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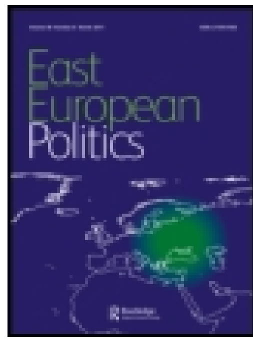

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Civil society and external actors: how linkages with the EU and Russia interact with socio-political orders in Belarus and Ukraine

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ABSTRACT
What is the importance of linkages between civil society and external actors? In this article we map the landscape of civil society organisations in Belarus and Ukraine linked to the EU or Russia. Compiling an extensive dataset of organisations, we identify which domains they belong to. We find that linkages with Russia prevail in the culture domain and are based on shared past and exclusive identities. By contrast, linkages with the EU operate in domains related to a democratic future and include diverse groups. These linkages interact dynamically with limited access orders: where they can contribute to opening, they are often restricted.

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Introduction

External actors – be they states or regional alliances – pursue a variety of goals with respect to other countries: from increasing their power and influence, trade and cooperation, to promoting their own regime type and ideological model (Börzel 2015; Risse and Babayan 2015; Vilpasauskas et al., 2020). Their success can depend on strategy, "hard" and "soft" power, but also the linkages they cultivate with citizens, organisations, and political elites in target countries. Research has shown that without links to domestic, non-state actors and their mobilisation, the influence and effectiveness of international actors remains limited (Sedelmeier 2014). Debates in the democratisation literature have emphasised the role of regional linkages for democratisation or authoritarian stability (Levitsky and Way 2010; Sasse 2013).

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In Eastern Europe, two of the most influential external actors – the EU and Russia – pursue goals that are sometimes unrelated, occasionally complementary, but, increasingly, mostly incompatible (Cadier 2019; Cameron and Orenstein 2012; Jonavicius et al. 2019). The EU and Russia promote their objectives and perspectives not only by interacting with governments, but also by connecting to local communities, civil society and citizens. These interactions have the potential to affect the development of social and political orders (Levitsky and Way 2010). However, despite the discussion focused on linkages in the region, there has been little comparative evidence of the linkages that the EU and Russia maintain throughout the post-Soviet space. More specifically, we do not have a systematic analysis of the range of organisations that can be mobilised to support external actors or an understanding of the interaction of these organisations with the domestic socio-political orders. This article contributes to these two objectives.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a prominent role in the evolution of state and society. Within North et al.'s (2009) conceptual framework for interpreting human history, developing socio-political orders are to a great extent defined by the density and type of existing organisations. The relationship between socio-political orders and organisations is, however, ambivalent. Most limited access orders (LAOs) restrict the possibility of forming organisations and associations independent of the state. Thus, organisations that can function independently of the state can exist only in open access orders or mature limited access orders (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009, 46–47). Building on this insight, we expect that the domain in which organisations operate is important for their interaction with the socio-political order. Not all organisations necessarily contribute to the opening of political regimes, some might actively prevent it, and many might engage in activities that are in no way related to political development. Investigating the domains in which CSOs are active can provide us with better understanding of their interaction with the socio-political order. Therefore, in this article, we focus on the domains in which organisations linking with external actors exist and operate.

Furthermore, the literature on external actors and linkages suggests that if domestic organisations link to external actors, this can affect the socio-political order (Levitsky and Way 2010). Others argue that the effects between organisations and socio-political orders can flow in the opposite direction: the type of socio-political order can be expected to shape the organisations that can develop within it. More specifically, authoritarian leaders can be expected to prefer "obstructive gatekeeping" when it comes to linkages between organisations in their jurisdiction and external actors from the West (Tolstrup 2014, 136). For our analysis, we have selected two countries from the post-Soviet region that vary in terms of openness. Belarus and Ukraine represent two different types of LAOs (Ademmer, Langbein, and Börzel 2020). Belarus is characterised by balanced closure – an order with strong restrictions on access to political and economic resources. By contrast, Ukraine is characterised by balanced openness, which allows for relatively widespread political and economic access. By selecting these two cases we aim to establish whether particular types of linkages developed with external actors are encouraged or restricted by respective socio-political orders.

Under the assumption that domestic civil society matters for opening socio-political orders, we provide a detailed, bottom-up picture of what civil society actors are present on the ground and in what domains they connect with the EU and Russia. Through extensive mapping of organisations linked to both Russia and the EU, we

investigate whether there are systematic differences in the types of linkages developed with either of them. Although the measurement of influence of organisations linking with the EU and Russia on the socio-political orders is outside of the scope of this article, following our mapping and comparison of CSOs we reflect on (1) whether activities within particular domains are encouraged or restricted by the dominant political elites (2) whether, by operating in specific domains organisations can potentially contribute to socio-political opening.

As the presence of particular organisations is a derivative of citizens' demand for activities in a given domain on the one hand and available options on the other, we analyse how the linkages with the EU and Russia are constrained or encouraged by the socio-political orders in Ukraine and Belarus. We use methodological triangulation by combining targeted searches of local and international sources with local expert assessments of the lists of organisations we have compiled. Such a systematic comparison of organisations linked to both external actors is not yet available in the literature. Furthermore, our emphasis on the relationship between domain of operation and interactions with the domestic and external actors provides new and important insights.

Our analysis shows the variety of actors that link not only with the EU but also with Russia. It provides empirical evidence that CSOs engage in different domains with the EU than with Russia. The domains inhabited by organisations linked to Russia are mostly culture, religion, and higher education. Most of the linkages are built around common history and traditional identity marked by the language or ethnicity. Linkages in these domains by themselves do not promote change in the direction of open or closed socio-political orders, but do glorify the past, traditional values, and status quo rather than change. Organisations linking with the EU inhabit domains such as monitoring of political processes, educating civil servants, and improving human rights. Many of these organisations aim to broaden access to political and social resources to include diverse often vulnerable groups. Organisations active in these domains have the potential for contributing to the opening of the LAOs. It is less clear whether organisations that promote change in other domains, such as sustainable development, climate protection or help for people with disabilities could stimulate an opening. The fact that they can function with minimal restrictions in Belarus, where other organisations linked to the EU face restrictions, indicates that they are not perceived as political and therefore not seen as a threat to the political status quo. We find that linkages in different domains interact dynamically with limited access orders: where they can contribute to opening, they are often restricted.

