



**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES (CES)**

The EU's democracy assistance efforts in Belarus

An analysis of the character of EU democracy assistance and involvement in the mass protests of 2020-2021 in Belarus

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Abstract

During recent events, Belarus has come under the light due to the falsified re-election of Lukashenko in 2020. Mass protests arose, and the civil society's demand for democracy became clear. This thesis aims to research how the European Union's democracy assistance approach towards civil society is reflected during the mass protests of 2020-2021. The research question is to analyze how the EU reacted during the mass protests of 2020-2021. Researchers have previously not studied how the EU supports their claim that they will support the civil society in neighbouring countries to push for democratization in the neighbouring ENP country Belarus. I use process tracing to conduct my thesis on the specific incident of the mass protests of 2020-2021 to make my own contribution to this field. The material consists of numerous European news articles, reports, action programs and annexes from the EU, and an article from Belarusian state media. The case study indicates that the EU has reacted and been involved in support of civil society in Belarus during the mass protests, both through indirect and direct linkage approaches. It is not clear if the reactions from the EU derives from their own agenda to support civil society in the quest for democratization or if active human rights organizations have pushed external actors, such as the EU to act. The EU's measures have not been strong enough to change Belarus's negative spiral of becoming more authoritarian.

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1. Introduction

Belarus is an autocratic regime and is still in the hands of President Lukashenko and has been so since 1994 (Bosse, 2012). Belarus's relation to external organizations and neighbourhoods, especially the EU, has remained complex since Lukashenko's presidency started over 25 years ago. When the EU tries to cooperate with Belarus, it seems to be followed by a counteraction or step backs in affecting the societal openness negatively (Korosteleva, 2014).

Despite these issues, the EU Commission gives aid (ENPI) to Belarus and 15 other countries included by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to promote democratic values and help civil society develop. A policy developed in the early 2000s aiming at promoting stability, security, and democratic development for the EU's neighbours and potential candidate countries. The ENP focuses on civil society in a new form, but it lacks a specific vision for how to support the civil society, claims Raik (2006).

Researchers discuss the effectiveness of ENP to help democratize third part countries. They present three main measures for the EU's work with neighbouring countries I.e., linkage, leverage, and political conditionality. Aid can be a way of using these measures, but the research field of this issue is not unanimously agreed upon if this is an effective instrument (Schimmelfenning, 2015, Schimmelfenning and Scholtz, 2008, Levitsky and Way, 2005, 2007, 2014, Smith, 1997., Beichelt et al., 2014).

Previous studies have analyzed the EU's democracy assistance in relation to civil society. My contribution in this field is to analyze the specific case of Belarus, during the mass protests of 2020-2021. I aim to analyze the reactions from the EU during the mass protests and how they were involved in supporting civil society in Belarus. Since the EU themselves has democracy assistance as one of their main objectives in ENP countries, the focus on democracy assistance through civil society is supported by many researchers to be a successful approach. Belarus is also an interesting case because of its separation from Western development amongst European countries, and it is still the last dictatorship in Europe (Bosse, 2012, Kasmach, 2015, Gerner, 2016).

The Belarusian people have continually pushed for Lukashenko's resignation and the quest for democratic principles (V-dem, 2020). I present a case study of the mass protests in Belarus in 2020-2021, and how the EU has reacted and been involved in supporting civil society. The methodology I use is process tracing. It will also be illustrated with a timeline of the actions from the Belarusian government's activities, the EU, and cooperating human rights organizations. The case study indicates that the EU has reacted and been active to support the civil society in Belarus during the mass protests. Both through aid and cooperation with organizations with closer links to the civil society than the EU itself. But it is not sufficiently clear that the EU reacted because of their own aspiration to offer democracy assistance, or if they responded to outside pressure from various actors directly involved in reporting on the human rights violations, such as human rights organizations.

