

Aid by Democratic Versus Autocratic Donors:  
Democratization Processes and Citizens' Perceptions in  
Recipient Countries

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*To my siblings Vranin, Janina & Besa*



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## Abstract

OECD countries are no longer the sole major providers of financial flows abroad. Authoritarian countries such as China, Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, with their distinct practices and implementation processes, are increasingly present in low- and middle-income countries. In this Ph.D. dissertation, I develop and test hypotheses on the influence of foreign aid on democratization processes and citizens' attitudes in recipient countries. Employing a multi-method approach, using observational and experimental methods, I analyze the role of democratic donors such as the European Union (EU) and autocratic donors like China, both together and separately. I find that democratic donors like the EU, who target democratic institutions via democracy assistance can foster democratization. I argue that democracy assistance is effective when aid is coupled with political conditionality and monitoring mechanisms. On the other hand, aid from autocratic donors like China can decrease support for democracy, especially among those who view autocratic donors very positively. Autocratic aid impacts these perceptions through (1) attribution processes, i.e., individuals learn about aid projects that are implemented close to where they live (2) the instrumentalization of aid by political elites, i.e., political elites influence citizens by spreading information about the benevolence and generosity of authoritarian donors. Finally, this Ph.D. dissertation demonstrates that foreign donors' attributes convey to citizens how likely corruption is in the project and how responsive their local government and donors will be in implementing such projects. The political regime of the donor, whether democratic or autocratic, signals the level of responsiveness to citizens' demands. On the other hand, whether a donor is transparent or not, indicates the risk of corruption in the project and in the local government.



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## Sammanfattning på svenska

OECD länder är inte längre de enda stora biståndsgivarna. Auktoritära stater såsom Kina, Ryssland, Iran och Saudiarabien, med sina specifika praktiker och implementeringsprocesser, är i allt större utsträckning närvarande i de flesta låg- och medelinkomstländer. I den här doktorsavhandlingen utvecklar och testar jag hypoteser om hur bistånd påverkar demokratiseringsprocesser och medborgares attityder i mottagarländerna. Jag kombinerar olika forskningsmetoder och analyserar effekten av bistånd från både demokratiska givare såsom Europeiska unionen (EU) och autokratiska givare såsom Kina. Jag finner att demokratiska biståndsgivare, som fokuserar på demokratiska institutioner genom demokratibistånd kan bidra till demokratisering. Jag menar att demokratistöd kan vara effektivt när det kombineras med politiska villkor och övervakningsmekanismer. Bistånd från autokratiska biståndsgivare som exempelvis Kina kan tvärtom medföra minskat stöd för demokrati i mottagarländerna, speciellt bland de medborgare som ser positivt på autokratiska biståndsgivare. Autokratiskt bistånd påverkar medborgares uppfattningar genom för det första, attributionsprocesser, med andra ord, situationer där medborgarna lär sig mer om biståndprojekt genom att dessa implementeras i deras närområde och för det andra genom instrumentalisering av bistånd från den politiska elitens sida, med andra ord, att eliten i mottagarlandet sprider positiv information om biståndet genom att i olika sammanhang lyfta den auktoritära biståndsgivarens välvilja och generositet. Slutligen visar denna doktorsavhandling att egenskaper hos utländska biståndsgivare förmedlar information om risker för korruption och nivåer av responsivitet i implementeringen av biståndprojektet både när det gäller biståndsgivarna och det lokala styret. Huruvida den utländska biståndsgivaren är demokratisk eller autokratisk påverkar medborgarnas uppfattning om hur mottaglig dessa kommer att vara inför medborgarnas krav. Huruvida biståndprojektet implementeras på ett transparent sätt eller ej signalerar hur stor risken är för korruption. Samarbete med olika typer av biståndsgivare påverkar alltså medborgares uppfattningar gentemot både lokala politiska ledare och utländska biståndsgivare.





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October 2018, I am taking the ferry boat in Istanbul, Kadikoy-Karakoy, crossing from Asia to Europe. It is the most beautiful ferryboat ride - overlooking the Bosphorus straits, the Ottoman and Byzantine buildings lining the horizon, and the azure skies with soaring seagulls that only add to the romantic atmosphere. I am filled with excitement because, finally, after three months of relentless job applications I have been invited for a job interview at a research institute, and I am on my way there.

It was my first ever gap year outside of academia and my seventh year as an international living in Tukey. The year that I explore options outside of academia, enjoy the beautiful weather, the food culture, and relish the getaway weekends near the sea or the mountains with friends. Upon finishing my MA degree, my MA supervisors encouraged me to apply to the Ph.D. programs. Yet, I wanted to make sure I am not applying to Ph.D. programs due to any external forces, because my mother, grandmother, sister, best friend, or neighbors want me to apply. I had to figure it out on my own.

I finally arrive at the research center. I see no other people waiting to be interviewed; it's as if they've been waiting solely for me. The center's employees greet me and inform me that the head of the research center wants to meet me. I enter the delightful office of Professor X, who has a Ph.D. in economics, worked for years as a professor, and now leads this research center at the heart of Istanbul. I had rehearsed all the possible interview questions I could be asked, I was ready, and I really wanted that job. He quickly introduces himself and says:

*"You are wasting your time, you should apply for PhD programs. I have been where you are, seeking alternative jobs, pursuing several MA degrees, and it is a waste of time. I have read your work, and spoken to your MA professors, and you should be applying for Ph.D. programs."*

*"But I only want a normal job for now"* - I said in shock. I had come all the way only to be told that I am not going to be interviewed, but to be lectured.

*"It is a waste of time, you are going to excel in academia"* - He continued, telling me success stories, using examples, and praising my writings, until he made his point crystal clear.

On that day, I decided to pick up Ph.D. applications.

While applying, I also knew the research that points out that Ph.D.

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students are more likely to struggle with stress-related mental health issues, imposter syndrome, rejections, low pay, and long working hours. As it usually goes, when you start with very low expectations, the experience only gets better.

Looking back on the past four years, my Ph.D. journey has been truly an enriching experience. Throughout this process, I often have felt grateful that I have a job that challenges my preconceived ideas, opens different perspectives, and ultimately equips me with the tools to understand the world in ways that I did not know I could. I have enjoyed every bit of this intellectual process, with its ups and downs, as it was.

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My actual luck in life is having Vranin and Janina as siblings. My other

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luck is that my best friend Besa, who grew up in a house that is right close to ours, become like a sister and a family member to us. Thank you for being the coolest medical doctors, my cheering crowd, and for your unwavering support throughout this process.

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# 1 Introduction

I learned about the role of international actors by growing up in Kosovo and experiencing first-hand their role in military intervention, post-conflict recovery, transitional justice, state-building, and finally, democratization processes. In 1999, my family, along with thousands of other Albanians, were forced to flee our homes due to the Serbian-led genocide in Kosovo. I became a refugee at the age of 5. After the war ended, upon our return to Kosovo, hundreds of international organizations and officials flooded the entire country and my hometown, Peja. Internationals who moved to Kosovo to help our country recover became part of our everyday lives and activities. To give you a glimpse of my childhood in Peja - I grew up greeting Italian peacekeeping soldiers on my way to primary school every day; my best friend's home became the United Nations office in Peja; my parents got recruited as doctors for the International Rescue Committee (IRC); and my aunt was working for Radio "Kosovo Force" (KFOR)<sup>1</sup>. Experiencing the presence of international actors at such a young age, sparked curiosity in me to learn more about their role in the democratization processes of low and

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<sup>1</sup>KFOR is a NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Kosovo that was established immediately after the end of the war on 11 of June 1999, following the United Nations Security Council resolution 1244

middle-income countries, like Kosovo.

