Autocracy promotion in Russia's foreign policy: a comparison between Armenia and Belarus

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La promozione dell'autocrazia nella politica estera russa: un confronto tra Armenia e Bielorussia

Abstract

Russia's influence in its Near Abroad (called "Bližkoe zarubeže" in Russian) has created a permissive zone, in which the countries within that area can ignore their democratic commitments being aware that their loyalty to Russia can protect them against any possible interference of the US and the EU. The analysis of bilateral relations between Armenia and Russia on one side, and between Russia and Belarus on the other, has led to the identification of the four models of autocracy promotion: spontaneous emulation, hard power efforts (mainly concerning military intervention), rewards (primarily regarding economic assistance) and negative sanctions (or blackmailing). A combination of rewards and punishments has proved to be the most frequent tactic used by the Kremlin, which has also been facilitated by Armenia and Belarus's weak linkage and leverage with Western democracy promoters. Russia's "conservative" diplomacy, which has followed a realist approach, has not resulted in a rigorous autocratic promotion policy, but the Belarusian and Armenian cases demonstrate that in these two (non-democratic) regimes (and also in those of Central Asia) the presence of Russia is stronger than in the democratic ones, such as the Baltic States. Russia's "sanctions" against

Belarus have been less than those directed against Armenia, owing mainly to the former country's proximity to Russia in the cultural arena and the strategic geopolitical location of Belarus in Eastern Europe. Armenia, on the other hand, has also been subject to direct military intervention by Russia, which was however limited to the first Artsakh war.

Keywords

Riassunto

L'influenza della Russia nel suo Estero Vicino (chiamato "Bližkoe zarubeže" in russo) ha creato una zona di permissività, in cui i paesi che vi si trovano all'interno possono ignorare i propri impegni democratici, essendo consapevoli che la loro lealtà alla Russia può schermarli da qualsiasi interferenza da parte degli USA o dell'UE. L'analisi delle relazioni bilaterali tra Armenia e Russia, da un lato, e tra Russia e Bielorussia dall'altro, ha portato all'identificazione dei quattro modelli di autocracy promotion: l'emulazione spontanea, le azioni di hard power (principalmente riguardanti interventi militari), i premi (facenti soprattutto riferimento all'assistenza di tipo economico) e le sanzioni negative (o i ricatti). Una combinazione di premi e sanzioni si è rivelata essere la tattica più frequente utilizzata dal Cremlino, la quale è stata ulteriormente facilitata dai deboli linkage e leverage che Armenia e Bielorussia hanno con i promotori occidentali della democrazia. La diplomazia "conservatrice" della Russia, la quale ha adottato un approccio realista, non è sfociata in una rigida politica di promozione dell'autoritarismo, ma i casi armeno e bielorusso dimostrano che in questi due regimi non democratici (ed anche in quelli dell'Asia Centrale) la presenza della Russia è più forte che nei regimi democratici, come le Repubbliche Baltiche. Le "sanzioni" della Russia contro la Bielorussia sono state meno di quelle dirette contro l'Armenia, dovendo ciò principalmente alla prossimità tra Russia e Bielorussia nell'arena culturale e alla posizione geopolitica strategica della Bielorussia in Europa Orientale. L'Armenia, dall'altro lato, è stata anche oggetto di un intervento militare diretto della Russia, che però si è limitato alla prima guerra dell'Artsakh. .

Parole chiave

Introduction

By analyzing Russia's foreign policy in its Near Abroad (called "*Bližkoe zarubeže*" in Russian), this article examines the former's relations with two countries whose institutions are characterized by undemocratic dynamics: Armenia (classified as "hybrid regime") and Belarus (a consolidated authoritarian regime).[1] The stages in which Russia's external action has fostered the persistence of the internally non-democratic regimes, are detected on the empirical basis constituted by the two countries' relations with Moscow, whose foreign policy is marked by the consciousness of being the hegemonic power in its region. The search for a link between Russia's foreign policy and autocracy promotion shall act as the "backbone" of this article, which will eventually lead to the identification of the four models of autocracy promotion: spontaneous emulation, hard power efforts (mainly concerning military intervention), rewards (primarily regarding economic assistance) and negative sanctions (or blackmailing).

Although Moscow's interventionism can be explained primarily on the basis of geopolitical interests, of the calculation of costs associated with the possible defection of a regime (Tolstrup, 2015) and on the search for domestic legitimation (Hale, 2018), autocracy promoters act according to a combination of both values and interests, because aiming at only one of the two risks undermining the relationship among all authoritarian (or non-democratic) regimes concerned. This combination emerges mainly when the promoter seeks to achieve regional hegemony, because it needs legitimation: ideological osmosis can create a deeper bond with the leader. The maintenance of regional hegemony is, however, a dynamic and not necessarily linear process. Therefore, the assumption that Russia's foreign policy has only fostered the emergence of authoritarian regimes in its Near Abroad has to be excluded, but in these regimes (including those of Central Asia) the presence of Russia is stronger than in the democratic ones, such as the Baltic States.

This article does not aim to explain why an authoritarian regime should counteract the possible effects of democracy promotion, but instead it focuses on the methods through which this occurs and tries to outline the factors that determine the choice of one way rather than the other. Given that any authoritarian regime is primarily interested in maintaining its domestic power and external geopolitical influence, a *democratic opening* can become possible also in a country where authoritarianism is fostered from outside. The promotion of hybrid regimes becomes indeed the second best option when support for authoritarianism does not ensure protection from possible contestations by civil society, which in turn is the main actor during the transitional stage until the establishment of the new government, as occurred in the 2018 Armenian velvet revolution. The "third option" entailing support in favor of democratic regimes is not preferable.

In order to clearly highlight the different stages of Belarus's and Armenia's relations with Russia, this article divides the Kremlin's foreign policy into four main periods: from Yeltsin to Putin's first term, and from the Putin-Medvedev diarchy to the current mandate of Putin. Finally, this paper will close the loop trying to evaluate the four above-mentioned methods through which Russia has fostered the presence of hybrid and authoritarian regimes in its Near Abroad.