1.1. Aim

Numerous researchers address the complex of democracy promotion outside the EU's borders. The Commission expresses its will to promote democracy and civil society in general in multiple neighbouring countries. There is a lack of studies that focus on EU democracy assistance in relation to civil society. Most of the literature and research on EU democracy assistance focuses on the elite state level or top-down approach. For example, how the EU uses political conditionality to gain influence in neighbouring autocratic regimes. Researchers do address how the EU has influenced democratic development in civil society, but no study has been made in the case of Belarus during the mass protests. My contribution is to study how the EU reacted during the mass protest in Belarus in 2020-2021.

The aim is to analyze the EU's democratic assistance efforts in the ENP country Belarus and how they influenced the mass protests of 2020. The study will explore if democracy assistance from the EU has had any effect on Belarus's democratic development. My research question is, therefore:

How has the EU's reaction been characterized during the mass protests of 2020-2021 in Belarus?

1.2. Disposition

In chapter two, I discuss the EU's functioning and complexity, democracy assistance and its relation to civil society, and present previous research on the topic of successful and unsuccessful attempts to democratize neighbouring countries. The chapter will also highlight efforts made in the ENP country Belarus by the EU. To understand why studying the reaction of the EU in relation to the aims of the EU's democracy assistance, through civil society, in the specific case of Belarus. In this chapter, I will also present my theoretical framework for this thesis. In chapter three I will present my chosen method and material and discuss why this is the best way to answer my research question. Next, I present the case study using the

process tracing method, followed by an analysis. Lastly, I conclude the actions the EU has realized during the mass protests in 2020-2021 and discuss what my thesis has brought to the table.

2. Theory and previous research

2.1. The complexity of the EU's democracy assistance

The promotion of good governance and democracy is one of the main objectives of the EU's policy towards third countries (EU Commission, 2020). Factors for the choice of a specific instrument can be located back to the third country itself. For example, the existence of civil society, economic motives, neighbourhood or the relationship with the EU are factors determining which type of instrument is the most useful. The usage of each instrument is regulated by different factors, suggesting that there is no single way of determining the most efficient instrument to offer democracy assistance (Kotzian et. al., 2011).

Wetzel et al. (2015) highlight that not only determining the most efficient or effective instrument is a complexity with democracy assistance by the EU. The EU itself is a complex actor, because it is built on cooperation on local, national and supranational level amongst 27 member states and seven institutions. The visions of the EU and the action from the EU is influenced by countless opinions, and the process from vision to action is long and filled with agreements and disagreements. The EU's internal agenda towards democracy assistance is depicted as technical but has recently developed a more active approach. The progress of democracy assistance by the EU is clearly visible. Still, it is restricted by the bureaucratic structures of the EU institutions and therefore lacks a clear and coherent approach.

The EU's objective to be engaged in democracy assistance in third part countries is according to Wetzel et al. (2015) an incoherent approach. No clear strategic framework is presented, and the ideological foundations are a mixture of liberal, neo-liberal and social democratic values. The EU also presents a view of democracy as the norm and focuses on democracy for individuals, rather than institutions. Compared with other actors involved in democracy promotion or assistance, the EU clearly differs, because of their incoherent approach. For example, the US democracy promotion efforts are clearly linked to liberal approaches and traditional core values of liberal democracy. The UN has a clear focus on sovereignty and good governance. The core values of liberal democracy only represent a smaller portion of the democracy assistance served by the EU, and the picture of a more technocratic approach is set

out by the EU. Wetzel et al. (2015) also notes that the Eastern European member states of the EU, has a clearer focus on democracy promotion and assistance through civil society. Due to the fact that the Eastern European countries themselves prioritize democratic engagement through civil society, on a national level.

Despite the inconsistency in the EU's democracy assistance strategy, the EU possesses some strengths in democracy assistance. The level of adaptation towards third part countries is one key function of the EU's approach. Since their strategic and ideological foundations are not completely coherent, this creates space for the EU to adapt their involvement in third part countries and adjust their incentives due to local circumstances. The EU also support to third part countries through various methods and approaches. They have consistent flows of funds and is therefore a strong actor because of their economic stability. The EU is a well-established actor in the field of democracy assistance, and their economic stability creates room for long term engagement in third part countries.

