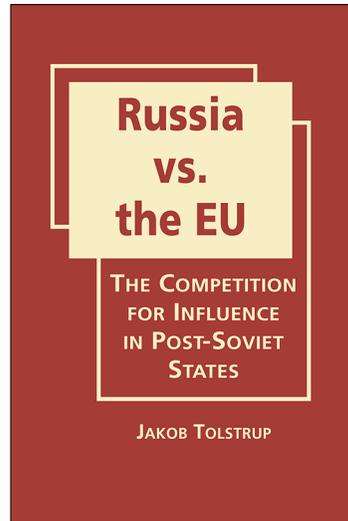


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Russia vs. the EU:
The Competition for Influence
in Post-Soviet States

Jakob Tolstrup

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1

Setting the Stage: Post-Soviet Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine

In his famous book *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (2009), Robert Kagan argues that the world is becoming increasingly divided between the *axis of democracy* (consisting of the Western world) and the *association of autocrats* (primarily represented by Russia, China and Iran). According to Kagan, the short-lived honeymoon period in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union is undisputedly over. It has been replaced with the re-emergence of “geopolitical fault lines where the ambitions of great powers overlap and conflict” (Kagan 2009: 12). His argument is that authoritarian regimes no longer accept the hegemony of the liberal order but increasingly challenge it and its Western proponents – thus creating a more conflict-ridden and insecure world. Kagan may be dramatizing the level of conflict. Indeed, he could be accused of essentialism due to his division of the world into good and bad guys. But he is definitely on to something. Several scholars (e.g., Diamond 2008a; Gat 2008) agree that authoritarian great powers generally act with more and more confidence, and increasingly challenge the liberal order that was the trademark of the 1990s.

This increasing great power competition has not just caught the attention of traditional international relations (IR) scholars but has also penetrated the literature on democratization rooted in comparative politics. A number of recent studies stress how the rising great powers actively inhibit democratization and strengthen autocratic tendencies in their regions (e.g., Bert 2004; Diamond 2008b; Ambrosio 2009; Corrales et al. 2009; Tolstrup 2009; Bader et al. 2010; Jackson 2010). Apparently, the authoritarian rise has dire consequences not just for the great powers themselves and the world system they act within but also for the many smaller states situated around them.

Scholars of Western democracy promotion are also becoming more skeptical. In general, the enthusiasm of the 1990s arising from a strong belief in the inevitable spread of democracy around the globe has yielded to a far more hesitant and pragmatic approach (Merkel 2010). The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the fight against international terrorism have once again brought security matters to the top of the agenda, thus putting severe pressure on the goal of promoting democracy across the globe. And, to make things worse (from the perspective of a global democrat), the challenge at hand has grown during the same period, as autocratic governments around the world have found ways to, at least partly, protect themselves against the actions of the democracy promotion industry (e.g., Schedler 2002; Carothers 2006; Gershman & Allen 2006; Krastev 2006).

Such reflections all point in the same direction – the overall perspective for the externally induced advancement of democracy is turning bleaker these days. The democracy-promoting external actors are losing ground, and the democracy-inhibiting powers are moving forward. But is the drama of two diametrically opposed forces competing for influence in regions around the world indeed an adequate depiction of what is going on? Are the various external actors truly capable of influencing the political development of other states in the first place? If so, has Western democracy promotion really received a serious blow during the last decade? Is the extrovert authoritarian resistance of the rising great powers an entirely new phenomenon, or has this been their *modus operandi* all along only now with increased vigor and power? And is it really fair to make the essentialist grouping that Kagan argues for? Are the good guys always good and the bad guys always bad? Or is the picture, perhaps, more blurred than black and white?

Answering such questions brings us into the realm of the literature on the so-called international dimension of democratization (e.g., Pridham 1991a; Whitehead 1996b; Carothers 1999; Levitsky & Way 2005, 2010; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005b), a journey that I will argue is absolutely necessary if we are to fully understand the dynamics of political development around the globe. This book, therefore, follows up on this aspect by analyzing the role two great powers have played in influencing processes of democratization and autocratization in their immediate and shared neighborhood.

More specifically, I concentrate on one of the fault lines mentioned by Kagan (2009: 12) – namely, the one that “runs along the western and southwestern frontiers of Russia”, thus effectively dividing Europe. On the one side, the democratic European Union (EU) has committed itself to promoting democracy in its Eastern neighbors through its enlargement policies and neighborhood policies (e.g., Vachudova 2005; Schimmelfennig

2007). On the other side, the gradually more autocratic and assertive Russia is eagerly trying to preserve its former sphere of influence (e.g., Nygren 2007; Trenin 2007) and has repeatedly been accused of protecting dictators and punishing regimes that seek integration with the West (e.g., Ambrosio 2009; Tolstrup 2009; Bader et al. 2010). In between, the former Soviet republics – Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova – find themselves squeezed between the two sides.

This apparent increasingly antagonistic relationship indeed emphasizes the significance of assessing how important the actions of the two external actors are for the internal political development of the countries in focus. Are Russia and the EU really capable of influencing the “level of democracy” (what I will term *the democratic performance*) of their neighbors? How do they do it, and do they truly influence the countries in only a “positive” or a “negative” way,¹ or do we see mixed patterns of influence? And if so, have these patterns changed over time, and do we see the significant change in the direction and the intensity of the external actors’ influence, as Kagan asserts? Through a comparative study of Russia’s and the EU’s influence on the democratization and autocratization² processes of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova in the period from 1991 through 2010, I seek to disentangle the role that the two external actors have played in bringing their neighbors closer to or further away from liberal democracy.