Traditional OECD countries are no longer the sole major providers of financial flows in low and middle-income countries. Authoritarian countries, such as China, have significantly expanded their financial initiatives worldwide and are currently present in nearly every developing country (Malik et al. 2021). An emerging wave of studies show that democratic and autocratic regimes exhibit distinct practices in beneficiary countries and, thus, have disparate consequences concerning corruption, transparency, conflicts, environment, and democratization processes (Isaksson and Kotsadam 2018; Parks and Strange 2019; Bermeo 2011; Li 2017; Dreher et al. 2022). For example, unlike traditional Western actors, autocratic donors do not employ political conditionality and have no safeguarding mechanisms in place related to transparency, accountability, and corruption (Dreher et al. 2022). Consequently, evidence indicates that donors can impact recipients' democratization processes, shape attitudes toward models of governance, and even influence the endorsement or rejection of democratic ideals (Bermeo 2011; Dreher et al. 2022; Blair et al. 2021). Yet, we know little about the theoretical mechanisms for different types of aid and donor characteristics related to democratization processes and public attitudes.

Foreign aid is among the key channels that foreign donors use to spread their influence to low and middle-income countries. To date, most existing research analyzes the impact of democratic donors and authoritarian donors separately. In this Ph.D. compilation thesis, comprising three articles, I undertake the task to examine the role of democratic and autocratic donors both together and separately. The overarching question this thesis poses is "How does foreign aid impact democratization processes and citizens' attitudes?" The dissertation aims to contribute to research on foreign aid and democratization by developing theoretical mechanisms and conducting empirical analyses on the influence of donor practices concerning democratic institutions, citizens' perceptions of democracy, and support for aid projects.

Understanding the impact of foreign aid from democratic versus autocratic actors becomes even more pertinent considering the significant global decline in democratic institutions over the past ten years (Papada et al. 2023). Strikingly, the year 2022 alone marked the highest number of countries autocratizing in the last 50 years, showing that the global average of democracy is back to that of 1986 (ibid). Yet, countries with long demo-

cratic traditions or stable autocracies are not at risk of democratic backsliding. Rather, low- and middle-income countries, with already weak existing democratic institutions, constitute the majority of countries that have experienced serious democratic backsliding and erosion of democratic freedoms. These countries are battlegrounds between the forces of democracy and autocracy. Therefore, first, I find it critical to understand the influence and pathways through which democracy assistance-led initiatives can impact democratization processes in these countries. But, I also find it critical to understand better what the growing presence and cooperation with autocratic donors can mean for recipients' state of democracy. The increasing influence of autocratic donors can determine whether recipient countries become consolidated democracies or transcend toward autocratization.

This PhD thesis aims to deepen our knowledge by developing theoretical mechanisms and providing empirical tests, related to the impact of foreign aid from democratic and autocratic donors. Each study in this thesis focuses on different levels of analysis (See Table 1 below). First, I focus directly on the impact of aid on democracy levels as defined by Robert Dahl (Dahl 1989). I provide a macro-level analysis and look at the impact of democratic assistance on democratic institutions at the country level. In the last two studies, I focus indirectly on democratization processes by analyzing citizens' attitudes towards 1) democracy and 2) support for projects and local incumbents. Both classical and modern studies show that citizens' support for democracy is vital for the survival, consolidation, and transition to democracy (Easton 1975; Claassen 2020). Thus, in the second study, I analyze citizens' support for democracy in the presence of autocratic aid. The second study focuses at the meso- level, analyzing the impact of aid projects on citizens' attitudes, nested into municipalities. Thirdly, I provide a micro-level analysis of the effect of aid projects on individuals' attitudes. I study citizens' support for cooperation with donors who are democratic versus autocratic, which can indirectly have implications regarding citizens' support for alternative regimes to democracy.

As a starting point, this dissertation seeks to understand the role of democratic donors like the European Union (EU) and its democracy aid efforts in recipient countries, at the macro-level (see Table 1 below). The first study in the thesis aims to contribute to existing theoretical debates that suggest democracy assistance can impact democratization by empowering

internal agents (Finkel et al. 2007) through anticipatory reactions (Scott and Steele 2011) and by providing the necessary "tools" for implementing democratic reforms (Kalyvitis and Vlachaki 2010; de Hennin and Rozema 2011). I argue that targeted democracy assistance alone may not be enough. Democracy assistance coupled with political conditionality and monitoring mechanisms can increase the recipients' likelihood of implementing democratic reforms. Donors that use these modes in their assistance are more likely to promote democracy. The findings demonstrate that democracy assistance from the EU enhances the democratization levels of recipient countries.

Shifting the focus to the role of autocratic donors, next, this Ph.D. thesis investigates the influence of autocratic donors in citizens' support for democracy. Studies show that autocratic donors are increasingly gaining clout abroad.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, I propose channels through which autocratic aid can shape democracy support, focusing on individuals at the municipal level. The findings suggest that people who are exposed to projects funded by autocratic donors and view autocratic donors' influence as highly positive are the least likely to support democracy (see Table 1 below).

Equipped with theoretical insights from the first two studies, next, this thesis explores the effects of both authoritarian and democratic donors on citizens' support of aid projects and local government. On this front, I focus on the attributes of the political regime of the donor, that is, democratic and autocratic, and the process of implementing aid projects, i.e., transparent and non-transparent implementation processes. I argue that citizens' attitudes toward donor attributes are shaped by their perception of the risk of corruption and elite responsiveness. The results show that foreign donor attributes determine citizens' perceptions of misuse of funds and elite responsiveness by the donor and their local politicians.

The rest of this first chapter is organized as follows. First, I elaborate on the research gaps and highlight the contributions that this thesis sets

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<sup>2</sup>To illustrate, China's development model is the second most attractive model for governance after the United States, among African citizens (Crisis 2018)

out to make. Then, I clarify key concepts used in the dissertation. Next, I explain the overarching theoretical framework and identify causal mechanisms related to aid. Then, I present the research design, the empirical and methodological contributions, and the case selection. Lastly, I summarize the key conclusions, future avenues for research, and policy implications.

Table 1: Brief Explanation of Papers

	Title	Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Levels of Analysis	Data Used	Research Method	Main Findings
1	Gafari, A. (2022). Can democracy aid improve democracy? The European Union's democracy assistance 2002–2018. <i>Democratization</i>	Levels of Democracy	Democracy Assistance	Country-year Level (N=2016)	OECD-DAC data & V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index	Time-Series Cross-Sectional Analysis & the Generalized Method of Moments (GMM)	EU's democracy assistance <b>enhances</b> democracy levels of recipients
2	Are Autocratic Donors Impeding Democracy Abroad? The Presence of Autocratic Donors and Citizens' Perceptions of Democracy	Citizens' Support For Democracy	Authoritarian Aid and Political Influence	Citizens Nested in Municipalities in Serbia (N=1403)	AidData & Opinion Data (Random Representative Sample)	Multilevel Analysis	Autocracy aid <b>decreases</b> support for democracy
3	Do Donor Practices at Home and Abroad Matter for Citizens in Recipient Countries? Experimental Evidence from Serbia	Approval of Aid Projects & Local Government	Characteristics of Democratic vs. Autocratic Donors	Citizens in Serbia (N=2500)	Original Survey Experiment	Survey Experiment	Support is <b>lowest</b> for autocratic donors & <b>highest</b> for transparent donors

## 2 State of the Art

Below, I outline existing research concerning foreign aid from Western donors and autocratic donors and identify the research gaps that this dissertation aims to address. I discuss the findings related to the impact of foreign aid on democratization processes and citizens' attitudes, which are the key dependent variables in this thesis.

Democratization processes are primarily explained through structural, strategic, social, and economic approaches (Teorell 2010). However, scholars of democratization often take for granted international influences and factors that lie outside domestic borders and how these factors impact democracy (Coppedge et al. 2021). The presence and influence of international actors is particularly difficult to ignore in the democratization processes of low- and middle-income countries which rely heavily on foreign donors' projects.

Based on existing democratization theories, foreign aid can contribute to democratization through two main channels: indirect approaches - aid targeting structural factors (e.g., development aid on socio-economic conditions) and direct approaches - aid empowering agents such as individuals, citizens, civil society, democratic institutions (Finkel et al. 2007). Aid can also foster democratization through anticipatory reactions, that is, higher levels of democratization attract more foreign aid and vice versa (Steele et al. 2021). Additionally, aid can relax the budget constraints of beneficiaries and equip recipients with adequate assistance and tools to execute democratic reforms. (de Hennin and Rozema 2011). Other factors that have been previously mentioned regarding the success of democracy assis-

tance include the role of political conditionality, the presence of multiple donors who promote democracy, and the extent that democracy assistance programs threaten the power of existing rulers (Cornell 2013; Grimm and Mathis 2018; Ziaja 2020). However, the causal pathways through which Western donors' democracy assistance fosters democratization in recipient countries are still not fully understood.