Domestic actors and their external linkages: what types of links can be developed in different socio-political orders?

Limited access orders, civil society and organisational density

In North et al.'s framework (2009), the expansion of organisational activity is linked with the evolution of the state from fragile to mature. When states mature, the organisations they support become more sophisticated and numerous. The emergence of numerous organisations that can function independently of the state is one of the main features of a mature state.

Societal organisations separate from the state have been investigated by political theorists under the collective term "civil society". Civil society has an organisational component and a social movement component and is distinct from both political parties and economic actors, but not necessarily in opposition to them (Cohen and Arato 1997; Linz and Stepan 1996). While the literature debating the specific role of civil society is huge and spans several centuries, we build specifically on the work of theorists who argue that civil society is always needed as a motor of democracy, especially so in emerging democracies (Linz and Stepan 1996). Civil society, therefore, plays a crucial role in democratic government (Cohen and Arato 1997).

Organisations are also a source of power, which can be yielded by groups, specific individuals or any member of society. Social orders where access to organisational resources is open and impersonal are open access orders (OAO), whereas in LAOs dominant political and business elites limit access to organisational resources (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009). Democratisation theorists see the development of civil society as an important aspect of democratisation processes (Linz and Stepan 1996, 8), or what we call here a process of opening, ensuring broad access to institutions and organisations. In transitions to democracy, civil society is often instrumental in starting the transition but continues to be important later in creating new political actors, monitoring governments and state institutions, and resisting reversals (Linz and Stepan 1996 , 8–9).

From these different perspectives we can conclude that, "how a social order structures organisations determines the pattern of social interaction within a society" (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009, 35). This also means that social orders, especially limited ones, attempt to control in which domains of socio-political life non-state actors can operate.

Linkages and leverage: the role of external actors and domestic dominant elites

Linkages are structured connections that can be established between citizens or elites from different countries in the economic, intergovernmental, technocratic, and organisational spheres (Way and Levitsky 2007, 50–51). Linkages have been identified as one key mechanism for strengthening democratisation or, conversely, for stabilising authoritarian regimes, especially in post-communist states (Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2016; Levitsky and Way 2010; Sasse 2016; Tansey, Koehler, and Schmotz 2017). The receptivity of citizens to cooperation with external actors can, to some extent, be channelled, amplified, or controlled by domestic civil society actors. Domestic networks and actors can link with external actors either by cooperating with them directly or by promoting similar goals and activities.

Linkages with democracy promoting external actors are viewed as raising the domestic cost of authoritarian reversals (Levitsky and Way 2010). Scholars generally agree that linkages with authoritarian regimes can make democratisation or opening more difficult (Cameron and Orenstein 2012; Sasse 2013, 581). Linkages with authoritarian regimes – mostly linkages with Russia – matter a lot in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. They are affected by language and legacy, geography and ethnic diversity (Linz and Stepan 1996, 16–37; Sasse 2013).

We build on the insight that the density and diversity of linkages matter for the stability of domestic orders, but also, in turn, the landscape of organisations is affected by politics in domestic and international arenas. International linkages – ideational, historical and

societal – can be activated or de-activated by external actors, but also by domestic elites (Sasse 2013, 2016; Tolstrup 2013, 718). Dominant elites can actively shape the organisational landscape in their country, and "facilitate or constrain ties to external actors" (Tolstrup 2013, 718). Therefore, we argue that, the extent of linkages and the domain in which they are established has consequences for the leverage of external actors – their ability to exert pressure through various means and the vulnerability of the targeted states to such pressures (see also Way and Levitsky 2007, 50–51).

The perspectives presented above on the role of organisations, their linkages with outside actors and their potential impact are quite complex and multi-dimensional. Several important propositions guide our study. First, the existence of a plethora of different organisations matters for society as a whole, while the extent of their openness to the public defines the socio-political order. Second, by linking to particular external actors, organisations may have a considerable effect on domestic political processes: pushing for opening of access and contributing to democratisation or restricting access and sustaining authoritarianism. Third, domestic political elites influence the range of domestic organisations and their opportunities to create and maintain ties with external actors. To understand the interactions between socio-political orders and CSOs linked to external actors, we need to empirically examine the range of organisations, explore systematically their domains of activity, and address how LAOs constrain and encourage relations between domestic and external actors. We also build on existing literature on democratisation to formulate some expectations on the effect the domains of CSO activity have on social and political change.

Civil society in different social orders

The theoretical perspectives discussed above imply that authoritarian regimes do not allow the existence of full-fledged civil society. They limit the social movements and organisations perceived to be subversive to the regime. Nevertheless, some independent organisations can exist and operate in a mature natural state combined with a LAO (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009, 47).

Authorities in closed socio-political orders try to control civil society using various strategies. Leaders divide organisations into those they see as socially relevant and operating in useful domains and those they dismiss as enemies and "foreign agents" by creating restrictive laws and engaging in active persecution (Mazepus et al. 2016). When CSOs engage with external actors, they are often labelled "grant-eaters", allegedly receiving funding from abroad without creating real benefits for society (Stepanenko 2006, 574).

While limiting the activities of organisations whose goals do not align with the goals of dominant elites, the authorities in LAOs create organisations oxymoronically referred to as "government organised non-governmental organisations" (GONGOs). These organisations function under state patronage and provide a managed space for civil society engagement with the state (Gilbert 2016). They operate in domains less directly related to the type of socio-political order, such as provision of basic social services, charity, and some socio-economic research (Chebankova 2012). Such strategies to manage civil society have also consequences for the engagement of domestic organisations with external actors and to the types of linkages that are promoted.

As civil society can contribute to the change of socio-political order and also operates within a domestic context managed by dominant political elites, it is important to research the domains in which linkages with external actors are developed. Such analysis will help better understand how linkages with external actors can interact with limited access orders and which types of organisations have a higher potential of contributing to their opening.