2.2. An overview of the EU's democracy assistance activities in Belarus

The EU has for many years been active in Belarus. One of the instruments used is The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a foreign relations instrument adopted by the European Commission in 2004. The EU Commission gives aid through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENPI) to Belarus and 15 other countries included by the ENP, to promote democratic values and to help civil society develop (European Commission, 2021). A policy developed to promote stability, security and democratic development for the EU's neighbours and potential candidate countries. The ENP focuses on civil society in a new form (Raik, 2006).

Some actions from the EU in coordination with other international donors took place in Belarus in 2006 to prevent further isolation of the Belarusian people (Forbrig et. al., 2014). They initiated two new programs to focus on the availability of independent media sources. The EU Commission granted a fund worth 2 million euros, to support free media, including radio news and satellite tv.

The EU is also active through a Delegation of the EU to Belarus, where they diplomatically represent the EU. The Delegation opened in 2007 and has the mandate to maintain contact with Belarus representatives on multiple levels, including local, regional, and national authorities. They establish a frequent dialogue with active members from civil society, through local media, schools, and universities, focusing on engaging in governance, social, economic, and human rights policy issues (EU Delegation to Belarus, 2016).

The EU has since 2011 continuously sided with Belarus to engage in civil society initiatives, through various organizations related to the EU. For example, Civil Society Forum (CSF), National Platform (NP) and The Belarus Eastern Partnership (EaP) are organization's that aims to support the EU's ability to support civil society in Belarus (EU Commission, 2014). In 2012, the EU initiated a new bilateral cooperating program. They aim to strengthen Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and their quest for democratic principles, keeping track of the civil activity within these organizations and establishing that they are aligned with EaP objectives. In 2014 there were over 60 active CSO's in Belarus, which was a massive improvement from previous civil society engagement (EU Commission, 2014).

This quote from the ENP Package review of 2014, from the European Commission, demonstrates the multiple goals and approaches the EU uses in Belarus to promote civil society.

“Projects aiming at guaranteeing freedom of thought, conscience and religion in Belarus, improving women and child protection and rights, supporting initiatives of various civic groups, increasing capacity of civil society organizations and human rights defenders, social inclusion and empowerment of disadvantaged people, integrating former prisoners in the society. Additional funds have been provided via scholarships, languages courses and support to the European Humanities University.” European Commission, 2014:4

The Commission is active in using multiple ways to reach the civil society in Belarus, illustrating that the quest for more civic engagement is a complex issue. Since the ways of trying to connect and help civil society is endless.

The Commission has also engaged in civil society through financial aid, promoting dialogue through European Dialogue on Modernisation (DoM). Combined measures from civil society organizations and small privately owned businesses to purport the best method of engaging the civil society. The EU has also offered help to the Belarusian people to request financial aid from the EU subjected to civil society in different forms and ventilate possibilities to improve the quality of life in Belarus (European Commission, 2014).

The interactions with representatives from civil society have highlighted the need for expanding the ties between Belarus and the EU to innovate the Belarusian society. According to the EU Commission (2014), their activity in Belarus has affected the Belarusian people in a positive way. They are allocating funds to sectors related to the quality of life, such as renovating schools, green energy, clean drinking water, reducing food wastage, and spreading the word of the EU's positive effect in local communities.

The EU is the most extensive donor in Belarus (European Commission, 2021). Over 30 million euros has annually (since 2016) been granted to help the Belarusian society. From 2014-2020, the total aid given to Belarus from the EU reaches over 170 million euros. The EU's actions aim to improve the quality of life for the Belarusian citizens, support economic progress, build stronger governance and encourage development to a more sustainable environment.

The European Investment Bank (EIB) is an extended arm of the EU and has since 2016 assisted Belarus with 530 million euros, supporting infrastructure and climate action programs and small private sector companies (SMEs) (Consilium Europe, 2020). Some examples of the measures taken by the EU to support Belarus through ENPI is firstly the EU4Business initiative. They are supporting over 900 private companies by providing loans and training. This results in producing over 3900 new jobs in private companies, which can positively affect Belarus' trade opportunities (European Commission, 2021).

