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Exploring Political Transition: Geopolitical Orientation and Civil Society in Post-Soviet Democratization

Abstract

The collapse of the Soviet Union was the beginning of a wave of significant political changes as its former member states transitioned towards various degrees of democratic governance. The path of democratization has been uneven among these states, with some moving forward and others reverting to authoritarian practices. This research delves into how the geopolitical stance, whether leaning towards the West or Russia, and the strength of civil society have influenced these distinct democratic paths. The study's approach attempts a nuanced assessment of the effect of civil society in driving policy and democratic change. By engaging in a comparative case study, the aim is to discover the relationship between international geopolitical dynamics and domestic societal forces and how they collectively shape the democratization of post-Soviet republics. This research provides theoretical and practical insights that could improve strategy development for policymakers and contribute to a deeper understanding of the post-Soviet political evolution.

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a pivotal moment for some of its former republics, making a transition from authoritarian regimes to varying forms of democracy. This period was characterized by political, social, and economic change, laying the foundation for extensive transformations. The democratization process in these countries represents a major departure from their shared Soviet histories, including efforts to implement multiparty systems, market economies and improved civil rights.

However, the democratization process has been inconsistent across the region. Certain states made notable advancements while others remained rooted in authoritarianism (McFaul 2002, 717–18; Bunce 2000, 221–23). The diversity of political reforms reflects the unique historical, geopolitical, and cultural situation of each state. Thus, the post-Soviet era is an important area of study underscoring both the potential and challenges towards democratization in a fast-changing world.

Understanding the factors that influence democratization in post-Soviet states is needed, as the region underwent a manifold and complex political evolution in the early 1990s. While several post-Soviet states made democratic progress, others experienced democratic backsliding or regression into authoritarianism. Such disparity underlines the need to investigate both the internal and external forces that can shape these transitions. Internal factors, like the strength of civil society (CS) and institutional adaptability, are vital in determining the direction of democratic change (Welch 2004, 306–7; Howard 2003). Simultaneously, external factors, such as geopolitical orientation (GO) and international relations also significantly impact these processes (Kopstein and Reilly 2000, 24–26).

How these internal and external influences interplay is not fully understood, making an in-depth study to untangle the components of democratization in the post-Soviet world necessary. The aim of this study is to provide insights into the complicated nature of political transition in post-Soviet states bridging the gap. It acknowledges that besides these specific internal and external factors other forces outside of the scope of this study can also be influential.

This research is guided by the question: "How do variations in geopolitical orientation and the strength of civil society organizations influence the democratization process in post-Soviet states?" To answer this, the research has the following objectives; first, to examine the impact of GO on the paths of democratization of these states, considering both Western and Russian influences. Second, to analyze the role of CS in driving public policy and democratic reforms. The aim is to offer a nuanced understanding of the dynamics between external geopolitical influences and internal civil drivers in post-Soviet democratization.

The research potential lies in contributing both theoretically and practically to the fields of political science and policymaking. Theoretically, enhancing our understanding of the parallel roles of GO and CS strength in influencing democratization processes, contributing to existing models of political transition. Practically, the insights can guide policymakers and international organizations in creating effective strategies to support democratization. By understanding the specific needs and challenges of post-Soviet states on their path towards democracy, advanced approaches can be developed fitting the historical, cultural, and geopolitical backgrounds of these nations.

Theoretical Foundations on Democratization

The study of democratization is a central theme in political science and has produced numerous models and identified various factors influencing democratization. This section delves into the theories forming the backbone of this research. It sheds light on the complex mechanisms through which GO and CS strength can interact to influence democratization in post-Soviet states. A variety of established theories and concepts on democratization illustrate that besides GO and CS, a multitude of other factors can influence democratization.

One key theory is Modernization Theory, introduced by Seymour Martin Lipset (1959, 71,75-85). According to this theory, economic development leads to social changes which eventually build democratic institutions. The underlying idea is that economic growth improves education, grows a larger middle class, and increases demands for political participation, all of which support democratic development.

The Transition Model described by Samuel Huntington (1991, Plattner 2014, 9–11), focuses on the shift from authoritarian to democratic regimes. This model emphasizes both national and global developments, and the contribution of political elites and their decisions in moving towards democracy. It states that democratization is mostly the result of external influences, rather than solely grassroots movements or economic factors.

Structuralist perspectives relate democratization to the nature of social classes and the state's participation in society (Moore, 1966). Arguing that the presence of a strong, independent bourgeoisie is crucial for democratic development. A developed social class can challenge the power of the authoritarian state through the "Bourgeois Route" (Skocpol 1973, 4–11).

Cultural democratization theories of argue for the importance of cultural values in shaping a country's political system (Inglehart 1997). Specific cultural conditions like self-expression and emancipation, are needed for democracy to take root and progress. Economic development drives cultural development but is not sufficient for democratization on its own (Hadenius and Teorell 2005, 87–89).

Geopolitical Orientation and Democratization

Kopstein and Reilly (2000, 24–26) argue that the proximity and openness of post-Soviet European states to Western democratic countries contributes to democratization. They suggest that Western pressures coming mostly from the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member states provide political and economic incentives for democratic reforms.

On the other hand, closer ties with Russia, the dominant power in the region, are linked to lower levels of democratization. Way (2005, 232–33) examines the conceptual importance of "competitive authoritarianism" in the post-Soviet states. Way argues that Russia's influence in post-Soviet states through political and economic means support non-democratic practices and regimes.

Lastly, the impact of international organizations on post-Soviet states' GO is also significant. Kelley (2004, 428–31) examines how the Council of Europe, the EU and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe influence political reforms in post-Soviet states through their democracy-promoting programs. The study finds that international organizations can play an important role in forming the political trajectories of these states by setting standards for democratic governance and civil rights.

Essentially, the GO of post-Soviet states towards both Western democratic institutions or Russian authoritarian pressures, plays a significant role in supporting or limiting democratization. The influence of international blocs and organizations are key variables in understanding the different political outcomes in the post-Soviet space.

Civil Society and Democratization

The effect of CS on political change is multifaceted and disputed. Howard (2003) argues CS is necessary for successful democratic governance. Specifically, its capacity for mobilizing public opinion, advocating for policy changes, and its ability to monitor government actions. Nevertheless, CS in post-communist Europe remains weak because of deeply rooted post-communist structures (Welch 2004, 306–7).

However, a strong CS does not always lead to democratic consolidation as Foley and Edwards (1996, 39–40) state that CS can be fragmented. Therefore, CS can both support and oppose state interests, which enables it to support non-democratic practices. This demonstrates its limited effectiveness in promoting democracy. Moreover, Diamond (1994, 13–16) also argues that while a strong CS is fundamental for developing sustainable democratic institutions, it is not necessarily sufficient to bring about democratization on its own. In some post-Soviet states this is evident as CSOs struggle to maintain independence and resist strong state or oligarchic pressures.

The causal argument regarding democratization suggests that states with a Western GO or strong CS, or both, tend to have stronger democratic outcomes. Ties with the West often bring democratic conditionality and support, promoting a stable CS to ensure a bottom-up check on government power and promotion of democratic norms. On the contrary, geopolitical

alignment with Russia and a weak CS are related with weak democratic outcomes. This results in less pressure to implement democratic reforms and fewer internal means for promoting democratic governance.

Investigating geopolitical pressures, CS dynamics, and their interaction, form a nuanced perspective on democratization in the post-Soviet realm. The synthesis of the literature suggests that while both factors are individually significant, their interaction is possibly particularly important as it could be sufficient in realizing the democratization process. Depending on the context their combined effect can either promote or block democratic development.

Conceptual Framework

Democratization

Democratization can be defined and observed as the transition from authoritarian governance towards a regime that includes free and fair elections, freedom of expression and media, broader citizen participation, equal citizenship rights, consultative governance, and protection against ungrounded state actions. Charles Tilly (2000, 4) defines democratization as a threefold movement towards these elements a substantive, constitutional and political-process-level, depending on state capacity, developments in public politics, inequality and trust networks.

Furthermore, the democratization assessment often includes the quality and sustainability of new democracies, considering the function of the political elite, the rule of law and state capacity. Kurzman (1998, 56) discusses Huntington's (1991) concept of "waves of democratization," acknowledging phases of positive net transitions to democracy illustrating

the diverse and non-linear paths of democratization across different regions and periods. This makes democratization a complex and multifaceted process as both influential internal and external factors van vary across regions and time. Therefore, identifying democratization by examining changing levels of democracy comes with a conceptual hurdle. No universally accepted set of democratic indicators is established as it is conceptualized in many ways using varying measurements. The Liberal Democracy Index provides a starting point for analyzing changing levels of democracy, serving as the basis for identifying moments and events driving or limiting democratization (See Appendix for complete variable interpretation).

Geopolitical Orientation

The GO of a state refers to the direction in foreign policy, the formation of strategic alliances, and its wider international engagement. In the case of post-Soviet states, this alignment often involves balancing between Western influences, such as the EU and NATO, and traditional relations with Russia.

Several key indicators constitute the GO of post-Soviet states. These indicators include membership in international organizations, bilateral agreements and treaties, economic ties, military cooperation, energy dependence, and diplomatic stance and foreign policy statements. By evaluating these factors, the extent to which each state aligns with Western institutions or maintains closer ties with Russia can be better understood. Not all indicators carry the same weight in determining the overarching GO, and the scope of this research is too narrow to discuss all indicators for each case.