While our theoretical knowledge of the influence of democracy aid programs is limited, we know much less about the impact of non-traditional, authoritarian donors in this regard. Donors like China, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have different practices and implementation processes of aid, which can affect democratic institutions and citizens' support for democracy (Parks and Strange 2019). Autocratic donors do not impose political conditionality or regulations regarding the environment or labor, and have fewer transparency and accountability mechanisms to the public (Findley et al. 2017; Dreher et al. 2022). Recent evidence suggests that China's financing favors countries with higher corruption, lower democracy, and fewer constraints on executive power (Dreher et al. 2022). Furthermore, Dreher et al. (2022) demonstrates that autocratic actors like China mainly engage in agreements signed behind closed doors and primarily interact with top-level leaders during project negotiations. Although there is growing interest in this field, the available empirical evidence and our knowledge of the theoretical mechanisms, related to these projects are limited.

Only a few studies analyze the influence of foreign aid from autocratic donors on citizens' support for democracy. Recent research shows that citizens residing near Chinese-funded projects have lower perceptions of democracy and fairness, and are less likely to reject authoritarian rule (Gehring et al. 2018; Rolland 2020). Another study by Tannenberg (2019), using Afro-barometer data combined with geocoded Chinese aid data, reveals that Chinese aid is likely to increase support for democratic values in democracies, while in autocracies, the presence of China does not influence support for democracy. Blair et al. (2021) test the effects of Chinese and US aid on citizens' support for liberal democratic values at the sub-national level in six African countries and find aid from both donors is likely to increase support for democracy. This study is among the few that test the effect of dueling aid regimes on support for democracy. While these studies provide empirical evidence and valuable insights into the potential impact of foreign



aid on support for democracy, it is not clear how autocratic aid influences citizens' support for democracy.

Lastly, studies show that citizens in recipient countries hold differing views toward foreign donors. A study conducted by Findley et al. (2017) which employed an experimental approach, found that citizens prefer development assistance from USAID rather than China, possibly due to concerns regarding transparency and corruption. Yet, most existing experimental research focuses on citizens' attitudes and endorsement of projects by specific donors e.g., the US, EU, Germany, and China. Consequently, it is difficult to disentangle which specific characteristics of foreign donors influence citizens' attitudes. In this dissertation, I contribute theoretically by elucidating which donor characteristics matter most and the mechanisms through which they impact citizens' attitudes. This thesis aims to advance our understanding of how donor attributes, such as democratic versus autocratic and transparent or non-transparent, influence citizens' support for foreign donors and local incumbents.

Moreover, the majority of existing research primarily focuses on low-income and highly authoritarian regimes. I investigate the influence of autocratic donors on citizens' support for democracy at the local level, with a focus on middle-income countries undergoing democratization. Thus, another contribution this thesis seeks to make is expanding our knowledge of the impact of democratic and autocratic donors in such contexts. I elaborate more on this, in section 4.3.

In sum, this thesis aims to contribute by developing and testing hypotheses about the influence of foreign aid in the democratization processes and citizens' attitudes in recipient countries. Firstly, this dissertation contributes by testing the impact of democracy assistance and theorizing about its channels on democratic institutions, in which previous research is very limited. Next, it contributes to the literature on aid from autocratic donors and democracy support. It develops mechanisms and provides empirical tests pertaining to autocratic aid, which is an underdeveloped area of research. Lastly, this thesis proposes mechanisms pertaining to donor attributes and aims to expand our understanding of how aid from various foreign donors can shape support for local elites and foreign donors, for which we know very little.

Before delving into the theoretical framework of this thesis, I first define

key concepts used in this thesis, namely, definitions related to democracy and financial flows.

### 2.1 Democracy and Democratization

First, to define democracy, I utilize the concept of democracy as defined by Dahl (1989), leveraging on its depth and breadth. Dahl (1989) coins “pol-yarchy” as a system that encompasses clean elections, freedom of association, universal suffrage, elected executive, freedom of expression, and alternative sources of information. Different from other scholars who provide a minimalistic definition of democracy, such as Schumpeter (2010) who defines it as a system where ruling elites occupy offices through a competitive struggle for citizens vote; or Huntington (1993) a system where collective decision-makers are elected primarily through free and fair elections; Dahl (1989) additionally, stresses civil and political liberties as principal components of a democratic system. Consequently, democratization is defined as any move or degree toward democratic development. More precisely, countries that experienced substantial changes and efforts in democratization processes as evaluated by democracy indices.

Second, a strong body of literature demonstrates that citizens’ support is key for the survival, transition, and consolidation of democracy.(Easton 1975; Foa and Mounk 2016; Claassen 2020). Thus, in the last two studies I focus on public attitudes. The increasing presence of autocratic donors and the sharing of ideas and practices at the local level prompts the question of how they influence citizens’ support for democracy. First, I examine citizens’ support for democracy, which directly relates to democracy and democratization processes (Foa and Mounk 2016; Claassen 2020). Next, I investigate the effect of democratic versus autocratic donors on citizens’ support for aid projects and cooperation with local incumbents, which are not directly linked to democracy. However, support for cooperation with authoritarian donors and endorsement of their practices can have implications for citizens’ support for alternative regimes to democracy.

### 2.2 Financial Flows

In this Ph.D. thesis, I study (1) foreign aid from democratic donors with a specific focus on democracy assistance and (2) aid flows that come from au-

thoritarian donors. Democracy assistance typically includes both technical assistance and expert advice to support public administration reforms, free and fair elections, media freedom, independence of civil society, legislative processes, and human rights. On the other hand, I define aid from authoritarian governments or autocratic aid, as any financial flows that come from authoritarian regimes. Aid from autocratic donors, which may come along with peculiar practices and implementation processes (as I elaborate more on later), does not necessarily directly target autocracy promotion and governance ideals. With this caveat in mind, I use the terms "autocratic aid" and "aid from autocratic governments" interchangeably throughout the thesis. For more conceptual clarity of what these flows entail, I rely upon the definition provided by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Assistance Committee (OECD - DAC).

OECD- DAC differentiates between funds that fall under Official Development Assistance (ODA), simply put, foreign aid, and Other Official Flows (OOF), namely, loans or debts (see Figure 1 below). In this dissertation, I analyze aid packages from the EU that fall under ODA funds and flows from China that fall, mainly, under OOF funds. Additionally, I test attitudes toward donors who fund road projects which fall, typically, under OOF flows. Below, I first define OECD-DAC flows.

OECD- DAC defines Official Development Assistance (ODA) as activities with development intent (often in a strict sense) provided by official agencies including state or local governments. ODA flows entail highly concessional loans with more generous payment periods compared to market loans. These packages include extended grace periods and lower market interest rates for the recipient country to pay back. From 2018 onward, the OECD-DAC adjusted the grant element of ODA flows according to recipients' level of development. More specifically, the grant element now encompasses 45% for loans toward least and low-developed countries, 15% for lower-middle-income countries, and 10% for upper-middle-income countries. Also, 10% for loans to multilateral organizations.<sup>3</sup> ODA funds include

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<sup>3</sup>The definition of ODA until the year 2017, included highly concessional loans – with

development aid for the improvement of socioeconomic conditions, infrastructure, and humanitarian aid (see Figure 1 below). Additionally, ODA flows encompass democracy assistance programs such as free and fair elections, civil society, political parties, and media.