These very important empirical questions constitute the backbone of this book. But at the same time, the empirical endeavor also serves as a springboard for bringing attention to an under-theorized and under-investigated issue in the literature on transition and democratization. In my view, conducting an analysis like the one sketched above is simply not possible without a proper analytical framework for studying external actors’ influences on democratization and autocratization processes. And as I will argue below, the part of the democratization literature that deals with the international dimension lacks such a comprehensive framework.

So the interesting and substantial questions asked above are naturally preceded by more fundamental theoretical and methodological questions of how, in general, one can study such external influence, and how we can expect this influence to vary. Thus, this book sets out not to just increase our knowledge of how specific external actors can influence democratization and autocratization processes but also to provide a theory explaining when external actors matter, and an analytical framework and a consistent terminology that can serve as common ground for future comparative analyses in the field.

Before I turn to the main parts of the book, let me first explain in greater detail what this study is about and how exactly it contributes to existing knowledge in the field. The rest of this introduction is organized as

follows: first, I conduct a brief survey of the literature on the international dimension of democratization. This allows me to present the research tradition that this study builds upon as well as pinpoint the shortcomings that currently cripple it. Subsequently, I explain how I address these shortcomings, and finally, I present the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen research design and clarify how the analysis will be conducted, exactly what is under study and, as important, what is not.

The International Dimension: The Birth of A New Research Agenda

In 1991, Pridham (1991b: 18) labeled the international dimension “the forgotten dimension in the study of democratic transition.” Indeed, the topic had been neglected at large. So at the time he wrote, Pridham’s blunt statement was certainly correct. The transitologists (e.g., Linz & Stepan 1978; O’Donnell & Schmitter 1986; Di Palma 1991) that dominated the thinking in the 1980s mostly favored actor-centered theories embedded in the national context. In the seminal work on transitions from authoritarian rule, Schmitter (1986: 5) famously stated that “one of the firmest conclusions that emerged... was that transitions from authoritarian rule and immediate prospects for political democracy were largely to be explained in terms of national forces and calculations. External actors tended to play an indirect and usually marginal role.” Before that, only a few of the themes covered by today’s literature on the international dimension had been addressed.

The obvious issue of outright foreign control and imposition of regime type – known from, for example, the Allied forces’ imposition of democratic systems in Japan and Germany after World War II – had been cursorily studied (see e.g., Dahl 1971: 189-202). The related issue of how either of the superpowers of the Cold War overtly and covertly intervened in other countries to uphold or install supportive regimes had only been investigated slightly further (see e.g., O’Donnell 1973; Muller 1985). Also in IR theory, only a few scholars (Gourevitch 1978; Putnam 1988) had sought to break down the artificial palisade between their own discipline and comparative politics, doing so by arguing that domestic politics and international relations are somehow related, and that one cannot be studied thoroughly without including the other. But their contributions only helped spur the debate, while their specific suggestions on how to study such phenomena did not resonate much with later works in the discipline.

Apart from these notable exceptions, the founding decades of democratization theory were in general characterized by the consensus that a given state’s regime trajectory is primarily determined by its internal

conditions. So, at the time when Pridham was calling for more attention to it, the literature on the international dimension's influence on transition and democratization was indeed severely underdeveloped. But 1991 marked a turning point. This was so for two reasons.

First, empirical realities changed dramatically during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The end of the Cold War fostered "an explosion of international political and economic incentives for states to qualify as democracies" (Whitehead 2004: 135), and also led to a considerable increase in the number of democracies. In addition, the end of bipolarity made the ideological and security-related rationale for tolerating authoritarian regimes disappear. Instead, the Western foreign policy agenda increasingly embraced worldwide democratization as one of its top priorities, and international organizations and international NGOs committing themselves to democracy promotion proliferated (Magan 2009: 13-14). The international dimension simply turned more visible to the naked eye.

Second, prominent scholars such as Whitehead (1986, 1996a), Huntington (1991), Pridham (1991b), Pridham, Herring and Sanford (1994) and Linz and Stepan (1996) began to stress the importance of the international dimension's effects on transition and democratization processes. Even Schmitter (1996: 27-28), the most ardent proponent of domestic-centered approaches, admitted that "perhaps it is time to reconsider the impact of the international context upon regime change." In the words of Levitsky and Way (2010: 38), the debate "turned from whether international factors matter to how much they matter." That is, the international dimension had now, for the first time, achieved recognition as a research subject in its own right, and the path was set for actually developing the field.

Here, one important contribution stands out. In the path-breaking book *The Third Wave* (1991), Huntington took up this task, setting the research agenda for the future. The main argument was that political development was a far cry from being determined by only internal factors. Policies of external actors (85-100), the prevailing *zeitgeist* (33) and demonstration effects (100-106) could simply not, *a priori*, be brushed aside.

The emphasis on the latter two factors – and the overall argument that political development takes place in waves – sparked the onset of what has become known as the diffusion literature.³ Here, the external environment is seen less as consisting of intentional actors and more as uncontrolled surroundings that sporadically influence given countries. That is, a constant pressure and inspiration for regime assimilation emanates from both the regional and global environment that surrounds any country – and this, at least to some degree, seems to influence the crucial choices regarding

political development made by national leaders, oppositionists and the population at large.

External Actors: What Has Been Studied and What Has Not?

The second item on the research agenda of the literature on the external dimension of democratization emphasized by Huntington seeks to understand the influence of specific external actors.⁴ But with the easing of the Cold War atmosphere and the general spread of democratic and liberal ideals, researchers' awareness that states can affect other countries both positively (facilitating democratization) and negatively (inhibiting democratization) simply faded away, and sole attention was dedicated to positive external actors.