Civil Society

CS occupies the public space between the state and the private sphere. CSOs comprise, but are not limited to, community groups, interest groups, labor unions, professional associations, spiritual organizations, social movements, charities, and other non-governmental

organizations. These organizations play an important role in shaping political dynamics in both democracies and autocracies as they push for their collective ideals and interests (V-Dem Codebook).

To measure CS strength, it is essential to use indicators that reflect the operational environment and influence of CSOs. The Liberal Democracy Index, which includes an index for CS, provides valuable insights. However, to avoid data bias, alternative indicators are necessary. Therefore, I have selected three indicators from the V-Dem dataset (See Appendix for complete variable description):

1. **CSO Entry and Exit**: This indicator measures the extent to which the government controls the entry and exit of CSOs into public life. Scores range from 0 (monopolistic control) to 4 (unconstrained). This indicator is crucial as it reflects the freedom of CSOs to emerge and operate independently, which is fundamental to their strength and influence.

The ability of CSOs to freely enter and exit the public sphere is fundamental to their strength and influence. When the government imposes strict controls on this process, it constrains the development of a strong CS by limiting organizational diversity. This environment curtails the ability of CSOs to represent diverse interests, advocate for policy changes, and hold the government accountable. Conversely, when CSOs can operate without excessive government interference, they are better positioned to mobilize citizens, promote civic engagement, and contribute to democratic processes.

2. **CSO Repression**: This indicator assesses the degree to which the government attempts to repress CSOs. Scores range from 0 (severely) to 4 (no repression). The

level of repression directly impacts the effectiveness and sustainability of CSOs, making it a vital measure of CS strength.

Government repression of CSOs is a direct measure of CS's operating environment. High levels of repression indicate a hostile environment preventing CSOs to function effectively by lowering their ability to mobilize citizens, advocate for reforms, and check governmental power. When CS is weakened, its capacity in promoting democratic norms and values is reduced. Contrarily, low levels of repression suggest a supportive or neutral environment where CSOs can contribute to democratization. By examining the extent of repression, this indicator captures an important aspect of CS strength, reflecting how government actions can either support or undermine its role in democratization.

3. **CSO Anti-System Movements**: This indicator evaluates the level of anti-system movement activity among CSOs and the perceived threat to the regime. Scores range from 1 (low-level activity posing minimal threat) to 4 (very high-level activity posing a real and present threat). The presence of anti-system movements indicates the dynamism and potential impact of CS on political processes.

The presence and activity level of anti-system movements within CS indicate its environment and potential impact on political stability and democratization. High levels of anti-system activity suggest a strong and contentious CS capable of challenging the status quo and pushing for significant political changes. Such movements often emerge in response to autocratic practices and can be pivotal in mobilizing public support for democratic reforms. On the other hand, low levels of anti-system activity may reflect either a stable democratic environment where such movements are unnecessary or a repressive context where dissent is suppressed. This indicator helps capture the intensity and impact of CS's engagement with

political processes, highlighting its role in either reinforcing or undermining existing power structures.

Using these alternative indicators prevents data bias that could arise from using the same CS strength indicators included in the Liberal Democracy Index as independent variables to explain changes in the index.

The established roles that GO and CS play in the democratization process resulted into the following hypotheses.

H1: Post-Soviet states with a Western geopolitical orientation will exhibit a higher level of democratization compared to those with a Russian geopolitical orientation. This is premised on the understanding that Western alignment, characterized by integration into European institutions and adherence to democratic conditionality, provides a conducive environment for democratic practices and reforms.

H2: Strong CSOs in post-Soviet states exhibit a higher level of democratization. Robust and independent CSO are hypothesized to foster democratic deepening by promoting political participation, governmental accountability, and the representation of diverse societal interests.

Methodology

The method for this research involves a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design. This strategy allows examination of the effects of GO and CS strength on post-Soviet democratization from 1991 to 2022. The selected period is interesting as it begins with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, marking significant political, social, and economic transformations across the newly independent states, and extends to 2022, capturing recent democratic shifts. The goal is to provide a detailed analysis that offers a nuanced perspective

on the effects and interplay between these internal and external forces driving democratization.

A comparative case study design is qualified to produce a comprehensive investigation on the post-Soviet state-level to represent unique experiences with democracy. Analyzing the distinct cases on an individual and collective level allows to build a comprehensive understanding that can reveal broader political trends in the post-Soviet region.

For data collection and analysis, a variety of sources are gathered to ensure a multifaced understanding of each case. Qualitative sources include academic literature, expert evaluations, and historical context. The CS-strength measurements and Liberal Democracy Index serve as a starting point for identifying impactful events and moment affecting democratization. The qualitative analysis of CS strength focuses on the activities, publications, and governance participation of CSO to elaborate the most influential moments and events. GO is evaluated by reviewing the indicators from the conceptual framework; membership in international organizations, voting patterns in the United Nations, bilateral agreements and treaties, economic ties, military cooperation, public opinion polls, energy dependence, diplomatic stance and foreign policy statements.

A combination of within-case and cross-case analysis attempts to demonstrate distinct democratization trajectories and allow for pattern identification. The within-case analysis looks at the historical trajectory, geopolitical stance, CSO strength, and democratization outcomes of each state. A cross-case analysis then compares these findings to understand the influence of varying GOs and CS strengths.

To strengthen the validity and reliability of the research, data triangulation is pursued by including multiple data sources and methods of analysis. Evaluating academic perspectives

can validate and complement other data sources in the analysis and allow controlling for confounding variables that potentially influence democratization processes. Challenges that might arise in collecting primary data will be countered by including alternative data sources to maintain a thoughtful understanding of each case. This methodology attempts to serve as a structured strategy for conducting efficient research, potentially producing findings that can contribute to the wider discourse on democratization in political science.

Case Selection

In this research, a case is defined as a post-Soviet state that is undergoing a process of democratization. This definition aligns with the research question, exploring how variations in GO and the strength of CSOs influence the democratization process in these states. The period of interest, 1991-2022, is chosen to encompass the era starting with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, enabling an examination of both early transitions and recent political dynamics.

The selected cases of Estonia, Belarus, Moldova, and Armenia showcase distinct experiences in the post-Soviet democratization process. Each case offers unique insights into the relationship between GO, CS strength, and democratization. Notably, the late 2010s witnessed substantial democratic shifts in two cases, such as the 2018 revolution in Armenia, and the 2019 anti-government protests in Moldova. Understanding these dynamics can produce a deeper comprehension of the broader post-Soviet world.

Following Seawright and Gerring's (2008, 304–6) MSSD approach, the cases of Estonia, Belarus, Moldova, and Armenia are particularly appropriate for this study. While these cases are not identical, they share numerous similarities, most notably their common starting point as former Soviet republics. This shared historical background provides a uniform baseline from which variations in post-Soviet democratization processes can be examined. The Soviet

legacy includes centralized political structures, state-controlled economies, and limited CS (Ishiyama and Kennedy 2001, 1177–78; Niyozov 2008, 477) , which collectively form a shared starting point for all the selected cases, ideal for a comparative analysis. By selecting cases that exhibit both similarities and differences, this study aims to identify the factors that influence democratization processes within the broader post-Soviet context.

Estonia represents a successful transition to democracy with a strong pro-Western GO and robust CSOs. Estonia's successful integration into Western organizations such as the EU and NATO, was critical in its democratic consolidation and this makes it an exemplary case of successful post-Soviet democratization (Silver and Titma 1996, 8; Kerikmäe, Mölder, and Chochia 2019, 2–3).

Belarus serves as a contrasting case of deeply rooted authoritarianism, even after its initial post-Soviet democratization efforts. The country's close relationship with Russia and the suppression of CS under Lukashenko's regime provide insights into how pro-Russian GO and weak CS can limit democratic development, as discussed by Marples (2009, 773–74) and Ambrosio (2006, 424–25).

Moldova is a case of complex political development with a slightly pro-West orientation, weak CS, and mixed democratization outcomes. Protsyk (2005, 19–21) and Tudoroiu (2011, 242,247,256) describe Moldova's unstable geopolitical stance and CS dynamics. These underscore the challenges and uncertainties in its experiences with democratization.

Armenia represents a state with a combination of a slightly pro-Russian orientation and a strong CS, which have played an important role in its democratization, especially during the 2018 Velvet Revolution (Grigoryan 2019, 168–71). The situation in Armenia is crucial to

understand how CS strength can still encourage democratization even in a context of Russian GO.

Table 1. Case Selection Categorization

	Country			
	Estonia	Belarus	Moldova	Armenia
GO	The West	Russia	Mixed	Russia
CSO Strength	Very Strong	Very Weak	Moderate-Strong	Moderate-Strong
Democratization	Democratized	Autocratic Consolidation	Democratization	Slight Democratization

Note: The attributed values of the countries represent the overall Geopolitical Orientation and CSO Strength and Democratization represents its 2022 value.

While these cases are valuable for this research, there are inherent trade-offs and limitations in the selection.

Estonia's success as a small state in the Baltic region might not be replicable in the wider range of post-Soviet states. Its unique historical, cultural, and geopolitical context, as well as its ethnopolitics through the relatively homogenous population, might limit the generalizability of its democratization experience (Saarts, Kunitsõn, and Vetik 2023, 158–60).

Belarus represents a case of extreme authoritarianism (Marples 2009, 759–60), which might outweigh less authoritarian or hybrid post-Soviet regimes. The Belarusian experience under Lukashenko, may not completely capture a representation of authoritarian resilience or decay in other states.

