

Towards open access social orders in Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a special issue that investigates the interplay between domestic socio-political orders and changing external influences – of the EU, Russia, Turkey and other external actors in the region. In this introduction, we lay the conceptual framework and propose theoretical mechanisms linking state capacity and the actions of external actors to the likelihood of transformations from limited to open access orders. Previewing the findings, we note a fundamental asymmetry: while external actors have many levers to undermine the establishment of an open access order, they are more limited in how they can support reforms towards liberal democracy and free-market economy.

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Introduction

The massive pro-democratisation protests in Belarus in 2020 made two things clear. First, while there may be enormous demand for political opening in a country, the incumbent regime has considerable capacity to keep these demands in check. Second, powerful external actors, such as the European Union (EU) and Russia, have only limited and indirect influence on developments in a country. These observations on the political drama in Belarus are the perfect backdrop to the questions that this article, and the special issue it introduces, address: To what extent do external actors facilitate or hinder the transition of Eastern European countries to open political and economic social orders? How is the influence of external actors transmitted and mediated by the domestic political context?

Existing research gives external actors different weight in the domestic political and economic developments in the post-communist states. Scholars initially focused on domestic dynamics. A second wave of studies attributed external factors, including the European Union (EU), a more prominent role as potential drivers of democratic change (Dimitrova 2004; Dimitrova and Pridham 2004; Jacoby 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Vachudova 2005). The broad finding of the so-called Europeanisation East literature was that the EU exercised unprecedented influence on post-communist EU candidate states in terms of polities, policies and economies (Epstein 2008; Héritier 2005; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Vachudova 2005). These effects, however, have not extended to

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other states in the region and have been much smaller when EU enlargement was not on the cards (Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017; Korosteleva 2012; Pridham 2008; Sasse 2008). Until recently, the literature on the post-Soviet region has focused too much on what the EU tries to do and not enough on how local elites and structural factors, such as state capacity, have conditioned the effects of EU actions. Likewise, the impact of autocratic external actors (often but not always Russia) on authoritarian regime survival and democratic reversals tends to be overestimated (Ambrosio 2010; Bader, Grävingsholt, and Kästner 2010; Burnell 2010; Delcour and Wolczuk 2013; Jackson 2010; Obydenkova and Libman 2015; Tolstrup 2009, 2013b). At face value, it seems that none of the external actors has achieved its foreign policy goals in the region.

Rather than privileging domestic or external actors, the special issue focuses on the interplay between varying domestic developments and changing external influences. Drawing on the seminal work of Douglass North and collaborators (North, Wallis and Weingast 2009), we start from the idea that the relations between political actors and institutions, as well as in society at large, in Eastern European countries need to be understood as social systems that have not fully transited from Limited Access Orders (LAO), based on personal relations, to Open Access Orders (OAO), based on impersonal institutions (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009).

Each contribution to the volume tackles different aspects of the question of what the potential influence of external actors is in shaping transformations from limited to open access orders, with a focus on the mechanisms, the mediating actors and the moderating factors of this influence. The distinguishing feature of the articles is the attention to the *interplay* between external and domestic factors. All contributions start from the premise that domestic actors and developments determine the dynamics of political and social orders, be they in equilibrium or moving towards more or less openness. We avoid looking at the countries and societies in post-communist Eastern Europe as passive spectators in the game between bigger or smaller external actors. This we term our “inside-out perspective”.

At the same time, we take the potential impact of the big external powers seriously, map their strategies, trace the channels of their influence, and try to ascertain their actual impact on the ground. Each contribution starts from the premise that a detailed understanding of how economic and political institutions interact in hybrid forms of social orders in order to prevent international engagement from further limiting rather than opening access to political and economic resources (Börzel 2015; Krasner and Risse 2014; North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009).

Below, we review the concepts of limited and open access orders. Then we summarise what we know about the opening and closure. After that, we discuss in more detail the context of post-communist transformations in Eastern Europe. Next, we propose mechanisms that link state capacity and the actions of external actors to the likelihood of societal transformations. We then discuss how each of the articles part of this special issue have contributed to our key questions and themes. Finally, we offer some conclusions that summarise the major findings and discuss their theoretical and practical implications.

Limited and open access social orders

We assess features of the political and economic development of countries in the region from the prism of a theoretical framework that emphasises the connectedness between

political economy and political institutions through the dominance of ruling elites extracting rents. The theoretical framework for explaining recorded human history developed by North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) helps us understand why the countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) have not progressed further in reforms, but have remained stable, with a couple of notable exceptions.

