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Democracy Promotion in Eurasia: A Dialogue

By Licinia Simão

Democracy promotion in the countries of the former Soviet Union is now a well-established policy in many Western institutions. For more than two decades, the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and even the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have developed specific tools and policies aimed at supporting and assessing democratization processes in this region. The outcome of these efforts has been far from homogeneous or clear, and the transition is far from being a

BOTTOM LINE

- The EU remains a key driver of Eurasian democratization.
- Russia's role is not benign, but its interests must be considered.
- Regional conflicts must be addressed head on to achieve sustained democratic gains.
- The problem of contested information is an increasing reality that must be addressed.

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linear process. The current context, in 2017, presents these institutions and Western societies with important questions regarding the relevance of old policies and practices. Is democracy promotion worth-while in a contested international setting? Under accusations of false universalism and self-interest by Western states and institutions, is there intrinsic worth in supporting democracy and human rights abroad? Can meaningful partnerships be established with elites and societies in Eurasia to make democracy a local reality?

These were some of the questions posed to a group of young students taking a course on “States and Conflicts in the post-Soviet Space” at the University of Coimbra, and which formed the basis of an EDSN event: *Youth Perspectives on Democracy Promotion in Eurasia*, held on December 5, 2017 at the School of Economics of the University of Coimbra, with the support from the BA program in International Relations. The reflections on this policy brief are taken from the ideas exchanged with and by students in this event, which also included the presence of the Georgian Ambassador to Portugal.¹

Overall, the purpose of the event was to gauge the views that various European and non-European young people have on these policies—relevance, pertinence, legitimacy and the challenges they faced—and contrast them with the views of policy makers. It became clear that democracy and human rights issues face compelling challenges, which derive both from the dynamics of regional relations, and from the unresolved nature of some of the local challenges affecting these societies, their nation, and state building processes.

¹ The elaboration of this policy brief relied on the excellent notes taken by Carlota Houart, acting as rapporteur of the event. The sole responsibility for the ideas expressed here is of the author.

The EU’s Significance

One of the assessments made was that the EU is the most significant democracy promotion partner in Eurasia and that the Eastern Partnership represents a valuable framework for assisting the democratization efforts of these countries.² The EU, through traditional conditionality and socialization approaches, is seeking to advance a normative view of social and political development of neighboring societies, modelled after its own integration process. The signing of new Association Agreements, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements, and ongoing visa liberalization efforts were seen as important incentives for a strategic pro-Western choice in these countries’ foreign policy orientations.

Despite significant results in anchoring countries like Georgia or Ukraine to EU policy, this EU strategy has achieved modest results from the view point of social, economic, and political local development—and it has been pursued at high cost. Russian foreign policy has been directed at countering EU regional ambitions and safeguarding specific Russian interests, raising costs for Ukraine and Georgia in terms of its territorial integrity and of the conditions to sustain effective peace processes with separatist entities. The poor state of relations with Moscow also led to economic and political opportunities being missed by these countries and by the EU, namely following the imposition of mutual sanctions between Russia and Western countries after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The perceived costs of engaging with the EU (and to a certain extent with NATO) have invited caution among other regional states,

² This point was elaborated by Agnieszka Sienkiewicz.

which have instead cultivated “multi-vectored” foreign policies and more autocratic or centralized forms of internal political power. Belarus and Azerbaijan are fully consolidated or consolidating authoritarian regimes, whereas Armenia might be understood as a semi-authoritarian regime, given a more open civil environment leavened by a purportedly competitive political process that is typically dominated by the ruling party. Moldova has engaged in important political transitions since 2009, but much work remains to be done in the consolidation of democratic institutions.