Approach and operationalisation

We focus exclusively on the linkages between *external actors* and CSOs, building on the idea that civil society plays an important role in sustaining or changing socio-political orders (e.g. Cohen and Arato 1997; North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009).[1] We analyse the linkages of organisations in Belarus and Ukraine with the EU and Russia.[2] We select (a) CSOs that either self-identify as linking with the EU/European or have a clear institutional affiliation with the EU; and (b) CSOs that either self-identify as linking with Russia/Russian or have a clear institutional affiliation with Russia.

The selection of organisations and collection of data involved two stages. First, we identified a set of organisations active between 2014 and 2020[3] that fulfilled the above selection criteria: organisations that clearly self-identify as linked to one or the other external actor. To find information about the organisations and triangulate it, we used multiple sources, including previous empirical studies and reports on civil society, traditional and social media, and official information provided by the organisations. In this way, we identified their main characteristics: domains of activity, scope, and frequency of activities and projects. We also coded whenever possible whether an organisation has been created by an external actor or by the local community. In many cases, organisations were set up in a hybrid way: by local communities with support of an external actor or by an external actor with support from the local community.

Second, to limit potential bias of our sample, we consulted seven external experts who evaluated the compiled data and corrected and completed the lists. They also provided comments about the characteristics of the organisations we identified.[4] At this stage we found out that following our selection criteria might lead to the omission of a substantial set of organisations in Belarus, because CSOs are legally restricted. Furthermore, possibilities for external financing from the EU are limited and requiring registration as "foreign agents". This would have affected the scope of the data gathered on linkages in Belarus. For this reason, in the Belarusian case, we decided to additionally include organisations that regularly organise activities and participate in projects about the EU or in collaboration with the EU.[5]

The final lists of organisations that we identified and coded are available in the online Appendix 1 and 2 (Appendix Tables A1–A4). Importantly, our goal was not to compile a complete list of all organisations, but an informative list of the most prominent ones, and to distinguish the domains in which they are active. The input from the external experts helped us understand better how to contextualise our results in relation to the specific socio-political orders.

Our empirical results are presented below, first for Belarus and then Ukraine.[6] For both countries we first focus on links with Russia and then on links with the EU, before comparing and interpreting the findings for both countries.

Mapping linkages of organisations in Belarus

Actors linking with and linked to Russia

Existing studies suggest that many actors in the post-Soviet space are directly linked to and influenced by Russia (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012; Hudson 2015, 2017; Lutsevych 2016; Saari 2014). This is not surprising as Belarus, in particular, has long been part of integration projects led by Russia (Preiherman 2020). Different studies (ISANS 2019; Kłysiński and Żochowski 2016) testify to the existence of numerous, strong and influential pro-Russian organisations in Belarus.

Our list of organisations linking to Russia (Table A1 in online Appendix 1) shows that multiple organisations exist in different domains (political, religious, cultural, business and even paramilitary). However, it is important to note that many organisations from this indicative list appear to be inactive. They do not organise regular events, initiatives, or have an online presence. Some of the organisations that are active appear to be rather marginal and do not attract many members and followers.

There are, however, a number of notable exceptions. Links with Russia are developed to promote ***economic, political, and social integration*** in the Union State of Russia and Belarus (USRB). Belarusian officials at different levels are among the key actors in this domain (ISANS 2019). Public officials not only communicate and cooperate with their Russian counterparts within the framework of the USRB, but also support initiatives such as the Youth Chamber and the Public Chamber. The Chambers involve a high number of Russian and Belarusian officials as members and create platforms for communication, bringing broader audiences together.

In addition, the promotion of integration between Russia and Belarus works through links at the regional level. Belarusian officials and their colleagues in Russia establish multiple initiatives and platforms for regional cooperation such as the high-profile Forum of the Regions of Belarus and Russia. The Forum has been organised annually since 2014 and is supported by the parliaments of both countries. It exists as a platform for cooperation between Belarusian and Russian regions in different domains from trade to youth policy to culture.[7]

Belarusian local officials also cooperate with Russia-linked organisations within the framework of officially established consultative bodies (e.g. "Russian House" in Mogilev is a member of the Regional Coordination Council of Political Parties and CSOs).

The Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) stands out as one of the most prominent organisations maintaining links with Russia in the ***domain of religion and, more broadly, culture.*** The BOC[8] is the union of Russian Orthodox eparchies under the Moscow Patriarchy operating on the territory of Belarus.

The Church operates with tacit and sometimes explicit support from the Belarusian authorities. The Church is very active, attracts large numbers of followers and cooperates with a variety of Russia-linked organisations and initiatives in Belarus. It organises common events with the Moscow House in Minsk and the Russian House in Vitebsk, and it supported the creation of Civic Initiative "Soyuz".[9] Church representatives often participate in state events at different levels. They can also initiate consultative bodies. For instance, in 2009 the BOC, together with the Belarusian Writers' Union, established a Public Council on Morality with the support of the Belarusian President.[10]

There are also some important GONGOs active in building links in the ***domain of culture and history***. For example, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) and Public Association *Belaya Rus'* partner up with organisations in Russia and jointly organise various activities. Among the partners of BRYU are organisations like *Rossotrudnichestvo*, the Parliament Assembly of the USRB, the BOC, and the Russian Youth Union (RYU).[11] BRYU and RYU co-organise regular youth events to commemorate the Second World War and to promote the "brotherhood" of youth of both countries.[12] Although GONGOs are created to appeal to different audiences within society, they have a rather clear top-down character and remain very formal.

Important linkages to Russia have been long established in the ***domain of higher education***. Higher education institutions in Russia have always been a popular destination for many Belarusian students. Of the 22,412 students who went to study abroad in 2017, almost half (11,600) studied in Russia (UNESCO 2019). Furthermore, a number of Russian higher education institutions have branches in Belarus. The Belarusian-Russian University in the regional centre Mogilev has a particularly good reputation, dating back to the Soviet times. Less well-known branches of the Russian State Social University and the Russian University of Economics in Minsk offer access to courses and programmes. Although their primary goal is to offer education, they can become platforms for pro-Russian events and activities (Belorusskii Partizan 2018). For example, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation has opened a centre at Brest University to promote the Russian language, education and culture.