To introduce North's framework, we need to start with the fundamental concept of social orders. A social order is defined as "ways of organizing societies that are self-sustaining and internally consistent" (North et al. 2007, 7). This definition echoes the one suggested by Randall Calvert: "the long-lived patterns according to which a society functions as a society, rather than a random agglomeration of individuals" (1998, 131). What is important to note is that a social order is more than just the political organisation of society (or just the socio-economic system of exchange); it is more general than the state, which can be considered one institutional form of a social order; it implies a certain degree of predictability, stability and sustainability; and it concerns not (only) the system of formal institutions and organisations in society, but the informal patterns of cooperation, exchange and conflict management as well.

Depending on how societies seek to limit and control the use of violence, two types or dynamics of social order are distinguished: Limited Access Orders (LAO) or natural states, which characterise the majority of societies in the modern world, including – in our view – all the EaP countries, and Open Access Orders (OAO), which comprise most of the EU member states, the US and some other industrial democracies.

The basic premise of North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) is that the majority of states in the world are natural states based on LAOs. LAOs are ruled by rent-seeking elites that limit violence and maintain social order but collect rents in a personalised system of relations. The incumbent regime tries to prevent the use of violence and maintain social order by limiting access to resources, organisations and privileges to a small number of actors that control the means of violence. More specifically, in LAOs the political system is used to limit economic competition and create economic rents only for the dominant coalition of military, political, economic and religious elites in order to strengthen their support for the incumbent regime. LAOs differ in their degree of statehood and state capacity, understood as the capacity of a state to make and enforce collectively binding rules for the provision of public goods, as well as the density and kinds of organisations (public and/or private) through which social order is maintained (North et al. 2007, 10–16; North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009, 41–49). Natural states align the interests of powerful individuals to forge dominant coalitions and extract rents (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009, 13). In contrast to LAOs, OAOs are sustained by competition rather than rent creation. All citizens – rather than only the elites – are able to form economic, political, religious or social organizations (e.g. firms, parties, religious groups, civil society organizations) in order to pursue their own interests. In OAOs, the political system is used to regulate economic and political competition aimed at ordering social relations.

A major advantage of this conceptual framework in analysing developments in Eastern Europe is the focus on the connection between politics and economics. As North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) point out, much of contemporary social science treats political and economic actors as belonging to two distinct spheres and precisely for this reason fails to explain why democratic institutions and markets are relatively rare and difficult to sustain (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009, 269). Looking at actors as involved in both politics and

economics clearly fits what we know about the EU's Eastern neighbors. It helps us understand the role of elites and the (mal-)functioning of states with high levels of state capture, corruption and inequality, such as Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia. It also fits with what we know about the state's control of citizens' access to economic and social institutions in authoritarian regimes such as Belarus or Azerbaijan (cf. Ademmer, Langbein, and Börzel 2020).

According to North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009), basic and mature LAOs as well as OAOs are relatively stable social orders, assuming the state holds the monopoly over the use of force. They see OAOs as more successful with regard to their economic performance and their political institutions, reducing the likelihood of coups d'état or other forms of disorder.

Mechanisms of opening and closure

The key mechanism identified by North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) leading to a successful transition to OAOs relies on economic growth and diversification. The reason is that economic and political competition have to sustain each other. In OAOs, unrestricted access and impersonal competition in the economy undermine potential abuse of economic power for political purposes. In turn, political competition and open access to political resources, such as executive, legislative, and judicial power, prevent the abuse of political power for the manipulation of the economy. In LAOs, the dominant coalition restricts access to political and economic resources for private gains. Following the "double balance" logic, the ability of dominant elites to manipulate elections and to undermine the level playing field in LAOs depends on their ability to extract rents thanks to their control over economic resources, such as trade or capital, and vice versa.

Furthermore, North, Wallis, and Weingast suggest that the "impersonal and credible delivery of public goods" (2009, 266) should be the starting point for supporting LAOs with democratic institutions into developing towards real democracies. The presence of a strong state with capacity to deliver public goods and services is, according to them, crucial for both open and limited access orders to survive.

Based on the mechanisms envisaged by North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009), we identify trade interdependencies and economic diversification as some of the key mechanisms that might influence stability or change in Eastern Europe's current political and social orders. Statehood and state capacity play a crucial moderating role in the transmission or constraining of external influence and in the domestic interplay of elites and groups influencing the regime. In addition, as attested by a growing set of studies, ideational factors – ideas, legacies, narratives and informational resources – also matter as they influence elite and citizens causal beliefs. North et al. refer to Greif's work on beliefs as components of institutions next to norms, rules and organisations (2007, 29). They are interested in causal beliefs, resulting from cultural, educational and legal organisations (2007, 29). There is plenty of evidence that external actors (and domestic ones), through their communications, aim at influencing the causal beliefs of citizens.