In 2016 the National Human Rights Action Plan was adopted by the Belarusian government. The EU's objective is to highlight the importance of respecting human rights by not implementing new legislation that opposes human rights. The EU is active by supporting

dialogue between the government and civil society during the process. The EU is also actively engaged in student exchange (Erasmus+) researchers, teachers and so on, to strengthen the relations between the EU and Belarus and encourage the youth in Belarus to study (European Commission, 2021).

Regardless of the initiated dialogue between the EU and Belarus, the EU Commission recognizes the lack of respect for the rule of law and human rights by the Belarusian authorities and stresses that they will continue their dialogue with Belarus to help offer democratic assistance. Even if little progress has been made, the EU is still actively trying to support the Belarusian people who suffer from the lack of democratic principles and societal freedom. This demonstrates that the EU's bilateral engagement in Belarus has been continuous since the ENP was created and the EU uses various forms to cooperate with Belarus.

2.2.1. Implications for democracy assistance by the EU

Korosteleva (2014) highlights that democracy assistance is far more complex than “*naming and shaming*” countries with low levels of democracy and expecting to see progress. Targeting countries and more or less forcing them to push for democratic development by submission to the EU or other influential organizations is a non-effective and challenging way to externally “help” these countries. The image of political conditionality as just a carrot and stick game are problematic because it has resulted in (seen in Ukraine and Belarus) an absence of effective decision-making on national level and minimizing the trade exchange between the two parties.

Despite the negative picture painted on Belarus's continued relationship with the EU and the West, my own contribution to this field is to examine if the democracy assistance objectives the EU has, to target civil society, can be linked to the reactions and involvement of the EU during the protest in Belarus 2020-2021. These articles previously mentioned mostly discuss democracy promotion from a top-down perspective. Previous studies explain how major institutions and countries in the West either actively strive towards further engagement or reduce the engagement between the two parts. I will focus more in-depth on small but

meaningful democracy assistance efforts made by the EU, towards civil society, during the mass protests of 2020-2021. Previous studies do explain the role of the EU in empowering civil society in ENP countries. My contribution is focused on the EU's involvement in the mass protests in the case of Belarus, from a civil society perspective. It is crucial to address how the EU's active democracy assistance efforts reflect in civil society, since the EU themselves highlight civil society empowerment as one of their main objectives in neighbouring countries.

Korosteleva (2014) presents that the people of Belarus want to see cooperation with both the EU and Russia in the future. The positive attitude towards the EU is increasing and the previously uninterest from the Belarusian people is decreasing. The EU's different sector and level engagement has generated a broader awareness of the functioning of the EU and expanding the potential for the people to question the status quo between the two parties. To some extent, the Belarusian government has expressed a will to further engage in foreign policy partnership with both the East and the West, which can be interpreted as a mirroring of the increased interest from the Belarusian people. The remarks made by Korosteleva (2014) helps to address the fact that the EU works, when they work closer to the people. By studying this further, I want to explore if there are examples of successful involvement of EU democracy assistance, on a smaller scale. This also supports that the top-down perspective is not the most efficient way to target democratic assistance in neighbouring countries with autocratic governments.

2.2.2. Prerequisites for the EU's democracy assistance in Belarus

In order for the EU to build links with countries included in the ENP, they should start at the people-to-people level, not on a supranational level, because that's where domestic change is initiated (Korosteleva, 2014). A developing civil society and access to objective news reports is two robust instruments to push for democratic promotion both in external and domestic forms. Belarus for example is a country where this link is weak. Because the government actively makes sure to isolate the Belarusian people from this development. Since that might jeopardize the government's control of the people. Therefore, the EU should protect the

people from further isolation by empowering the civil society from within (Forbrig et al., 2014, Levitsky and Way, 2014).

Some actions from the EU in joint forces with other international supporters took place in Belarus, the year 2006, to stop further isolation of the Belarusian people (Forbrig et. al., 2014). They initiated two new programs to focus on the availability of independent media sources. The EU Commission granted a fund worth 2 million euros to support free media, including radio news and tv. These are essential measures taken to slowly challenge the Belarusian government's media monopoly but does not say much about how this affected the Belarusian people's access to free media.