In particular, contributions on the West's efforts to promote democracy around the globe proliferated. Scholars analyzed both the softer tools – diplomacy, persuasion strategies, democracy assistance (such as electoral assistance, support of civil society and independent media), and help with implementing legal and legislative reforms – and the harder tools – from political conditionality to the abovementioned democratization by force.⁵ Most recently, the literature on positive external actors has taken a theoretical quantum leap with the so-called Europeanization literature, emphasizing how the EU uses conditionality to force candidate countries, association countries and targets of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) to complete a plethora of political, economic and administrative reforms.⁶

But still, the sole focus in all these democracy promotion studies is to trace only positive effects of the actions of the Western external actors; possible negative effects are sometimes reflected upon but are seldom treated in any systematic manner. This is what I term the *substantial shortcoming* of the literature on the external dimension on democratization. Simply put, we have so far been predominantly occupied with the transition from dictatorship to democracy, and therefore, only the question of the West's efforts to promote democracy (what I term positive influence) has been examined, thereby disregarding what I term the potential negative influence (influence that weakens democracy) of those same players or of other great powers. In my view, the specialized literature on the influence of external actors has suffered from a positive Western bias and, thus, has reduced the international dimension to a unidirectional push factor for democracy (Tolstrup 2009).

True, quite a few authors point to the fact that regional great powers support autocratic incumbents or counteract democratizing states in their neighborhoods.⁷ Although these authors are aware of the phenomenon, only

very few of them carry out empirically-based comparative studies that thoroughly trace the actual effects. One very recent, notable exception who deserves mention is Ambrosio (2009), who convincingly juxtaposes Russia's *bolstering* of the autocratic Belarus with its *subversion* of the democratizing Ukraine. Nevertheless, like the others, he focuses on the external actor's actions rather than on the effects of these actions, and therefore does not pinpoint exactly what is influenced by the external actor in these countries.

Burnell & Schlumberger (2010: 10) reiterate this criticism and note that "there is a striking neglect of attention to international factors (whether deliberate and policy-driven or unintended) in the development of non-democratic regimes on a national level." Thus, even though a small group of scholars have taken the first steps towards addressing the substantial shortcoming, the imbalance is still very real, and I propose that it be tackled much more consistently and thoroughly.

Bringing into focus the substantial shortcoming necessarily begs the question of how we can discriminate between positive and negative influence in an unbiased manner. This question naturally leads to a second shortcoming of the literature: the methodology. In general, the literature on the external dimension has not been particularly concerned with methodology, at least not the positivist variant of it that I advocate. A few scholars have attempted to think of how the subject can be systematically studied (Pridham 1994; Whitehead 1996a; Schmitter 1996; Burnell 2006; McFaul, Magen & Stoner-Weiss 2008), but none of the contributions have gained a wide hearing so far. As a result, the field has not attained the level of methodological meticulousness characteristic of democratization literature proper.

Basically, the problem is that only some studies clearly discriminate between various actions of external actors (the independent variable), and even fewer studies systematically pinpoint exactly what the external actors influence (the dependent variable). The two shortcomings combined mean that not only is our understanding of the international dimension's influence on democratization and autocratization processes severely simplified, but we also lack the methodologically sound concepts and approaches without which we are ill-equipped to conduct stringent comparative analyses. So, if we are to "move beyond generalizations about the international context of democratization, and towards tracing particular sources of external influence, and testing their influences" (Magen 2009: 16), we need to work more with the methodology.

Finally, the literature on the external dimension of democratization not only suffers from substantial and methodological shortcomings but also from a theoretical shortcoming. Several scholars have produced theories on

the circumstances under which external actors can influence the development of other states (e.g., Kopstein & Reilly 2000; Yilmaz 2002; Levitsky & Way 2005, 2010; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005a; Vachudova 2005). Yet, these contributions are constructed to account only for the influence of positive external actors (and sometimes even more narrowly, the EU), and by far, most of the authors emphasize *either* actors *or* structures as the crucial determinant in their explanation. I will argue that this leaves us with only a partial understanding of how the influence of the external dimension really comes about. Only if we construct a model that is applicable to both positive and negative external influence *and* that combines both the macro-logic and the micro-logic of when external influence matters will we be able to fully grasp the complexity of the international dimension.

The Contributions of This Study

This book does not offer a complete solution to the problems outlined above, but it does constitute an ambitious attempt to rectify some of the imbalances characteristic of the literature today. On the empirical level, I conduct a comprehensive mapping of the positive and negative influences of both the EU and Russia in the three post-Soviet republics of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova in the period from 1991 to 2010. Such a study offers new empirical ground in at least four ways.

First, it provides new insight into the political dynamics of the post-Soviet republics. Second, by analyzing not just the influence of the EU but also of Russia, I depart from the tradition of only focusing on Western external actors. Russia is a very important actor in the post-Soviet region; so if it is not included in analyses of external influence on processes of autocratization and democratization in the area, one simply ends up with a distorted and unreal picture of reality.

Third, the study increases our knowledge of the EU's capability to positively affect non-candidate countries. Indeed, as noted above, a steadily growing number of contributions address Schimmelfennig's (2007: 4) call for "analyzing Europeanization beyond Europe." But by far, the majority of these studies deal only with the period after the EU introduced its Neighborhood Policy in 2004. To the best of my knowledge, nobody has until now simultaneously mapped the European influence in three post-Soviet countries, thus, covering the whole period of their independence as sovereign states.