The post-communist transformations in Eastern Europe

In contrast to North et al.'s framework, the political science literature studying post-communist transformation in Eastern Europe has tended to focus on the political

fundamentals of regime types.¹ Early studies focus on the historical legacies of the communist regimes (Cirtautas and Schimmelfennig 2010), structural factors and historical patterns of political development (Kitschelt 1993; Kitschelt et al. 1999), the constellation of preferences and relative power distribution at the time of collapse of the old order (Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 1999), the interplay between markets and democratic transitions (Offe 1991; Przeworski 1991) and institutions established early in the transitional period (Bunce 2003; Di Palma 1990). More recent studies show how post-communist and post-Soviet regimes combine democratic (elections) and authoritarian (repression, clientelism) features to stabilise their rule (Cianetti, Dawson Hanley 2018). The economic literature, in turn, points to the state-economy relationships (state role in the economy, private ownership, property rights) that affect economic performance and hence the stability of a regime. Some studies have explored the connectedness between political and economic factors shaping hybrid (in)stability. Hellman's (1998) seminal article on the causes of partial reforms showed why states that experience weak political competition are less effective economic reformers. Olson (2000) offered a prominent explanation why rent-seeking elites become interested in property rights institutions when faced with increasing political competition.

In a similar vein, scholars identified state capture, clientelism, corruption and the absence of market-enhancing institutions as key factors affecting post-communist regime dynamics (Grzymala-Busse 2008, 2010; McMann 2009; Stefes 2006, 2008). In the absence of strong regulatory institutions, economic opening through liberalisation and deregulation can arguably lead to political closure (McMann 2009). Stefes (2008) argues that political control over corrupt state agencies allows co-opting business elites. In turn, loyal business elites help secure the steady flow of rents and undermine a level playing field at election times to the incumbent's benefit (see also Levitsky and Way 2010). Despite these findings, existing typologies of post-Soviet regimes rarely use the political economy literature on post-Soviet transitions to arrive at theoretically informed expectations regarding the variation and stability of hybrid regimes. More precisely, they say little about the kind of political and/or economic change that is likely to move a regime toward more openness or closure, and how these expectations vary across different types of hybrid regimes.

The review of existing literature presented above suggests many plausible causal mechanisms and potential drivers that can account for specific instances of reform or stability. At the same time, they leave a lot of scope for improvement, and the influence of external actors as drivers of reform successful under specific conditions and domestic circumstances is a prime candidate for extending these theories.

It is important to emphasise that Eastern Europe provides a highly interesting context for the study of the influence of external actors on political and economic openings. First, the region attracts the attention of two big powers – Russia and the EU. Both try to project their influence on the countries in the region, and both have developed comprehensive strategies and institutions for engagement. Moreover, Russia and the EU have rather different visions about the long-term fate of these states, including their economic integration and forms of government. It is of considerable theoretical interest to examine how and why external actors can or cannot have influence in such a highly competitive environment where strategies, narratives and actions on the ground clash.

Second, the countries in the Eastern Europe share characteristics of modern states, such as relatively large (if often outdated) bureaucracies with many formal organisations. At the same time, the formal markings of a modern state are often mere smokescreens behind which fundamental deficiencies in the organisation of their social orders are revealed. It is theoretically interesting how democratisation and the establishment of market economies can proceed in such settings of incomplete modernisation and big but rather hollow bureaucracies.

Third, the mere extent of the variation in transformation paths and trajectories makes the countries in Eastern Europe interesting to study and their experiences instructive for other regions of the world.

The influence of external actors

The role of external actors is ambiguous and underspecified in the theoretical framework of North et al. On the one hand, they have suggested that the EU is capable of transferring OAO institutions during enlargement (North et al. 2007). On the other hand, North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009, 13–15) have warned that external assistance and introduction of OAO institutions in a natural state can lead to a breakdown of the social order because it weakens the incentives of dominant elites to control violence.