Levitsky and Way (2014) and Yakouchyk (2016) emphasize that certain circumstances that complicate the EU's ability to promote democratic values in neighbouring countries are the existence of "domestic gatekeepers". Economic elites, state-officials and political opposition is actors that strongly enables or restricts the countries linkage levels. In the case of Belarus these actors historically and in present time, have been unwilling to cooperate. Even the EU's democracy promotion work has also showed inconsistency, under the ENP. The Belarusian government and economy rely on state-owned enterprises. The US decided to sanction these enterprises, but the EU did not follow the US footsteps. The EU has neither sanctioned the trade relations in any form and the trade between the two parts has only increased over the years. They are resulting in a continuous flow to the Belarusian economy (Börzel & Bidzina, 2017).

2.2.3. Previous successful democracy assistance cases in Europe

Forbrig et al. (2014), Schimmelfenning (2005), Levitsky and Way (2005) describe that the EU's leverage is less influential where the targeted government has closer connections to alternative regional power. In Central Europe, the EU has been very effective in promoting democratization because no alternative power exists in this region and the leverage is therefore high. Second, the effectiveness of the EU's external pressure is also determined by the existence of rival interests by the EU itself. Pushing for democracy assistance in Belarus might be seen as a statement against Russia. The resistance to keep pushing for democracy

assistance is also present in Western institutions. An example of influential institutions that offered politically *unconditional* financial support to the Belarusian government under the financial crisis of 2008, is the IMF and the World Bank. That contributed to the regimes continued economic stability and in the long run, strengthening of the Lukashenko presidency (Börzel & Bidzina, 2017).

An example of the EU using the political conditionality towards a country is in the case of the Ukrainian election of 2004 (Börzel & Bidzina, 2017). The EU decided to not impose financial sanctions. Instead, the EU used political conditionality to push for a democratic outcome of the election. The future ties to the Ukrainian government depended on how the country acted to improve its democratic quality. After the election of 2004, both the US and the EU demanded re-election and excluded the country from NATO negotiations. With the motivation of not wanting to legitimize the existing Ukrainian government. The West succeeded to influence the electoral outcome and a re-election took place, resulting in the oppositions victory in Ukraine. This is one successful example of how the EU uses political conditionality and uses their linkage and leverage to push for democratization in third part countries.

2.2.4. EU in relation to civil society

Beichelt et al. (2014) explains that European countries shifted towards democratization during the second half of the 20th century. This wave of democratization also contributed to a new way of democratic participation, from civil society, and became prominently evident in Eastern Europe with a socialist history.

A new drive was shown from civil society, pushing for democratic principles. Youth organizations actively participated in protests and prospered for a democratic future. They also received support from external democracy promotion actors, supplying them with material, knowledge and funds. These highly recognized external democracy promoters (e.g. EU, UN, USA) also speaks of this period as a success for external democracy promotion in authoritarian states, through civil society engagement. Democracy promotion actors believed in the changes happening in post-socialist countries in Europe, convinced that the protests and engagement from civil society would generate a path for democratization.

Unfortunately, the effects of anticipated democratic shift were not going to last for long, and many of the post-socialist countries slid back to an authoritarian society. But the ideal and quest for more civil society participation, to democratize, is still supported by external democracy promoters, and the scholar community. The idea of a link between active civil society and democratization is a common formulation from external democracy promoters. One example is the European Commission expressing that the foundation of democratic development is to engage with civil society, in third part countries (European Commission, 2020). Despite the ambitious formulations, the historical attempts to engage in democratic promotion and assistance through civil society has not been thriving.

The EU helped form cooperation between civil society in post-socialist countries and NGO's funded by the EU. The NGO's were designated to offer alternative ways of work-life, not directly linked to the government. They were successful in offering non corrupt occupations, helping the youth to be a part of the working society. These NGO's are nowadays not clearly linked to civil society's quest for democratization. Beichelt et al. (2014) purports that the governments of the states receiving support from NGO's are not willing to engage in democratic efforts. The connection between the NGO's and pushing for democratic progress is therefore weak, but non the less, they still offer occupations for the local community.