Armenia's institutional framework and democracy scores

From its independence (1991) until the mid-1990s Armenia improved its political and civil rights performances. From a score of 5 and 5 (political rights and civil liberties) in 1991-92, it went on to 3 and 4 during 1994-95, according to Freedom House. The president's power was further strengthened by the very nature of the Armenian party system, which was atomized and characterized by over 50 political parties registered in 1996. From the mid-1990s the Freedom House score worsened (5 and 4 in 1996-97) and political rights improved only by one point (from 5 to 4) in the shift from the presidency of Ter-Petrosyan to that of Robert Kocharian. After having been reelected in 2003, Kocharian passed the baton to his political ally Serzh Sargsyan (who had

become the leader of the Republican Party - HHK) at the 2008 presidential election. Because of the post-electoral protests and consequent repression ordered by the outgoing president (who also imposed a 20-day curfew), Armenia's performance in terms of political rights and civil liberties worsened, from 5 and 4 to 6 and 4.[2] Serzh Sargsyan was re-elected in 2013 (with 59% of the votes), also obtaining the certification of regularity by the OSCE electoral observation mission. Armenia indeed improved its score in political rights, returning to 5, while the civil rights rating remained unchanged at 4.[3] In 2017, the HHK (pro-Russian conservative) obtained a wide majority conquering 58 seats, thus marginalizing the "Yelk" coalition (pro-european liberal), which was created in 2016 and included three different parties: Bright Armenia, Hanrapetutyun Party, and Civil Contract headed by Nikol Pashinyan. This coalition obtained indeed only 9 seats. In early 2018, Armen Sarkissian (after the vote by the National Assembly) succeeded Serzh Sargsyan to the presidency. The latter was however proposed by the Republican Party as the new Prime Minister, after the then premier Karapetyan had resigned in April that year. Despite the fact that Sargsyan had stated he would not run the country after his last term in office, he was appointed Prime Minister (on April 17, 2018), and this in turn immediately sparked contestation by the political opposition, which labelled this move as a premeditated takeover. After a week of intense anti-government protests, Sargsyan resigned, and was replaced temporarily by Karapetyan until May 2018, when Nikol Pashinyan was appointed Prime Minister, with 59 parliamentary votes (6 more than the 53 required to be elected). While aiming at isolating the Sargsyan's Republican Party, Pashinyan formed a government with all the other factions within the National Assembly, excluding the HHK. After having obtained only 4.7% of the votes in the 2018 snap parliamentary election, the HHK did not manage to cross the electoral threshold (5%) to access parliamentary seats, thus disappearing from the National Assembly for the first time after Armenia's independence. Nikol Pashinyan's party (Civil Contract), on the other hand created the new "My Step Alliance" (together with the "Mission Party"), which managed to gain over 70% of ballots at the same parliamentary elections, acquiring 88 out of 132 seats. The Freedom House score for Armenia in terms of political rights improved in 2018, going from 5 to 4, while civil

[2] According to Freedom House, the deterioration of Armenia's rating in political rights (from 5 to 6) was due to three main factors: the impossibility for the opposition to compete in the 2008 election, the relatively violent repression of protesters and the detention of about 100 people following the demonstrations.

[3] The Freedom House score will remain the same until 2018, following which the political rights rating has further improved (from 5 to 4).

liberties remained unchanged (4). Although the approval rate of the opposition remains lower than that of Pashinyan, confidence of Armenians in their premier has been partially weakened by the signing of a ceasefire (together with Azerbaijan and Russia) in early November 2020, after about two months of armed confrontation between Artsakh (Armenians) and the Azerbaijani army.

The agreement has been regarded by the Armenian people as a disastrous defeat, because it involves the obligation (for Armenia) to withdraw from all since 1991 occupied territories around Nagorno-Karabakh (including the Lakhin corridor) and it provides for the deployment of around 2000 Russian peace-keepers, not to mention the right for Azerbaijan to keep control over all territories it has conquered during the war (including the town of Shusha, whose majority of inhabitants is Armenian). After a dispute with the Armenian military, Pashinyan accepted political responsibility for the defeat in the war against the Azeris, and on April 25, 2021 he resigned, declaring to remain in charge as acting PM until the next parliamentary elections, which actually took place on June 20, 2021.[4] In the year before the elections, the majority retained little over 80 parliamentary seats, which were not enough to amend the Armenian Constitution.[5] At the party level, there had been a tripolarism since 2018, with the majority consisting of Pashinyan's "My Step Alliance", and the opposition constituted by two different parties: Prosperous Armenia (the more conservative, aligned to extra-parliamentary parties, like the HHK, during the 2020 protests) and Bright Armenia, which represented the more pro-European and liberal wing of parliament. The outgoing Prime Minister Pashinyan took part in the election not with a coalition, but with only his former party "Civil Contract", with which he managed to win 54% of ballots (assigned with a proportional electoral system) and 72 seats out of a total of 105. With a score of 55/100 (Freedom House, 2021), Armenia has been included in the category of hybrid regimes, with a slight improvement compared to 2019 (53/100).[6]

[4] "Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan Announces His Resignation To Enable Snap Polls". 2021. France 24. https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210425-armenian-prime-minister-pashinyan-announces-his-resignation-to-enable-snap-polls.

[5] In order to amend the constitution it is necessary to have a qualified majority of two thirds in the National Assembly (at least 88 out of 132 MPs).

[6] Since 2018, Freedom House has used a score in hundredths (/100) to evaluate political rights and civil liberties performance. The score for the former goes from 0 to 40, and the latter go from 0 to 60.

Belarus's institutional ramework and democracy scores

Belarus can be classified as an authoritarian regime, according to the political rights and civil liberties performance measured by the Freedom House independent organization.[7] Today's authoritarianism in Belarus is the result of an involution that began after the country's independence (in 1991) when Belarus had embarked on a democratic transition, which was abruptly interrupted after the election of Aleksandr Lukashenko to the Presidency (in 1994). Between 1990 and the entering into force of the new constitution in 1994, Belarus remained de facto without a well-defined system of government. Stanislav Shushkevich (a centrist), the president of the Supreme Soviet (the unicameral legislative body) served as *de facto* Head of State. The government was instead led by Vyacheslav Kebich (conservative), whose cabinet was composed mainly of former communists. In the aftermath of Belarus's independence, two main factions emerged: the pro-Western reformists and the pro-Russian conservatives. The latter prevailed in 1993, when Aleksander Lukashenko (then chair of the parliamentary anti-corruption committee) accused 70 government officials, including Shushkevich, of corruption. These charges led to a motion of censure in front of the parliament (January 1994), by which Shushkevich was forced to resign. Two months later (March 1994), the parliament approved the new constitution, which introduced a presidential government system that entailed the presence of a Council of Ministers and a Prime Minister, whose role would however be overshadowed by that of the President (with prerogatives similar to those of the Russian President according to the 1993 federal constitution). The first presidential election, which took place in July 1994, marked the victory of Lukashenko (at the second turn) with 80% of votes. The electoral law included in the 1994 constitution entailed a majority voting system in which most voted candidates had to obtain an absolute majority in their electoral district, but the votes could only be considered valid with at least a 50% turnout.

As stated by Silitski (2005), the introduction of the presidential system in post-Soviet Belarus has been one of the decisive factors in undermining the possibility of democratization in the

8) Belarus's Freedom House score, from 1991 to 1995, was between 4 and 5. After the 1996 constitutional referendum, Lukashenko's regime has always been ranked as authoritarian, with a score of 6 (out of 7) both in political and civil rights until 2004, when the former have further worsened (7/7).

