, although the number of Georgians working in the Russian Federation remained high, at least up until 2006 (before the first deterioration of the relations between Saakashvili and Putin). Unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia never had a significantly large number of ethnic Russian minorities either. So in terms of linguistic affinity, Russian language never had the same status in Georgia as is the case in other two countries. In other words, there is a lack of critical mass among Georgians that would support closer links with Russia. This is not to say that Georgians do not want to see improved relations between the two countries. In fact, according to the above-mentioned IRI (2016) opinion poll results, 59% of the people surveyed were in favour of "further dialogue with Russia"; however, 71% also considered Russia as the biggest threat to Georgia and 67% believed Russian aggression was 'active and ongoing'.

Against this general background of negative perceptions of Russia, linkages between the two countries remain relatively low, and Russian attempts to gain more traction in Georgia have not, so far, succeeded. Probably one exception remains the two countries' shared religion—Orthodox Christianity, which Russia has increasingly tried to use as a powerful tool among more conservative circles of Georgian society, making a strong appeal to the country's more traditional values. The most notorious among those has been the discourse against the LGBTQ community and the portrayal of the EU (that they often refer to as 'Gayropa'), and the West in general, as immoral and threatening to the Georgian 'mentality'. Many in Georgia hold views that being gay is "a sexual choice based on debauchery" and many Georgian Orthodox clergy, among others, have opposed the anti-discrimination bill that guarantees equal rights of the LGBT people. As priest Alexandre Galdava from the Church of Archangel Michael in Tbilisi puts it, "bringing in this [equal] status and making the sexual minority a norm, the church considers this a crime. It is a problem brought from outside, from the EU" (The Guardian, 26 June 2014).

The same can be observed in the case of Moldova too. Unlike Georgia, who has its own self-governing patriarchate, Moldovan Orthodox Church still comes under the rule of the Russian Orthodox Church. Over the years, some of its senior Orthodox clergy "have campaigned tirelessly to block their country's [Moldova's] integration with the West" (The New York Times, 2016). As Marchel Mihaelscu, who was appointed as a Bishop in Balti, Moldova by the Moscow Patriarch, notes, "For me, Russia is the guardian of Christian values. ... [The EU has] definitely given us lots of money, but wants too much in return. It demands that we pay with our souls, that we alienate ourselves from God. This is not acceptable" (The New York Times, 2016).

Situation seems to be different in Ukraine. While the LGBTQ rights remain a contested and controversial issue in the country, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of

the Moscow Patriarchate[18] has openly supported the country’s quest for Western orientation and greater European integration. In fact, supporters of the head of the Church—Metropolitan Vladimir—have even argued that “there are much more important social problems in the country than the struggle with single-sex relations” (Rosbalt.ru, 2 Oct. 2013). According to Taras Antoshevsky, head of the Religious-Information Agency, spreading rumours that Euro-integration will bring ‘immoral anti-Christian values’ in Ukraine is a result of the “propaganda ideas of ‘Russian world’” (Kommersant.ru, 4 Oct. 2013). The Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine are supported by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church too. According to its head, Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the country should "continue to pursue integration into European political structures in order to prevent the nation’s absorption by Russia” (CatholicCulture.org, 13 July 2016).

In the case of Georgia, the latest parliamentary election results may indicate that anti-EU/anti-Western narrative has failed to garner much support. Thus, while Russia's military muscle has succeeded in removing Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Tbilisi's control for the foreseeable future, it has also diminished Russia's chances of exerting leverage over Georgia. These break-away territories had always been Russia's main tools of leverage for much of the 1990s and early 2000s. However, since Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states in the aftermath of the August 2008 war, Russia has significantly, if not fully, undermined its most powerful tool of leverage over Georgia.