Democracy assistance through civil society is depicted by Beichelt et al. (2014) to not be flawless, despite the ambitious belief in the approach from democracy assistance actors and researchers. On the other hand, numerous researchers criticize the external democracy actors' previous approach, a top-down perspective, focused on sanctions and targeting domestic elites. This illustrates that not one single method is perfect, but out of the tools available, this one seems most viable and is also currently used by the EU themselves. I focus on democratic assistance through civil society, since the EU themselves put great belief in the effects of this approach. I want to test if this actually is the case in the 2020-2021 mass protests in Belarus.

2.3. Theory

I rely my theoretical framework on the findings from Levitsky and Way (2005, 2007, 2014) and Beichelt et al. (2014). They purport that the linkage and leverages model is one of the most common models used by Western actors to engage in democracy assistance in authoritarian states. It is built to advocate towards democratic promotion, by targeting democratic institutions and support the civil society. The indirect support to civil society is broadcasted by pushing for civil participation, engagement, and enabling greater autonomy to civil society groups and functions, to build a stronger influential sphere of the civil society.

The linkage model is one of the most recognized approaches to push for democratic assistance through civil society. The linkage is built on transnational cooperation, among two actors, in this case, the EU and Belarus. EU being the promoter, and Belarus the recipient. It can be illustrated with two separate blocks, the 'direct' support, targeting democratic civil society and political opposition, and the 'indirect' support, seeking to promote further transnational cooperation with democratic assistance actors, in this case, the EU. In both blocks, the focus is for the democratic assistance actor to encourage societal and local actors to actively work for democratization, from a bottom-up perspective in the recipient state. It is important for the civil society to try and flourish without governmental actors being prominently involved.

The 'indirect' block of linkage is highly linked to the modernization perspective on democratization in authoritarian states. Meaning that economic and societal growth are two key aspects of the functioning of democratization. According to Beichelt et al. (2014), economic development is the main aspect to study, since it generally is related to a state's level of wealth, which reflects in higher levels of industrialization, education, growth of middle class, and lower levels of poverty. Higher levels of economic development can also be traced to reduced class conflicts and minimize class differences. It is also seen to be linked with lower levels of political extremist involvement, and higher level of societal tolerance. A focus on democracy assistance only through indirect approaches are rare, since it does not directly aim at pushing single actors towards democratic principles. It is a more general approach centered around long-term cooperation, related to economic development and

transnational cooperation. The methods consist of external investments, aid, trade and other methods related to border exchange, not necessarily directly linked to democratic assistance.

Direct linkage has many similarities with political conditionality, and is on the contrary from indirect linkage, centered around multiple instruments related to democracy assistance. Active civic movement groups are provided with financial and/or technical help, given that they meet the terms and conditions set out by the donor (in this case, the EU). It is constantly related to the development of democracy, but can come in various forms, for example increased engagement with human rights actions, organizational structures, governance, teaching how civil organizations can be influential, and other forms of socialization of the spread of democratic ideals in civil society. The ultimate goal for the external democracy promoter is to teach democratic key concepts, creating tools for the civil society to grow and becoming a meaningful actor in the political room, to meet the long-term goal of a developing democratic institutions and functions.

The objective is for the civil movements to first spread the notion of democratic ideas, later engaging in mobilization activities (e.g. peaceful protesting), aiming to open up the political dialogue on democratic adaptation in the current political system further down the lane. Creating space for political opposition, ability to criticize the political elite and creating an alternative path for the political development, towards democratization. The EU also carry a huge advantage as a democracy promoter, since they have stabile financial assets and can offer long term cooperation (Beichelt et al., 2014).