Finally, this book improves our understanding of the interplay between positive and negative external influences. The parallel investigation of what we normally conceive of as two very different external actors addresses

Whitehead's (1999: 78) long-neglected call for studying *cross-pressured* states. Recently, the clash between the EU and Russia in the western part of the post-Soviet area has received a fair amount of attention (e.g., Malfliet, Verpoest & Vinokurov 2007; Haukkala 2008a, 2008b; Schmidtke & Yekelchik 2008; Wilson & Popescu 2009; Averre 2009, Kanet & Freire 2012). Yet, the focus here is again mainly on the tools and interests of the conflicting great powers, not on their precise effects. And again, the period studied is mainly constrained to the latter part of the 2000s, not the entire post-Cold War era.

To grapple with the methodological shortcoming in the literature, this book uses a new analytical approach as well as a new framework and terminology. Basically, I propose doing three fairly simple things. Most importantly, we have to be cautious of the *essentialist trap*. I will argue that Russia has on several occasions acted as a negative external actor towards its neighboring republics. Nevertheless, we have to develop concepts that are tied, not to particular actors *per se*, but to their influence. That is, focus should be on external actors' effects – not on who they are or what they intend to do. Why external actors act the way they do is always interesting but is nonetheless irrelevant for studying the drivers of political development in the states affected by the external actor.

So, if we are to steer clear of the normative bias that characterizes, for example, Robert Kagan's division between the good guys (democrats) and the bad guys (autocrats) in world politics, we need to construct our theoretical concepts so that it is possible for an external actor to act as both a positive and negative factor depending on the time and place, thus leaving it to the empirical analyses to settle the question. Negative external actors need not be authoritarian, and positive external actors need not be democratic. So our concepts must never rule out the possibility beforehand.

Second, to use concepts that do not determine external actors *a priori*, we have to take seriously the ever-present problem in democratization studies regarding the understanding of democracy and clarify what we understand as positive and negative acts. Certain criteria have to be established upon which an unbiased evaluation of the empirical data can be based. Simply put, it is of paramount importance to clearly define the dependent variable that I perceive as *changes in democratic performance* (i.e., democratization or autocratization). Once the dependent variable has been specified, it is essential to clarify precisely what the external actor influences in a given country and how this influence connects with the dependent variable. That is, if the influence of the external actor does not affect a given country's democratic performance directly, then we need a step-by-step specification of the causal mechanisms that finally produce the positive or negative effect. Clarity about the dependent variable not only

increases transparency but also allows us to discriminate between positive and negative actors in an unbiased manner – thus avoiding the trap of essentialism.

Third, I propose developing an objective analytical framework (consisting of typologies and categorizations of external actors' actions and effects) that can be used by comparativists to analyze both positive and negative external actors regardless of choices of cases and time periods. That is, I scrutinize the independent variable by asking in what ways and with which means external actors can influence democratization in other countries, and I spell out the simple types of effects that this influence can take. This analytical framework is then applied in the empirical analyses in order to characterize the influence strategies that Russia and the EU have followed and applied since 1991. The aim is not only to introduce a more consistent terminology but also to promote an approach that sharpens our analytical thinking and hopefully produces more methodologically sound empirical analyses.

Finally, on the theoretical level, this book offers a substantive corrective to the structuralist theory that currently dominates our understanding of when and how external actors matter. Basically, I hold that the widely cited theory of leverage (the vulnerability of the targeted state to external pressure) and linkages (the density of ties between the external actor and the targeted state), developed by Levitsky and Way (2005, refined in 2010), is somewhat flawed.

I argue that the main explanatory factor, the density of linkages between the external actor and the target state, is determined by more than structure, which is what the two scholars limit it to. Linkages are not forever fixed or solely predetermined by geography or history but can be altered to some degree; they can be initiated, deepened or reduced by what I term the *gatekeeper elites* (political, economic and civil society elites of the target countries). So while Levitsky and Way offer a more or less static argument about international actors' influences on political development, I, on the contrary, propose a dynamic model: one that accepts the structural premise but also takes into account how interactions between external actors and states evolve over time. As elites actively affect the density of linkages, they also change the importance and influence of the external actors.

Thus, I propose a theory emphasizing not only power and interdependence but also the calculations and values of individual leaders. By synthesizing insights from both actor-centered and structuralist theories into one single framework, one can, in my view, come much closer to a rewarding explanation of when external actors matter.

Research Design

Designing a study in the right way requires that we are fully aware of the purpose it is to serve. In this book, I argue the necessity of studying not just positive external actors but also negative external actors. More specifically, I highlight the relevance of looking closer at the processes taking place in states subjected to intensive cross-pressure. Furthermore, I criticize Levitsky and Way's leverage-linkage model, and argue for refining it by including the variable of gatekeeper elites. Thus, two considerations must steer the choices concerning the design: the need for studying cross-pressure and the need for testing my theoretical claim. As I have already pointed out, I address these challenges by conducting a comparative case study of Russian and European influence on the political development in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova in the period from 1991 to 2010.

The comparative case method has at least two major advantages. First, the method allows me to meticulously map the intensity and character of the influence of the external actors under study. Using the framework laid out in Chapter 2 and taking advantage of the diachronic and cross-spatial nature of my design, I can track both the broader tendencies and the crucial changes in an external actor's behavior. Thus, on the basis of focused and structured rules of comparison, the comparative case method allows me to present a thorough, in-depth examination of specific external actors' workings in varying case settings (George & Bennett 2005: 69-71).