As a result, and in clear contrast to Moldova and in partial contrast to Ukraine, Georgia has emerged as a relatively more consolidated regime. Territorially divided like the other two, the country saw a period of peaceful cohabitation followed by a full transition of power from Saakashvili to the Georgian Dream and a reconfirmation of the latter in office in October 2016, with a solid majority and a pro-Western orientation. While the EU (and the US) have maintained their leverage and increased their cross-sectoral linkages, Russia seems unlikely to regain either, at least in the short term. This has contributed to Georgia’s institutional consolidation, evident, in part, in its considerably better performance in fighting corruption. Georgia may not be significantly more democratic on a variety of other measures, but it is surely the most consolidated regime among our case studies, and more clearly in the Western orbit.

Conclusion: competitive influence-seeking in the contested neighbourhood

At present, neither Russia nor the EU/West has won a decisive victory in their competitive influence-seeking in Moldova and Ukraine. Both outside powers have asserted significant leverage and exploited the varying degrees of linkages they had.

[18] There are two other branches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church: Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. However, only the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is recognised officially by the Orthodox Christian community across the world.

Yet, this has all but exacerbated social, political, economic, and institutional instability. Both Moldova and Ukraine are split along multiple political, ethnic, linguistic, cultural and socio-economic cleavages, which, although not perfectly overlapping, inevitably divide both countries along a predominant pro-EU/Western and pro-Russian fault-line. In this sense, linkage and leverage 'work', but they do so by merely drawing parts of either country into the orbit of the respective influence-seeker. Short of a further redrawing of international boundaries—perhaps more feasible in Ukraine than in Moldova—continuing geopolitical competition between Russia and the EU/West is likely to entrench this situation.

Efforts so far to promote the different geopolitical projects of European and Eurasian integration as a way of establishing influence and thus a friendly neighbourhood have exacerbated the weakness of the Moldovan and Ukrainian states. In turn, this weakness, resulting from the incompleteness of political and economic transition processes that began more than two decades ago, in part also accounts for the failure of democracy/autocracy promotion. Despite several changes in government—from pro-Russian to pro-European and vice versa—neither country has been able to build resilient, legitimate, and effective state institutions capable of unifying the population (or at least a significant majority) behind a coherent vision of national identity and geopolitical orientation.

In Moldova and Ukraine, the prevailing patterns of using leverage and exploiting linkage have all but torn both countries apart and, at most, produced second-best outcomes for Russia and the EU/West. On the current trajectory, the logic of competitive influence-seeking would suggest that rather than being able to promote democracy or autocracy, both sides may well have to, and, indeed, may be willing to, settle for not "losing" all of Moldova or Ukraine to their geopolitical rival.

By contrast, Georgia appears more consolidated as a domestic regime and in its foreign policy orientation. While territorially still divided, the increasing permanence and apparent sustainability of the post-2008 status quo has limited both the leverage and linkages Russia once had into Georgia and has made a generally pro-EU/Western foreign policy orientation the popularly widely supported default choice for all Georgian governments since 2004. Georgia may not be the most democratic of regimes, but it seems most firmly anchored in the European/Western orbit.

This leaves us to conclude, in line with our hypotheses, that the outcome of competitive influence-seeking is significantly co-determined by domestic factors, as suggested by our comparison. In countries with fragile states and divided societies it is likely to end in a stalemate that sustains, and potentially exacerbates, the conditions of its own failure. By contrast, where institutions are stronger and more capable, regime consolidation is possible and a sustainable foreign policy orientation can be achieved. Georgia demonstrates this most clearly; Ukraine may be headed into this direction. Moldova, on the other hand, is likely to remain a centre-piece for EU and

Russian influence-seeking with all its destabilising domestic and regional consequences.

To consolidate these preliminary findings, more research is needed in two directions. On the one hand, we have only covered three of the six countries in the contested neighbourhood that fulfil our scope conditions, and a broader comparative project across all six cases would be necessary to strengthen our theoretical claims. At the same time, it would be useful to explore in more detail in-case comparisons and extend the period of observation back to 1991 when the dynamics of *competitive* influence-seeking were different. Beyond that, cross-regional comparisons with the Balkans and Central Asia could be used to extend the typological reach of our nascent theory of competitive influence-seeking in contested neighbourhoods.

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