Both the situations in Moldova and Armenia have outstanding challenges in its transitional process, these might not represent other post-Soviet states with a more straightforward path to authoritarianism or democratization. Moldova's mixed GO and unresolved handling of the Transnistria situation (Protsyk 2005, 7–9; Tudoroiu 2011, 244) and Armenia's recent

democratic surge among the regional conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh (Babayev and

Mahmudov 2023, 895; Grigoryan 2019, 158–59) form unique challenges in analyzing their

democratization progress.

Estonia' Geopolitical Orientation and Democratization

Initial Transition and Western Orientation (1991-1994)

Following independence, Estonia rapidly oriented itself towards the West. This period was

signified by efforts to break away from Soviet influence and attempts to integrate with

Western political, economic, and security structures. The adoption of the new Estonian

Constitution in 1992 laid the groundwork for democratic governance and rule of law,

signaling a clear commitment to Western democratic norms (Berg 1999).

Outset of Western Alliances (1995-2004)

Estonia intensified its efforts to join Western institutions. This period saw significant reforms

aimed at meeting the criteria for EU and NATO membership (Figure 1). In 1997, Estonia was

invited to begin negotiations for EU membership, marking an significant milestone in its

Western integration. This was a turning point that underscored Estonia's firm orientation

towards the West (Lainela 2000, 204). Estonia's accession to the European Union and NATO

in 2004 was a landmark achievement. These memberships solidified Estonia's position within

the Western geopolitical sphere and provided strong institutional support for its democratic

framework (Lamoreaux and Galbreath 2008, 1,8).

Figure 1. Liberal Democracy Index in Estonia (1991-2022)
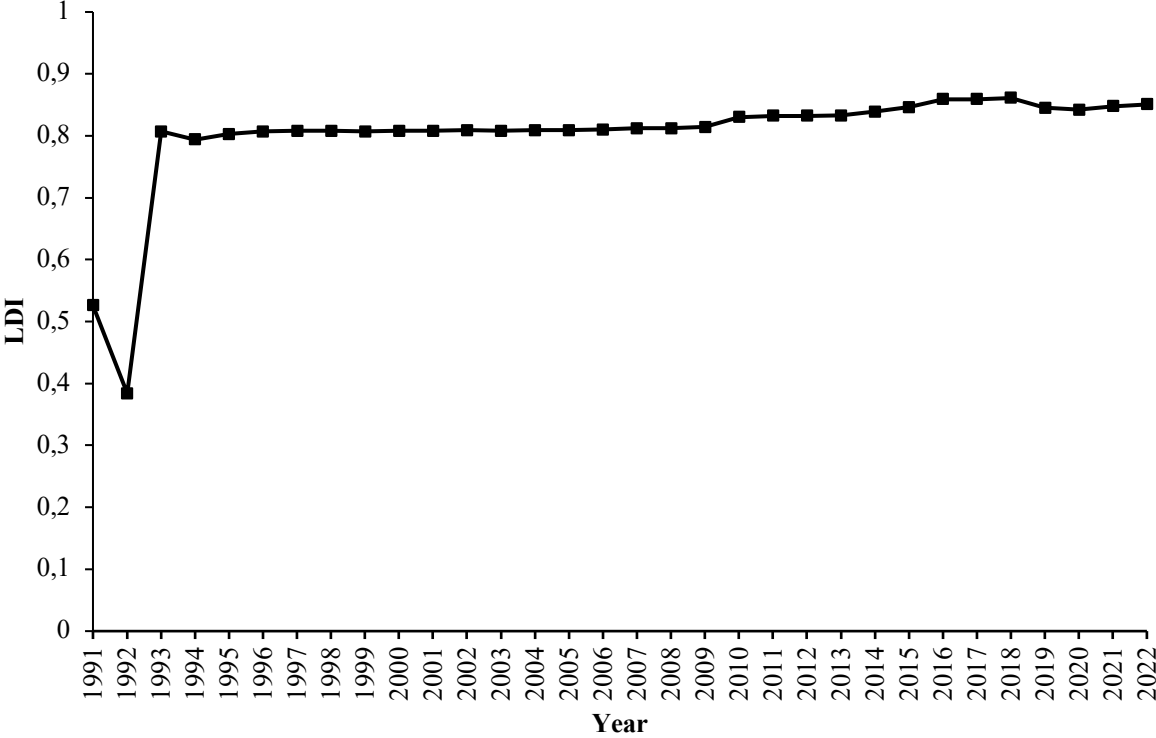
Source: V-Dem Dataset

Deepening Integration and Western Alignment (2005-2013)

The Bronze Soldier crisis in 2007, involving the relocation of a Soviet-era war memorial, stressed the tensions between Estonia and Russia. This incident underscored Estonia's commitment to distancing itself from Russian influence and reaffirmed its Western orientation (Brosig 2008, 15). Estonia adopted the euro in 2011, further integrating its economy with the European Union and reinforcing its commitment to Western economic and political structures (Siarkiewicz 2011).

Security Concerns and Continued Western Ties (2014-2022)

The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 heightened security concerns across Eastern Europe. In response, Estonia reaffirmed its commitment to NATO and sought increased military support from Western allies. Estonia's active participation in NATO's Enhanced

Forward Presence (EFP) initiative, hosting multinational battlegroups, demonstrated its strategic alignment with the West and its reliance on NATO for security guarantees (Polcikiewicz 2019, 100–102). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further reinforced Estonia's Western GO. Estonia emerged as a vocal supporter of Ukraine and called for stronger Western sanctions against Russia, emphasizing its dedicated alignment with Western policies and values (Veebel 2023, 154–59).

Civil Society and Democratization in Estonia

Early Independence and Democratization (1991-1994)

Following Estonia's independence, the country embarked on establishing a democratic state. The early years of independence were characterized by significant efforts to dismantle Soviet-era structures and create a political environment conducive to democracy. (Figure 2).

The adoption of the new Estonian Constitution in 1992 was an important moment. It enshrined fundamental democratic principles, including the protection of civil liberties and the right to association, which are important for a vigorous CS (Berg 1999). This period saw the rapid emergence of a CSO-friendly political environment, facilitated by decreasing government control over their entry and exit. The legal framework supported the formation and operation of CSOs, allowing them to actively impact the democratization process (Lagerspetz 2001, 410–12).

Figure 2. Civil Society Organizations - Estonia (1991-2022)

Source: V-Dem Dataset. *Note:* See Appendix for CSO Score interpretation.

Integrating Democratic Institutions (1996-2004)

As Estonia sought to integrate with Western political, economic, and security structures, significant reforms were undertaken to strengthen democratic institutions and CS.

The 1996 Non-Profit Associations Act simplified the registration process for CSOs and reinforced their independence. This legislation was instrumental in creating a supportive legal environment for CS ("Non-Profit Associations Act" 2014). Estonia's efforts to join the European Union and NATO necessitated comprehensive reforms. Meeting the stringent criteria for membership required strengthening democratic governance, rule of law, and civil liberties. These reforms had a direct positive impact on the strength and effectiveness of CSOs (Auers 2003, 68–69). The government maintained minimal control over CSOs. The

supportive legal environment allowed CSOs to flourish and actively participate in the democratization process

Deepening Democratic Engagement (2005-2013)

With EU and NATO memberships secured in 2004, Estonia focused on deepening democratic engagement and leveraging digital innovations to enhance civic participation. Estonia continued pioneering in e-governance and digital democracy initiatives. The e-Estonia project facilitated greater transparency, public participation, and accountability in governance. Digital platforms empowered CSOs to engage more effectively with the government and the public (Alvarez, Hall, and Trechsel 2009, 503–4). The 2007 Bronze Soldier crisis in Estonia, CS mobilized both ethnic Estonians and the Russian-speaking community, leading to significant public demonstrations and violent riots. This incident brought about deep-seated ethnic tensions and differing historical narratives within Estonian society, reflecting broader issues of integration and minority rights (Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipila 2008, 393–94).

Resilience and Adaptation (2014-2022)

CS in Estonia became highly vigilant and proactive following the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia. This vigilance was driven by concerns about Estonia's own security and the potential for similar actions by Russia in the Baltic region. CSOs intensified their efforts to foster national unity, support democratic values, and strengthen Estonia's integration with Western institutions, such as NATO and the EU, to ensure durable collective security measures (Veebel 2023, 155–56). In response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Estonian CS demonstrated remarkable solidarity and support for Ukraine. Estonia emerged as the leading donor per capita in assisting Ukraine, showcasing the nation's commitment to supporting democratic resilience against aggression. The invasion also intensified public discourse on national security and pointed out the importance of ethnic and social cohesion

within Estonia, driving CS to further engage in activities that promote national unity and resilience against potential threats (Veebel 2023).

Estonia's strategic Western alignment and robust CS are likely to have been instrumental in its democratization. Key geopolitical moments, including EU and NATO accession, and responses to regional security threats, have reinforced Estonia's democratic institutions. Concurrently, the supportive environment for CSO, marked by legal reforms, minimal repression, and digital democracy initiatives, has bolstered civic engagement and democratic resilience. These combined forces underscore the assumed consequences of Western integration and a durable CS in Estonia's successful democratic consolidation.