Looking at the latest EU foreign and security policy priorities, established in the Global Strategy of 2016, and more specifically in the neighborhood policy revision document of 2015, the EU is set to pursue a more pragmatic approach in its foreign relations. Maintaining relations, even at a minimal level, is perceived as more advantageous to its own interests and responsibilities, than keeping a high level of normative conditionality. In this context, one can expect the EU’s energies to be focused on the cases where partner countries are willing to push for closer relations with the EU, whereas those unwilling to do so will be given tailor-made frameworks for relations. Domestic stakeholders fighting for democratic accountability and for strong democratic institutions and processes may be left without support in this context, since the reality of EU policy choices may undermine its normative rhetoric. In that sense, the EU is becoming a more “normal” empire, rather than a

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normative one, which carries with it the potential negative impacts that this may entail for democratization in Eurasia.

Russia Must be Considered

A striking feature of the event was the need to understand why Russia’s regional policy is so problematic and how Moscow frames its own interests in the region.³ This is perhaps one area where the views of the youth participating in the event were more divided and were, quite expectedly, clearly contrasting with the views of the Georgian Ambassador. Russia remains the most divisive actor in the region; whereas some argue that Russia has legitimate security, economic and political interests in its neighboring countries, others view these legitimate interests as being manipulated by Russian authorities for short term gains. Democracy promotion is one area where Moscow’s policy seems, at first sight, quite self-defeating, as more democratic neighbors would likely result in more transparent and, to a certain extent, more predictable and constructive partners.

Looking at how Russia may be engaged, two tensions need to be acknowledged. For one, there is a powerful expectation in many societies in Eurasia that their countries can find means to balance their relations between the West and Moscow. Severing ties with Russia is perceived as having strong costs and, to a certain extent, an impossible and unwanted move for these countries. This raises an additional issue, which pertains to

³ This point was elaborated by Bruno Della Sala.

the role domestic leaders assign to Russia as the external threat, mobilizing nationalist and patriotic feelings around their own personal political projects. Not only is this view strategically myopic, since it undermines democratic debate over the domestic nature of many of these societies' challenges, it is also a convenient means to discredit different views as unpatriotic. This is a move which hampers democratic processes.

Secondly, fears do exist among elites in Russia and in other Eurasian states that more muscular democracy promotion policies by the EU and the US are not oriented necessarily to addressing democratic deficits, but instead tend to target perceived "anti-Western" actors. Separating these two aspects in Western democracy promotion policies would prove a valuable contribution to democratic consolidation in the region.

Regional Conflicts and Democracy

The problems posed by separatism and non-recognition also negatively impact processes of democratization.⁴ In a similar way, the prevalence of violent conflict also weighs down democratization, as decision-making under conflict conditions becomes more centralized, while the narrative is increasingly polarized. The permanence of separatist and violent conflicts in Eurasia, affecting all countries except Belarus, needs to be accounted for in the policies supporting democratic institutions. Can democratization proceed in contexts of protracted conflict? What positive examples are available in other regional contexts that may be used as models for regional western policy?

Another important dimension is looking for ways to support democratic engagement at all levels of governance, including in separatist regions. In the absence of clear instruments

and approaches aimed at allowing for democratic institutions to flourish in these regions, other forms of governance may take root. The so-called Kosovo precedent, of standards before status, suggests that democratization may be used as criteria for international recognition (or at least robust engagement). However, for the separatist regions of Eurasia, no positive results have been achieved in terms of these regions' integration into the international community. This has been followed by a more conservative and more centralized approach to power in a context of persistent uncertainty.

Portraying the protracted conflicts of Georgia as a conflict between Georgia and Russia furthers the negative trend of making the separatist entities invisible and irrelevant for peace. This, of course, can only result in further alienation of these authorities and in their retreat into Moscow's influence. Democratization in these regions is unlikely to develop in this context. Western institutions' adoption of the Georgian-Russian conflict narrative and its lack of engagement with the separatist societies will further their marginalization and undermine their democratization.