The democratisation literature has focused on the importance of leverage and linkages to investigate the *interplay* of external and domestic factors and actors in Eastern Europe (Levitsky and Way 2006, 2010; Sasse 2013; Tolstrup 2013a). For a brief period, Belarus, Ukraine, and other post-communist states in the region appeared to be the ideal cases to illustrate the role of linkages between neighbouring countries as a source of democratic change or authoritarian stability, as for example, shown in the work of Tolstrup (2013a). Studies of the post-communist region broadened their field of inquiry to recognise the role of ideas and discourses in influencing domestic actors (Hughes and Sasse 2016). Research on Europeanization and the “transformative power of Europe” (Börzel and Risse 2012) offers a typology of mechanisms by which the EU and other external actors can engage in the promotion of OAOs drawing on the distinction between incentives, socialisation, and capacity-building (see below).

Studies on illiberal regional powers as autocracy promoters or democracy blockers, finally, demonstrate how external actors can also impair transformation (Ambrosio 2010; Bader, Grävingholt, and Kästner 2010; Babayan 2015; Risse and Babayan 2015; Delcour and Wolczuk 2013; Obydenkova and Libman 2015; Tolstrup 2013b).

These growing bodies of literature suggest that external actors can both support and undermine transformations. We know that the EU or the US do not always promote and protect OAO transitions, while illiberal powers, such as Russia or China, do not necessarily oppose and impair such changes (Börzel 2015; Langbein 2015; Obydenkova and Libman 2015). This insight is key for analysing the EU’s transformative power in the Eastern neighbourhood, since the EU is not the only game in town, as it used to be in the context of the Eastern enlargement. Russia, the US, Turkey, and China shape the dynamics of social orders in Eastern Europe as well.

Russia's engagement

Russia's role is crucial in this respect, not only because it is the other large geopolitical force in the region and has shown that it plans to remain so, but because Russia's political system can be seen as a specific type of LAO. Access to Putin and his inner circle is a crucial condition for being part of big business in Russia, or to put it differently, big Russian companies and the Presidency have become indistinguishable (Zygar 2016). Under the condition of existing bilateral and regional interdependencies, for example through the structures of the Eurasian Economic Union and through trade links, Russian elites have a stake in Ukrainian, Moldovan and Belarusian economic and political developments and aim to reproduce an LAO based on personal relationships (Całus et al. 2018; Dragneva et al. 2018; Jonavicius et al. 2019).

We analyse whether Russia supports LAOs in the region and if so through what means. Besides manipulating interdependencies, we also explore to what extent Russia can rely on soft power bolstering the legitimacy of LAO regimes and countering the EU's normative influence by appealing to a common Slavic identity or shared Christian Orthodox religion. Finally, we investigate which external actors other than the EU and Russia, for example, China, Turkey, the US, but also individual EU member states, complement or countervail the EU's transformative power in the EaP.

The EU's engagement

The EU's attempts to transform its Eastern neighbourhood have been largely influenced by the set of strategies and instruments the EU has developed in former candidates and recent member states from Central and Eastern Europe. Conditionality has been part of the fundamental logic of the 2004–2007 enlargement, supporting political, economic and administrative change in the post-communist countries that became EU members (Dimitrova 2004; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005a; Vachudova 2005). The EU's approach has evolved considerably during the preparation for the "big bang" Eastern enlargement and has been complemented by assistance, dialogue and other "soft" modes of integration (Börzel and Lebanidze 2017). Conditionality has become pivotal in establishing the logic and guiding key decisions in the ENP, for example, in making the signing of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with Ukraine conditional upon specific reforms and actions (Council of the European Union 2012).

Recent events have made it painfully clear, however, that the application of conditionality in the EaP lacks some preconditions to be effective (Börzel and Schimmelfennig 2017). The first precondition refers to the EU side (or supply side as we call it here), identified in the literature as key to the EU's transformative power in the CEE: sizeable and credible rewards in the form of a membership perspective (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Sedelmeier 2011; Vachudova 2005).

The second element that underpinned the success of conditionality in CEE in the past and may be missing in the EaP relates to the demand side, that is, the incentives of domestic elites for EU integration (Dimitrova 2018). Not only is the EU not offering a tangible membership perspective; even more importantly, a significant part of the political and economic elites in the countries we look at may not see accession to the EU as a

reward. Their domestic embeddedness in personal clientelist networks is likely to prevent them from perceiving the adaptation of their markets and political institutions to European standards as a benefit. On the contrary, from their perspective, greater transparency and accountability may undermine opportunities for rent-seeking and threaten their power and wealth (Dimitrova and Dragneva 2013; Langbein 2015; Solonenko and Shapovalova 2011).