Gaining access to students via university platforms provides organisations with broader audiences for promotion of their ideas and for strengthening the links between Russian and Belarusian societies. For external organisations, access to universities is impossible without the support of Belarusian authorities. The fact that organisations linked to Russia are granted such access shows that they enjoy stronger ties with Belarusian authorities than organisations linked to other external actors. In addition, in the domain of international academic cooperation, Russian institutions and funding bodies are still the most attractive for Belarusian researchers (Toshkov et al. 2019, 18).

Business-oriented CSOs are not a common type of actor developing links with Russia. We have identified one example – the Union Club "Vanguard". The Club promotes cooperation between enterprises and businesses in Belarus, Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) by organising expert consultations, meetings between businessmen, and provision of information about economic issues in Belarus and Russia. Of course, Russia as the main trade partner and investor has very broad economic linkages with Belarusian businesses rather than civil society actors.

Finally, linkages between Belarusian (civil) society and Russia are developed in ***the domain of (para-)military activities***. Organisations in this domain vary in terms of size and are rather enigmatic when it comes to their activities. Not much information about them is publicly available. Independent media and activists have reported widely on Cossacks participating in the military summer camps for youth and other events initiated by the BOC (Garbatsevich 2018; Informnapalm 2016; Lyalkov 2016). The "Night Wolves" are another group in this domain with strong links to their Russian counterparts that engage in yearly motorcycle tours to commemorate USSR's victory in the Second World War.

The Belarusian authorities, however, are rather wary of paramilitary activities. Official media (Pruzhilin 2015) and President Lukashenka himself (2019) have cautiously criticised the Cossacks and their activities. The Belarusian government no longer welcomes the "Night Wolves".[13] The changing attitude towards these organisations can be explained by the authorities' concerns about erosions of Belarusian sovereignty following Russia's annexation of the Crimea and its involvement in the conflict in Ukraine. Paramilitary Russian or pro-Russian actors are perceived as a threat.

Actors linking with and linked to the EU

While there are numerous and diverse actors promoting links with Russia in Belarus, there are far fewer such organisations maintaining linkages with the EU. Grassroots CSOs and especially those that try to remain independent from the state have existed for a long time in a rather hostile environment and have been facing political, institutional and legal limitations. According to the 2018 CSO Sustainability Index, the legal framework for CSOs in Belarus remains the most unfavourable among East European and Eurasian countries (USAID 2018).

With limited options for domestic financing, independent CSOs are closely interconnected and highly dependent on European and other foreign support. Despite such unfavourable conditions, Belarusian CSOs create European linkages in different domains and implement projects and initiatives related to the EU. Umbrella alliances (e.g. Assembly of NGOs, International Consortium EuroBelarus) are important, as they bring organisations together and create platforms for EU-related projects (Table A2 in online Appendix 1).

The most extensive European linkages are probably in the ***domain of research and policy advice***. Most independent think-tanks (BISS, Research Center IPM, BEROC, CET, SYMPA/ BIPART) promote EU-related issues, reforms, norms and values. They conduct research and offer recommendations aimed at modernising the Belarusian economy, public administration, social policy, and other policy areas in accordance with international practices and EU standards. They promote enhanced cooperation with the EU in security and an alternative security strategy that would result in less dependence on Russia.

Educational linkages with the EU are not especially strong. Young Belarusians have limited possibilities to visit or attend European educational institutions or engage with peers in the EU. This is mainly due to the limited opportunities for exchange and educational visits provided by universities[14] and the restricted use of European programmes such as Erasmus+.[15] Students, academics, and professionals can apply for educational or professional visits with the help of a designated programme (MOST), developed by the EU to encourage people-to-people contacts with Belarus.[16] However, participation in these exchanges is not encouraged by Belarusian universities: students and lecturers have to seek permission from their university or the Ministry of Education if they want to leave Belarus during the academic year. While decisions about issuing a permit to go abroad are rather arbitrary and untransparent, leaving without obtaining permission puts students and academics at risk of losing their positions (Belarusian Independent Bologna Committee et al. 2014)

However, the limited education opportunities through official channels are compensated by a growing number of informal (unofficial) education programmes and projects

that promote EU values. Organisations that are active in this field target broad audiences: from students, to young professionals (School of Young Managers in Public Administration – SYMPA), to the general public (European Colleague of Liberal Arts – ECLAB, Belarusian Collegium and others).

Another set of organisations that link with the EU operates in the ***domain of citizens' rights***. Organisations such as the Press Club and Belarusian Association of Journalists are active in protecting freedom of speech and freedom of press and run initiatives targeting Russian propaganda and fake news. The Human Rights Center *Viasna* and the Belarusian Helsinki Committee actively participate in the Belarusian National Platform of the Eastern Partnership (BNP EaP), especially in discussions on human rights issues and election monitoring. Other organisations, such as the Office for the Rights of People with Disabilities and Gender Perspectives, are active in protecting the rights of specific vulnerable groups. Despite government restrictions of their activities, these organisations have a diverse network of European partners and implement projects with EU support.

In the ***domains of environmental protection and regional development*** organisations from Belarus can build linkages with the EU with relatively few restrictions. The authorities are mostly tolerant of such international organisations operating in Belarus.[17] Environmental organisations and initiatives focusing on local and regional development are also broadly and openly supported by the EU. International environmental organisations such as *Ekapraekt* and the *Interakcia* Foundation implement EU-promoted projects focused on sustainable development. Domestic organisations, for example the "Green network" partnership and *Ekodom*, are active and well-known for their environmental initiatives and participation in BNP EaP.

Finally, our analysis identified a group of organisations active in the ***domain of culture***. Organisations such as the World Association of Belarusians *Baćkaŭščyna* (in particular, the *Budzma* campaign), Belarusian PEN Center and the Frantsishak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society (TBM) promote Belarusian culture in the context of European culture. They present Belarusian national identity and culture as a part of European civilisation, in contrast to Slavic or Eurasian. They also see the Belarusian national culture and language as separate and independent from Russia. All these organisations are involved in EU-supported activities.