External democracy assistance towards civil society is criticized for having a Western understanding of how civil society organizations operate in post-socialist countries of Europe. The public has a weaker trust to civic movements in general, which prevents the organizations the reach their full capabilities, since they are not well anchored among citizens in these types of states (authoritarian). They are perceived as separated from the influential sphere of the state and political room and operate as independent unites (Beichelt et al., 2014).

Despite the criticism of the linkage approach, through civil society in authoritarian states, the EU has succeeded to influence and cooperate with neighbouring countries on people-to-

people level, and engage in civil society according to (Korosteleva, 2014, Forbrig et. al. 2014, Levitsky and Way, 2014). They support the notion that the EU's ability to promote democracy is most effective when they succeed to influence the civil society. Based on previous literature, my argument is that these types of measures to support the civil society from the linkage and leverages approach is an effective way for the EU to offer democracy assistance in the ENP country Belarus.

2.3.1. My hypothesis

Based on the findings from Levitsky and Way (2005, 2007, 2014) and Beichelt et al. (2014) my hypothesis is that the EU's focus on democracy assistance through civil society, using the linkage and leverage approach, can be a meaningful tool to support the democratization of Belarus.

I reason that the EU uses both indirect and direct approaches to target civil society, but in the specific case of the mass protests, I reason that the approaches will be mainly direct. Since it the situation in Belarus is of special measure and would be more difficult to approach through indirect approaches, focusing on transnational exchange and long-term visions of economic development. To gain support for my hypothesis that the EU has reacted during the protests, I will look for evidence in the selected material, in the form of written formulations and direct action from the EU towards civil society. Based on Beichelt et al. (2014), formulations of how external democracy assistance functions, as presented earlier in this chapter.

3. Method and material

3.1. Method – Process tracing

Belarus is an interesting case because multiple geopolitical actors are involved in trying to change the future of Belarus (EU, Russia and China), my focus is on the EU. It is compelling because despite the EU's efforts we have seen, the presence of autocratic leaders, and the protests in 2020 displayed the ongoing struggle for democracy. Hence, it would be valuable to assess how the EU was involved in Belarus during the mass protests. To check if the EU's democracy assistance approach towards civil society is reflected in their reactions during the mass protests in Belarus 2020-2021.

Process tracing as a method is a qualitative analysis methodology, by tracing mechanisms to see links between a cause and an outcome. The main goal is to identify if and how a cause affected a specific change. Take a cause (X) and try to find the links that lead to a certain effect or outcome (Y) (Beach, 2016: 463). The method requires measuring how strong the links are between the cause and the specific change. To identify if there is any change, the hypothesis must go through five steps of analysis to be confirmed. Each test can perform a Pass, Fail or Implication for rival hypothesis (INTRAC, 2017).

3.2. Discussion of method

The method of process tracing is useful in research papers that focuses on analyzing some sort of change and that fits my research question since it focuses on change (reaction) during the protests in Belarus 2020-2021. I want to study how the EU has reacted and been involved during the protests in Belarus 2020-2021, since they self-proclaim to highly prioritize support to civil society and offer democratic assistance when in need. My thesis aims to study the reaction, and how the involvement of the EU progressed. By first collecting the evidence to illustrate their reaction and measure the change. Then systematically work your way backwards and asses which contributions have been most important for the change. Therefore,

the method of process tracing is a useful method, since it requires big cautiousness and precision and uses a backwards approach to change. (INTRAC, 2017).

The method will be useful since it is developed to assess' multiple factors for how they have contributed to change and compares this with alternative explanations to change. It is particularly suiting for research that has difficulties with assessing and evaluating evidence and so is the case for my research question.

The only hesitation in using the method of process tracing is that is relatively new, the guidelines are not fully anchored to academic research, and it is very time-consuming. The data I use it is difficult to explain causality, it is more focused on studying change. Despite these difficulties the analyzing process is multifaceted. It contains five different layers of analysis, making the analysis sensitive to different factors, contributions and minimizing the risk of missing important evidence in the study of change (INTRAC, 2017). To analyze the effects of the EU's initiatives, require a rigorous analysis, condemning alternative explanations to how the change has come about. Since this study focuses on a short period and will rely on news articles, it is difficult to determine why change has occurred. By using the process tracing method it is easier to do a thorough analysis and minimize the risk of drawing a false conclusion.