In other words, it is not only the EU's weak supply of sizeable and credible incentives for reform but also the lack of real demand from domestic elites that largely accounts for the failure of the EU to induce political and economic transformation in its Eastern neighbourhood. The EaP, launched in 2009, promised deep and comprehensive political and economic integration to six post-Soviet states of "strategic importance" – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Sufficient progress towards "fundamental values including democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights (...) as well as the principles of market economy, sustainable development and good governance" (Council of the European Union 2009, 5) has been the precondition for concluding new agreements. As a major trading partner for the EaP, the Association Agreement (AA) and DCFTA should have provided the EU with a new set of incentives to induce political and economic reforms (Börzel and Lebanidze 2017). Yet, AA may not be effective or appropriate given the changing geopolitical landscape in "wider Eastern Europe". For example, Armenia withdrew from AA with the EU in 2014 and negotiated a new treaty (CEPA) meant to leave Armenia's position in the Eurasian Economic unaffected.² This suggests that there may be different options for cooperation when AAs cannot be finalised.

On the one hand, political and economic integration with the EU imposes costs, which not all public and private actors are likely to embrace given their limited capacity either to implement and comply with EU rules or reap the benefits of living by them (Delcour and Wolczuk 2013; Langbein 2015). On the other hand, closer relations with the EU have been undermined by an increasingly illiberal and hostile Russia whose leadership is manipulating economic, security and societal interdependencies with the EaP to undermine their rapprochement to the EU (Delcour and Wolczuk 2013; Dragneva and Wolczuk 2014; Dragneva-Lewers and Wolczuk 2015).

Open questions and theoretical expectations

Against the background of existing studies, this special issue addresses the set of questions we formulated at the start. These questions are made pertinent both by empirical developments in Eastern Europe, which show the current limits of our understanding, and by the theoretical work on OAOs developed by Douglass North and co-authors, which we reviewed briefly above.

Firstly, building on recent insights on the role of state capacity in transition (Berenson 2018; Brambor et al. 2020) we pay attention to the state as an instrument and constraint for domestic elites and ask: What is the role of state capacity in moderating external influence and affecting the survival of LAOs more generally? Statehood and state capacity are both salient outcomes of political and economic processes, and significant factors shaping these processes in their own turn. A role for state capacity in supporting transition to OAOs is theoretically plausible and even likely. Yet, the extensive literature

linking stability and capacity points to the necessity to examine the reverse hypothesis, namely, that state capacity can sustain LAOs. Theoretically, high state capacity can provide domestic elites with the potential to resist external pressures. At the same time, it is a potential locus for intervention by external actors, which makes its interplay with political and economic reforms even more interesting.

Therefore, we ask further: How do domestic and external actors interact in influencing the transformation paths of the countries in the region? This question calls for further attention to domestic elites and organisations in transmitting, strengthening or modifying external influence. As North et al. insist, political and economic opening emerges primarily from the interplay of domestic forces and the dynamics of domestic developments. Hence, to understand external influence mechanisms we need to know how they interact with the local context, changing (or not) the strategic calculus and resources of the domestic elites and the structure of domestic social orders. Once we recognise that the influence of external actors is modified through local context, it becomes increasingly important to map the network of local actors and organisations that external actors use to promote their interests. Theoretically, we expect that the local context has even more power to constrain and shape external influences than previously recognised. Within an LAO, a power equilibrium between elites can resist or accommodate diverse pressures yet remain fundamentally intact. This goes both for pressures to open (democratisation) and pressures to integrate in external initiatives, such as the Eurasian Economic Union.

Secondly, reversing the perspective and starting with the external dimension, we ask: What are the mechanisms facilitating or constraining the influence of different external actors in Eastern Europe? While a lot has been written on the role of external actors, we still do not know enough when it comes to the concrete mechanisms through which influence is exercised. What we hypothesise on theoretical grounds is that the mechanisms of influence and interaction differ across political regimes. Democratic, autocratic and hybrid regimes have different sets of drivers they mobilise to try to influence the mechanisms that affect the course of social, political and economic developments in other states. Therefore, the analysis needs to be sensitive to the type of political regime. We also hypothesise that the mechanisms influencing change differ significantly across different domains: security, trade, state-building, energy, migration, and so on. Some domains, such as energy, have received more attention than others, such as state-building. To reveal the full repertoire of mechanisms that external actors can rely on to influence domestic politics in Eastern Europe, we need to study different domains of engagement on their own terms, and then evaluate the bigger picture that emerges.