On the other hand, OECD defines Other Official Flows (OOF) as less concessional loans with a grant element below 25% and without development intent. The intent of OOF is primarily to facilitate export. This category includes mainly export credits, subsidies (grants), and other funds to support investment (OECD 2022) (see Figure 1). These flows typically fall under debt or loans with less generous repayment periods and market-based interest rates, as shown below in Figure 1. In practice, Western donors like the US and Germany allocate financial aid that falls mainly under ODA, while autocratic donors like China distribute flows that fall mainly under OOF, as depicted below in Figure 2.<sup>4</sup>

Since China's activities abroad are mostly in the form of loans, it is debatable whether China's initiatives should fall under the foreign aid umbrella. Although, most studies that focus on Chinese flows use the term foreign aid (Isaksson and Kotsadam 2018; Dreher et al. 2019; Blair et al. 2021). There is a risk, however, of overstating the impact of foreign aid from China. A counterfactual scenario could be that if Western donors would allocate more OOF than ODA, we would find similar empirical results. In that case, we would conclude that the characteristics of foreign donors don't matter. However, this counterfactual scenario seems unlikely given that traditional donors like the EU and autocratic donors like China do not differ only in terms of flow types. They also differ concerning their unique practices. Different from traditional OECD-DAC donors, autocratic donors like China do not have transparency nor safeguarding mechanisms, do not use competi-

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a minimum of 25% grants calculated at a rate of 10% discount (OECD 2018).

<sup>4</sup>Malik et al. (2021) in their recent policy report show that China's development finance, different from OECD donors, consists largely of semi-concessional and non-concessional loans and export credits which fall under OOF. While OECD - DAC donors give mainly highly concessional loans and grants with developmental purposes which fall under Official Development Assistance (ODA).

tive bidding processes, and cooperate mainly with the highest-level elites and not technocrats. These practices have consequences for transparency, accountability, and corruption in recipient countries (Dreher et al. 2022). Nevertheless, when drawing inferences and conclusions about the impact of financial initiatives on China, we must be cautious about the extent to which these findings can be interpreted as foreign aid.

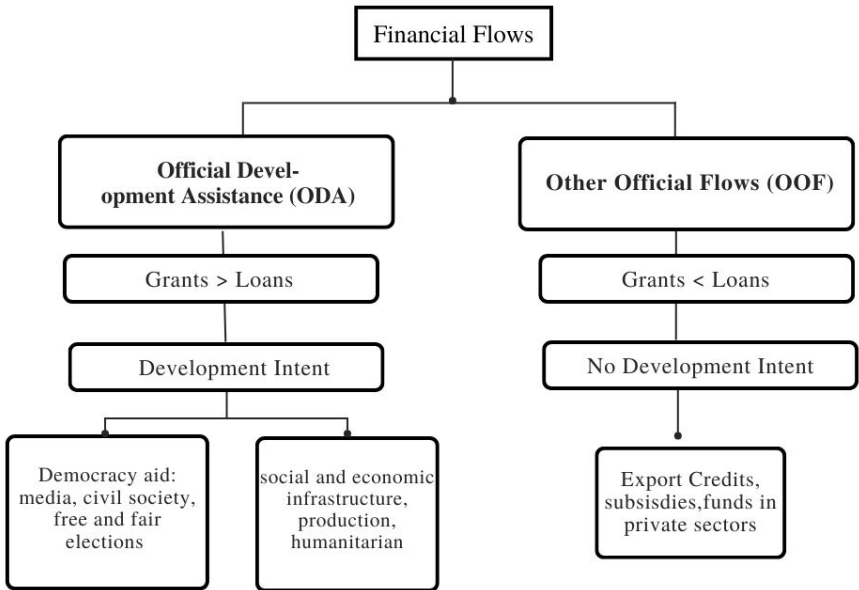


Figure 1: Defining ODA and OOF funds

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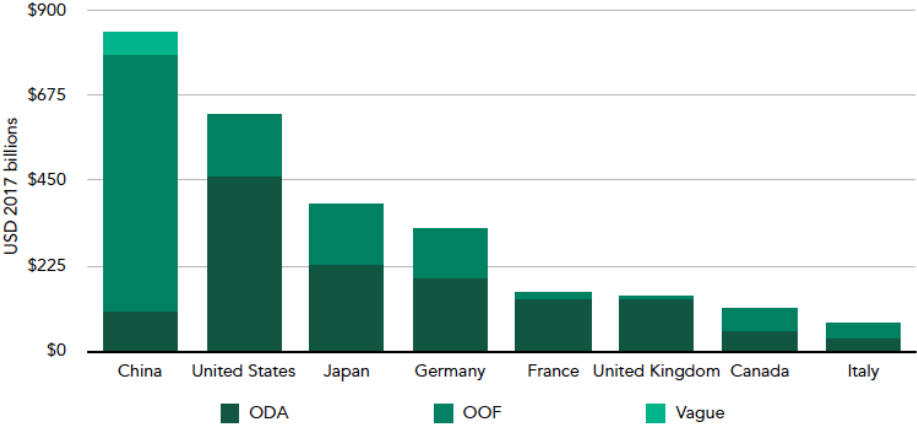


Figure 2: ODA and OOF Flows from China and G7 countries, 2000-2017  
(Source: Malik et. al., 2021, shared with permission)

### 3 Theoretical Framework

Building upon the arguments purported by previous scholars, the overarching argument of this thesis is that foreign aid and donors with varying characteristics can influence democratic institutions and citizens' attitudes through multiple channels. Foreign aid from democratic donors like the EU who target democratic institutions via democracy assistance can foster democratization, especially when aid is coupled with political conditionality and monitoring mechanisms. On the other hand, aid from autocratic donors can alter support for democracy, particularly among those who view autocratic donors very positively. Autocratic aid impacts these perceptions through (1) attribution processes - living closely to aid projects and learning about them and (2) the instrumentalization of aid by political elites who promote the benevolence and generosity of authoritarian donors. Furthermore, the attributes of foreign donors i.e., democratic versus autocratic shape citizens' support toward projects and their local politicians. The regime of the donor signals the extent to which both the foreign donor and local politicians are responsive to citizens' demands. Whereas, whether a donor is transparent or not, indicates to citizens the risk of corruption by local elites and the donor.

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows. First, I explain the channels through which aid from democratic and autocratic donors, separately, impact democratic institutions and citizens' support for democracy. Next, I turn to aid *from* both democratic and autocratic donors and explain the causal pathways through which they influence citizens' support for aid

projects and local incumbent government.

### 3.1 Democracy Aid and Democratization

Building on previous theoretical debates on the effectiveness of democracy assistance, I contribute by focusing on the tools that foreign donors can use to increase the chances of success of democracy assistance programs. I add to existing theoretical debates by arguing that targeted democracy assistance alone may not be enough (Finkel et al. 2007; Scott and Steele 2011; Steele et al. 2021). Democracy assistance coupled with political conditionality and monitoring mechanisms may further increase the likelihood of implementation of democratic reforms in beneficiaries (Gafuri 2022). Foreign donors who use these modes may be successful in pushing democratization processes forward in recipient countries.

By examining the influence of democracy assistance from the EU, I argue that the EU's democracy initiatives abroad differ from those of other international actors. The EU utilizes accession conditionality instruments, offers material incentives, and has effective monitoring bodies (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008). Therefore, the EU is an exemplary foreign donor under this perspective because it employs both political conditionality and monitoring mechanisms much more vigorously. I elaborate on these key mechanisms exemplified by the EU next.

#### 3.1.1 Political Conditionality

Political conditionality is one of the most powerful tools that the EU uses to incentivize countries to democratize (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004). I refer to political conditionality as a donor's set of rules and conditions that recipients must comply with to receive rewards from donors. In practice, through incentive-based conditionality, the EU rewards targeted governments in return for compliance with reforms on democratic practices and human rights. The EU applies a wide range of mechanisms and a multitude of political conditionality instruments that differ across countries and issues over time (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008). By far, the EU's most efficient political conditionality instrument is the membership prospect, a type of conditionality peculiar to the EU. Additionally, the EU implements political conditionality with other countries that are not on the EU membership



pathway for example in the domains of trade relations, financial aid, visa liberalization, market access, and bilateral ties.

Thus, the EU offers tangible material incentives to recipient countries. I argue that beneficiaries are strategic actors and are likely to adhere to the EU conditions for democracy, as this increases their propensity to receive more benefits from the EU. Despite that there may be challenges to the EU's democracy promotion, through targeted democracy assistance, the establishment of closer bilateral ties and incentive-based approaches may still encourage recipients to implement democratic reforms in return for other benefits.