Belarus' Geopolitical Orientation and Democratic Backsliding

### Initial Transition and Challenges (1991-1993)

Belarus faced significant challenges in establishing a stable democratic framework after independence. The country's initial attempts at political and economic reform were hampered by internal and external pressures. The early 1990s featured economic difficulties and political instability, which undermined efforts to consolidate democratic governance (Bekus 2023, 99–100). In February 1993, the parliament ratified the START I treaty and acceded to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapon state. This move was significant in the context of Belarus' geopolitical alignment and demonstrated its commitment to disarmament and international cooperation (Lockwood 1993).

The Rise of Authoritarianism (1994-1999)

The 1994 election of Alexander Lukashenko as president indicated the beginning of an era characterized by increasing authoritarianism. Lukashenko's administration quickly

consolidated power and limited democratic institutions (Figure 3). During this period, Belarus

aligned itself closely with Russia, signing various treaties and agreements that reinforced

economic and political ties. This alignment was part of Lukashenko's strategy to maintain

power and support from a strong ally (Ambrosio 1999). The formation of the Union State

with Russia in the late 1990s further solidified Belarus's alignment with Russian geopolitical

interests, impacting its foreign and domestic political landscape (Dunlop 2000, 44–46). A

controversial referendum in 1996 extended Lukashenko's term and expanded his powers,

leading to significant democratic backsliding. This event underscored Belarus's shift towards

an authoritarian regime with limited political freedoms (Marples and Pervushina 2005, 19–

23).

Figure 3. Liberal Democracy Index in Belarus (1991-2022)
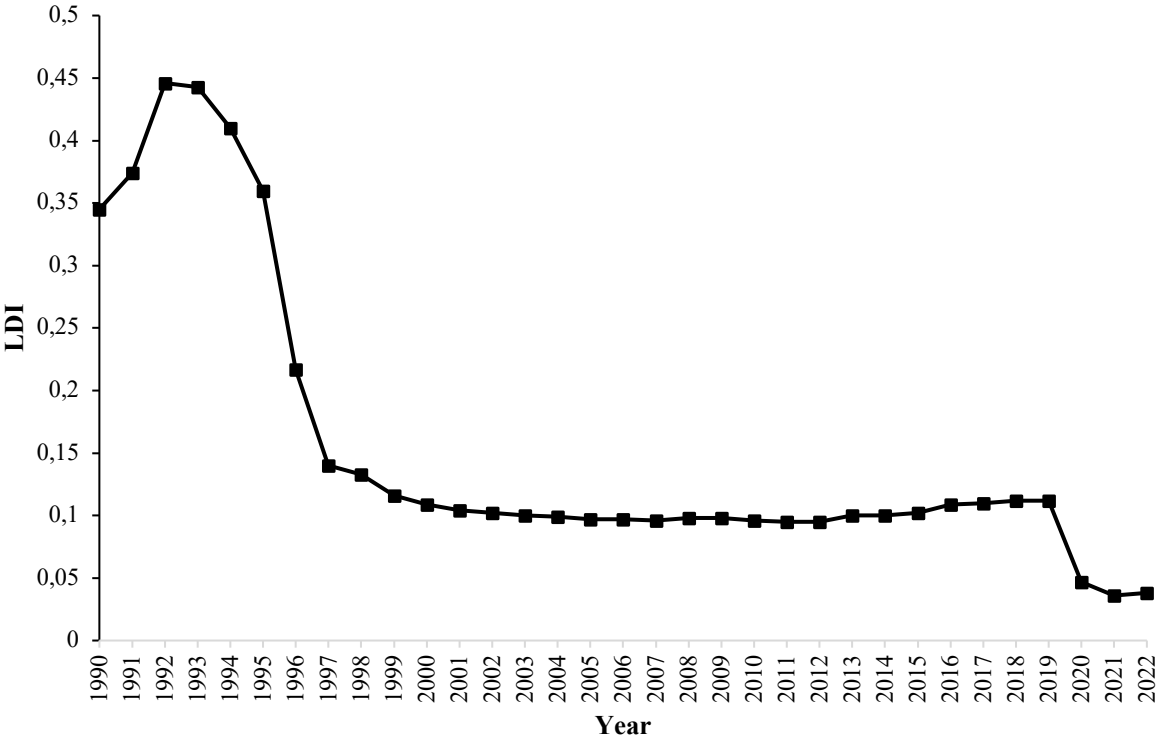
Source: V-Dem Dataset

Consolidated Authoritarianism and Limited Engagement with the West (2000-2013)

The presidential election in 2006 was widely criticized for lack of transparency and fairness. The government's suppression of opposition protests accentuated the continued authoritarian grip on power (Silitski 2006, 138–41). The election process involved significant manipulation, repression of political opponents, and misuse of state resources to ensure Lukashenko's victory. Another disputed presidential election in 2010 led to violent crackdowns on opposition figures and CS. further isolating Belarus from planned Western engagement (Potocki 2011, 49–50; Padhol and Marples 2011, 3). Engagement with the European Union was already limited, but after the election the weak relationships deteriorated even further (Bosse 2012).   The brutal suppression of post-election protests demonstrated Lukashenko's determination to maintain control, regardless of international condemnation.

Geopolitical Maneuvering and Continued Repression (2014-2019)

Following the 2014 February Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, Belarus cautiously engaged with the West while maintaining its close ties with Russia, as evidenced by its voting patterns at the United Nations (Lennon and Becker 2019, 321–22). The annexation of Crimea by Russia in April and subsequent regional instability impacted Belarus's geopolitical stance further. As the threat of domestic Russian intervention was clear, Lukashenko carefully sought closer ties with Russia to prevent this scenario (Kuleszewicz 2016, 34–38).

Increased International Isolation (2020-2022)

The presidential election in 2020 sparked widespread protests and international condemnation due to allegations of electoral fraud. The government's harsh crackdown on demonstrators and opposition leaders showcased the entrenched authoritarian regime. The Kremlin reacted by supporting Lukashenko, it recognized the results and ensured political stability (Fung 2021,

309–10). Belarus fully aligned with Russia, allowing its territory to be used for launching attacks on Ukraine and providing logistical support to Russian military operations. This alignment was justified by Belarusian leadership on grounds of regional security and perceived threats from Ukraine (Mudrov 2022, 271–77).

Civil Society Strength and Autocracy in Belarus

Early Independence and Authoritarian Consolidation (1991-1995)

Before 1996, NGOs in Belarus experienced relatively minimal government pressure and were allowed to receive foreign grants, benefiting from a preferential tax system set up by the government (Figure 4). This enabled organizations like the Soros Foundation to become significant donors, supporting around 1,100 political and nonpolitical organizations. Despite this initial leniency, the new government under Lukashenko increased surveillance of NGOs and maintained control through a registration process. Many NGOs sought to legalize their activities and avoid political involvement, often encouraged by large grant-makers such as the EU and the Soros Foundation. However, this cooperative environment began to deteriorate as the government tightened its grip (Lenzi 2002, 409).

Figure 4. Civil Society Organizations – Belarus (1991-2022)
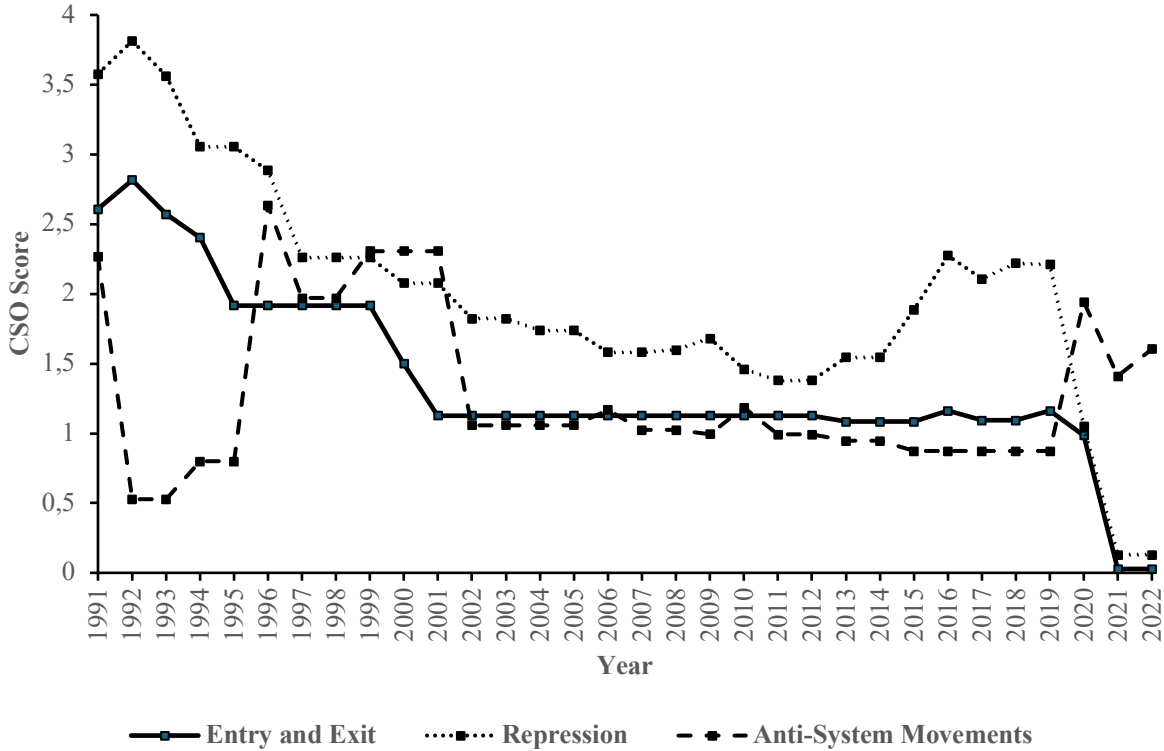
Source: V-Dem Dataset. *Note:* See Appendix for CSO Score interpretation.