The landscape of linkages with the EU in Belarus is rather diverse in spite of the limitations imposed by the dominant political elites. Unlike Russia-related organisations, the EU-related ones are usually bottom-up initiatives of grassroot activists addressing the needs of Belarusian population. These activists see EU-linkages as a necessary and important element for the development of their country. Moreover, connections with the EU provide Belarusian actors with the necessary infrastructural support, offer best practices that help them function (e.g. transparency, effective communication), and often give direction to their activities by specifying values to be promoted and goals that can be achieved (e.g. promotion of human rights, protection from discrimination).

Mapping linkages of organisations in Ukraine

Actors linking with and linked to Russia

Linkages between domestic organisations and Russia are quite different in Ukraine compared to Belarus. Many CSOs linked to Russia waned after Russia's annexation of Crimea

and its engagement in the conflict in Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Most of the restrictions on Russia-linked organisations imposed by the Ukrainian state concerned business activities, not CSOs. While only a handful of CSOs linked to Russia have been banned (twenty out of over five hundred organisations), many ceased to exist for different reasons.[18] After Ukraine banned several key Russian organisations, many of their affiliates lost their source of funding. Other organisations lost public appeal or support from local authorities, and, in several cases, their leaders emigrated to Russia or joined separatist groups.

A number of the initiatives and umbrella organisations that we have identified have not been officially active since 2014. Less than a half of the twenty organisations on our list were openly active at the time of conducting this study (Table A3 in online Appendix 2). Nevertheless, important linkages between the Ukrainian and Russian societies persist. We map the domains in which these linkages operate and specify what common goals or activities they promote.

Examining the list of organisations that self-identify with Russia or are affiliated with Russian institutions shows that most of them have cultural and educational linkages or focus on information provision. Several organisations are active in protecting citizens' rights. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) promotes religious bonds between Russian and Ukrainian societies.

Almost all initiatives associated with Russia are concerned with one broad domain: ***promoting Russian language, culture, and history***. These initiatives often have a very specific target audience: people identifying as Russian-speakers or Russian compatriots. Organisations active in education (e.g. NGO Russian School or Ukrainian Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature) promote learning Russian and studying in Russia, organisations active in culture (e.g. Russian Cultural Centres and Russian Centre for Science and Culture) promote Russian art and the common historical heritage of Russia and Ukraine, and organisations focusing on citizens' rights (e.g. the Foundation for Support of Compatriots, the All-Ukraine organisation "Russian Movement of Ukraine") claim to protect the rights of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians. Their membership and goals are ethnically and linguistically delineated.

Educational linkages are also cultivated, although it is difficult to associate the flow of students between Ukraine and Russia with concrete initiatives. Over 22,000 Ukrainian students studied in Russia in 2017, which makes Russia the second largest destination for Ukrainian students after Poland. Ukrainian citizens studying at Russian universities make up approximately 17% of the total number of Ukrainian students abroad (UNESCO 2019), and represent 12% of all foreign students in Russia (Aref'ev and Shegeri 2016).

Local initiatives linking to Russia are not that numerous – up to 200 before 2014. Due to their affiliation with large, well-known Russian umbrella organisations (e.g. *Russkiy Mir, Rossotrudnichestvo,* and the Foundation of Saint Vasily*),* they seem to have been well funded and visible in the public sphere. Some of the identified organisations do not have proven affiliation with any of the Russian donors and claim to be self-funded.

One of the advantages that Russia-linked organisations seem to have is the way they develop their links with local communities. Many of the culture and community clubs target people offline rather than online, establish personal relations and work locally with schools, pensioners and university departments that teach Russian or in Russian.

This approach to building and maintaining linkages might be especially effective with segments of society with more traditional values and older generations.

Actors linking with and linked to the EU

In contrast to organisations linking with Russia, there has been an increase in initiatives related to the EU in Ukraine since 2014. Our list (Table A4 in online Appendix 2) also includes multiple organisations that have been founded earlier: between 2000 and 2010 and even in the 1990s. Actors establish linkages that mostly aim to promote citizen education and information. More recently, they engage in monitoring reforms and policy changes related to the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU.

Multiple civil society initiatives aim to link Ukraine and the EU in the ***domain of education***. Initiatives set up the local organisations affiliated with EU (e.g. National Erasmus+, Eurodesk) and by domestic initiatives (e.g. National Youth Council of Ukraine, Center for Ukrainian Reform Education) provide information about study exchanges, collaborative research, and self-development opportunities in the EU or with European partners. Some of them focus on specific fields of collaboration like science and technology or volunteering (e.g. the Regional Centre for Eurointegration Projects "Euro Projects", the All-Ukrainian Association for Youth Cooperation Alternative-V).

Another domain in which local actors maintain linkages with the EU is ***facilitating business***. Organisations active in this domain (not businesses themselves) offer support to small and medium enterprises for innovation through consultancy and by stimulating networks with EU partners. They target the improvement of business climate and support for enterprises (e.g. Agency of European Innovations, European Business Association).

Various initiatives linked to the EU, of local and external origin, aim at ***gathering information, analysis and provision of information*** to the citizens and to the Ukrainian authorities. Organisations operating on different scales and with different levels of institutionalisation inform about the EU's policies and the implementation of reforms related to the AA (e.g. the Team Europe Experts Network, the EU-Ukraine Civil Society Platform), and provide assessments and policy advice. Analytical reports and policy advice have been delivered by civil society actors on multiple topics, for example, the EU's environmental impact assessment system, anti-corruption regulations needed for visa-liberalisation, currency regulation policies, progress of particular reforms, and formation of open society in Ukraine (e.g. Reanimation Package of Reforms, Eurointegration Portal, Ukrainian Centre of European Politics, the New Europe Center, the Ukrainian Centre of European Politics).

Other analytical centres specialise in research and ***policy advocacy*** on narrower sets of issues. They are active in various fields: the political system, parliamentarianism, and the rule of law (the Laboratory of Legislative Initiatives), the energy market (Dixi Group), economic policy (Center for Economic Strategy), foreign policy (Institute of World Policy), and environmental policy (Resource and Analysis Center "Society and Environment", ICO Environment-People-Law).