9) Art. 106 par. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8

country. Thus the initial (and only) democratic opening that immediately followed the collapse of the USSR was mainly due to the "delay" in the adoption of presidentialism in Belarus. Right after its independence Belarus was indeed categorized as "hybrid regime", which after 1996 turned into an autocracy that has strengthened since 2003.[8] The development of the civil society was accompanied by a simultaneous weakening of political opposition, which struggled to adopt a common strategy, owing to the control of the regime over the electoral process and to the lack of leadership within the opposition front (Silitski, 2003). Lukashenko's following electoral campaigns indeed emphasized the absence of credible alternatives to the current president. Lukashenko won the 2001 presidential election after having gained control over state bureaucracy, the security apparatus and the electoral process itself (Silitski, 2005).

Between 2003 and 2004, Lukashenko enacted his strategy for carrying out a new referendum which would abolish the clause that fixed the limit of two consecutive presidential mandates. According to the official results, 80% of the votes were in favor of Lukashenko, thus enabling the President to participate (for the third time) in the 2006 elections. After the referendum, the Freedom House scores for political and civil rights in Belarus worsened, reaching 7 (political rights) and 6 (civil liberties). Hyper-presidentialism, a form of "constitutional hybrid" (Lytvyn & Osadchuk, 2019) consolidated in Lukashenko's Belarus, providing the President with the power to dissolve the legislative, without the simultaneous possibility for the parliament to "censure" the Head of State. In accordance with the 1994 Constitution [9], the government is indeed responsible in front of both the Parliament and the President, and it must transfer its powers to the Head of State when it is censored by the lower house of parliament. The Prime Minister may ask the Parliament for a vote of confidence on its government agenda and other issues, but if the parliament adopts a motion of no confidence against the government, the President has the right to decide (within 10 days) whether to dismiss the executive or to dissolve the parliament, and call for new elections. The President can decide to keep the government in charge (despite the vote of no confidence) and has the right to revoke each member of the government. Lukashenko managed to maintain office (for the fourth consecutive term)

after having obtained 79% of the votes in the 2010 presidential election, while the remaining 9 candidates did not obtain more than 2.5% of ballots. With such a managing of the elections and of its consequences, Lukashenko was willing to accept a "defeat in foreign policy" in exchange for a significant gain at the domestic level, i.e a worsening of Belarus's relations with the European Union (and with the US) in return for an even more stable internal situation. Lukashenko won a fifth (consecutive) term (with 83% of ballots according to the official results) against the main opponent Tatiana Korotkevich (4.4%) in 2015. An only illusionary turning point characterized the 2016 parliamentary election, which assigned one seat to the opposition party "United Civic Party", the first after 2004.[10] The pro-regime faction in parliament effectively monopolized representation in the lower house after the 2019 legislative elections, even though the parliament had already been *de facto* emptied of its prerogatives since the 1996 constitutional referendum.

Lukashenko's political strategy has encountered a stronger popular resistance since the last presidential elections held in 2020, managing nonetheless to prevail on the domestic (and international) opposition. This time, the charges of electoral fraud have been embraced by thousands of citizens, that flooded the streets to protest against Lukashenko's renewed victory (officials with 80% of the votes against 10% of Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya). Lukashenko has therefore changed his tactic, i.e. not giving in to the requests of the political opposition and ordering to police forces not to carry out direct repressive actions but to conduct under-track arrests and at the same time accusing the opposition of trying to illegally seize power.

10) The Freedom House score has indeed improved just for one year (2017), when the political rights' rating went from 7 to 6, but since 2018 it has worsened again.

Autocracy promotion in Armenia

Yeltsin's Presidency

Internal factors can only partially explain the failure of democracy in Armenia, because, for instance, the authoritarian legacy of the Soviet period also characterized the Baltic republics, which however undertook a process of democratization, positioning themselves today among the countries with the best democratic performances (Freedom House, 2021). The foreign policy of

Yeltsin's Russia (1991-1999) was led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrey Kozyrev (1991-1996), who attempted to obtain recognition of Moscow's prerogatives in the South Caucasus as a first step towards regaining supremacy over the post-Soviet space and recognition of a great power. In order to accomplish this goal, Kozyrev made several concessions to the US, such as support for the UN sanctions against Yugoslavia and tolerance for discrimination against Russian minorities in the Baltic states.

The new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Primakov, became convinced that neither the EU nor the US could be Russia's "natural partners" (Trenin, 2001). The "Primakov doctrine" (Toal, 2016) stated the need to counterbalance the (growing) influence of the US in the CIS area by any means. Since the mid-1990s, Russian activism in the South Caucasus had resulted in hegemony over the region until the last war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020. The close ties between the pro-Russian clan of the *Karabakhtsi* (the natives of Nagorno-Karabakh) and the Kremlin have allowed Russia to strengthen its political leverage in Armenia, binding it to the Artsakh issue. After having created deep divisions within the Armenian government for accepting a conflict resolution plan prepared by the Minsk Group of the OSCE, the first Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan was forced to resign, because both the Prime Minister Kocharian and the Minister of National Security Serzh Sargsyan (both belonging to the *Karabakhtsi*) rejected the plan. Becoming friend with Vladimir Putin, Kocharian attempted to establish a regime similar to that of his Russian counterpart (Derluguian & Hovhannisyan, 2018), characterized by numerous shared political interests, based upon a reactionary approach vis-à-vis potentially destabilizing events. In fact, after Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005), Russia and Kocharian feared that Armenia could be involved in a "colored revolution", so it was necessary to avoid such an outcome.

Putin's first Presidency

In the first presidency of Vladimir Putin (2000-2008, first and second terms), Russia initially tried to establish cooperation with the West with regard to the war on terrorism and energy policy. However, the US-Russian relations worsened rapidly after the start of the so called colored revolutions in the post-Soviet space. Since the early 2000s, Russia had begun to pursue a more prag-

matic foreign policy, with more defined priorities and structured interests. The main objective was (and still is) the preservation of its influence over the Near Abroad. For this reason, Putin gave new impetus to his foreign policy initiatives through the so called "CIS project", signing a series of new agreements with the members of the CIS, in order to fortify the Russian presence in the post-Soviet area. In 2002, Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan created the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). To avoid the further fragmentation of the CIS area, Russia developed a multi-level institutional ground, by employing the CIS summits to carry out bilateral meetings and as discussion forums between the Heads of State, but without establishing any real multilateral cooperation. The "CIS project" yielded positive results in Armenia, ushering the series of "assets-for-debt" agreements with Russia. In exchange for the cancellation of its debt (of about 100 million USD accumulated since 1991), Armenia progressively transferred some of its strategic assets to the Russian Government, which came into possession (via state-owned and parastatal companies like Gazprom and Inter RAO UES) of roughly 90% of Armenia's energy production capacity. Kocharian had made himself the promoter of this "exchange", claiming that it would have created new and better paid jobs, an increase in productivity and no more debts with Russia, which would have acted in the interest of the Armenian people. Putin's first presidential visit to southern Caucasus was in Armenia (March 2005), at a stage in which Kocharian's popularity was diminishing, due to the post-election protests in 2003 (the year of the signing of an "equity-for-debt" agreement). In his meetings with his Armenian counterpart, Putin stressed the need to ensure stability to the country, with the aim of strengthening the *Karabakhtsi* clan, who are traditionally more pro-Russian than the Yerevantsi, those who come from Yerevan (Minassian, 2008). The increased international involvement of Putin's Russia in the early 2000s, based itself on the Kremlin's engagement in existing conflicts in its Near Abroad, and the subsequent stance in favor of the status quo, in order to preserve its influence in the contested territories.[11] Aligning himself with Russia, Kocharian did not prevent military dialogue between Baku and Moscow from continuing. Russia and Armenia adopted the same interventionist policy in order to avoid the diffusion of colored revolutions, reenforcing