Second, since the research field of external actors' influences on processes of democratization and autocratization is far from well-developed, we really do not know much about which external factors are the most influential and why the effects of these factors seem to vary considerably across cases. That is, our understanding of which variables are important and exactly what the causal mechanisms look like is very limited. So, theory-building and a deeper understanding of how the independent and dependent variables are linked is required at this early stage. For this purpose, the comparative case method is especially well-suited, as it can give us "a richer understanding of particular contexts and processes, while at the same time providing a rich evidence base with which to test propositions, [and] establish empirical relationships" (Landman 2008: 82). This is not to say that the comparative method *per se* is better at disentangling complex causal relationships (Gerring 2007: 61), but it is definitely useful in grounding this work, and well-conducted case studies can also unfold the workings of a theoretical argument in greater detail and serve as a natural test of the validity of the claim.

Why the Chosen Cases?

Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova are interesting and useful cases for a variety of reasons. Currently, the three countries, to varying degrees, are in limbo concerning their future political development. So studying the forces that pull them in one or another direction is important and relevant. However, the case-choice has several other advantages.

For one, the design is quite apt for meticulously mapping the cross-pressure of Russia and the EU. Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova constitute good examples of what Whitehead (1999) terms cross-pressured states,⁸ and therefore, they are ideal for a study of the influence of competing international actors. In fact, their location on the fault line between Russia and the EU suggests that the external actors will be more likely to fight over their internal development. Therefore, the three cases can be regarded as *most-likely cases* for finding external influence in the first place (cf. Eckstein 1975: 118-119). That is, if neither Russia nor the EU has any effect on the democratic performance of countries where we expect their influence to be particularly strong, then it will be fair to assume that geographically more remote external actors do not matter at all in the post-Soviet area.

Second, the chosen cases are excellent for testing the theory outlined in Chapter 3. The gist of Levitsky and Way's argument is that the density of linkages (the ties conditioning the strength of the external actor's influence on the target state) is structurally determined. I, on the other hand, argue that linkages are not forever fixed or solely predetermined by geography or history but can be altered to some degree by gatekeeper elites (they can be initiated, deepened or weakened). Consequently, to test the argument of the alterability of linkages, it is advisable to choose cases that share approximately the same geographical and historical traits because marked variation in the density of linkages to external actors between such cases would weaken Levitsky and Way's structural theory.

Such cross-case similarity is exactly what characterizes Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. The cases are crudely similar regarding historical preconditions, and they share commonalities on a wide range of important structural factors. For example, they all share a legacy of Communism and Russian imperialism; they are all classic borderlands that have been moved back and forth between neighboring countries and, therefore, show a cultural shading between the Russian orthodox to the East and the Latin world to the West (Ukraine between Poland/Austria-Hungary and Russia, Belarus between Poland/Lithuania and Russia, and Moldova between Russia and Romania) (Löwenhardt, Hill & Light 2001: 607). None of them have prior experience with independence or democratic rule, yet they have

inherited a relatively robust infrastructure of state power (Way 2005: 241). They all lack natural resources and none of them are mature market economies. Furthermore, at the time of independence, the three cases were also crudely similar with regard to the level of linkages to Russia (Tsygankov 2000) and the EU (Levitsky & Way 2010: 375; Kopstein & Reilly 2000).⁹

Even if we take other relevant factors into account, the political trajectories of the three cases have unfolded in different ways than would have been predicted by the theories of the democratization literature. Take, for example, the factors highlighted by modernization theory (cf. Lipset 1959; Boix & Stokes 2003). The theory argues that richer and more equal societies are more favorably disposed to achieving democracy. But, if we consult statistics from the early 1990s on such parameters, then it becomes clear that Belarus performed the best and Moldova, the worst. Belarus had a comparatively high GNP/capita and a low Gini coefficient,¹⁰ but it was, nevertheless, the Belarusians who, by far, witnessed the oncoming of the most autocratic regime. Nor can differences in political culture or mass belief alone explain the differing political development of my three cases. Many scholars have posed that the autocratization of Belarus can be ascribed to the particularly undemocratic nature of the Belarusian political culture (e.g. Burant 1995). Yet, such arguments are contradicted by surveys conducted in the post-Soviet countries. The population of Belarus did indeed favor a “strongman” more than that of the two other cases in the early 1990s, but this tendency quickly changed, and by 1994, when President Lukashenka was elected, the Belarusian electorate actually figured among the most democratically inclined, while the attitudes of the populations in Moldova and Ukraine were the least democratic (Haerpfer 2003).

Finally, we cannot attribute the diverging regime trajectories to institutional settings. Scholars have argued that parliamentarism is more favorable to democratization than is presidentialism (e.g., Linz 1990; Fish 2006). Yet, at the outset in 1991, semi-presidential systems were in place in Moldova and Ukraine, while the only parliamentary system was in Belarus, which, as mentioned, quickly descended into full-blown autocracy. This puts the institutional argument into question. Moreover, these basic state institutions have changed several times in all three cases since then. Rather, as Easter (1997) has convincingly argued, and as I will show in the analyses, the changes in institutions seem to be caused by changes in the concentration of political power among the elites rather than the other way around.