Civil society actors also actively promote ***citizens' rights*** and ***monitoring the progress of democratic reforms***. Some of these are official EU initiatives (e.g. Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum) established to coordinate activities or sponsor projects in

multiple regions in Ukraine. Others are local organisations established by private actors in order to protect human rights by raising awareness for example on gender equality, access to justice, and social solidarity (e.g. Center for Civil Liberties), monitor the government and promote transparency and accountability (e.g. Centre of United Actions), and by funding projects that facilitate and monitor democratic transition, good governance, and the rule of law (e.g. European Programme of International Renaissance Foundation).

Comparative analysis

Domains of linkages with Russia and the EU

Despite the differences in the socio-political orders and geopolitical context of Belarus and Ukraine, the overview above shows that the linkages between Russia and civil society in both countries have developed in similar domains. Likewise, the linkages between the EU and local communities operate in similar domains across the two countries.

In Belarus and Ukraine both, the organisations initiated by Russian actors or linking with them still operate in the ***domain of promoting Russian language, cultural exchange (e.g. in music or literature), and shared history***. These are traditional links that organisationally date back to the 1990s and are rooted in the relations all three countries had within the Soviet Union. Very similar initiatives are conducted either by actors under the umbrella organisations such as *Rossotrudnichestvo*, *Russkiy Mir*, or by grassroots local actors such as Russian cultural centres. All of them promote (Russian) ethnic bonds, common language, cultural heritage, commemoration of the Second World War and similar historical events from the Soviet period. When these organisations are active, their strength lies in the direct contact with specific target groups in society, based on clearly defined criteria for membership: being an ethnic Russian, speaking Russian, or belonging to the Orthodox Church. The ROC is an exceptionally strong actor operating in the domain of culture, especially in Belarus through the BOC. The most extreme activities of organisations linking with Russia, built on the basis of ethnicity, language and history, are paramilitary initiatives. In general, organisations associated with Russia focus mostly on the linkages rooted in the common past of the countries. This makes it increasingly difficult to attract younger generations.

However, active linkages between Russia and younger generations, especially in Belarus, are being developed in the domain of ***higher education***. In addition, since the beginning of the 2000s, Russia-linked actors have been focussing on youth, education and research. Their activities vary from events and initiatives focussed on the shared cultural and linguistic community to a more sophisticated promotion of Russia as a regional integrator. In Ukraine, the domain of higher education is populated by more actors linked with the EU (e.g. National Erasmus+, Eurodesk, National Youth Council of Ukraine) promoting, exchanges, scientific collaboration in various fields, and professional development opportunities in the EU. Most Ukrainian students choose to study in Europe, although Russia remains the second most popular country to study behind Poland.

Organisations that are initiated by the EU or link with the EU often operate in the field of policy advice and build relations with expert communities in both countries. EU-linked organisations conduct a much broader range of initiatives aimed at protecting ***citizens' rights*** than Russia-linked organisations. The EU-linked organisations are active in fields

ranging from election monitoring and transparency of institutions, to protecting values such as freedom of speech, to supporting vulnerable minorities (women, people with disabilities, victims of human trafficking). Several Russia-linked organisations claim to protect the rights of Russian speakers and other so-called compatriots in Belarus and Ukraine.

Organisations linked to the EU in both countries are very active in the domain of ***environmental protection and sustainability***. We have not been able to identify any Russia-linked organisations focusing specifically on activities in this domain.

This comparison shows that Russia-linked organisations are rather limited in their domains of activity, but can appeal to specific sectors of society. The linkages they develop between Russia on one side and Belarus and Ukraine on the other are based explicitly on identity (ethnic or linguistic) and refer to legacies: the connections between the countries rooted in the past. Rarely do they promote political or societal change. Instead, they promote the status quo, glorify ethnic and historical ties, and Eurasian integration projects that are reminiscent of the Soviet Union past.

Our data show that in both Ukraine and Belarus, the EU-linked actors have more decentralised programmes and funding for societal initiatives, quite different from the centralised Russian actors that are or used to be, in most cases, directly linked to the Russian or Belarusian governments. This decentralisation allows for an increasing number and diversity of citizen initiatives: the EU-linked organisations conduct a broad scope of activities and operate in the domains of policy advice, information and access to education, environment, democracy promotion and monitoring, and citizens' rights. These organisations are not limited ethnically or linguistically. Many of them explicitly promote reform of political institutions and social development.

EU-linked organisations include a broad range of civil society actors that offer opportunities to engage in more domains of socio-political life. Importantly, they promote improvement of political life (through monitoring of authorities, and protection of freedoms and rights). In this way civil society can help to transform state-society relations and contribute to democratisation. This is, of course, conditional on the genuine interest of grassroots organisations in democracy: enhancing civic rights, monitoring institutions, and protecting the rule of law. That being said, some domains are more important for moving towards an open socio-political order, while others play a role in development more broadly. For example, organisations operating in the domains of environmental protection and regional development might be highly successful, but do not necessarily have to push the LAO in the direction of open access.

Linkages across different socio-political orders in Belarus and Ukraine

Our analysis of CSOs shows that the landscape of linkages with external actors differs depending on the socio-political order in which they operate. The legal context and the political elites in charge in Belarus and Ukraine shape the boundaries for civic engagement: they influence the domains within which linkages can be established and constrain external actors' leverage (Tolstrup 2013).

In Belarus, a balanced-closure LAO, political and legal restrictions on the civil society sector mean that relatively few CSOs promote European values and ideas openly, and the domains in which they can operate are more limited than in OAOs. Organisations linking with Russia enjoy more support from the political elites and we have identified instances of Belarusian political actors involved in organisations linked with Russia and Russian actors' involvement in

Belarusian politics. The relative closure of political and economic access allows the gatekeeping elites to shape the societal linkages in addition to political and economic ones. Moreover, they prioritise developing and sustaining linkages with another limited access order and actively encourage them. These links seem to be to a great extent based on personal relations.