[11] In 2002, Vladimir Putin had told Azeri President Ilham Aliyev that Russia wanted "no winners or losers in Nagorno-Karabakh" (RFE/RL, 25 January 2002). Today Moscow keeps sev-

eral "gray areas" in Donbass (Ukraine), Transnistria (Moldova), Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia (Georgia).

the authority of the state. The backbone of the government consisted of the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior and the intelligence service. In 2005, the head of the Russian FSB, Nikolai Patrushev, claimed that Russia was trying to harmonize the NGO legislation in all CIS countries, so as to prevent the spreading of colored revolutions. This ushered an "import substitution" strategy, according to which the abroad (Western)-funded NGOs would gradually be replaced by domestic organizations, which would be financed directly by the Russian Government (Henderson, 2010).

The Putin-Medvedev Diarchy

The *Rossotrudničestvo* federal agency (created in 2008) is controlled by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and it plays a central role in the promotion of the activities of pro-Russian actors in the post-Soviet space even nowadays. Its Yerevan's branch is currently active in maintaining relations between those who graduate at the Russian institutions in Armenia and the Armenian students who are being sent to Russia.[12] In 2008, the then Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan ordered the creation of the "Public Council", established as a body composed of State representatives and delegates from the civil society. This was done after the Russian Federation created the "Public Chamber" in 2005, a similar entity, with a de jure advisory function, but de facto becoming an instrument to monitor civil society (Roberts, 2015). The first phase of Sargsyan's presidency was therefore characterized according to the first model of autocracy promotion, i.e emulation.

After Medvedev's inauguration to the Russian presidency (in 2008), Russia's approach towards the Southern Caucasus remained the same. The role of Armenia as a pillar of Russia's strategy in the Caucasus was emphasized by the Russian military intervention in South Ossetia (besieged by the Georgians) and in Abkhazia in August 2008: such an action resulted in the Russian recognition of independence of both secessionist republics and in the creation of Russian military installations in both areas.[13] Sargsyan was tied to the "Russia first" policy (Terzyan, 2018), even as, shortly before Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (in 2015), Russia signed an arms sales agreement with Azerbaijan amounting to about USD 300 million.

[12] Since 2015 the Armenian branch of the Moscow State University "Lomonosov" has been operating in Yerevan, with about 3500 Armenian students (mfa.arm)

[13] *Russian troops to stay in Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, su The Guardian, 9 settembre 2008.

Putin's second Presidency

Once having returned to the Kremlin (in 2012) Putin visited Armenia both in 2013 and 2015, when the Caucasian country was in the delicate phase of the controversial constitutional reform, that (since 2018) has replaced presidentialism with a parliamentary system. The start of Putin's second presidency (third and fourth terms) was parallel to Sargsyan's second mandate and it saw a surge in Armenia's (mainly economic) dependency on Russia. This aspect has to be identified in Armenia's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). On January 2, 2015, despite having continued the discussions with the EU for an Association Agreement which would also have established a *Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area* (DCFTA) Armenia officially joined the EEU. Yerevan should have signed the EU documents at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in November 2013 (Vielmini, 2013). Since the 2013 presidential election, Armenia had also improved its political rights score (from 6 to 5) according to Freedom House, always remaining a "hybrid regime" (non-democratic). Nevertheless, within the Armenian political opposition there were increasingly pro-Western instances, which were more directed against the pro-Russian Sargsyan than against Russia itself. Putin's meeting with Sargsyan (in September 2013), before the talks between Armenia and the EU, is not sufficient to explain Armenia's U-turn, from the withdrawal from negotiations with the EU to the accession to the EEU.

The change of course and the immediate accession to the Eurasian Economic Union have indeed been the result of three factors: Russia's assertive foreign policy, determined not to lose influence over another country of its "Near Abroad" (as had already occurred with Ukraine and Moldova), the relative weakness of the Euro-Armenian relationship and, once again, an external factor given by the conflict with Azerbaijan and the subsequent search for security and stability of Sargsyan's regime. Once reelected, Putin had indeed not only improved relations with Yerevan, but he had also boosted Russian-Azerbaijani relations, supplying Baku with around 85% of the latter's arms imports, which had increased by 249% between 2010 and 2014. Moscow wanted to deliver the following message: if Armenia gets closer to the West (EU-USA), Russia will better support Azerbaijan. The increased

sales of weapons to Baku indeed forced the Armenian leadership to refrain from the EU project and to bind to the Russian Federation (through the accession to the EEU). The "rewards" for Armenia can be identified mainly in Russia's energy policy towards Yerevan (Syssoyeva, 2019). Such an element has thus had a twofold result for Armenia. On the one hand, the accession to the EEU has significantly reduced the *linkage* effect of the US and the EU on Armenia (Libman, 2016), shifting the balance towards Russia (Armenia's most powerful non-democratic partner)[14], and encouraging the consolidation of autocratic tendencies in the Caucasian country. On the other hand, EEU membership contributed to preserving (in the short run) President Sargsyan's domestic legitimacy, because the leaders of the Armenian National Congress party and of Prosperous Armenia (the most euro-skeptic) had criticized the government, arguing that a deeper cooperation with the EU would have undermined the alliance with Russia. Sargsyan had always attempted to justify his choice emphasizing all the potential political and economic problems resulting from a possible "deviation" of Armenia from its strategic partnership with Moscow (Terzyan, 2018). The "hypothetical future" tactic did not however prevent the fall of Sargsyan following the 2018 velvet revolution, which was indeed not directed against the Kremlin's foreign policy, as repeatedly stated by the leader of the protest movement, Nikol Pashinyan.

Under Sargsyan's Presidency Moscow also became the first foreign investor in Armenia, primarily in the sectors of energy, telecommunications, metals and transports. Out of a USD 5.7 billion Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) stock in Armenia in 2019, Russia has covered around 48% of FDI in the country, by far surpassing France (11%) and Germany (5%), which are the two main investors from the EU in Armenia. The Russian FDI stock has increased after Armenia's accession to the EEU: the inflows from Russia were 21% of the total between 1988 and 2002, while since 2015 these have surpassed 45% of the total (third model of autocracy promotion: economic incentives).

