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The EU's Neighborhood Policy and Authoritarian Regimes: a Mounting Security Challenge

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Abstract

This policy brief analyses the recent security challenges generated by authoritarian regimes in the EU's neighborhood and the broader implications for the EU's strategy of dealing with authoritarianism, which should be made more intelligent and consistent so as to minimize interdependence with authoritarian regimes and their opportunities to blackmail and manipulate democratic societies.

such have when it comes to dealing with manipulative and aggressive dictatorial regimes. It has also revealed the dangerously unpredictable nature of such regimes, which tend to use escalation and international blackmail for their own domestic political purposes. Therefore, for the sake of European security, the present approach to dealing with authoritarianism needs to be overhauled in favor of a more responsible and consistent strategy.

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes in the EU's neighborhood have produced a number of security challenges. The EU's overall approach has been to ensure its own security by promoting democracy, good governance and economic prosperity. In practice, the EU as a whole, alongside its individual members, have also cooperated with authoritarian regimes, when it came to sensitive issues like migration or energy security. Arguably, this cooperation, and the resulting interdependence, has made the EU more vulnerable and exposed the structural weaknesses that democracies as

EU's neighborhood: a failing security community?

In the recent period, the EU faced several security challenges, a few of which stemmed from authoritarian regimes in its Eastern neighborhood. In May 2021, the domestic political crisis in Belarus spilled over the borders with the forced landing of Ryanair Flight 4978. The subsequent "hybrid" migration crisis on the Belarus-EU border was engineered by the Belarusian authorities as a form of retaliation for the new round of sanctions. Relying on

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political and economic support from Russia the Lukashenka regime exploited a highly sensitive international issue to blackmail the EU. Moscow also became increasingly confrontational, and, in December 2021, presented NATO and the US with an ultimatum, simultaneously amassing large number of troops next to the Russian-Ukrainian border. The two regimes, now seemingly working in a tandem, presented the EU with new security challenges.

The EU's overall approach to regional security has been heavily influenced by a *milieu* strategy, i.e., an attempt to reshape the regional environment around the Union in order to make it safer, stabler, and more predictable. The philosophy that underpinned the neighborhood policy was thus premised on the idea of building a broader regional *security community* and creating “a ring of friends” around the Union.¹ To some extent, this approach to security was an attempt to externalize the EU's own previous experience of being a “peace project,” which successfully reconciled old enemies in Europe and durably locked European countries into close economic, political and institutional interdependence.

However, the ambitious project of transposing this approach to the neighborhood faced serious challenges. The so-called “transformative power Europe” proved to be much weaker² here. This had to do with a combination of factors. Inter alia they included the absence of a clear membership

perspective, which typically served as a mobilizing factor in post-Communist transitions in Central and Eastern Europe. Also, the EU had come face to face with entrenched and sometimes highly repressive dictatorial regimes. Here, the liberal philosophy of fostering interdependence could actually increase the vulnerability of the Union by making it dependent on cynical and manipulative authoritarians. In more recent years, the EU visibly scaled down its pro-democracy rhetoric, focusing on stabilization instead of democratization, and also seemed to be more eager to form partnerships with authoritarian leaders, when it came to sensitive security issues like migration.³ Long term energy cooperation with Russia, which has been traditionally backed by some Western European Member States, has also worked towards fragmenting the EU by contributing to the East/West divide inside the Union.

“Security vs. values”: a false dilemma?

In the short run, trading values for security may look like a clever *realpolitik* move. However, in the long-term perspective, juxtaposing values and security seems ultimately unsustainable as interdependence with authoritarian regimes creates serious risks, which can hardly be justified by the short-term gains. This vulnerability of democracies has to do with several structural weaknesses, which tend to get exposed when facing authoritarian regimes. First, as it is often

¹ Rieker, P. (ed.) (2016) *External Governance as Security Community Building*. London Palgrave Macmillan

² Börzel, T. A. and B. Lebanidze (2017) “The transformative power of Europe” beyond enlargement: the EU's performance in promoting democracy in its neighbourhood. *East European*

Politics, 33(1): 17-35. DOI: 10.1080/21599165.2017.1280473.

³ Pomorska, K. and G. Noutcheva (2017) Europe as a Regional Actor: Waning Influence in an Unstable and Authoritarian Neighbourhood. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55: 165-176.

observed, policymakers in democratic systems typically adhere to a “culture of compromise.” They tend to see politics as a consensual process for rational actors, who also have a habit for power-sharing (e.g., coalition governments) and are normally pressured by their publics into rule-based behavior. That is, when established rules are openly broken or lies are exposed, there are usually very high political costs for policymakers. Second, democracies are “polyarchies,” complex, institutionally decentered systems with many competing groups and interests. Furthermore, in democracies, the people in power are critically dependent on electoral cycles, i.e., being elected and reelected every four to six years.