Such commonalities allow me to control for a wide selection of background variables and, thus, from 1991 on, treat the three cases as *most*

similar (cf. Przeworski & Teune 1970: 32-34). Thus, the risk of confirmation bias (cf. George & Bennett 2005: 217) is minimized, as competing explanations, both with regard to how the influences of external actors are expected to vary and to why changes in democratic performance happen, do not co-vary systematically. Moreover, this similarity in antecedent conditions and geographical position prompts us to believe that the strategic importance for both Russia and the EU (and therefore also the intensity with which they sought to influence) can be kept more or less constant across the three cases. From the Russian viewpoint, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova were considered a natural part of the traditional Russian sphere of influence, and for the EU, the countries were important parts of the so-called Neighbourhood Policy, as they were the only post-Soviet republics that had a slim chance of being granted candidate status in the long term.¹¹

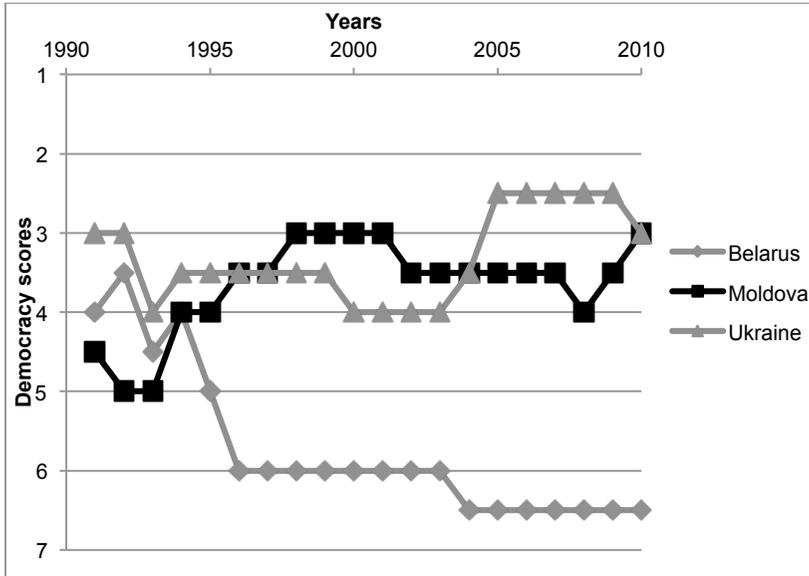
Hence, according to Levitsky and Way's structural theory (as neither geography, history, leverage, strategic importance, intensity of external pressure, nor the initial level of linkages varies systematically across the three cases), we would expect that in the two-decade period under study, the external actors' leverage over and linkages to the three target states should develop in much the same way, and consequently, the two external actors' influences should be approximately the same across the three cases. If this is not what we find, then the theory of leverage and linkage might need some fine-tuning. This is exactly what I will argue in the empirical analyses that follow.

Third, the design chosen minimizes the risk of both confirmation bias and selection bias, important because if the case choice is systematically biased, the variation of the phenomenon under study is not fully represented (Geddes 2003: 129). As the Freedom House scores in Figure 1.1 illustrate,¹² all of the countries (albeit to varying degrees) have experienced both, what I in Chapter 2 term, *democratization* and *autocratization*, and therefore, the dependent variable "change in democratic performance" is not biased by including only democratic successes or failures.¹³ Moreover, the visible difference in political development across the three cases, combined with their similarity in structural preconditions, allow for a thorough examination of my claim that variation in gatekeeper elites is crucial for understanding when external actors matter.

To sum up, the chosen cases are well suited for studying the competing influences of external actors and for testing the theoretical argument presented in Chapter 3. With this design, I avoid the dangers of selection bias and, at the same time, rule out counterarguments from many of the "usual suspects" of the democratization literature beforehand. So, using the most similar systems design (MSSD), I enhance the chances of successfully

isolating the effects that the external actors under study may have brought upon the political trajectory of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.

Figure 1.1 Freedom House Scores, 1991–2010



Source: www.freedomhouse.org

Note: the democracy scores are calculated as an average of the scores of political rights and civil liberties in each year. I have chosen to stick to Freedom House's own, albeit somewhat arbitrary, scale running from 1 to 7, to allow for easy comparability with other cases. Thus, the higher the score, the less democratic the country is.

The Data and the Analytical Approach

In order to examine the external influence of Russia and the EU on the democratic performance of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, one needs insight into the political development of the three countries since 1991. The narrative of what has happened in the three cases, and how the interactions between the two external actors and the target states have evolved, must be meticulously reconstructed.

To do so, I rely on both primary and secondary data sources: specifically, academic literature on the three cases, and reports and policy

documents from Russia, the EU, various international organizations and NGOs, as well as articles from analytical news sites about the post-Soviet space, such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL),¹⁴ East Week,¹⁵ and Eurasia Daily Monitor.¹⁶ Moreover, I have used the Eastview database (www.eastview.com) to search Russian and English language newspapers in the countries under study for cuttings that cast further light on their development and interactions with the external actors.¹⁷ This all provides good insight into the context in which the events took place.

The amount of data in the above sample is daunting, but in order to avoid selection bias in my material (cf. George & Bennett 2005: 94-98), I have found such pluralism necessary. Still, deciphering the enormous amount of data can be demanding, and an ordering principle is, therefore, absolutely necessary if one is to make sense of the information. Furthermore, to ensure measurement validity as well as transparency and inter-reliability, clear analytical criteria must be established *a priori* (George & Bennett 2005: 86, 89-90; Mahoney 2004: 95). Five types of observations can be identified as relevant for this study:

1. An external actor causes a change in the democratic performance of a target state.
2. A target state clearly intends to change its democratic performance, but the influence of an external actor makes the target state reconsider and, therefore, no change takes place.
3. An external actor pushes for a change in the democratic performance of a target state but does not succeed in changing it.
4. Gatekeeper elites are successful in initiating, deepening or weakening linkages to an external actor.
5. Gatekeeper elites fail in their attempt to initiate, deepen or weaken linkages to an external actor.