Overall, answering these broad questions offers a novel empirical assessment of the impact of different external actors on the transformations towards OAOs in an important region of the world. They contribute to our theoretical understanding of these processes by extending the North et al. framework towards a more systematic incorporation of external actors. The questions are pitched at a relatively low level of abstraction, which enables policy implications to be drawn from our findings, for example, for policy actors interested in supporting the democratisation of the region.

In the next section, we briefly summarise and preview the findings of the several empirical studies that follow in this special issue.

Domestic dynamics, external actors: findings and insights

Addressing the first set of questions, two articles start with domestic aspects affecting stability or change in socio-political orders. While Dimitrova et al. (2021) focus on the role of state capacity for stability or opening, Mazepus et al. (2021) map the non-state actors linking with key external actors and the various domains in which they are active.

State capacity is given special attention as a factor that plays a crucial role constraining the possible transformation paths of the states and as a locus of intervention by external actors. Dimitrova et al. offer a new conceptualisation of state capacity and apply it to the cases of Belarus and Ukraine to deliver an analysis of the link between state capacity and opening and closure, with special attention paid to the role of external actors. The authors argue that state capacity, as a major aspect of statehood along with the control over the means of violence in a given territory and international recognition, should be conceptualised along multiple dimensions. This should include the administrative capacity to govern, extractive capacity, and the capacities to deliver basic infrastructure and to provide essential public goods and services.

Importantly, from a theoretical perspective state capacity has both universalising and stabilising aspects. Looking at these aspects, Dimitrova et al. find that on several dimensions, for example, health care and transport, Belarus scores higher than Ukraine. The centralised bureaucracy in Belarus, however, despite being capable of executing policies, has little capacity to process feedback, and to formulate and coordinate new policies. The politicised leadership of Belarus' administration represents a weakness in terms of the quality and consistence of public services and policies. In Ukraine, by contrast, there have recently been major efforts to reform public administration and depoliticise the civil service, with the crucial support of the EU. These efforts, due to their potentially universalising nature, are coming up against opposition from members of dominant elite coalitions, in line with North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) theoretical framework.

The authors highlight the fact that the relatively high state capacity in Belarus might have been instrumental in defusing mass opposition against the political regime and contributing to its survival. Conversely, the lack of sufficient state capacity in Ukraine might have undermined democratic consolidation and the transition to an open market economy with equal opportunities for all. Hence, the article suggests a dilemma for external actors: enhancing state capacity might be necessary to sustain reforms once they get going, but it might decrease the demand for reforms in the first place.

The other key aspect of the domestic environment determining the socio-political order, besides the state, are civil society organisations. The article by Mazepus et al. takes on board the literature stressing the importance of linkages with specific external actors. At the same time, it highlights that non-state actors are, in line with North et al.'s theoretical premises and the existing literature, constrained by domestic political elites. Given that civil society organisations (CSO) actors can operate only in domains determined by political elites and the legal constraints they have introduced, the article maps systematically the civil society organisations linked to the EU and Russia and the domains in which they are allowed to operate.

The empirical analysis unearths a wide variety of actors linked with the promotion of Russia's narratives of Slavic brotherhood, Orthodox Christian community or Russian speakers' world: cultural foundations and religious organisations, media, education, and

research institutions, (quasi)military organisations, individual politicians, and more. The breadth and diversity of the network alone suggest the considerable interest and capacity of Russia in influencing developments in Belarus and Ukraine. The corresponding network linking to the EU seems more limited but is growing in size, especially in Ukraine. In fact, the article notes significant trends over time, with increasing presence of “a growing constellation of organisations linked with Russia” in Belarus, but decreasing presence of such organisations in Ukraine. In light of these trends, the authors make a contribution to theory by suggesting that by linking to organisations focussing on identity, history and the past, Russia aims to preserve the status quo, while the organisations the EU links to could potentially contribute to opening of the socio-political order.

The two contributions on state capacity and civil society actors show the limits of influence of external actors. Without sufficient administrative and informational infrastructure, no government can maintain stability and support reform. Even when external actors get more involved in supporting state capacity, they can only make a relatively small contribution to domestic governance in this respect. External actors can connect with non-state organisations, but while they can enlist the support of many local actors and organisations to speak on their behalf, the recipient states retain mechanisms through which they can limit this influence (at least if they have sovereignty left and the state capacity needed to do so).

Regarding the second part of our set of questions, focusing on external actors and mechanisms to understand domestic-external interactions, a number of contributions provide both broad and specific country findings. The articles focus primarily on the major external actors in Eastern Europe – the EU and Russia, but also on Turkey, China, and NATO. Most of the analyses deal with Ukraine and Belarus, as two contrasting examples of post-Soviet transformations. Some bring further evidence from other countries in the region, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova. The articles cover different domains of interaction between domestic forces and external actors, such as security, trade and migration.