### 3.1.2 Monitoring Mechanisms

Second, inspired by Bush (2015)'s book on "Taming of Democracy Assistance" which stipulates the importance of monitoring mechanisms for effective democracy promotion, I purport that the second key mechanism for successful implementation of democracy assistance programs is the presence of monitoring offices. Monitoring mechanisms refer to donors' ability to track and control the implementation of projects through monitoring bodies in recipient countries such as via diplomatic offices, international agencies, regional offices, and delegation offices. The EU deploys one of the largest numbers of diplomatic offices abroad through the External Action Service. Through monitoring bodies, donors have the power to track and safeguard the allocation of funds; assess the effectiveness of assistance programs; produce reports; and prevent corruption or misuse of funds by domestic agents. I argue that monitoring bodies provide a feedback mechanism to external actors, allowing donors to adjust conditionality strategies, offer better incentives using "carrots and sticks" and encourage needed political reforms. These bodies create opportunities for strategic donors to focus on precise needs and explore possible openings for pushing democracy reforms in recipient countries. Overall, monitoring mechanisms enable the EU to assess the implementation of reforms and prevent the misuse of funds.

## 3.2 Autocratic Aid and Support for Democracy

Next, I theorize about the influence of foreign aid from autocratic donors and how it affects citizens' support for democracy in recipient countries.

Drawing upon prior research, I go beyond the more simplistic views that posit a direct impact of authoritarian aid on citizens' perceptions of democracy (Blair et al. 2021). I argue that authoritarian aid serves as a moderating variable that influences the relationship between citizens' perceptions of autocratic donors' political influence and citizens' support for democracy. More specifically, among citizens who live close to projects funded by authoritarian donors, those who perceive autocratic donors' political influence as very positive, are the least likely to support democracy. The influence of autocratic aid on citizens' attitudes can be explained through two possible mechanisms (1) the process of aid attribution - direct exposure to projects and (2) the instrumentalization of aid by elites - use of aid for domestic political gains by leaders. Below, I first explain the relationship between attitudes toward donors' political influence and support for democracy. Then, I explain the two aforementioned mechanisms that can enhance the impact of autocratic aid.

#### **3.2.1 Autocratic Donors' Influence And Support For Democracy**

Citizens hold varying perceptions regarding the political influence of foreign donors in recipient countries. Positive or negative attitudes toward democratic and autocratic donors can be associated with citizens' support for democracy. The presence of aid can strengthen these attitudes.

Foreign donors actively promote their political influence, political ideals, and aim to present themselves as benevolent actors to the recipients' public (Wellner et al. 2022; Blair et al. 2021). They invest significant time and resources to accomplish this goal. These activities include attaching logos to aid projects, utilizing social media platforms, and organizing gatherings. Additionally, they can employ more aggressive strategies like forming partnerships with specific television channels, radio stations, and other broadcasting networks to spread information about their initiatives to the broader public (Wellner et al. 2022).

Following their endeavours, when citizens in recipient countries evaluate the political influence of an external country, they may think of the respective actors' political system, values, practices, governance, policies, and impact on the domestic and foreign policy in their respective country, abroad or in the donor country. For instance, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights are often associated with donors like the European

Union, Germany, and the US. In contrast to actors like China or Russia, which would be defined more closely with economic incentives, technological advancement, surveillance technologies, and disregard for democratic norms. Hence, if citizens perceive the political influence of an authoritarian actor, such as China, to be highly positive, it is plausible that they may be inclined to develop more favorable attitudes towards authoritarian regimes. Consequently, this could diminish their support for democracy.

I argue that the presence of autocratic aid influences citizens' support for democracy, particularly among those who hold very positive attitudes toward autocratic donors. The presence of aid from autocratic donors conditions this relationship through two main channels (1) attribution processes and 2) instrumentalization of foreign aid by political elites in recipient countries.

### **3.2.2 Attribution of Autocratic Aid**

Citizens learn about projects through direct exposure and personal experience with projects, and/or through indirect exposure such as via media outlets, billboards, politicians, and friends. Blair et al. (2021) call this the process of aid attribution. Citizens who live close to aid projects experience both the advantages and disadvantages of these projects. They are likely to benefit from projects including hospitals, highways, roads, training, education, employment opportunities, and services. Similarly, local citizens are exposed to negative consequences such as environmental hazards and poor working conditions. Consequently, citizens who live closest to the aid projects from autocratic donors are directly impacted by the outcomes of these projects and are therefore most likely to alter their attitudes. Thus, for citizens who live closest to aid projects, I expect the association between donors' political influence and support for democracy to be the most evident.

### **3.2.3 Instrumentalization of Aid by Politicians**

Next, I argue that the second key mechanism through which aid from autocratic donors shapes citizens' perceptions is the instrumentalization of authoritarian aid by political elites. Undemocratic elites in recipient countries instrumentalize financial assistance from authoritarian donors for their domestic gains.

Although autocratic donors like China claim to pursue a non-interference policy in recipient countries, evidence shows that China's financial assistance targets countries that are more corrupt, less democratic, and have fewer constraints on executive power (Dreher et al. 2022). Additionally, autocratic donors cooperate mainly with the highest-level elites and not technocrats or lower-level bureaucrats. In countries marred with corrupt practices and weak democratic institutions, aid from authoritarian donors is often manipulated by political elites and allocated in places where elites' constituencies live (Chen and Han 2021). Thus, autocratic aid is likely to be instrumentalized by political elites for political purposes.

The incumbent elites in recipient countries often proclaim these projects to their public as their ability to attract foreign investment, create employment opportunities, and promote overall development. Additionally, since authoritarian donors do not use monitoring mechanisms nor political conditionality to ensure that aid is not used for political gains, it enables political leaders in beneficiary countries to use the funds to extend their political longevity and avoid accountability to the public. In exchange for more aid from autocratic governments, elites in recipient countries often praise and advertise foreign donors' generosity, values, and practices which inadvertently impact public opinion (Hamilton and Ohlberg 2020). Consequently, political elites who promote the success of autocratic actors and praise their political models and economic growth signal to citizens that democracy is not the only path forward.

### 3.3 Democratic versus Autocratic Donors

Lastly, this Ph.D. thesis seeks to develop hypotheses about the effect of both - democratic versus autocratic donors - on citizens' approval of aid projects and support for their local incumbents.

Emerging evidence indicates that there are different practices and, thus, consequences of foreign donors with different attributes (Findley et al. 2017). I contribute to this field of research by developing and testing mechanisms related to the impact of donor characteristics on citizens' approval of foreign projects and their perceptions of local incumbents. I purport that two key attributes of foreign donors are likely to shape citizens' perceptions – the regime of the donor i.e., democratic versus autocratic, and the project implementation process – transparent and non-transparent. I argue that

citizens' attitudes toward donors' attributes are shaped by their perception of the risk of corruption and elite responsiveness. First, the regime of the donor influences citizens' perceptions of responsiveness by local politicians and the foreign donor. Second, I theorize that the project implementation process transparent versus non-transparent signals to citizens about the risk of misuse of funds.

### **3.3.1 Donor Attributes: Citizens' Support for Aid Projects and Local Incumbents**

The characteristics of foreign donors who fund aid projects are likely to matter for citizens' approval of projects and their attitudes toward their local incumbent government. Research shows that foreign donors use aid projects to increase their attractiveness, and benevolence and to spread their political values among citizens in recipient countries (Blair et al. 2021). When aid projects facilitate positive developments such as employment opportunities and better services – e.g., schools, parks, and infrastructure, this may increase citizens' approval of these projects and convince them that their local incumbents are successful at attracting funds from abroad. On the contrary, when aid projects facilitate corruption and exacerbate rent-seeking behaviors which benefit only specific groups of people, citizens may become dissatisfied with the presence of donors and their local elites for cooperating with these donors.

I argue that for citizens to approve of aid projects and local incumbent cooperation with specific donors, it matters if the donor is (1) transparent or not - that decision-making and hiring processes are open to the public, and whether the donors are (2) democratic or autocratic - if they hold free and fair elections and citizens are free to express themselves.