In Ukraine, a balanced-openness LAO, the domestic political elites do not prevent civil society from linking with either external actor. Naturally, since the eruption of the conflict in 2014, Russia-linked organisations face more constraints from the authorities. However, the official restrictions on organisations linked to Russia apply specifically to Russian GONGOs, while domestic civil society actors are still free to develop links with Russia (even after six years of war). Moreover, organisations created by Ukrainians with direct links to Russian authorities and strongly opposing European integration are highly visible in the public space, for example "Ukrainian Choice" (Lutsevych 2016, 20–21). Meanwhile, pro-European organisations have been mushrooming in Kyiv and other regions of Ukraine since Euromaidan. The Ukrainian state does not formally restrict civil society actors that promote democratic reforms, monitor the authorities, provide expertise, and encourage transparency. Many of these organisations are bottom-up initiatives and are not stimulated by political elites, but rather advise them or check their power. Therefore, we can suggest that political elites in Ukraine do not limit building linkages to just the EU nor do they prevent linkages with Russia.

In sum, while in Ukraine reform-oriented, democracy-promoting and progressive organisations do not face political restrictions and even advise political elites and monitor their activities (Keudel and Carbou 2020), in Belarus their activity is limited. On the contrary, organisations linked with Russia have long enjoyed political support in Belarus while their activities are less welcome in Ukraine since the eruption of conflict in 2014.

Discussion and conclusions

A major contribution of this article, hitherto absent from the literature, is that it systematically identifies the domains of activity in which CSOs in Belarus and Ukraine maintain links with the EU or Russia. Our investigation showed cross-country similarities and differences in terms of the landscape of CSOs linking to these external actors. Overall, actors that link with the EU operate in similar domains (education, policy expertise, citizens' rights, environment, and minority protection) in both Belarus and Ukraine. The same is valid for actors that link with Russia as they operate in both countries in the domains of culture, promote historical commemorations and maintain bonds between societies on the basis of ethnicity and language.

What is the significance of these differences in the domains of operation of organisations linking to EU or Russia? The links with external actors that represent different socio-political orders cannot, in our view, be directly classified as promoting democracy (links with the EU) versus promoting authoritarianism (links with Russia). Instead, the relationship appears to be indirect. To start with, the analysis above showed that CSOs linked with the EU are more diverse and aim at societal and often political change, while organisations linked with Russia aim to preserve the status quo or even return to the past in terms of socio-political order. Our comparative analysis showed that the

Table 1. Domains of operation of Russia- and EU-linked organisations and the potential independent effects of these domains (examples).

Focus	Domain	EU-linkage	Russia-linkage	Potential independent effects
Tradition & identity	Language		x	Status quo preserving
	Cultural exchange		x	No promotion of opening
	History		x	
	Ethnicity		x	
	Religion		x	
General development	Economic integration	x	x	Status quo change
	Environment protection	x		No promotion of opening*
	Sustainability	x		
	Regional development	x		
Socio-political development	Citizens' rights expansion	x		Status quo change
	Rule of law	x		Promotion of opening
	Monitoring of institutions	x		
	Democracy promotion	x		
Cross-domain	Education	x	x	Content dependent

*Following the assumption that economic development ultimately leads to opening of socio-political systems, long term opening effects of operation in this domain are possible (Carothers 2009).

domains in which organisations exist and operate potentially have specific, independent effects on societies' development.

Building on the theoretical framework introduced above (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009) and our empirical findings, we can further refine the theory with regard to organisational domains (Table 1). To structure our empirical results, we incorporate insights about static and dynamic societies (based on Deutsch 2011) that can help us understand the role organisations play in opening socio-political orders. We propose that operation in some domains cannot contribute to an opening (e.g. domains focusing on tradition and identity) as the very rationale of these organisations is to preserve the status quo. In other domains, the status quo can be changed in terms of general development (e.g. in promoting regional development or economic integration), but change in terms of socio-political opening is not likely in the short term. Finally, there are domains in which a change of the status quo is equivalent to some socio-political opening.

EU-linked organisations promote change by providing better information and analysis to authorities and to the public, improving citizens' rights and human rights, and protecting the environment and promoting sustainable development. These organisations are characterised by diversity and by broadening access to political and social resources to include vulnerable groups. They also often stand for universal rights that citizens can evoke irrespective of ethnicity, gender, or political orientation, such as freedom of speech, protection of property, and free and fair elections. Although organisations with EU linkages promote inclusion, they tend to be rather technocratic and this might hinder their ability to attract wider audiences. Nevertheless, as many of them operate in domains relevant to politics, these organisations are more likely to contribute to the opening of the socio-political order. More broadly, these organisations often contribute new knowledge and focus on the critical assessment of the political system, which is the fundamental requirement for progress and dynamic and open societies (Deutsch 2011, 13 & 387). In combination with the EU's transformative agenda, activities of organisations in many of these domains push for change in terms of general development (status quo change), but also in terms of opening of the LAO (see Table1).

In turn, organisations linked with Russia aim at preserving the status quo by celebrating the past, reinforcing narrow identity linkages based on ethnicity and language, and bonding through Orthodox religion. Although these identity markers are all exclusive – if you are not ethnically Russian, of Orthodox faith, or Russophone, you do not belong to this community – they do demarcate a large population in each country. Drawing on the past can be attractive for those who feel worse off after decades of transformation and many stalled reforms (especially in Ukraine) of recent years. In more general terms, these organisations support a static vision of society: they aim to preserve tradition, which most of the times means trying to "keep things the same", discourage criticism of the status quo (in societal and political terms), and prevent knowledge from growing (Deutsch 2011, 13 & 379). Preserving the traditional status quo would mean that Belarus and Ukraine reject closer integration with the EU, which demands a long and costly (at least initially) process of political and economic reform.

Even if these domains of activity do not directly promote authoritarianism, civil society linkages rooted in common history or shared identity are not likely to contribute to opening up. Although different identities (ethnic, religious, historical) can be used to mobilise groups in the strife for democracy (e.g. as in the Baltic states at the end of the 1980s), they can also serve to strengthen authoritarianism as observed in some of the successor states of Yugoslavia (Bunce 2003, 170–177). As long as organisations building the linkages with Russia in the domains focusing on tradition and identity do not aim to expand and improve the rights of citizens and make political authorities responsive to citizens (as was the case in the Baltics), they are more likely to enhance the stability of LAOs.