One perspective on the influence of external actors is offered by Vilpišauskas et al. (2021) who look at the influence of external actors through the prism of susceptibility. Exploring from the domestic arena how domestic orders in Belarus and Ukraine interact with external influences, the authors identify conditions affecting the susceptibility of key domestic actors to various external influences. The empirical analysis is focused on the attempted reforms of the business environment and the energy sector in Belarus and on the energy sector and anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine. Vilpišauskas et al. find that Ukrainian authorities are not always susceptible to external actors promoting open-access institutions, despite their apparent commitment to democracy and membership of the EU. They also find – concluding their analysis in 2019, before the 2020 protests in the country – that Belarussian authorities are more susceptible to external actors promoting political and economic competition than assumed.

Taking a broader perspective guided by North et al.’s framework, Ademmer et al. (2021) review evidence showing that diplomatic ties, trade, and migration linkages can indeed have an impact by (de)stabilising ruling elite coalitions. They propose that the mechanisms transmitting the impact of international linkages vary with the type of interdependence. Building on existing literature, they suggest four mechanisms: patronage, sanctions, crisis support and elite learning. They consider the sensitivity and vulnerability

of actors as scope conditions for the effectiveness of these four mechanisms. Subsequently, they provide a rich empirical analysis focused on the significant challenges to established political and economic orders in three countries where the limited access regimes have proven remarkably stable: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. This focus allows the authors to examine how Russia and the EU tried to leverage their power relying on the existing interdependencies with the countries.

In Armenia, Ademmer et al. find that elite learning from Russia played a role in the power shift in April 2018 and that the 2015 constitutional amendments in the country emulated Russia's questionable political practices. In Belarus, the targeted sanctions imposed by the EU after 2010 had only minor effects on the stability of the regime due to the weak sensitivity of Belarus to the EU, an effect of Russia's economic support.³ In Azerbaijan, efforts of external actors to influence the local political situation in 2005 and 2014 proved rather futile: "the country's resource abundance shielded the country from linkage mechanisms (such as financial ties of the opposition) that may otherwise have contributed to instability" (Adammer et al., 2021). Altogether, this study finds that elite learning is perhaps the most important mechanism for the influence of external actors, but it is also one they cannot really control, interdependencies notwithstanding.

The role of Turkey in the broader region of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus is clearly growing, as the outcome of the latest iteration of the armed conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh showed. The article by Frahm and Hoffmann (2021), however, focuses on the less understood role of business actors from Turkey, as an example how regionally powerful hybrid regimes combining authoritarian and democratic features can influence the transformation towards open orders in their neighbourhood. Economic relations between Turkey and a number of post-Soviet states take centre stage in their analysis, and they find that economic relations provide ample opportunities for broader influence.

In theoretical terms, Frahm and Hoffmann (2021) propose that hybrid regimes (like Turkey) find it hard to coordinate actors around the implementation of a coherent foreign policy strategy, unlike autocratic states such as Russia. Nonetheless, individual actors can export aspects of the hybrid regime, for example, when it comes to governance norms or ways of doing business. Learning and norm diffusion emerge as key mechanisms of influence. The authors find that hybrid regimes can act as "dual agents of transition", disseminating both closure (and neo-patrimonial models of politics) and openness (in the sense of impersonal competition in the economic sphere). The implication for the EU is that it might find allies in its promotion of OAOs among business actors coming from businesses vested in hybrid regimes.

Two contributions highlight important sectoral dynamics of interaction between domestic and external forces and actors, focusing on key sectors: trade and security. For trade, the analysis by Langbein, Gazizullin and Naumenko (2021) studies the link between trade liberalisation and political and economic openings. Theoretically, they develop the argument that trade liberalisation helps to consolidate the power position of rent-seeking elites who restrict access to economic and political resources (see also Mazepus et al., 2020). In effect, instead of promoting economic opening, trade liberalisation in a LAO can further consolidate the existing regime. Whether opening or closure follows trade liberalisation depends on the pre-existing alliance between the state and economic actors.