In many aid-receiving countries, foreign donors often finance services and public goods (Montinola et al. 2020). While citizens in recipient countries want better services, easier access to public goods, and lower taxes, they may not want these services at the cost of worse local governance outcomes such as a higher risk of corruption and less responsiveness by elites. Thus, I argue that if the foreign donor is a democratic regime or transparent in project implementation, these attributes are likely to matter because they signal the extent to which donors or local politicians may engage in corrupt practices and will respond to citizen demands.

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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More specifically, citizens will mind whether the foreign donor is transparent or not because this indicates the degree to which both the foreign donor and their local elites can engage in corrupt practices. Citizens tend to favor projects from transparent donors because this means that foreign donors will not facilitate corruption, the projects will not be captured by a small ruling elite, and everyone has equal access to benefits. In short, the key reason why they prefer transparent donors is that they perceive that both the foreign donor and their local elites, will be less likely to engage in the misuse of funds.

On the other hand, since democratic donors are more likely to include citizens in decision-making processes, citizens may think that democratic donors have specific channels to express dissent and influence the project if they disagree with aid practices. They will associate democratic donors with more responsiveness. On the contrary, they may be concerned that autocratic donors have fewer channels for citizens to voice their concerns if they are dissatisfied with bad aid practices. Moreover, citizens may think that local government elites will be more attentive and responsive to autocratic donors' demands than citizens' demands which would weaken accountability between elites and citizens. Thus, the reason why citizens will prefer democratic over autocratic donors is that they will perceive them as more accountable and responsive to their demands.

## 4 Research Design

To understand how different types of aid influence democratization processes and citizens' attitudes, this dissertation utilizes a multi-method approach that allows for a comprehensive analysis of foreign aid's impact at various levels: macro, meso, and micro. Across the three papers, I employ quantitative methods, namely, time-series cross-sectional analysis with fixed effects, mixed-effects probit regression, and survey experiments. Additionally, the thesis uses a combination of firsthand and secondhand data, encompassing both observational and experimental approaches.

First, to understand the association between democracy assistance and democratization processes, I employ time-series cross-sectional analysis, which is useful to provide a comprehensive analysis across all countries and for all available years in different datasets. Next, to test the impact of authoritarian aid on citizens residing near aid projects, I utilize mixed-effects probit regression. This approach is beneficial for capturing the effect of aid on citizens' perceptions at the municipal level. Employing a nationally representative sample, moreover, allows me to tackle issues related to omitted variable bias and to compare between municipalities that receive autocratic aid and those that do not. Thirdly, recognizing the limitations of observational data concerning endogeneity, such as omitted variable bias, I then employ survey experiments. The survey experimental approach is beneficial to test the novel mechanisms related to donor characteristics that I propose, while also reducing the possibility of omitted variable bias. In this section, I discuss my methodological choices across the three papers in light of en-

dogeneity issues, the empirical contributions, and finally, the case selection.

### 4.1 Addressing Endogeneity

Foreign aid is often not randomly allocated. Most studies that analyze foreign aid are constrained by the issue of endogeneity. The main endogeneity biases that scholars of foreign aid studies deal with include reverse causality, selection bias, and omitted variable bias. For example, recipient countries can receive different types of foreign aid depending on the recipients' level of democracy, economic development, population size, natural resources, geopolitical stance, and diplomatic support. Additionally, the allocation of projects even within beneficiary countries may not be random; localities that receive aid versus those that do not may differ. Factors that can influence the allocation projects of foreign donors within recipients, can include the presence of economic activity in urban/rural areas, the presence of natural resources, patronage networks, access to highways, and proximity to the capital city. Next, I discuss methodological choices and endogeneity issues for each paper.

To answer the question “Can democracy aid enhance democratization”? I use a time-series cross-sectional approach encompassing the period 2002–2018 across 126 recipient countries. I additionally control for several factors including assistance from other donors. To account for potential omitted variable bias, I include fixed effects. Scholars who analyze the impact of democracy assistance on democratization, argue that a potential issue with this approach is that achieving higher levels of democracy can attract higher levels of democracy assistance from Western donors. In this case, there is a risk of reverse causality, and the relationship between democracy assistance and democracy levels is endogenous (Scott and Steele 2011; Steele et al. 2021). But also, the association between democracy assistance and democracy can be dynamic over time e.g., the implementation of democratic reforms may cause more foreign aid and vice versa. To account for potential sources of endogeneity in my model, I use the Generalized method of moments (GMM).

The generalized methods of moments (GMM) approach is commonly used for panel data to deal with dynamic endogeneity and unobserved heterogeneity (Wintoki et al. 2012). Roodman (2009) explains that researchers should make use of the GMM method 1) when the cause and the effect be-



tween the dependent and independent variables are dynamic 2) when some of the regressors are endogenous 3) regressors are not strictly exogenous and 4) when the period is smaller compared to the sample N. The study on democracy aid faces all these challenges which makes the GMM method appropriate to use. Practically, the two-step GMM model includes lags of the dependent variable as an explanatory variable. As such, the lags of the outcome variables are included in the model as “internal instruments” to account for the endogenous relationship (Roodman 2009). The GMM model corroborates the results from the OLS models, which gives confidence that my main models are correct. Yet, GMM estimation with non-causal instruments does not eliminate the possibility that the relationship is endogenous (Lanne and Saikkonen 2011).

Additionally, to understand better democracy assistance allocation processes, I interviewed several EU officials and analyzed secondary documents. I learned that the EU grants democracy assistance projects for several years and not every year.<sup>5</sup> Once these frameworks are established, the beneficiary’s current level of democracy should not impact how much money the recipient receives the next year. I learned that carrot and stick approaches applied by the EU depend on the type of relationship the EU has with the recipient country. One EU representative who worked for several missions abroad stated “If recipients comply with democratic reforms, we reward them with budget support, and they ought to decide where they want to invest the money. The process is pre-planned and it’s not spontaneous, it can take three to five years sometimes. If recipients fail to reach milestones, they lose the rewards.” Her statements confirmed that the beneficiaries’ current level of democracy should not have an impact on how much aid the country receives in the next year. Yet, considering that I use observational data, I refrain from making far-reaching causal claims and acknowledge that the relationship may still be endogenous.

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<sup>5</sup>For instance, the CARDS program for the period 2000–2006, the Instrument of Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA I & II) 2007–2013, and the European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) 2013–2020.

Second, I ask “Does the presence of autocratic donors alter citizens’ perceptions of democracy?” To answer this question, I use Chinese aid collected from AidData – one of the largest autocratic donors worldwide. I utilize survey data conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) between 26 December 2016 and the 14th of January 2017. The questions were asked face-to-face and included a random representative sample of adult citizens in Serbia. Since data presents a random representative sample of the Serbian population, this gives us confidence that the results can be further generalized not only for the sample but for Serbia’s larger population. Although, Chinese aid is not randomly allocated and that can be a source of endogeneity. For instance, existing research shows that Chinese flows are used by elites and located in the hometowns of political leaders (Chen and Han 2021). To mitigate this potential issue, I control for citizens’ party affiliation. I do not find a positive correlation between places that receive aid from China with higher support for China, or, for the main incumbent party. These results show that these are not reasons why China allocates aid to these municipalities.

To analyze the data, I use mixed-effects probit regression. I choose the multilevel approach deriving from my theory which suggests that authoritarian aid at the municipal level strengthens the relationship between citizens’ perceptions of China’s political influence and their perceptions of democracy. More specifically, this method is appropriate because 1) citizens are nested into municipalities that receive different levels of authoritarian aid, and 2) the key-dependent variables are binary. Studies on foreign aid and public opinion often utilize quasi-experimental designs leveraging from the precise geospatial survey and foreign aid data – at the micro level or panel data at the country level – macro-level (Brazys et al. 2017; Isaksson and Kotsadam 2018; Finkel et al. 2007; Scott and Steele 2011). However, due to data privacy concerns, most survey opinion datasets do not provide the precise geolocation of the respondents. While, simultaneously, the tools and methods to analyze geospatial data have never been so vast. To overcome this hurdle, I leverage by using multilevel analysis to study the impact of aid at the sub-national level. Other researchers who face similar issues regarding the precise geolocation of respondents can utilize multilevel method approaches to study the impact of aid across different countries and contexts such as in countries in Europe, Latin America, and Asia. Yet, given these

shortcomings and that the data is observational, this study is limited by potential omitted variable bias. Although the theoretical argument proposes a causal relationship, the multilevel model does not suffice to establish that the relationship is causal.