Increasing Control and Repression (1996-2000)

After the 1996 referendum, CS structures in Belarus faced severe repression (Figure 4).

Prominent CSOs, such as the Open Society Institute's Belarusian Soros Foundation, were

harassed by the government, leading to the closure of the Soros Foundation in 1997. This

characterized the beginning of a full-scale assault on CS by the Lukashenko regime, aiming to

intimidate and dismantle independent organizations. In response to the crackdown,

democratic CSOs made efforts to organize a collective defense, including a human rights

convention and an assembly of CSOs. Despite these efforts, the government's tactics to divide

and weaken CS prevailed, limiting the ability of CSOs to mobilize effectively. The OSCE

attempted to mediate, but the regime's creation of puppet CSOs undermined meaningful

dialogue and further destabilized legitimate CSOs (Lenzi 2002, 411–13).

Consolidation of Authoritarianism and Resistance (2001-2013)

In the 2001 presidential election, Lukashenko employed extensive repressive measures to stifle CS and democratic forces, including shutting down independent media, closing NGOs, and manipulating the electoral process to ensure his victory. These actions exemplified his broader strategy to maintain power by systematically dismantling any opposition or CS structures. After the 2006 presidential election, NGOs in Belarus organized mass protests against the reported election results, with CS activists setting up a tent camp in Minsk's October Square, inspired by Ukraine's Orange Revolution. However, these efforts were quickly suppressed by riot police, leading to the eventual dispersal and arrest of protesters (Silitski 2006, 144–46). CSO's attempted to mobilize opposition against Lukashenko's regime and organize protests against around the 2010 election process. Despite facing repression and restrictions from the government, CSOs tried to create awareness and challenge the legitimacy of the election results with support of the EU (Potocki 2011, 58–59).

Intensified Repression and Control (2014-2019)

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 catalyzed a significant movement within Belarusian CS towards nationalism. It came with a renewed emphasis on national identity and cultural independence as a form of resistance against further assimilation into the Russian sphere (Marin 2019, 28–29). The regime maintained a facade of CS through government-organized non-governmental organizations, which were used to suppress genuine civil activism and promote state-approved narratives (Matchanka 2014, 68–71).

Total Suppression and International Isolation (2020-2022)

The period saw extreme repression of CSOs, especially in the context of the disputed 2020 presidential election and subsequent protests. The 2020 election sparked significant anti-

system movement activity, posing a substantial threat to the regime. However, the government's aggressive response, including widespread arrests and suppression of demonstrations, limited the effectiveness of these movements (*Human Rights Watch* 2020; *Human Rights Watch* 2021). CS exhibited strong resistance to 2022 Russo-Ukrainian the war, both through public sentiment and direct action. This response has been characterized by a mix of public opposition, volunteerism in Ukraine, strategic reassessments by opposition leaders, and the geopolitical entanglements of the Lukashenka regime (Rudnik 2022).

Belarus's geopolitical alignment with Russia and the repressive environment for CS have significantly hindered its democratization. The formation of the Union State with Russia and the 2020 disputed presidential election, have entrenched authoritarian governance. Severe repression of CSOs and restricted political freedoms have limited civic engagement and any democratic development. These elements collectively underscore the difficulties to democratization in Belarus. It shows how its authoritarian regime and geopolitical alliances shaped its political landscape.

Moldova's Geopolitical Orientation and Democratization

Independence and Initial Transition (1991-1993)

Independent Moldova initially struggled to establish a stable political and economic framework. The country faced significant challenges in transitioning to a market economy and democratic governance (Quinlan 2002, 88-89). The outbreak of the Transnistrian conflict in 1992, where a breakaway region declared independence, underlined the complexities of Moldova's geopolitical environment and posed challenges to its democratic consolidation (Całus and Kosienkowski 2018, 3–4; Quinlan 2002, 88–89).

**First Shifts Towards European Integration (1994-2004)**

Moldova carefully pursued closer ties with European institutions singing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1994, while managing its relationship with Russia (Litra, 7). The country sought to balance its GO between East and West (Całus and Kosienkowski 2018, 3–8). The parliamentary election of the Communist Party in 2001 signaled a shift towards closer relations with Russia, though European integration remained a strategic objective In 2004 the European Neighborhood Policy was established, which aimed at strengthening political and economic ties with the EU and promoting democratic reforms (Całus and Kosienkowski 2018, 5).

EU Aspirations and Internal Challenges (2005-2013)

The 2005 election coalition was a significant effort towards European integration without large changes in parliament. The government embarked on comprehensive reforms to align with EU standards and even aspired membership(Całus and Kosienkowski 2018, 5).

The political crisis following disputed 2009 parliamentary elections led to widespread protests and eventual political changes. Moldova's commitment to democratic principles and European integration was heavily reinforced with the Alliance for European Integration taking parliament, strongly improving democracy. While Moldova continued to implement reforms in preparation to the EU-Moldova Association Agreement from 2009 onward. It was aimed at fostering political and economic integration with the EU (Całus and Kosienkowski 2018, 9), this was accompanied by a period of democratization (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Liberal Democracy Index in Moldova (1991-2022)
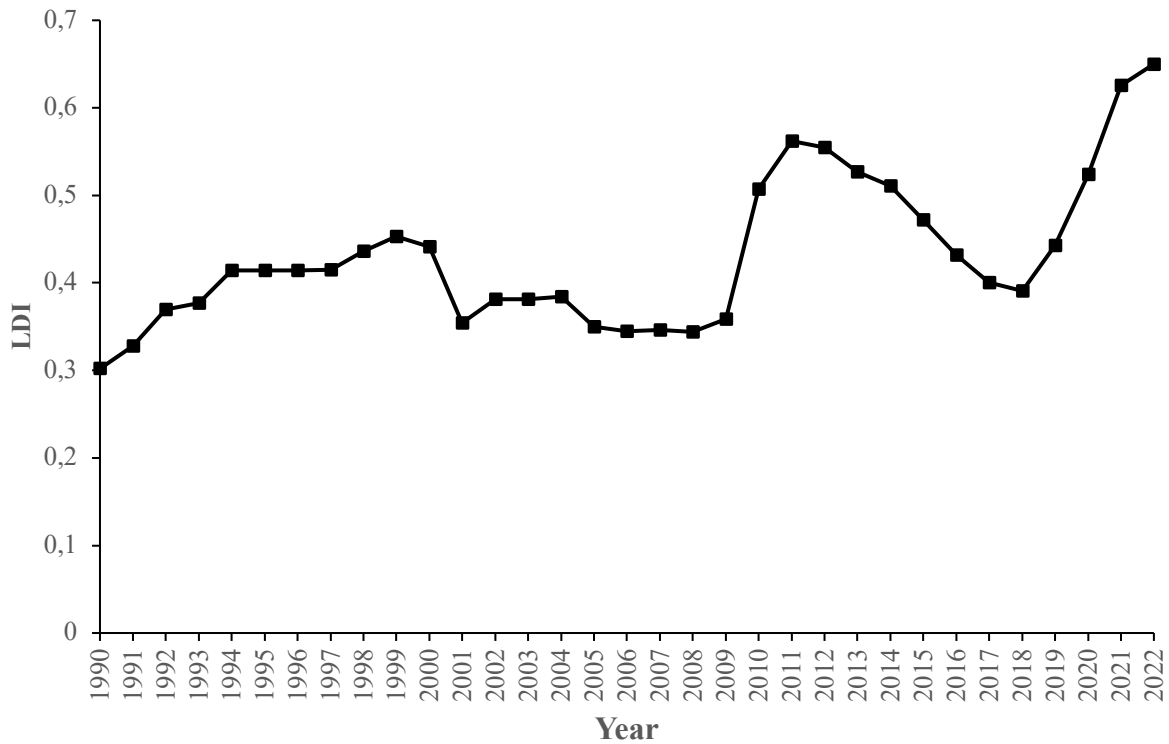
Source: V-Dem Dataset. *Note:* See Appendix for CSO Score interpretation.

Deepening EU Ties and Regional Instability (2014-2022)

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 heightened Moldova's geopolitical tensions, as it intensified fears of a similar scenario in Transnistria, leading to increased alignment with Western powers for security assurances. This alignment is evidenced by Moldova's strengthening of ties with the EU and NATO to counteract Russian influence (Quinlan 2020). Moldova signed the EU Association Agreement in 2014, which included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), reinforcing its commitment to European integration (Całus and Kosienkowski 2018, 9).

The Republic of Moldova-United Nations Partnership Framework for Sustainable Development 2018-2022, aimed at enhancing governance, human rights, and gender equality, while promoting sustainable and inclusive economic growth (United Nations 2017; Figure 5).

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine significantly drove Moldova closer to the European Union, with the government accelerating its EU integration efforts for long-term security and economic stability (Strategic Comments). As a result, Moldova submitted and received EU candidate status, reflecting its commitment to European integration (Cebotari and Bevziuc 2022, 102–4).

Civil Society Strength and Democratization in Moldova

Early Independence and Democratic Foundations (1991-1997)

Since gaining independence in 1991, Moldova has faced difficulties in consolidating statehood and democratizing due to national minority dissent, resulting in frequent changes to its political system, including the adoption of a new constitution in 1994. and amendments to strengthen parliamentary power in 2000. Despite progress in establishing a judicial system and legislative framework, ongoing issues such as inefficient administration, inadequate funding, poverty, territorial separatism, and corruption have hindered full implementation of democratic standards, although the political system remains on a democratic path (Cukrowski, Gortat, and Kazmierkiewicz 2003, 13–14).