Observations from the first three categories refer to the degree to which the external actor has influenced the political development of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. In the first two groups, the external actor matters by either changing or avoiding a change in the democratic performance of a target state, whereas in the third group, it does not matter – even though it attempts to do so. All these observations are, therefore, categorized according to the typologies developed in Chapter 2. The interesting question here is whether we can discern a pattern illustrating why some external influence attempts fail while others succeed.

This is exactly where observations from categories 4 and 5 become relevant, as they cast light on the theoretical proposition put forward in Chapter 3. By studying these observations, we can find out whether the

linkages that seem to determine the degree to which external actors matter are really non-amenable, as Levitsky and Way argue, or whether gatekeeper elites in the three countries are capable of influencing their density, thereby further enabling or disabling the influence of specific external actors.

The Limits of This Study

First, this is a study of effects, not intentions or motivations. Though the empirical analyses are intended to lay bare the degree to which and the way in which Russia and the EU have affected democratic performance in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, the study will not try to explain why the external actors acted the way they did but rather to trace the consequences of these actions. This does not mean there will be no discussion of the motivations and intentions behind all actions; they just are not the primary goal here.

Second, since the primary focus is not on intentions, I will not engage in the normative debate concerning whether “the international community should be actively involved in democracy promotion efforts” (Schraeder 2003: 25). This book only seeks to analyze whether the EU and Russia facilitated or hampered processes of democratization and autocratization, not whether the interventions they made were illegitimate in the first place (Carothers 1999: 61-62). For the same reasons, the terms positive and negative external factors are not used to signal any normative stand but should rather be understood in the purely mathematical sense – that is, either as enhancing or diminishing a certain phenomenon (here: democratic performance).

Third, no mention will be made of how external actors should prioritize the concerns of stability and democratization. That is, I shall not take a stand on when political stability is preferred over efforts to push democratization forward. Naturally, stability and political development are intrinsically connected – a strong regime (be it either an autocracy or a democracy) always rests on some degree of stability. Obviously, the stability dimension can be hypothesized to have an indirect bearing on democratic performance. Consequently, I cannot fully avoid this debate. In some cases, social conflict is so severe that dealing with the stability issue simply becomes a prerequisite for democratization, and thus, externally sponsored stability must be interpreted as a positive external act. Yet, in other cases, external stability support easily turns into overt support for, for example, an autocratic incumbent, who is then somewhat protected from criticism – and then the external act turns negative. But, the question is not easily answered and calls for some degree of discretion. In any case, I

refrain from taking a normative stand on the issue and instead seek to disentangle the effects where relevant.

Finally, even though the main focus in this book is on external factors and their effects on political development, I do not claim that the external factor is the prime mover. That is, this book does not attempt to give a full-scale explanation of the regime changes in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. The external dimension may be important in some periods, but only on rare occasions is it omnipotent and almost never can it drive development singlehandedly. The goal here is more modest, though important: to thoroughly analyze, what I argue to be, one of the main aspects influencing the political trajectory of these states. Only by summing up the positive and negative *internal* factors as well as positive and negative *external* factors do we get the full picture of the forces turning the wheels of political development throughout the world. And only then will we be better able to explain the striking regime diversity in the post-Soviet space and beyond.

Book Outline

This book is divided into two parts. The first, Chapters 2 and 3, addresses the methodological and theoretical challenges outlined above. This section constitutes the necessary foundation of the book. The second part, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, then zooms in on the Russian and European influences on Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova during the period 1991-2010. Here, the value of the methodological and theoretical innovations of the first part comes to the forefront.

This introductory chapter sets the stage for the study by singling out several substantial, methodological and theoretical shortcomings in the existing literature on the external dimension of democratization. In Chapters 2 and 3, I seek to resolve these shortcomings. Chapter 2 introduces the innovative approach and the coherent analytical framework for studying both positive and negative external influences, presenting the analytical framework of typologies and categorizations of external actors' actions and effects. Overall, I argue the necessity of constructing clear concepts and typologies in order to advance the quality and comparability of studies of the international dimension's impact on democratization processes. Chapter 3 presents the theory, explaining the circumstances under which external actors can be expected to influence political development.

In the empirical study, the analyses are split up into four time periods, each constituting a chapter. Dividing the time frame (1991-2010) into smaller periods aids the presentation but also carries a comparative rationale within. The EU, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova have changed substantially since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. So, to avoid having

everything vary, I need to create controllable and solid “footholds” to base my comparisons on. This can be done by treating the external actors and the target states in time period X (during which the EU and Russia might be passive, and the internal situations for the three cases might be similar) as distinct from the external actors and the target states in time period Y (during which the EU and Russia might be active, and the internal situations for the three cases might differ). That is, with this approach, I compare not just countries but also time periods. My chosen periodization (1991-1994, 1995-1999, 2000-2004, 2005-2010), therefore, reflects an attempt to categorize different stages of both the intensity and character of external influence as well as different stages of the internal development for the three cases.

In each chapter, I briefly introduce the period, then, analyze the external actors’ actions and effects in accordance with the analytical framework laid out in Chapter 2, and assess the relationship between choices of domestic elites regarding linkages to the external actors and these external actors’ influence, thus “testing” the validity of the theoretical proposition presented in Chapter 3. The last chapter of the book presents a summary of the results of the empirical analysis, an evaluation of the utility and validity of both the analytical framework and the theoretical argument, and a discussion of the implications of the findings.

Notes

¹ The terms *positive* and *negative* should not, in this context, be ascribed to any normative connotation but are only meant as a reference to whether the external actor promotes or restrains processes of democratization in other countries. A thorough introduction to and definitions of the concepts will follow in Chapter 2.