Third, I ask “Do foreign donors’ characteristics impact citizens’ approval of aid projects and strengthen/weaken incumbent support?” Given the limitations of observational data due to endogeneity concerns, in the third study employs a survey experiment. This approach allows me to mitigate endogeneity concerns and delve deeper into the underlying mechanisms. I use a survey experiment with vignettes and not a choice-based conjoint experiment. I deem that this approach is better for this study because choice-based conjoint analysis often results in a combination of attributes that do not pertain to the characteristics of real-life donors.

Experimental vignettes are useful to disentangle attitudes of citizens that are hard to disentangle and remain unrevealed otherwise. The vignette describes a scenario that is close to real-life and allows citizens to imagine the presence of donors with different characteristics, namely, autocratic, democratic, transparent, and non-transparent. The benefit of using vignette experiments is that I can specifically isolate the impact of treatment on the outcome variables using random assignment. I use a sample of 2500 respondents which gives enough statistical power to test nine different treatments. Additionally, I add manipulation checks to understand whether the respondents understood the treatment correctly and if the treatment worked, following the suggestions by Mutz (2021). I found that around 80% of the respondents in each treatment group correctly identified the treatment. I run the analysis with the whole sample and with the sample that understood the treatment correctly only. Among the limitations of this approach is that the survey experiment stimuli may be stronger than real-life stimuli. Citizens in host countries may have concerns about autocratic versus democratic foreign donors. However, these concerns can be muddled by other factors like environmental impact, labor regulations, procurement, political and economic conditionality, and ethnic ties with the donor country, which this study does not fully address.

## 4.2 Empirical Novelty

This Ph.D. thesis makes several empirical contributions. First, I contribute by isolating the impact of the European Union’s democracy assistance (from all other foreign donors) across all recipient countries, which no previous quantitative study has done before. Then, while most previous research has focused on China’s growing influence in sub-Saharan Africa and low-income countries, in the last two studies I analyze China’s growing role in Europe. I focus on Serbia, a middle-income country located in southeastern Europe. Equipped with insights about the dynamics of donors with different attributes in Serbia, next, I design a novel survey experiment using vignettes featuring hypothetical donors that approximate actual donors in Serbia. I explain each of these contributions below.

Existing studies on the European Union’s democracy assistance abroad mainly focus on specific regions such as the Western Balkans, the impact of the EU’s general foreign aid on democracy levels, or the EU as a donor lumped together with other OECD countries and major multilateral organizations (Carnegie and Marinov 2017; Grimm and Mathis 2018). While, other comprehensive studies that analyze democracy assistance concerning democratization processes abroad mainly focus on assistance from USAID or OECD countries (Finkel et al. 2007; Scott and Steele 2011; Kalyvitis and Vlachaki 2012; Cornell 2013; Grimm and Mathis 2018). In the first analysis, different from previous studies, I disaggregate the impact of the EU democracy assistance programs from other donors and include all recipients eligible for EU democracy assistance during the period 2002–2018, controlling for the most important confounding factors. Additionally, I use the V-Dem Electoral index as the primary democracy measure, rather than Polity IV or Freedom House indices, which most previous democracy assistance-focused studies have used. The V-dem index outperforms Polity IV and Freedom House indices concerning measurement and theoretical justification of aggregation procedures and it is coded by multiple country experts (Boese 2019). Thus, I offer the most comprehensive analysis of the EU democracy assistance in terms of the time frame and across the largest sample of EU recipient countries ever evaluated. I contribute to this literature by elucidating that the European Union can facilitate democracy abroad.

Second, I analyze the channels through which authoritarian aid can impact citizens’ support for democracy using China as the main donor – one

of the largest autocratic donors worldwide. On the recipient side, I analyze Serbia a country located in Europe. In the past decade, there has been an increasing focus by scholars on the influence of Chinese flows in low-income countries with a specific focus on Africa and to some extent Asia (Findley et al. 2017; Brazys et al. 2017; Dreher et al. 2019; Khomba and Trew 2019). However, few studies focus on the role of Chinese aid in middle-income countries and Europe (Vangeli and Pavličević 2019). China invests heavily in construction projects and digital networks in European countries that ultimately aim to gain closer access to the European common market. Thus, this paper contributes empirically by focusing on a less traditional and not aid-dependent country, like Serbia, which I elaborate more on in the next section.

Third, I contribute empirically by designing a novel survey experiment and studying the attitudes of citizens toward foreign donors in Serbia, using hypothetical vignettes that can be closely associated with real-life donors that are present in Serbia. I use hypothetical vignettes about infrastructure projects which closely mimic projects funded by foreign actors in Serbia including the World Bank, United Arab Emirates, China, Germany, and the European Union. However, since I am not interested in attitudes toward specific donors, empirically, I contribute by distinguishing and testing which attributes shape citizens' perceptions. In this study, eight out of nine groups can be associated with foreign donors present in Serbia. Only the treatment group that describes a donor who is authoritarian but also transparent is, to my knowledge, difficult to find in Serbia, which is why I reduce the sample size of this group by half. Additionally, to distinguish for subgroups effects in the political context of Serbia, I ask pre-treatment questions and identify heterogeneous treatment effects across Serbian respondents regarding their political affiliation, corruption perceptions, and level of education. I identify that in the context of Serbia, citizens who vote for the incumbent party, which is a far-right nationalist party, are also more likely to support authoritarian donors. The association between attitudes toward far-right parties and support for autocratic donors is another novel empirical contribution that no other study has scrutinized before. However, I leave it to future research to delve deeper into this relationship.

### 4.3 Case Selection: The Case of Serbia

The majority of existing studies primarily focus on examining the effect of foreign aid on low-income countries located in Africa (Isaksson and Durevall 2022; Blair and Winters 2020). However, we know much less about the impact of foreign aid in middle-income countries located in regions like Europe. The findings from the studies conducted in Serbia in this thesis have implications for middle-income countries undergoing democratization processes, that are also subject to influences from both democratic and autocratic external actors. Given the currently growing trends of autocratization among middle-income countries, the role of such external influences in countries like Serbia can play a pivotal role in determining whether a country democratizes or transcends into autocracy (Papada et al. 2023). Thus, focusing on these countries provides valuable insights into the dynamics and the impact of these actors on the recipients' state of democracy, which remains largely overlooked in the literature. Additionally, this research seeks to enhance our understanding of China's growing role in Europe.

Serbia is part of the Western Balkan (WB) region which consists of countries that are on the accession pipeline for the EU membership. The European Union is heavily involved in the political processes of these countries, although in the past years, the EU has fallen short to provide a credible membership perceptible (Bieber 2018). The WB region is, peculiarly, geostrategically important for China, to deepen its influence on the European continent and get closer to the EU markets (Vangeli 2019). It has been argued that the EU and the US have watered down their commitment to the region, and Beijing and Moscow have gained momentum by offering quick solutions without conditionality for democratic reforms.

Serbia is, also, an interesting case to study because it is one of the largest recipients of Chinese financial flows in Europe and also among the front-runner candidate countries in the EU accession process (Custer et al. 2021; Noutcheva 2009). Additionally, Serbia has close political and ethnic ties to Russia. Thus, Serbia has both high linkage and leverage ties with Western donors like the EU and the U.S. but also with Russia and China (Levitsky and Way 2005). To illustrate the involvement of different actors in Serbia, between 2007-2020 alone, the EU invested around 9.3 billion dollars in Serbia (Agatonovic 2022). China, on the other hand, has allocated more than four billion dollars between 2000-2017, mostly in the form of loans (Custer et al.

2021).

Strikingly, in the past years, Serbia has progressed in the EU accession criteria, while also being among the top ten autocratizing countries in the world (Papada et al. 2023). On the other hand, It has been argued that the presence of China has bolstered authoritarian strongmen in Serbia (Miteva 2021). Thus, Serbian citizens present an intriguing subject to study given the clashing influences of donors which have impacted largely domestic politics, and, potentially, Serbia's democratization trajectory. The insights gained from examining this case can have broader implications for other countries in the Western Balkans as well as autocratizing countries facing competing geopolitical influences, such as Turkey, Brazil, India, Argentina, and Kenya. Yet, conducting further studies is necessary to fully comprehend patterns across different countries.