The strengthening of Russian influence over Armenia since 2013 has coincided with the opening of some policy windows, such as the adoption of the new constitution (2015), the new electoral code (2016) and the amendments to the NGO legis-

[14] According to Freedom House, the 2016 score for Russia was 6 (political rights) and 6 (civil liberties), thus being considered as an authoritarian regime.

lation (2017), which created an opportunity for Russia to affect Armenian policies in those sectors (Roberts & Zimmer, 2018). In 2014, the then Russian Ambassador to Armenia, Ivan Volynkin, stated that the NGOs financed by the West posed a "threat for the Russian-Armenian bilateral relations", maintaining that it was necessary to "neutralize" them through information campaigns and through the adoption of Russian NGO legislation in Armenia.[15] In 2016, however, an endogenous factor contributed to weakening Sargsyan's popularity, after also his party (the HHK) had already entered its declining stage. The "Four-Day War", i.e. the series of armed clashes between Azeri and Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh occurred in April 2016, resulted in a wave of anti-Russian protests, whose participants asked for Sargsyan's resignation. The latter was indeed blamed for endangering Armenia's national security vis-à-vis Azerbaijan. And the anti-Russian nature of the protest had once again been caused by the increased Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan (Demytrie, 2016). The Armenian President acknowledged his country's vulnerability with respect to Moscow's choices, but then reaffirmed Armenia's full support of Russia's foreign policy actions (Ukraine, Syria…).

After the start of the 2018 velvet revolution, Russia immediately chose to react more quietly compared to the Ukrainian scenario of 2014, adopting a pragmatic and prudent approach.[16] This has occurred for two main reasons: the Kremlin's realization that Sargsyan was not more popular among the majority of Armenians, and the possibility of facing further sanctions from the West if Russia had tried to stop the ongoing change in Armenia (Davidian, 2019). Unlike other protests, those demonstrations (against Sargsyan and the old *Karabakhtsi* ruling class) were not aimed at imparting a shift in Armenia's foreign policy objectives, even though Pashinyan himself, as a deputy, had voted against the ratification of accession to the Eurasian Economic Union, pointing to the asymmetric relationship between Moscow (dominant) and Yerevan (dependent). This (realist) perception notwithstanding, the adverse relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, as well as its limited military strength, do not leave Yerevan with much room for political maneuver. After being appointed Prime Minister, Pashinyan indeed repeatedly denied the possibility of reconsidering Armenia's foreign policy, continuing to grant Russian military presence on the Armenian national territory and the presence of

Armenia within the EEU (Batashvili, 2019). During the last four years since the end of the velvet revolution, Russian-Armenian relations (and Yerevan's dependence on Moscow) have revolved once again around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

On September 27, 2020 the second Nagorno-Karabakh war broke out when Azerbaijan (militarily backed by Turkey) launched an offensive against the Armenian forces. The latter were defeated on the battleground (Azerbaijani dominance and incapacitation of Armenian-controlled territories), while Russia intervened only on a political level, in order to promote the peace agreement signed on November 10, 2020 (Fossati, 2021). Russian peace-keeping forces have been also deployed in the Lakhin corridor area (multilateralization). The ceasefire was violated both in November and December 2020. The Azeris reconquered about one quarter of Artsakh[17] (reciprocal incapacitation: 3/4 Armenia, 1/4 Azerbaijan), and they managed to capture the buffer zones (controlled by Armenia since 1994) such as Shusha, which surround the Armenian enclave.

Compared to the pre-war period in 2020, Russia has now a direct military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh, thus continuing to play a vital role for Armenia, but not for Azerbaijan, which has been binding more tightly to Turkey. For this reason, Russia supported Yerevan during the last war, but just up to the point of allowing Armenia not to face complete defeat, so as to be able to then deploy its (Russian) peace-keepers in the disputed territories (Sukiasyan, 2020). The presence of Russian soldiers in that area has a more political meaning, which is coupled with Armenia's domestic political unrest, engendered by the military defeat in the recent armed conflict with Azerbaijan. The precarious regional situation further increases Armenia's dependence on Russia, also because no national political party (nor the PM Pashinyan) have questioned the necessity to remain tied to Moscow (Sukiasyan, 2020). Former Armenian President Kocharian has also insisted on a "greater integration" with Russia. After having been released in the summer of 2020 and following the ceasefire signed by the Armenian government (November 2020), Kocharian has sided with the opposition forces, asking for Pashinyan's resignation and running in the snap parliamentary elections on June 20, 2021, with the "Alliance Armenia" coalition. The last elections (won by

[17] In 2020, Nagorno-Karabakh was considered by Freedom House as a "partially free" (hybrid) regime (with a score of 35/100), like Armenia (55/100), while Azerbaijan was classified as authoritarian (10/100).

Pashinyan) have demonstrated that Russia's main interest lies in the stability of the region, since it also became the guarantor (together with Turkey) of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace agreement.

Russia's approach highlights the non-rigid nature of autocracy promotion towards Armenia, since a hybrid "protected" regime has been accepted by Moscow. If the latter had supported Sargsyan and the HHK during their most critical phase, it could have weakened its policy of influence over the Near Abroad and also its search for increased international legitimacy. For this reason, the incentives granted to Azerbaijan and the agreement with Turkey for the partition of influence over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, have served to force Pashinyan to re-align to Russia. Thus, contrary to the period that immediately followed the first Artsakh war, there is now a rather symmetric balance of power in the region, without Russian hegemony. Pashinyan for his part has been compelled to downsize the pro-Western tendencies of his electorate, by showing how the misalignment to Moscow can result in losing the entire Nagorno-Karabakh territory. Hence, Russia's blackmail has been successful and Pashinyan's Armenia has returned on the emulation path (the first model of autocracy promotion).

Autocracy promotion in Belarus

Yeltsin's Presidency

Immediately after its independence, Belarus was not classified as an authoritarian regime.[18] Yeltsin's Russia played a crucial role in Belarus's transition towards authoritarianism and the consolidation of Lukashenko's personalist regime (Way, 2015). Initially, cultural affinity between Belarus and Russia was the means that Moscow exploited to maintain (or regain) its political influence also on the rest of the former Soviet space. It was not without reason that the three Slavic former-Soviet republics (Russia, Belarus and Ukraine) signed the Belavezha agreement, thereby establishing the Community of Independent States. The second track followed by Yeltsin's Russia was the re-establishment of cordial relations with the West. The internal conflict between President Yeltsin and the Parliament of the Russian Federation (which

18) Freedom House (from 1991 to 1995) classifies Belarus as Partly Free (hybrid regime) with scores between 4 and 5.

opposed Yeltsin's reforms) culminated in the September 1993 assault on the Parliament building in Moscow. Such domestic instability was the main reason for Russia's low level of foreign policy activism in the early 1990s until the end of the constitutional crisis.