² The terms *democratization* and *autocratization* will be discussed and specified in Chapter 2.

³ See e.g., Starr 1991; Drake 1998; O’Loughlin et al. 1998; Kopstein & Reilly 2000; Gleditsch 2002; Starr & Lindborg 2003; Brinks & Coppedge 2006; Bunce & Wolchik 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Beissinger 2007, 2009; Leeson & Dean 2009; Weyland 2010.

⁴ Note that external actors need not only be states or international organizations (IOs) but can also be NGOs (see, e.g., Keck & Sikkink 1998; Risse, Ropp & Sikkink 1999; Thomas 2001) and even powerful individuals. In the rest of the book, unless stated otherwise, external actors are understood to be either states or IOs.

⁵ On the importance of diplomacy and persuasion strategies, see e.g., Checkel 2005; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005b; Adesnik & McFaul 2006; on democracy assistance, see e.g., Smith 1994; Diamond 1995; Carothers 1997, 1999; Newberg & Carothers 1996; Crawford 1997, 2003; Burnell 2000;

Seligson et al. 2009; on political conditionality, see e.g., Schmitter 1996; Pevehouse 2002; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2005b; Vachudova 2005; on democratization by force, see e.g., Lowenthal 1991; Forsythe 1992; Whitehead 1996a; Peceny 1999; Edelstein 2004; Tures 2005; Grimm & Merkel 2008; Merkel 2008; Beetham 2009.

⁶ On the Eastern enlargement see e.g., Youngs 2001; Pridham 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b, 2005; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2002, 2005b; Schimmelfennig, Engert & Knobel 2003; Kelley 2003; Jacoby 2006; Dimitrova & Pridham 2004; Vachudová 2005; Emerson 2005; on the Balkan association countries see e.g., Renner & Trauner 2009; Trauner 2009; Mungiu-Pippidi 2010; on the ENP, see e.g., Emerson 2002; Haukkala & Moshes 2004; Dannreuther 2004; Aliboni 2005; Smith 2005; Milcher & Slay 2005; Warkotsch 2006; Kelley 2006; Dannreuther 2006; Mancke & Gstöhl 2008; DeBardeleben 2008; Browning & Joenniemi 2008; Freyburg et al. 2009; Dangerfield 2009.

⁷ Diamond (2000) has accentuated how large countries (so-called “swing states” such as Russia, Nigeria, and Pakistan) turning away from democracy can exert critical negative demonstration effects in their region; Whitehead mentions Russia as a possible negative factor that may “produce significant constraints on the scope for democratic consolidation” (1999: 78), and Bugajski (2004), Ambrosio (2006; 2007; 2008; 2009), Kramer (2008), Tolstrup (2009, 2012), Jackson 2010, and Bader et al. (2010) exemplify in empirical analyses that Russia truly has attempted to limit Western influence in the post-Soviet space by acting as a negative external actor; Whitehead argues that China has precluded the democratization of Hong Kong and severely constrains democratic progress in Taiwan (Whitehead 2002: 258), and Bert (2004), Corrales et al. (2009), and Bader et al. (2010) expand this view of China as a negative external actor that also protects authoritarian regimes in Myanmar, Cambodia and Africa; Levitsky and Way (2010: 41) and Diamond (2008b: 113-114, 119) point out that France has kept on supporting autocratic rulers in its former African colonies, and that the United States is still doing the same in, for example, the Middle East (see also Wittes 2008); Finally, as mentioned in the introduction, Kagan (2009) has pointed to an “association of autocrats” that deliberately counteracts the promotion of democracy and grants dictators around the world protection from Western sanctions.

⁸ Actually, they constitute the whole population of truly EU-Russia cross-pressured states in the post-Soviet area.

⁹ The similarities at the point of independence are further substantiated in Chapter 4.

¹⁰ www.hdr.undp.org.

¹¹ For the time being, Belarus is not part of the Neighbourhood Policy because of its autocratic ruler Alyaksandr Lukashenka, but the country is still offered the same possibilities and shares the same long-term perspective as the other countries (lately it has also been invited to join the new initiative *The Eastern Partnership* together with five other post-Soviet republics).

¹² The democracy ratings from Freedom House are definitely not without their problems, and one should be cautious not to take all minor ups and downs at face value (cf. Munck 2009). Here, they are only reproduced to provide a quick overview of the overall development of the cases under study.

¹³ True, full variation in regime type is not present across my cases. Missing are regimes with average scores between 1 and 2.5 – the cases termed

free by Freedom House – while scores between 2.5 and 4.5 dominate. In my view, this is not a major problem, as enough regime-variation exists to meaningfully investigate the research question at hand. However, when generalizing from the cases, it is important to remember that I have studied one full-blown autocracy (Belarus from 1995/1996) and several variants of hybrid and soft authoritarian regimes (Belarus in the early 1990s, and Moldova and Ukraine for most of 1991-2009), not real democracies.

¹⁴ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty surveys developments in a range of countries, including the post-Soviet region. All newlines are available from <http://www.rferl.org/>.

¹⁵ Eastweek is a weekly analytical newsletter on Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus and Central Asia. All newsletters are available from www.osw.waw.pl/en.

¹⁶ Eurasia Daily Monitor surveys developments in Eurasia. All newlines are available from <http://www.jamestown.org/edm/>.

¹⁷ Often, such news reports are quite biased by political forces or the personal value judgments of journalists, but nevertheless, they provide detailed accounts of specific events (cf. Katchanovski 2006: 59).