Heightened Repression Consolidation of Democratic Institutions (1998-2008)

CSOs in Moldova faced a challenging environment in this period, particularly with the Communist Party's return to power in 2001, which slowed the development of the nongovernmental sector. Despite these challenges, CSOs continued to advocate for democratic principles and human rights, though media freedom and human rights protection regressed during this period (Cukrowski, Gortat, and Kazmierkiewicz 2003, 13–14). The early 2000s saw increased involvement of Moldovan CS in cross-border cooperation with Romania,

especially after Romania's EU accession in 2007. These organizations shifted focus from direct aid to advocacy, promoting best practices and democratic principles within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Șoitu and Șoitu 2010).

Dual Democratic Engagement (2009-2013)

Following the disputed 2009 parliamentary elections, CSOs in Moldova were central in drawing international attention to human rights abuses and pushing for democratic reforms, despite facing significant government repression. This period was an important phase for CS in advocating for greater transparency and accountability in the political system (Dura and Gnedina 2009; Figure 6). The environment for CSOs in Moldova saw increased support from the European Union during this period, as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the EU-Moldova Action Plan initiated in 2009. This external support helped CS's capacity to engage in governance and policy advocacy, contributing to more significant involvement in democratic processes (Șoitu and Șoitu 2010).

Figure 6. Civil Society Organizations – Moldova (1991-2022)
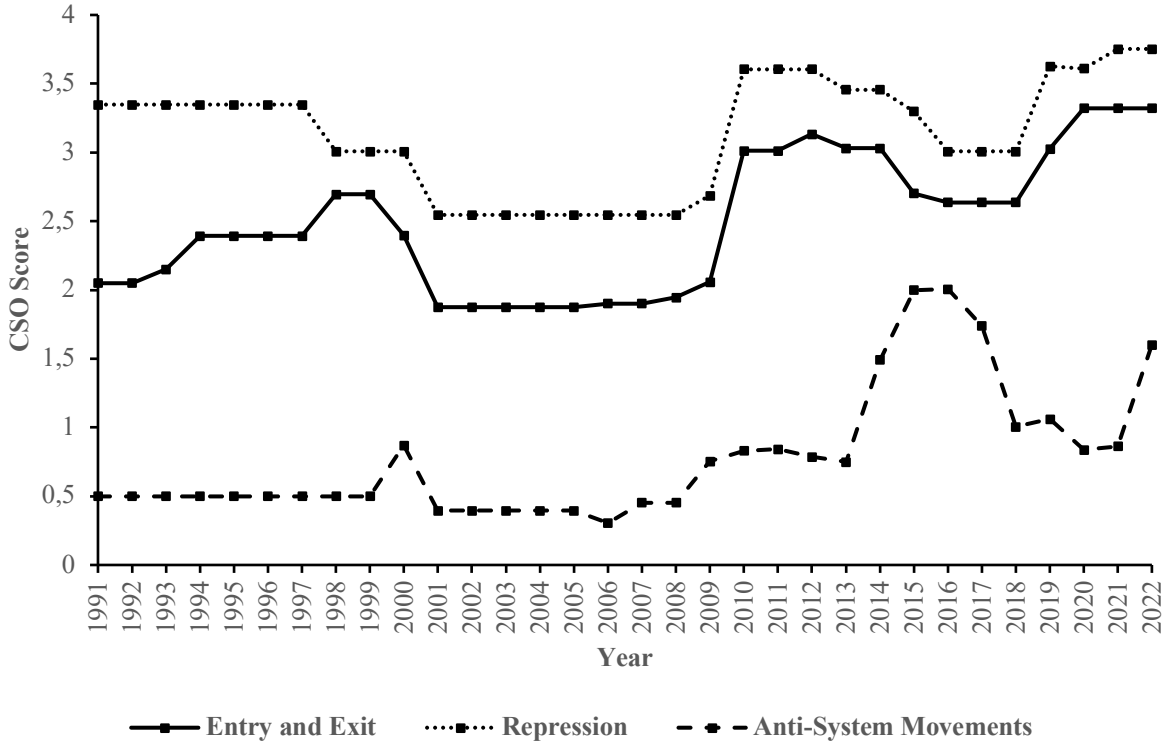
Source: V-Dem Dataset. *Note:* See Appendix for CSO Score interpretation.

Resilience and Adaptation (2014-2022)

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 heightened regional security concerns and exacerbated political polarization within Moldova. This led to fears of potential Russian ambitions in Transnistria and intensified focus on security issues, influencing the political discourse towards stronger pro-European and anti-Russian sentiments (Bîrlădeanu 2014, 363–67). Moldovan CSOs played an impactful role in advocating for democratic reforms and anti-corruption measures, promoting transparency and accountability in government institutions (Haider 2022, 3).

The annexation of Crimea intensified these efforts, prompting CS to push harder for reforms to safeguard democracy (Rogstad 2018, 2–10). In 2022, Moldovan CSOs provided extensive

support to Ukrainian refugees, offering a wide range of services at border crossing points and places of residence within Moldova (Oceretnîi et al. 2022, 91). The annexation of Crimea and the ensuing conflict in Ukraine were direct catalysts for this mobilization, highlighting the interconnectedness of regional events and CS responses.

Moldova's path to democratization has been shaped by its geopolitical choices and the CSO strength. The country has balanced between aligning with Europe and maintaining ties with Russia, which have both influenced its democratic progress. European ambitions have pushed for reforms and strengthened democratic institutions, while Russian influence has often created obstacles. At the same time, a growing CS has advocated for democratic values, especially during times of political crisis and external threats. Overall, this has led to a gradual and sometimes uneven democratic development, with notable progress in recent years thanks to a stronger push for European integration and the dedication of civil society.

Armenia's Geopolitical Orientation and Democratization

Independence and Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict (1991-1994)

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia faced immediate challenges related to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The war with Azerbaijan over the disputed region dominated the country's early years of independence. The ceasefire agreement in 1994 brokered by Russia meant the end of active conflict, but the unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabakh continued to shape Armenia's GO and internal politics (Papazian 2008, 1–3).

Russia Alignment and Internal Consolidation (1995-2004)

Armenia established a close alliance with Russia, which provided essential economic and military support. This alignment was crucial for Armenia's security given the ongoing tensions with Azerbaijan. In 2001, Armenia joined the Council of Europe, committing to democratic reforms and human rights standards. This step indicated a desire to balance its Russian alliance with integration into European institutions (Hille 2010, 250). Armenia's relationship with the European Union began to develop, although the country remained heavily influenced by Russia in terms of security and economic policies (Hille 2010, 253–55).

Balancing Acts and Democratic Aspirations (2005-2017)

The integration of Armenia European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) with the EU showed a significant step towards closer European relations, aiming at democratic reforms and economic development (Kokubo 2009, 167). Armenia joined the Eastern Partnership initiative in 2009, further aligning with European Union standards and policies, while still maintaining its strategic alliance with Russia (Gahler 2021, 14–22). The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the subsequent conflict in Ukraine heightened regional security concerns. Armenia, a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, faced pressures to navigate its geopolitical position carefully (Elzbeta Kaca 2014, 53–56).

Velvet Revolution and Security Threats (2018-2022)

The 2018 Velvet Revolution led to the peaceful resignation of Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan and the rise of Nikol Pashinyan. This demonstrated a significant shift towards democratization and increased civic engagement (Figure 7). The Revolution saw minimal intervention from Russia as it did not push an Anti-Russian Agenda (Lanskoy and Suthers 2019, 85–87). The renewed conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and the subsequent 2020 ceasefire agreement mediated by Russia had significant implications for Armenia's political landscape

and regional alliances (Harvard International Review 2019). The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 significantly impacted Armenia's CS, as the country faced increased pressures to navigate its alliances carefully. Armenia's strategic relationship with Russia was complicated by the need to balance this with the regional security concerns and the shifting dynamics involving Western influences and sanctions on Russia, Therefore Armenia sought new allies and partnerships to maintain its security and economic stability (Souleimanov and Fedorov 2023, 95–98).