Consequently, Russian support to Belarus was put into practice through both institutional and power dynamics. The latter are related to the individuals that retained the former state monopolies of the USSR (in the material, energy and financial sectors), and they manifested mainly beginning from the 1994 Belarus presidential election. Lukashenko managed to obtain the support of the Russian parliament and of the most conservative groups within the Russian society, playing the card of "nostalgia for the common Soviet past" as opposed to the anti-Russian nationalism of the other candidate to the Presidency, Zianon Pazniak, that was part of the Belarusian Popular Front (the nationalist party). Lukashenko's ties with Luzhkov (Moscow's Mayor from 1992 to 2010) on the one hand, and with the then Russian Prime Minister Primakov on the other, were key in securing political and financial support ahead of the presidential election (and also after). The rhetoric of integration between Russia and Belarus became thereafter a constant in Lukashenko's strategy towards all leaders of the Kremlin. However, the so called "Union State" still needs to be fully implemented. In this way Lukashenko managed nonetheless to gain the direct support of Boris Yeltsin, who exploited the integration rhetoric to strengthen his domestic position, softening the pressure of Parliament.[19] A decisive stage of Russia's support to Belarus's regime was that of the 1996 Belarusian referendum, which institutionalized Lukashenko's hyper-semipresidentialism. Russia intervened in the dispute that had emerged between Lukashenko (the referendum's promoter) and the Belarusian parliament (that had proposed to abolish the role of the Presidency), managing to achieve a compromise that would make the result of the referendum "non-binding". Such a tactic succeeded in dissuading Belarus's Supreme Soviet, which after the referendum was dissolved and replaced by a new (single-chamber) "National Assembly". Russia's "mediation" (Lukashenko-biased) was however subject to an exchange: Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky acquired Belarus's metallurgical sector and Lukashenko accepted

[19] Some observers have argued that Boris Yeltsin was suffering from the "Belavezha complex", i.e a sense of guilt for having buried the USSR, through the Belavezha Agreement (Jonavičius, 2013)

the removal of the remaining nuclear weapons from the country's territory (Wilson, 2011).

The element that facilitated Moscow's intervention in favor of Lukashenko was the way in which Belarusian political actors (contrary to Georgians or Ukrainians) perceived Russia, which was not regarded as a direct threat to the Belarusian identity and state sovereignty (Burant, 1995). In the second half of the 1990s, Moscow's diplomacy towards Minsk relied on the "Union State" (integration) factor, in order to keep the Russian government domestic approval rate at a high level, since the Soviet mindset was still incisive in most of the people (Balmaceda, 2014). Without considering the latter element, it would be difficult to explain the massive economic and financial assistance provided both by Yeltsin and by Putin to Lukashenko's Belarus. Between 1994-5 and 2000, Russian support contributed to the consolidation of the Belarusian regime mainly through cheap oil and gas supplies, whose savings accounted for around one quarter of the Belarusian GDP and one third of the government's budget (Aslund, 2002).[20] Russia's support enabled Belarus to keep its Soviet-era economic system alive, without the need to pursue radical market reforms.[21]

Putin's first Presidency

Russia established bilateral relations which were essentially based on energy policy and economic interests (Jonavičius, 2013). With regard to Belarus, however, the cultural factor should not be overlooked, since it has represented a fundamental means of influence of the Kremlin over Belarusian domestic politics and also an instrument that Belarus (and Lukashenko) has exploited to keep its linkage to Russia (first model of autocracy promotion: emulation). As Putin's agenda was focused on avoiding the spread of "colored revolutions" in the post-Soviet space, Moscow's policy evolved into an effort to consolidate its position against the growing influence of the EU and NATO (and therefore the US) in Eastern Europe. Compared to Yeltsin's era, Putin's Presidency was characterized by the progressive establishment of a "vertical" power structure, aimed at reducing the power of regional leaders and oligarchs. The loss of political power of Luzhkov (Moscow's Mayor) and Berezovsky (anti-Putin oligarch), both supporters of Lukashenko, compelled the Belarusian President to reconsider his position towards Moscow. This resulted in a significant tightening

[20] In the second half of the 1990s, Belarus paid about USD 22/1000 m3 for Russian natural gas, and it resold it on the national market at USD 48. In contrast, Ukraine and Poland, for instance, paid USD 40 and 75 per 1000 m3 respectively (Ioffe, 2004).

[21] According to Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom, out of a max score of 100 (complete economic freedom), Belarus went from 40.4 (in 1995) to 61 (in 2021), just one point above the "Mostly unfree" category.

of Belarus's authoritarianism, which however had two opposed effects: on the one hand, Lukashenko incremented his control over society, on the other hand he distanced himself from the West, becoming even more dependent (politically and economically) on Russia (Jonavičius, 2013).

Putin's diplomatic assistance to Belarus proved to be crucial both in the 2001 presidential election (won by Lukashenko with 75% of the votes) and above all in the aftermath of the "colored revolutions" in the neighboring countries. After the "Orange revolution" in Ukraine in 2004, Belarus entered a period of political instability, which Russia exploited by adopting preventive measures to avoid a possible spillover of the revolution in Belarus. These resulted in a massive Russian support for Lukashenko's 2006 presidential campaign, against the pro-Western opponent Milinkevich. The Kremlin had indeed labelled electoral revolutions as an attempt of the West to establish pro-American regimes at the border with Russia, in order to weaken the latter's position in its Near Abroad (Trenin, 2005).

Between 2005 and 2006, Lukashenko intensified domestic repression so as to prevent a colored revolution-like scenario, and Russia simultaneously intervened by supplying political and economic assistance to the Belarusian regime, through the mechanism defined by Tolstrup (2015) as "election bolstering". The intervention of so called "black knights" (external actors that act as guardians of autocracy or challengers of democracy) is driven by two essential factors: the geo-political acquiescence of the incumbent (beneficiary) leader, and the uncertainty of the electoral results (this mode of action is included in the political-diplomatic and economic "incentives"). This dynamic is determined by the fact that elections, including those in authoritarian regimes, open a window of opportunities that anti-regime or opposition forces can exploit to carry out a regime change (Schedler, 2002).

There are four essential elements that should be highlighted in order to frame the above theoretical discussion. First, so as to improve Lukashenko's reputation towards his electorate, Russian state media as well as several Kremlin top-level politicians emphasized the absence of valid alternatives to the incumbent president, also arguing that good relations between Russia and Belarus would be possible only if Lukashenko were reelected in 2006. Second, the involvement of Russian political technicians

in planning and managing Lukashenko's electoral campaign was another essential element. Thirdly, fiscal facilitation (such as the keeping of low gas prices) by Russia enabled Lukashenko to increase public service wages shortly before the vote, thus being able to be considered the main guarantor of the country's economic stability. The fourth element consisted of the (successful) discrediting of the political opposition, both prior to and after the vote, when demonstrators in the streets of Minsk were described by Russian media as West-sponsored extremists (Silitski, 2007). The effectiveness of the Russian-backed information campaign in Belarus was then demonstrated by a public survey conducted by the Belarusian independent agency IISEPS (whose headquarter is in Minsk), which showed that only 20.4% of Belarusians approved the post-election protests, while over 46% opposed them.