Empirically, Langbein, Gazizullin and Naumenko (2021) analyse the effect of trade liberalisation between the EU and Ukraine since 2008 and find support for the theoretical

arguments sketched above. In particular, when rent-seeking economic elites with direct links to the political elites are present in the main export sectors, trade liberalisation helps consolidate the pre-existing *status quo* of limited access to economic and political resources. Still, these effects must be considered in the broader effects of trade liberalization, such as increased trade with the EU and more positive trade balance for Ukraine. Moreover, even when it empowers existing elites, trade liberalisation might still increase the economic importance of sectors in which a large number of diverse actors operate, such as agriculture and food production. This research makes an important contribution regarding the diverse effects that trade liberalisation might have and calls for more research about the scope conditions under which different effects might prevail.

For security, the article by Shea and Jaroszewicz (2021) examines how security sector reform promoted and supported by external actors plays out in the domestic setting of Ukraine, affected by the annexation of the Crimea and open conflict in the East. The EU, NATO and the OSCE have all engaged with Ukraine's security sector reform. The authors show that, in the period since the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, the open conflict in the East of the country creates challenges for capacity building in the security sector, as well as for the promotion of political and economic opening. It is particularly difficult to move towards an open society in a time of war. This situation also limits what external actors can do to support reforms and contain the open level of violence caused by the conflict, as geopolitics and internal political calculations limit their options.

Yet, as Shea and Jaroszewicz argue, while the war poses limitations on the assistance chosen by external actors, it has motivated domestic actors to seek closer cooperation with NATO and the EU. The desire for membership of these organisations in light of the geopolitical situation has incentivized elites to implement security sector reforms, even in sensitive areas of national security where elites would typically seek to consolidate power during wartime. Hence, this contribution departs from the literature in showing that war, as a moderating factor for the influence of external actors, does not necessarily cause elites to block reform. Furthermore, the authors argue that external actors can achieve some success when they coordinate their approach, assist domestic elites in strategy development, target specific aspects of reform, and allow for flexible implementation, they.

Conclusion

The seven articles that follow are based on in-depth empirical analyses and contain a wealth of new findings relevant for understanding the drivers of opening and closure in Eastern Europe. A brief introduction, such as this one, cannot do justice to all the insights and nuance that they offer. Nonetheless, several common themes emerge from these studies that are worth summarising here and tracing in detail in the individual contributions.

First, we note a fundamental asymmetry: while external actors have many levers to undermine the establishment of an OAO, they are much more limited in how they can support reforms towards liberal democracy and free-market economy. The durability of LAOs is over-determined. It is easier for political orders to collapse into a state of anarchy and lose control over parts of their territory than it is to transition to OAOs. In this respect, a lot of what external actors can do is reinforcing the *status quo*, whether they aim for that or not.

Second, the actions of external actors have unintended side effects and cannot always be controlled. There is a multitude of scope conditions and moderating factors – state capacity, geopolitical developments, the global informational environment – that translate the projected influence of external actors. Moreover, domestic elites can sometimes pick and choose what to and how to respond. Finally, the mechanisms that seems most sustainable – elite learning and norm diffusion – are the hardest to steer from outside.

Third, different regimes have different tools for influence at their disposal. Autocratic regimes with relatively high state capacity, such as Russia, can enlist the support of many organisations by offering financial support and by sponsoring media campaigns, building and promoting powerful narratives, and utilising anything from direct military pressure to bribes, to disinformation campaigns and the Orthodox Church in the promotion of its interests. Russia can also use personalised links with elites in neighbouring countries to offer tailored and personal awards for taking favourable to Russia policy decisions. This makes Russian interventions more flexible and faster than the interventions of other actors.

Hybrid regimes, such as Turkey, are more constrained in developing and transmitting a coordinated strategy, but they can have influence through other channels, for example, business links that “export” their economic and political models.

Democratic regimes based on the rule of law, such as the EU, face another set of constraints and are subject to different expectations about their actions when trying to influence the course of reforms in neighbouring states. They are often caught between a rock and a hard place, risking to stabilise the *status quo* of limited access with their attempts to promote political and economic opening or to enhance state capacity. Yet, inaction and disengagement can be even worse and damage the prospect of reforms completely.

Overall, the seven studies that follow offer plenty of reasons for caution about the potential impact of external actors on opening in a region where two big powers compete for influence, and a host of other actors have interests as well. At the same time, they suggest that they are ways in which external actors can have impact, even if limited, indirect and accompanied by unintended effects.

Notes

1. The following discussion draws on Ademmer, Langbein, and Börzel 2020.
2. Armenia joined the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. The Comprehensive and Partnership agreement concluded between the EU and Armenia in 2017 stipulates cooperation should not affect areas of involvement in the EEU.
3. This trend has reversed more recently, as Russian economic support has been made conditional on closer integration of Belarus with Russia.

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