Figure 7. Liberal Democracy Index - Armenia (1991-2022)
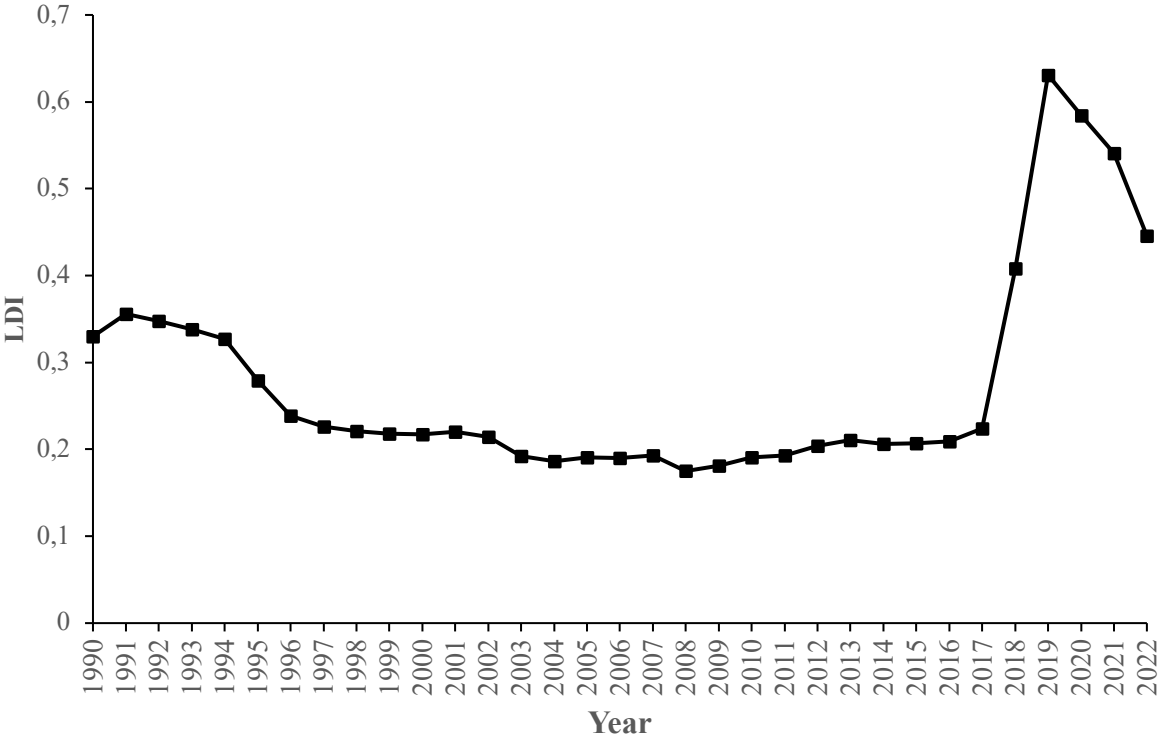
Source: V-Dem Dataset

Civil Society Strength and Democratization in Armenia

Independence and Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict (1991-1994)

In the early years following independence, Armenia's CS was nascent and primarily focused

on the immediate issues of national sovereignty and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The newly independent state faced significant challenges, including economic instability and war, which limited the development and influence of CSOs. The priority on national security and the war effort overshadowed democratization efforts. While some CSOs emerged, their impact on promoting democratic governance was minimal during this period due to the overarching focus on survival and stability (Gevorgyan 2023, 60–61).

Russia Alignment and Internal Consolidation (1995-2004)

The post-war period saw the gradual development of CSOs, particularly with international support aimed at promoting democratization. Armenia's alignment with Russia provided security but also influenced the extent and nature of CS activities. Joining the Council of Europe in 2001 signified a significant step towards democratic reforms, partly driven by the need to align with European standards (Hille 2010, 250). This period also saw increased engagement of CSOs in advocating for human rights and democratic practices, though their influence was still limited by state control and the need to maintain Russian support (Smith 2011, 386–93).

Balancing Acts and Democratic Aspirations (2005-2017)

The signing of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Action Plan with the EU in 2006 and participation in the Eastern Partnership in 2009 furthered Armenia's democratic reforms. These initiatives enhanced the effect of CSOs in monitoring government actions and advocating for transparency and accountability (Gevorgyan 2023, 60–61). This period witnessed significant CS activism, including major protests around the 2008 presidential election (Figure 8). CSOs played a significant role in mobilizing citizens and advocating for electoral integrity, which emphasized their growing influence on the democratization process (Stefes and Paturyan 2021, 5).

Figure 8. Civil Society Organizations - Armenia (1991-2022)
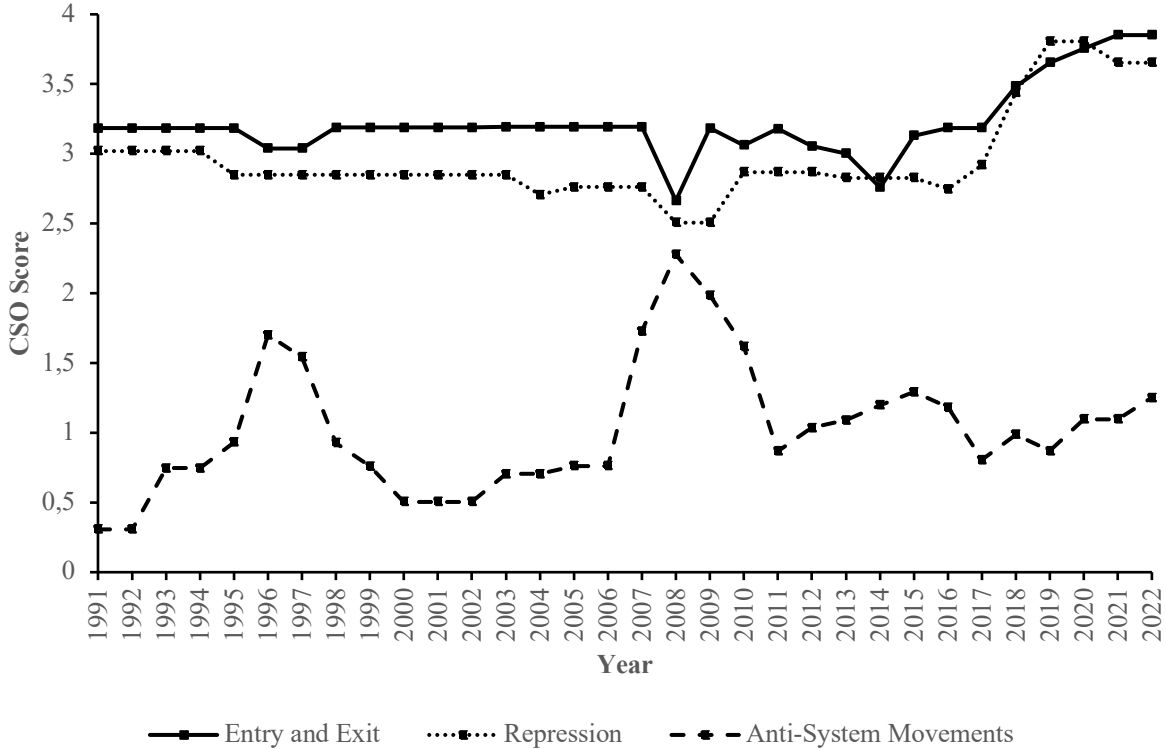
Source: V-Dem Dataset. *Note:* See Appendix for CSO Score interpretation.

Velvet Revolution and Security Threats (2018-2022)

The Velvet Revolution of 2018 was a landmark event in Armenia's democratization, driven by widespread civil resistance and led by a coalition of CSOs (Figure 8). This revolution resulted in significant political changes and increased civic engagement, marking a turning point in Armenia's democratic development (Grigoryan 2019, 1661–164). Post-revolution, they maintained their independence, continued to monitor government actions, and promoted transparency and anti-corruption measures. Armenian CS facilitated public engagement and empowered citizens to actively participate in political processes. This engagement helped sustain the momentum of democratic reforms and ensured continued public involvement in governance (Lanskoy and Suthers 2019, 98).

The analysis of Armenia from 1991 to 2022 illustrates the profound impact of its CS and the limited yet significant role of CSOs on its democratization process. Armenia's alignment with Russia, driven by security needs against Azerbaijan, constrained its foreign policy and democratization efforts, though periods of European engagement through the Council of Europe and Eastern Partnership initiatives spurred significant reforms. While CSOs had minimal influence in the early post-independence years, their role expanded, culminating in the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which marked a strong shift towards democratization. Despite facing renewed conflicts and geopolitical challenges, the revolution underscored increased civic engagement and the potential for further democratic advancements.

Cross-Case Analytical Conclusion

Estonia, Belarus, Moldova, and Armenia, share common challenges in their journey towards democratization. Each country faced significant hurdles transitioning from centralized control to establishing new political, economic, and social systems. A common feature among them is the strong influence of GO, where the tension between Western integration (with the EU and NATO) and alignment with Russia played a decisive role in shaping their political landscapes and governance models. Overall, both constant and occasional GO toward the West appear to drive democratization. A Russian GO tends to have a reversing effect, keeping existing authoritarian practice in place. Russia's involvement in both Moldova's and Armenia's regional conflict show its deep integration in these states.

Connected to GO, international institutions and external actors have also had a substantial impact on their democratization processes. Economic aid, political support, and security guarantees from these actors have been vital in shaping the stability and political progress of these nations.

Although assessing CSOs' actual effect on democratization remains difficult, they have been instrumental across all four countries advocating for democratic reforms and governance improvements. Despite varying government control and repression, supportive legal frameworks and international assistance have sustainably strengthened these organizations, only not Belarus.

Despite these commonalities, the paths taken by each country have diverged significantly. Estonia has firmly oriented itself towards the West, achieving successful integration into the EU and NATO, which has resulted in strong democratic institutions and governance. In contrast, Belarus has maintained a close alignment with Russia, leading to entrenched authoritarianism and international isolation.

Moldova has balanced its efforts between European integration and Russian influence, resulting in fluctuating political stability and democratic progress. The country has experienced periods of reform, particularly in increasing alignment with European Union standards, yet continues to face challenges related to corruption and governance.

Armenia's geopolitical journey has been characterized by its need to navigate between Russian security dependence and aspirations for European democratic standards. Significant internal democratic movements, such as the Velvet Revolution of 2018, have driven substantial reforms, although the country continues to grapple with regional conflicts and a deep relationship with Russia.