One important factor that goes beyond the above mentioned elements, lies at the political diplomatic level. Both in bilateral pre-election meetings and at the meetings of the Council of Europe, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov repeatedly dismissed the charges against Lukashenko, and warned him against the attempts by the West to carry out a regime change in Belarus.[22] As a response, the then Belarusian Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynaw thanked Russia for its support, stating that "the most serious problems come from the Western front".[23] Immediately after the elections, Lavrov publicly congratulated Lukashenko on his victory, highlighting the opportunity to make "real progresses" towards the Union State (Ambrosio, 2006). The ratio of energy subsidies over Belarus's GDP reached an all-time high in 2006, surpassing (between 2005 and 2015) USD 100 billion, with an average of USD 9.7 billion a year. In 2007, however, Gazprom envisaged an increase in gas prices (and thus a reduction of energy subsidies) for Lukashenko's regime, because the latter had refused to sign a new agreement for the gradual increase in the price (fourth model of AP: punishment). The parties ultimately reached a compromise that included: the selling of Russian gas at USD 100/1000 m^3, the progressive convergence of the gas price towards the price on the European market, a 70% increase in tariffs for the transit of gas in Belarus and the selling of 50% of Beltransgaz (Belarus's state company) to Gazprom.

[22] RIA Novosti (Moscow): "Russia Warns against Attempts at 'Regime Change' in Belarus," reproduced by BBCMIR, February 27, 2006.

[23] *Ibidem*

The Putin-Medvedev Diarchy

The initial phase of Medvedev's Presidency (2008) was marked by Lukashenko's opposition to the creation of the Eurasian Customs Union[24],the Belarusian non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence and the inauguration of the EU Eastern Partnership (to which also Belarus adhered). This situation resulted in increased gas prices for Minsk (up to USD 187/1000 m³), thus further reducing energy subsidies (fourth model of AP: punishment). Compared to Putin, President Medvedev developed a less cooperative relationship with Lukashenko, upon whom the Kremlin (and the liberal élite around Medvedev) put a constant pressure, so as to force the Belarusian government to privatize State assets and hand them over to Russian companies (Jonavičius, 2013). Since Lukashenko opposed this idea, because he did not want to lose control over the economy, relations with Moscow deteriorated. Shortly before the 2010 Belarusian presidential election, Gazprom (controlled by those same liberals close to Medvedev) raised gas prices for Belarus[25], and the Russian TV channel NTV broadcasted a tv series (called "God Father") that openly insulted Lukashenko's authoritarian regime. Although the Kremlin distanced itself from this broadcast, it became evident that Russia was not satisfied with Lukashenko's governance.

This notwithstanding, nine days before the presidential election, Lukashenko went to Moscow to follow up to the Kremlin's requests (Nechyparenka, 2011): the parties signed an agreement for a "Customs Code" that would establish the Eurasian Customs Union together with Kazakhstan. Russia then supported Lukashenko's candidacy in the 2010 presidential election, which were won - again - by the incumbent. In the attempt to win back the trust of the Russian leadership, Lukashenko then openly supported Vladimir Putin in the 2012 Russian presidential election, following which Russia significantly reduced the gas price for Minsk (from USD 265/1000 m³ in 2011 to USD 165 in 2012).

Putin's second Presidency

Belarus's prolonged economic dependence on Moscow did not prevent Lukashenko from trying to normalize his country's relations with the European Union, so as to balance Russia's lev-

[24] Available at: https://www.senno.vitebsk-region.gov.by/en/republic-en/view/alexander-lukashenko-concerned-about-belarus-interests-in-customs-union-4479/

[25] In 2010, the price of Russian natural gas reached USD 187/1000 m³ for Minsk.

26) In 2017, the Belarusian delegation at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly supported the so called "Minsk Declaration", in which Russia was defined as an "aggressor" that had "occupied" part of the Ukrainian territory (Suzdaltsev, 2020).

erage on Belarus. Despite not being a "U-turn" against Russia, Lukashenko's approach showed the discrepancies in the foreign policy decisions made between 2013 and 2015, primarily concerning the divergence between Russia and Belarus around the Ukrainian conflict.[26] Belarus did not *de jure* recognize the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, attempting to adopt a neutral stance, but it then also continued to adhere to Russia-led regional initiatives, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (created in 2015). This element helps to explain the peculiar relationship between Minsk and Moscow during Putin's third and fourth terms: almost complete dependence on Russia in the economic (and cultural) arena, and partial autonomy in foreign policy decisions. This asymmetric power relationship has been built on an explicit deal: Russia's economic assistance in exchange for Belarus's geopolitical loyalty (Sivitsky 2019). This asymmetry is convenient for Lukashenko, since with a greater degree of (economic and political) liberalization, the democratic opposition forces might try to seize power.

In a personalist authoritarian regime such as Belarus, the leader is permanently (and primarily) concerned about his own survival. For this reason, the apparently neutral stance adopted by Lukashenko after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine has not been directed against Moscow (which has remained the main international supporter of President Lukashenko) but it has had the aim of improving domestic political stability.

Since 2015, however, the Kremlin has begun to push for a tighter political, economic and military integration with Minsk, by progressively cutting the energy subsidies to Belarus. Lukashenko's reluctance in explicitly supporting Moscow against Kyiv, and the post-election *détente* (2015) between the EU and Minsk, have increased the Kremlin's fear of a strengthening of internal opposition to Lukashenko, which could potentially lead to an Euromaidan-like scenario. For this reason, Belarus's accession to the EEU has been used by Russia as a "stick" to discourage pro-democracy (and pro-Western) tendencies in Belarus, by further politicizing the organization in order to make it functional to Russia's own interests against the EU sanctions since 2014.