Dictatorships are nothing like that. With a “winner takes all” attitude, they lack power sharing habits. They tend to view politics as a zero-sum game and rules and institutions as a mere fig leaf for the elite power games. Therefore, what policymakers from democratic countries see as consensus-seeking and rational compromise, their authoritarian counterparts are likely to interpret as signs of *weakness* and as an invitation for further pressure and blackmail. Notably, authoritarian regimes have also watched democracies and learned that they can manipulate, bluff, and blackmail them with escalation, in the hope that democratic leaders will back down under pressure from their voters and competing political elites.

Thus, you can reap short term benefits from cooperating with authoritarians but as a democracy (or an alliance of democracies), but in the long-term you are making yourself exposed and increasingly vulnerable to manipulation and blackmail. What the EU's recent lessons from the

neighborhood also suggest is that you cannot rely on the authoritarian leaders' presumed rationality to make assumptions about their predictability. For instance, prior to 2021, the Lukashenka regime in Belarus had been a security issue only to its own people, but the incident with the forced landing of Ryanair Flight 4978 had directly jeopardized the security of EU citizens. The ensuing “hybrid” migration crisis on the border with the EU, which the Belarusian authorities deliberately engineered, immediately turned Belarus from a contributor to European security, which helped guard the EU's border, into a source of major regional security issues. Few would have predicted this prior to 2020.

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The dangerous unpredictability of authoritarianism

Naturally, none of the aforementioned hostile activities would have been possible without direct political and economic backing of the Lukashenka regime from Russia. Moscow has also grown increasingly confrontational and has used the Minsk regime as an additional asset, a proxy in its “geopolitical” fight against the West. Late in 2021, the Kremlin issued an ultimatum to the US and NATO, which, practically speaking, demanded to limit the sovereignty of post-Soviet/post-Communist countries and change the foundation principles of the Western

alliance according to the Russian guidelines.⁴

In issuing this ultimatum, the Kremlin cited its own security interests, i.e., the goal of stopping Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO. However, rationally speaking, no security threats to Russia could be identified to begin with. Ukraine's NATO membership was not in any way on the table, and even if it had been, membership in an organization like NATO does not necessarily entail any changes in the projection of Western power, i.e., in the actual deployment of missiles or troops, which could hypothetically threaten Russia. Thus, a small number of Western troops was stationed in the Baltic states and Poland as NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence only after 2014, and as a reaction to Russia's own aggression against Ukraine.

A much more likely explanation for Moscow's blackmail is related not to international but to domestic politics. As Putin's regime ages together with its leader, it starts losing popular legitimacy and becomes increasingly repressive. Whilst it has always relied on fostering a "siege mentality" with anti-Western rhetoric, now it needs the West as a geopolitical enemy more than ever, and hence the increasingly confrontational posture.

The three listed security challenges, the forced landing of Ryanair flight, the engineered migration crisis, and the blackmail with threats of big war on the EU's borders, are all caused by internal regime dynamics and, as such, they demonstrate the unpredictability of

authoritarian regimes and the unsustainability of systematically appeasing them or drawing them into stable partnerships. The behavior of authoritarian regimes does not conform to the rational assumptions of the liberal logic, which is based on seeking consensus and creating win-win situations. However, it also defeats the seeming cleverness of *realpolitik*, which often claims that it knows how to do business with them rationally. Post-Soviet authoritarian regimes are driven primarily by their own logic of regime survival and are prone to enemy-making and international escalation, in particular, when they are cornered by domestic political circumstances. This is what makes them ultimately unpredictable and dangerous for everyone.

Conclusion and recommendations

Recent security challenges in the EU's neighborhood have demonstrated that authoritarianism is a serious security challenge, owing to its dangerous unpredictability and the overall futility of the attempts to appease or engage it. There are certain lessons that need to be learned from this. For the sake of their own security, the EU and its individual Member States need a much stronger anti-authoritarian and pro-democracy consciousness. The post-Cold War experience with democracy promotion has taught us that the capacity of external actors to build or sustain democracy "from the outside" is rather limited. In some cases, international pressure helped prevent authoritarian backsliding in candidate countries (e.g., Slovakia in the

⁴ The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2021): Treaty between The United

States of America and the Russian Federation on security guarantees, December 17, 2021

1990's), but even the EU's "domestic" experience with Hungary as a Member State now looks much more ambiguous. Nevertheless, a stronger anti-authoritarian consciousness and a much more informed, intelligent, and consistent approach to the problem of authoritarian regimes is necessary. To begin with, the policies of the recent decades should be given a fundamental audit, in order to understand, where, when and how political mistakes and the policymakers' near-sightedness and short-term gain calculus may have strengthened authoritarian regimes. For instance, this applies to the lenience that Western European member states like Germany have demonstrated with respect to Putin's Russia in exchange for favorable energy deals. Consequently, the EU and the broader Western world should come up with a consistent strategy for approaching authoritarianisms, in order to minimize the extent to which they can be blackmailed and manipulated through their own institutional complexities and electoral cycles. These democratic weaknesses vis-à-vis authoritarians need to be converted into strengths.

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