The CS environment in these countries also differs significantly. Estonia's minimal control and repression of CSOs have led to a robust CS actively participating in and influencing democratic processes. In contrast, Belarus has faced severe repression of CSOs, with substantial government control stifling democratic engagement. Moldova's experience has

been mixed, with varying levels of control and repression, though significant international support has bolstered its CS. Armenia has seen increased civic activism, particularly after the Velvet Revolution, with government support aiding CSOs in advocating for democratic reforms.

In summary, the experiences of these states illustrate the diverse experiences with democratization. While they share common challenges related to their Soviet legacy and geopolitical pressures, their unique geopolitical alignments and internal dynamics have resulted in substantively different democratic outcomes. Estonia's successful Western integration stands in stark contrast to Belarus's entrenched authoritarianism under Russian influence. Moldova and Armenia's hybrid approaches reflect their complex balancing acts between European aspirations and Russian dependencies, underscoring the importance of CS and external support in shaping their democratic trajectories.

Discussion

This research offers a nuanced understanding of democratization processes in Estonia, Belarus, Moldova, and Armenia, but several limitations must be acknowledged. One significant limitation is the potentially bidirectional relationship between CS and democracy, which became problematic in the analysis. The analysis demonstrated that strong CSOs can drive democratic reforms and simultaneously a more democratic environment can also enable the development and effectiveness of CSOs. This is also reflected in the CS-component of the Liberal Democracy Index, which required a new conceptualization and operationalization of CS strength. Nevertheless, this bidirectionality complicates the assessment of causality and the specific impact of CS on democratization. Therefore, utilizing CSO-indicators measuring the political environment, while being excluded in the V-Dem assessment of democracy, were necessary.

In the analysis it appears that GO, CSOs and democratic or autocratic regimes exert mutual influence on one another. GO seems to be the most influential among the three variables, however, the scope of the research prohibits inference on the exact nature of this assumed triangular relationship.

Furthermore, the varying quantitated levels of the democracy and CSO-indicators across time served as a baseline to identify large changes and trends. The categorization of the analysis in different time periods is done both by the quantitative trends and by thematic events. The aim of the CSO-indicators and Liberal Democracy Index is to visualize the overall change between 1991 and 2022. Their purpose did not lie into making hard categorizations across time. For example, democracy scores were often consistent for decades in all cases, limiting its utility.

Additionally, the research primarily focuses on geopolitical GO and CS as key factors influencing democratization. However, other factors could have played substantial roles. These include economic conditions, non-political historical legacies, institutional designs, leadership dynamics, external economic dependencies, and cultural factors. For instance, economic stability and growth can enhance state capacity and public trust in democratic institutions, while cultural legacies of governance can either hinder or facilitate democratic transitions. Leadership transitions and the presence of charismatic or reform-minded leaders can also significantly impact the process of democratization.

Future research should explore the reciprocal relationship between GO, CSO and democracy to clarify causal mechanisms and directions. Therefore, expanding the scope to more influential factors could offer a deeper understanding. Comparative studies with a broader range of post-Soviet states or other transitioning regions can enhance generalizability. Thus, by addressing these areas, future research can provide a more nuanced understanding of

democratization processes, contributing valuable theoretical and practical insights for supporting democratic development in diverse contexts.

The theoretical value of this research lies in its contribution to understanding the complex interplay between external and internal factors in shaping democratization in post-Soviet states. By assessing the roles of GO and CS, the study enriches existing theories on democratic transitions and consolidation, particularly in the context of geopolitical tensions and post-authoritarian societies. Practically, the findings offer insights for policymakers and international actors involved in supporting democratic development. Understanding the nuanced impacts of GO and CS's empowerment can guide more effective strategies for promoting democratic governance.

In terms of internal validity, the research draws country-specific analyses, allowing for a relatively in-depth exploration of each case's unique context. However, more primary sources could enhance the comprehensiveness of the analysis. External validity is supported by the cross-case analysis, which identifies common patterns and divergences among the countries studied. Nevertheless, the generalizability of the findings to other post-Soviet states or regions with different GOs might be limited.

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Appendix
Liberal Democracy Index
Question: To what extent is the ideal of liberal democracy achieved?
Clarification: The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The liberal model takes a "negative" view of political power insofar as it judges the quality of democracy by the limits placed on government. This is achieved by constitutionally protected civil liberties, strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective checks and balances that, together, limit the exercise of executive power. To make this a measure of liberal democracy, the index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account.
Scale: Interval, from low to high (0-1).
Source(s): v2x_liberal v2x_polyarchy
Data release: 1-14. Release 1, 2, and 3 used a different, preliminary aggregation formula.
Aggregation: The index is aggregated using this formula:
$v2x\_libdem = .25 * v2x\_polyarchy1.585 + .25 * v2x\_liberal + .5 * v2x\_polyarchy1.585 * v2x\_liberal$

CSO entry and exit
Question: To what extent does the government achieve control over entry and exit by civil society organizations (CSOs) into public life?
Responses:
0: Monopolistic control. The government exercises an explicit monopoly over CSOs. The only organizations allowed to engage in political activity such as endorsing parties or politicians, sponsoring public issues forums, organizing rallies or demonstrations, engaging in strikes, or publicly commenting on public officials and policies are government-sponsored organizations. The government actively represses those who attempt to defy its monopoly on political activity.
1: Substantial control. The government licenses all CSOs and uses political criteria to bar organizations that are likely to oppose the government. There are at least some citizen-based organizations that play a limited role in politics independent of the government. The government actively represses those who attempt to flout its political criteria and bars them from any political activity.
2: Moderate control. Whether the government ban on independent CSOs is partial or full, some prohibited organizations manage to play an active political role. Despite its ban on organizations of this sort, the government does not or cannot repress them, due to either its weakness or political expedience.
3: Minimal control. Whether or not the government licenses CSOs, there exist constitutional provisions that allow the government to ban organizations or movements that have a history of anti-democratic action in the past (e.g.
the banning of neo-fascist or communist
organizations in the Federal Republic of Germany). Such banning takes place under strict rule of law and conditions of judicial independence.
4: Unconstrained. Whether or not the government licenses CSOs, the government does not impede their formation and operation unless they are engaged in activities to violently

overthrow the government.

Scale: Ordinal, converted to interval by the measurement model.

Data release: 1-11.

Cross-coder aggregation: Bayesian item response theory measurement model (see V-Dem Methodology).

CSO Repression

Question: Does the government attempt to repress civil society organizations (CSOs)?

Responses:

0: Severely. The government violently and actively pursues all real and even some imagined members of CSOs. They seek not only to deter the activity of such groups but to effectively liquidate them. Examples include Stalinist Russia, Nazi Germany, and Maoist China.

1: Substantially. In addition to the kinds of harassment outlined in responses 2 and 3 below, the government also arrests, tries, and imprisons leaders of and participants in oppositional CSOs who have acted lawfully. Other sanctions include disruption of public gatherings and violent sanctions of activists (beatings, threats to families, destruction of valuable property). Examples include Mugabe's Zimbabwe, Poland under Martial Law, Serbia under Milosevic.

2: Moderately. In addition to material sanctions outlined in response 3 below, the government also engages in minor legal harassment (detentions, short-term incarceration) to dissuade CSOs from acting or expressing themselves. The government may also restrict the scope of their actions through measures that restrict association of civil society organizations with each other or political parties, bar civil society organizations from taking certain actions, or block international contacts. Examples include post-Martial Law Poland, Brazil in the early 1980s, the late Franco period in Spain.

3: Weakly. The government uses material sanctions (fines, firings, denial of social services) to deter oppositional CSOs from acting or expressing themselves. They may also use burdensome registration or incorporation procedures to slow the formation of new civil society organizations and sidetrack them from engagement. The government may also organize Government Organized Movements or NGOs (GONGOs) to crowd out independent organizations. One example would be Singapore in the post-Yew phase or Putin's Russia.

4: No. Civil society organizations are free to organize, associate, strike, express themselves, and to criticize the government without fear of government sanctions or harassment.

Scale: Ordinal, converted to interval by the measurement model.

Notes: For reasons of consistency, as of December 2014, responses to this question are reversed so that the least democratic response is "0" and the most democratic is "4".

Data release: 1-11.

Cross-coder aggregation: Bayesian item response theory measurement model (see V-Dem Methodology).

CSO Anti-System Movements

Question: Among civil society organizations, are there anti-system opposition movements?

Clarification: An anti-system opposition movement is any movement — peaceful or armed — that is based in the country (not abroad) and is organized in opposition to the current political system. That is, it aims to change the polity in fundamental ways, e.g., from democratic to

autocratic (or vice-versa), from capitalist to communist (or vice-versa), from secular to fundamentalist (or vice-versa). This movement may be linked to a political party that competes in elections but it must also have a "movement" character, which is to say a mass base and an existence separate from normal electoral competition.

If there are several movements, please answer in a general way about the relationship of those movements to the regime.

Responses:

0: No, or very minimal. Anti-system movements are practically nonexistent.

1: There is only a low-level of anti-system movement activity but it does not pose much of a threat to the regime.

2: There is a modest level of anti-system movement activity, posing some threat to the regime.

3: There is a high level of anti-system movement activity, posing substantial threat to the regime.

4: There is a very high level of anti-system movement activity, posing a real and present threat

to the regime.

Ordering: If coded "0", skip the following questions focused on anti-system movements.

Scale: Ordinal, converted to interval by the measurement model.

Data release: 1-11.

Cross-coder aggregation: Bayesian item response theory measurement model (see V-Dem Methodology).