Likewise, Moscow has unilaterally pushed for a tighter military integration within the Union State (Czerny, 2020), mainly due to Belarus's attempts at balancing in the international arena

between the EU and Russia. The latter's current strategy is constituted by three elements. First, trying to push for the establishment of a permanent Russian military base on the Belarusian territory. Second, weakening Belarus's decisional autonomy by incrementing control over its armed forces. Third, creating a gap in combat capabilities by avoiding delivering modern weaponry to Belarus at preferential conditions (Sivitsky, 2019). Moscow has used the latter element in order to achieve the first objective (the military base), arguing that only a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus can improve security and minimize the vulnerability of the Union State's western flank. The joint military exercise "Zapad-2017" (which was part of an exercise that has been taking place every four years involving both Belarus and the Kaliningrad *oblast*) represented an exclusively political maneuver by Russia, which, since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, has used Belarus as a "cushion" in its attempts to put pressure on Kyiv. This has been confirmed by the most recent "Zapad-2021" joint exercise, which involved around 200 thousand (Russian and Belarusian) troops, compared to the previous 100 thousand of 2017.[27]

The progressive reduction of energy subsidies for Minsk has been the result of the implementation by the Kremlin of a tax on mineral extraction (instead of a direct tax on oil exports), which has affected Belarus's crude oil imports that were once duty-free. This move by Putin has served to give Lukashenko an "integration ultimatum" (Sivitsky, 2019), by putting Minsk in front of two possible alternatives: the reduction of its refined oil export or the adoption of a common fiscal legislation with Moscow. At the February 2021 meeting between Putin and Lukashenko, Russia imposed conditionality on its economic assistance to Belarus (such as the USD 1.5 billion loan of 2020), compelling the latter to further integrate with Russia.[28] After the repression of the post-election protests that had begun in the summer of 2020, three main features of Russian-Belarusian bilateral relations can be identified as a result of Russia's autocracy promotion in Belarus: first, the expatriation of most pro-Western opposition leaders, including Sviatlana Tikhanovskaya (which fled to Lithuania); second, the shutdown of more than 50 NGOs ordered in the summer of 2021 (Deutsche Welle, 2021); third, the increase in

[27] https://uacrisis.org/en/zapad-2021-military-exercises

[28] Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-china-cooling-on-lukashenka-investment-leverage-eu-moscow/31136175.html

financial loans from Russia, to cope with EU and US sanctions.

In December 2021, Lukashenko eventually led to the complete realignment of Belarus's policy to Russia, and also *de jure* recognized Crimea's annexation by Russia (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Conclusion

The in-depth analysis of the Armenian and Belarusian case studies has led to the identification of the four main models of support to non-democratic regimes. With regard to Armenia, evidence shows that emulation of authoritarian practices can sometimes have uncertain results compared to the direct intervention (as occurred in the first Nagorno-Karabakh war). There have been some stages in which the adoption of the authoritarian model consolidated and went in the direction desired by the regime (as at the end of the 1990s with Kocharian), and there have been other periods in which it took an opposite direction (as with the 2018 velvet revolution). The emulation of the Russian political model has been realized in two ways: through the attempt of Belarus and Armenia to reproduce Russia's higher performances (concerning security, social stability…), thus adopting the same regime type, and through the attempt of band-wagoning to the regional hegemon (Natalizia, 2019). In this context, Russia's influence in its region has created a "permissive space", in which each country finding itself within that area can ignore its democratic commitments being aware that their loyalty to Russia can protect them against any possible interference of the US and the EU. Moreover, especially for Lukashenko's regime, Russia has established itself as an ideological and cultural model, thus generating a positive sentiment in the Belarusian public opinion towards Russia (and its objectives).

Autocratic export (Burnell, 2010) has instead materialized with the military aid (directly) provided by Yeltsin's Russia to Armenia since the first Nagorno-Karabakh war, which led not only to the restoration of Russian hegemony over southern Caucasus (and the activation of the Russian military base in Armenia), but also resulted (in 1998) in the rise to power of the *Karabakhtsi* élite (those born in Nagorno-Karabakh), with Kocharian first and then Sargsyan (both not democratic). In the most recent Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020, after having brokered the peace talks, Russia deployed its military in the disputed territories,

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further bolstering its policy aimed at maintaining the so called "frozen conflicts", i.e. the grey areas to which Russia has sent its troops or where it provides military support to local actors, as has been the case of the quasi-states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria.

Both in the case of Armenia and of Belarus, the foreign policy choices that favored Russia's position in the regional context have been incentivized by favorable and preferential energy pricing policies and by electoral support. This was the case of the 2006 Belarusian presidential election, which took place in an atmosphere of fear for a possible spillover of Ukraine's colored revolution of 2004. The "punishments" that Russia gave to Belarus when it did not abide by Moscow's demands (e.g. in not recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia or in Belarus's initial approach towards the Ukrainian conflict) have taken the shape of diplomatic pressure on the élite in power (to push for liberalization of the economy and integration of state institutions with Moscow) and a reduction of the energy subsidies, thus diminishing the government's budget surplus. The same procedure has also characterized Russia's policy towards Armenia, especially as the latter was approaching the EU. By exploiting its "energy weapon" (the increase in gas prices) and the military threat (the increase in arms sales to Azerbaijan), Russia deterred Armenia from improving its relations with the EU. Besides the fact that, after the 2018 velvet revolution, the Armenian regime has not *de facto* changed (according to Freedom House it can still be classified as a hybrid regime), Russia's intervention did not occur in terms of immediate support for Sargsyan's contested regime, but rather through a sort of "punishment" towards the new (Pashinyan's) regime. Moscow indeed not only did not take steps to provide military support to the Armenians after the beginning of Azerbaijan's offensive in September 2020, but it also repeatedly rejected Pashinyan's requests for military assistance. A direct Russian military intervention in the area would have triggered a deep confrontation with Turkey (which supported Azerbaijan). This can be demonstrated by the fact that, after the capture of Shusha by the Azeris, Russia took action to facilitate the conclusion of a ceasefire and a successive peace agreement (more favorable to Azerbaijan), guaranteed by Putin and Erdogan. The Kremlin's diplomatic intervention has

enabled Armenia to limit the damage suffered with the military defeat, simultaneously allowing Pashinyan's regime to survive and *de facto* restricting the scope of the punishment that Russia had enacted towards Yerevan. In the regional context, the latter's linkage with Moscow remains the only game in town for Armenia, i.e. the only possibility for the Caucasian republic to secure its (and Artsakh's) territorial integrity.

A combination of rewards and punishments has proved the most frequent tactic used by the Kremlin, which has also been facilitated by Armenia's and Belarus's weak linkage and leverage with Western democracy promoters. Russia's "penalties" to Belarus have been less, owing mainly to the two countries' proximity in the cultural arena and the strategic geopolitical location of Belarus in Eastern Europe. Armenia, on the other hand, has also been subject to direct military intervention by Russia, which was however limited to the first Artsakh war. It is thus possible to establish that the salient features of autocracy promotion have mainly emerged in Belarus, while support for hybrid regimes has materialized in Armenia. This can be explained by Russia's "conservative" diplomacy, which has adopted a realist approach in international relations. If a rigorous autocratic promotion policy were to take place, Russian diplomacy would risk weakening rather than strengthening. The ability to alternate the four above mentioned mechanisms links Russia's foreign policy to the concept of *smart power* as defined by Nye (2004), both with regard to a combination of soft and hard power and in the choice between non-intervention (anarchy) and direct support with rewards, punishments and/or military actions (governance).

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