## 5 Discussion and Conclusions

This Ph.D. dissertation aimed at developing theoretical mechanisms and empirically testing the impact of foreign aid on democratization processes and citizens' attitudes in recipient countries. The findings demonstrate that foreign aid can impact democratic institutions and citizens' perceptions through several channels.

First, my research contributes to the literature on the impact of democracy assistance by democratic donors on the democratization processes of developing countries. The results show that the European Union's democracy assistance enhances the democracy levels of recipient countries, and it is more significantly robust than other types of aid and even USAID which is the largest donor that allocates democracy assistance abroad. I argue that this is mainly due to the EU's political conditionality and monitoring mechanisms in place.

Second, this thesis contributes to the growing research on the influence of autocratic donors by enhancing our understanding of how aid from autocratic regimes can impact support for democracy in developing countries. In the presence of autocratic aid, citizens who hold very positive attitudes toward autocratic actors like China are the least likely to support democracy. In low- and middle-income countries, attribution processes of autocratic aid and the instrumentalization of aid by political elites for domestic gains enhance the impact of this type of aid.



Lastly, this thesis contributes to research on aid from both democratic and autocratic donors by examining how cooperation with such donors can impact citizens' support for local politicians and foreign donors. The results show that the political regime of the donor (democratic versus autocratic) and project implementation practices influence citizens' support for aid projects and local incumbents. Citizens particularly show strong dissent against donors who are autocratic and have a strong preference for transparent donors. Moreover, the results demonstrate that citizens prefer the most transparent projects because they perceive that the money is less likely to be misused by political elites and foreign donors. They also prefer democratic donors because they associate democratic donors with more responsiveness to their demands when they have complaints against the projects. Additionally, I find that citizens who support the incumbent party, which is a far right-wing nationalist party are the least likely to condemn authoritarian donors.

Although the findings from the last two studies appear contradictory, they are complementary. In the presence of autocratic aid, citizens who have positive attitudes toward autocratic donors are less likely to support democracy. Yet, on average, citizens strongly oppose authoritarian donors. Among those who vote for far-right (more authoritarian parties), they are less likely to mind the regime of the donor. Thus, possible implications from these studies include that citizens who hold more authoritarian values such as those who vote for far-right parties and support donors like China, are more likely to endorse authoritarian regimes, support local governments' cooperation with autocratic donors, and possibly show less support for democracy.

The thesis, moreover, contributes empirically by studying the impact of present donors in recipient countries both democratic – the EU, and autocratic – China, and additionally, by discerning the effect of key attributes pertaining to these donors to understand what characteristics matter the most.

## 5.1 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This thesis is limited in several ways. First, it falls short in testing all the mechanisms that I present across the three papers. Due to data limitations, I test causal pathways and mechanisms related to aid attributes, only in

the last paper. Below, I discuss more thoroughly these limitations and how future research can tackle these shortcomings.

The first study purports that political conditionality and monitoring mechanisms are key for democracy assistance to work. However, due to data limitations, I do not test these mechanisms. Scholars who are interested in democracy assistance programs should gather data on the presence of monitoring offices in recipient countries and the role of different types of political conditionalities. Future studies can scrutinize the varieties of conditionality and understand closely how incentives work regarding democracy assistance across different contexts, regime types, and aid programs. For instance, the EU accession membership conditionality has received immense attention from the scholarly community (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2020). Yet, most countries that receive democracy assistance are not on the EU accession pipeline. Thus, there should be more nuance concerning the types of conditionality and other incentives, including economic incentives, trade ties, visa liberalization processes, and regional alliances.

Moreover, the extent to which varieties of conditionality work, under what conditions, and how they differ across countries is largely unexplored. The field of research could benefit by exploring further the channels of interaction between donors and local actors, identifying key stakeholders in aid programs, and comparing the effectiveness of different democracy aid programs. The research could additionally benefit from in-depth interviews with actors including members of civil society, donor agencies in recipient countries, and officials in ministries involved with aid initiatives.

Furthermore, many studies pinpoint the importance of political conditionality in fostering democratic reforms (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004). However, there are trade-offs between aid ownership and political conditionality. Aid ownership pertains to the extent that recipient governments have control and coordination power over foreign aid. While studies suggest that conditionality is effective in fostering democratization, other research indicates that when recipient countries have stronger ownership of aid programs and thus coordination power, aid programs are more successfully implemented. Hence, aid is effective because it gives voice to local demands but also encourages local actors to adhere to the demands of the international community (Teshome and Hoebink 2018; Carothers 2015). In this case, autocratic donors that do not attach political conditionalities al-

low recipient governments to have more ownership over aid programs. This stands in contrast to Western donors who attach political conditionality to aid which gives them higher leverage in comparison to the recipient governments. This thesis does not account for these trade-offs. Thus, future research should more cautiously engage in the debates concerning the dilemma between aid ownership, country sovereignty, and political conditionality.

Second, throughout the thesis, I use the term “foreign aid” to account for financial flows from various donors. Yet, as I discuss in section 2.2, flow types and sectors differ significantly between OECD-DAC and actors like China. Future research that studies aid from different donors should focus on differentiating the impact of flows that fall under loans (OOF) and those that typically fall under financial aid (ODA). ODA and OOF flows have different intents and channels of influence, and accordingly, the mechanisms should differ. Next, while democratic donors share similar practices abroad i.e., political, and economic conditionality, it is questionable to what extent autocratic actors including China, Russia, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar exhibit similar practices abroad. To gain more theoretical mileage and understand these nuances, scholars should compare the strategies and practices of different autocratic donors.

Third, foreign aid data availability at the geospatial level is limited to only China and the World Bank. Other donors provide very limited geospatial data on aid programs and for specific countries only. As such, there should be more endeavors from both donor agencies and researchers to collect data at the geospatial level for both democratic actors like the OECD countries and the EU and autocratic actors like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. Geospatial data availability regarding foreign aid efforts by external actors can provide tremendous opportunities for researchers who focus on development studies to study the effects of aid. For example, it can allow for opportunities to discern more clearly the impact of different types of aid flows on attitudes including democracy, corruption, and transparency but also other outcomes such as economic activity, environmental impact, and elections outcomes.

Lastly, future studies should provide an in-depth analysis of autocratic donors’ strategies to influence the public in beneficiary countries. Furthermore, existing research could benefit from exploring the channels through which autocratic actors can influence political elites in beneficiary countries

to disseminate their political messages and propaganda through the media. Additionally, scholars can utilize further experiments to understand attitudes toward donors with different characteristics by civil society, journalists, public officials in ministries, members of parliament, and governmental officers. This approach will allow us to discern how different actors view these donors and the extent they cooperate with these actors based on their attributes.

### 5.2 Policy Recommendations

Several policy implications can be derived from the research findings of this Ph.D. thesis. Given that a significant number of countries worldwide are experiencing democratic backsliding, Western donors such as the European Union, who strive to promote and safeguard democracy, should not decrease democracy assistance programs. Instead, such donors should aim to improve mechanisms related to political conditionality and monitoring. These mechanisms can contribute to a better understanding of local demands in recipient countries, offer feedback to design projects more effectively, and provide insights into the efficacy of donor strategies.

Second, based on the findings of the second study, Western donors should be aware of the growing influence of authoritarian donors in recipient countries. Western donors should also aim to understand what closer proximity between recipients' elites and authoritarian donors entail. As autocratic donors aim to spread their propaganda globally, Western donors committed to promoting democracy should give priority to advertising strategies and promoting their projects more effectively. This way, the public in recipient countries is informed accurately where aid comes from and what the implementation processes of aid projects entail.

Lastly, foreign donors should improve their transparency mechanisms and establish channels through which citizens can express their concerns regarding aid projects. In countries where corruption is endemic, citizens are apprehensive that the presence of foreign donors may exacerbate corrupt activities in their vicinity and among local politicians. Consequently, foreign donors should strive to provide channels where citizens can access informed information about project details, decision-making processes, and relevant financial matters.

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