Importantly, domestic audiences are not only passive recipients of external initiatives. They may be sceptical of the activities of organisations that are fulfilling external actors' objectives in a direct manner (Hudson 2015, 332), both linked to Russia and to the EU. It is, of course, not coincidental that organisations operating in particular domains link either with the EU or Russia, actors that promote mostly divergent visions of society.[19]

There are several limitations of our study that can be addressed by future research. First, we focused on linkages developed by actors within civil society only and did not analyse linkages in other domains, such as media, businesses, or politics. Those other linkages have consequences for the functioning of civil society and socio-political orders (see, for example Cameron and Orenstein 2012 on economic linkages). Second, our list is not exhaustive and can be improved[20] and built upon.[21] Nevertheless, our illustrative list provides a valuable resource to advance our understanding of how civil society linkages with external actors cluster and what their potential consequences for socio-political orders are. Importantly, our study does not assess the actual influence of the CSOs on the opening of LAOs, but suggests potential contribution of civic activism in different domains to domestic social and political dynamics.

Another direction in which this research can be expanded is by analysing discourses and narratives that the different organisations use. As CSOs related to Russia are often linked to misinformation and anti-Western messages, it would be informative to know to what extent they act as messengers of the Russian state propaganda, how far it travels, and what is the role of citizens of Ukraine and Belarus in spreading it (Golovchenko, Hartmann, and Adler-Nissen 2018). Future studies can use our mapping of domains and expectations about their potential impact on opening to test the effects of CSOs' activities and discourses on both stability and change of socio-political orders.

Notes

1. Even though we do not explore their links here, we recognise that businesses are of great importance for societal dynamics and that civil and business elites often overlap, especially in the post-Soviet context (Mazepus et al. 2020).
2. To keep our comparison neutral, we do not include organisations that do not explicitly self-identify with either Russia or the EU or have no institutional affiliation with one or the other, such as USAID or multiple grassroots organisations. We fully acknowledge that other organisations can emerge and develop links promoting similar goals.
3. To be included, organisations had to be active at some point in this period.
4. We are grateful to Yuliya Bidenko for the valuable additions to the list of EU-related organisations and to Mariia Symonova and Kateryna Zarembo for their comments on our selection strategy for the Ukrainian case. We also thank Ivan Bakalov for tips on the search strategy for Russia-related organisations in Ukraine. We thank Tatiana Kouzina for her help with the Europe-related organisations. We thank two experts who wished to remain anonymous for their help with Russia-related organisations in Belarus.
5. We have considered using the source of funding as an organisational selection criterion. There were, however, several problems that prevented us from using this strategy. First, many organisations receive funding from multiple sources and it is therefore difficult to associate them with one external actor. Second, information about funding is not always accessible and transparent. Third, revealing sources of foreign funding in non-democratic context creates problems for some organisations.
6. More detailed information about the selection of organisations and analysis grouping organisations into categories is available in the online Appendix 1 and 2.
7. For official information about the Regional Forum, see http://www.sovrep.gov.by/ru/forumy-ru/ (accessed April 10, 2020).
8. Effectively, the BOC does not have autonomy from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC): the BOC is a branch of the ROC. However, it is important to note that the ROC is not the only orthodox church in Belarus, neither is it entirely homogeneous. Within it the Christian Orthodox community, a small minority of different (pro-Belarusian and pro-European) denominations and voices exist.
9. This was reported by Nasha Niva and other national media outlets. For more see https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=212920&lang=ru (accessed April 9, 2020).
10. For more see: http://sobor.by/page/V_Belarusi_sozdan_Obshchestvenniy_sovet_po_nravstvennosti (accessed April 10, 2020).
11. In many cases, the partnership of Belarusian GONGOs with Russian actors might be purely formal and may not go beyond official affiliation. Therefore, linkages between GONGOs in Belarus and Russia need further investigation.
12. Examples of such events are the annual youth summer camp "Be-La-Rus'". See the Russian media report at https://rg.ru/2019/07/31/kurgan-druzhby-na-granice-treh-stran-sobral-500-tvorcheskih-iunoshej-i-devushek.html (accessed April 4, 2020).
13. While in the past Belarusian authorities used to be quite supportive of the "Nights Wolves", this has changed in 2018–2019. The arrival of Russian bikers in Belarus is no longer welcomed by Belarusian officials (Belsat 2018).
14. With some exceptions, for example the Faculty of International Relations of the Belarusian State University is open to international contacts.
15. Around 10,000 students studied at European universities in 2017 (UNESCO 2019).
16. MOST programme: https://most-belarus.eu (accessed March 26, 2019).
17. There are notable exceptions among environmental groups: for example, actors dealing with nuclear threats face repression from the authorities.
18. See the following official acts: Annex II to the Decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine as of 28 April 2017. Available at: https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/00/40/30/6f76b8df9d0716da74bb4ae6a900d483_1494864914.pdf; Annex II to the Decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine as of 21.06.2018.

Available at: https://www.president.gov.ua/storage/j-files-storage/00/61/50/f5678abf43bcb17ce6b232500e9a7312_1529676085.pdf. Accessed 18 March 2020.

19. Neither Russian nor the EU elites are the only actors that foster cooperation with organisations in these domains. For example, Turkey's authorities emphasise cultural ties between Turkic people in different regions of Europe and Asia (Frahm, Hoffmann, and Lehmkuhl 2018, 21).
20. Although we took measures to avoid sampling bias, given that not all information about registration, funding, and functioning of organisations is easily or even openly available, we might have omitted CSOs that function in other domains.
21. We do not list organisations that have linkages with individual member states of the EU or any other external actor that might also impact socio-political orders of the target countries. Moreover, we compared Russia and the EU as two major actors that build links in the region, but there are drawbacks to this comparison between a state and international organisation. The EU is restricted in what linkages it can build to what the member states are interested in or agree on. Russia does not face such limitation. The comparison is also slightly asymmetric: although Russia could build linkages in the domains of democratic reform and human rights, the EU as an international organisation is less likely to build linkages based on common language.

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