Information Wars, Media Manipulation

The manipulation of information and media sources for political purposes was also signaled as a particular trend destabilizing regional relations and having a detrimental effect in democratization processes.⁵ The case of Ukraine is particularly striking, since media wars have been ongoing regarding the nature of political authorities in Kyiv and of the political transition that followed the *Euromaidan* protests. Russia's engagement in information operations has aimed to undermine the narrative of a democratization

⁴ This point was elaborated by Joanna Seraphim

⁵ This point was elaborated by Naiara Gamero

process anchored in Ukraine's pro-Western foreign policy. The use of Russian language channels, internet-based media outlets, and social media makes it particularly easy for the Russian government to support alternative interpretations of EU policies. This strategy has been rather successful in creating divisions among public opinion in Ukraine regarding European and Euro-Atlantic integration and in undermining support for the current Ukrainian government.

Media wars mean that all sides engage in contested interpretations of reality, including (in the case of Ukraine) Kyiv, European capitals, and the European Union itself. A fight for public opinion suggests that the democratic nature of political regimes makes them particularly vulnerable to oscillations in public perception and support. However, even in semi-authoritarian regimes, such as Russia, public support for the regime is fundamental. The EU itself has engaged in more ambitious public diplomacy efforts, committed to making its policies more visible to local populations, rather than relying only on elite relations. A fight for hearts and minds of Eurasian populations is underway, and media wars are a central part of the process. Democratization trends will certainly be affected by the ability to convey the right messages on the benefits of this option.

The role of the United States

The United States has been a powerful force for democratization in Eurasia since the 1990s.⁶ Both bilaterally and in the framework of NATO's collaboration with former Soviet bloc countries, democratic conditionality has been a constant element. It has, nevertheless, varied in intensity and, under the current administration, it is expected to be a marginal element in U.S. foreign policy. Previous administrations have linked their strategic

interests in the region, namely in energy development and military strategy, to the advancement of a democratic agenda. The normative basis of U.S. foreign policies impacted NATO, and EU enlargement further consolidated a democratic agenda. In the post-9/11 context, particularly in the second Bush Administration, a more muscular, triumphalist means of effecting democratization, namely through popular revolutions, sought to open the way for NATO enlargement. The Obama administration's comparatively lower intensity of interest in the region and pragmatic relations ensued, although US foreign policy became more focused on Asia as well as broader strategic convulsions in the Middle East.

In this context, Eurasian democratization has relied mainly on EU policy, and under Obama the US chose to lead from behind. Support for the Eastern Partnership and a clearer commitment by the EU on enhanced political and economic relations has been the privileged U.S. strategy over the last decade. This has opened way for Russian assertiveness in the region, as the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea illustrate. In the absence of a strong U.S. commitment to these countries' security, their policy choices have been less consistent with U.S. norms of democracy and human rights. Alternative pressures have been felt and a consolidation of power has been preferred as a means of assuring regional and regime stability. Under the current Trump Administration, the defense of democracy in Eurasia will most likely remain a marginal interest. This will reinforce two trends: the centrality of the European Union for domestic stakeholders on democratization, and reinforce pragmatic calculations by local leaders on the benefits of pursuing democratic reforms in a context of

⁶ This point was elaborated by Diogo Lima

authoritarian trends in the absence of a strong supportive force.

This context raises important challenges to the societies of Eurasia and the future of their political processes. Improving the regional context for democratization means nurturing success stories which are anchored in democratic achievements, rather than just

pro-Western in rhetoric. Ukraine may be a case in point. Whereas the EU will remain a central supporter of democratization processes in these countries, a consistent policy aimed at the protracted conflicts needs to be articulated with the U.S. and regional organizations, so that democratization can include sensible policies towards the conflicts.◆

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About EDSN

The **Eurasia Democratic Security Network** (EDSN) is a project by the Center for Social Sciences with the generous funding of National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The project aims to cultivate an international network of scholars and practitioners to further develop the intellectual and public policy rationale for the maintenance of Euro-Atlantic conditionality as a peacemaking and economic dynamizing force. Particularly aimed to aspirant states, EDSN also advocates for liberal democratization on its own merits, such as through the increasingly and variously established linkages between democracy, national security, and economic development.