3.3. Material

I will use the Annual Action Program from 2020; European Commission (2020c) *Commission Implementing Decision of 11.12.2020 on the special measure in favour of the Republic of Belarus for 2020*.

Together with the Annual Action Programs, the Commission realizes Annexes of the strategic documents every year. These documents do to a higher extend explain and evaluate the program's effectiveness, than what the *Commission Implementing Decision* does. The Annexes contain the overall and specific objectives, lessons learned, expected results and

main activities in the targeted country. These Annexes will be used to check for how the EU has worked with democratic assistance.

European Commission (2020) *ANNEX of the Commission Implementing Decision on the special measure 2020 in favour of Belarus Action Document for: EU4Belarus: Solidarity with the People of Belarus.*

These reports are quite dense and might be difficult to use because of their sparse formulations. Material from Freedom House and V-dem Institute is also used to complement the annual action programmes. The analysis will also include news articles. The protests are recent in time and not many scholars have yet presented any data on the subject. News articles from active newspapers can also bring light to aspects that are not always covered by academic literature and will therefore be used in this thesis.

3.3.1. Selection of material

The analysis also consists of news articles, that has reported on the mass protests in Belarus of 2020-2021. This thesis focuses on the European perspective on the mass protests in Belarus. Therefore, the five articles selected are all published in a European newspaper. They are all published within the timeframe of the analysis (August 2020- April 2021). The keywords used to browse through the articles published on the subject of the EU's reactions during the mass protests consisted of the following key words; EU, protests, opposition and Lukashenko.

The thesis could have benefitted from interviewing local Belarusians, to get a better understanding if and potentially how they have benefitted from the EU's involvement during the protests. But since I do not speak Belarusian or have access to contacts that could enable me to reach the civil society of Belarus, no interviews were conducted. The thesis also focuses on the EU's reaction of the mass protests, and not the Belarusian civil society's reaction.

Since this thesis studies a European perspective, I only included articles from European newspapers. The newspapers used do claim to be politically independent, but with the

precaution that no source is completely neutral. Therefore, I decided to focus on the European perspective, since I reasoned that this perspective would be constant. The analytical approach is to search for evidence that supports my hypothesis, that the EU has reacted and supported civil society during the mass protests.

The first article selected is from the paper Euro News, published 29 of April 2021. “*Has Lukashenko fatally fractured Belarus’ opposition movement?*” (Euro News, 2021). Euro News is one of Europe’s biggest international newspapers, focusing on international news from a European perspective. The paper is relevant to the study of the European perspective on an international issue and meets the search criterium I conducted of key words, European perspective and timeframe of analysis.

A news article from the German paper, Deutsche Welle, was also included in the analysis on the same selection criteriums presented earlier. The article selected had the highest hits on the key words, is published within the timeframe of analysis and is published in one of the biggest European newspapers, more precise the biggest German newspaper focusing on international issues. The article selected was “*EU response to Belarus protests hampered by internal divisions*” (Deutsche Welle, 2020). This article reports on the internal conflict within the EU, of how they should target Belarus in the best manner during the mass protests in Belarus. It illustrates the difficulties of the EU cooperation, and the implications for the EU to react quickly to international political issues.

An article that was not included in the analysis but included to discuss the adaptation of ‘Magnitsky laws’ requested by the The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in the EU. The article is published in the European Observatory of Crimes and Security (EU-OCS, 2019) “*PACE calls on European countries to adopt ‘Magnitsky laws’*” (EU-OCS, 2019). Since the article is used to discuss the implementation of Magnitsky law, and not EU’s reaction on the mass protests, the article is published without the timeframe of the analysis and is not included in the analytical section, but used to discuss the implementation of Magnitsky law, meaning no issue for the analysis.

International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX, 2021) is a nonprofit NGO. Among many things, they write articles on issues related to freedom of expression around the world. They are an influential paper in the field of freedom of expression and has a European network, that focuses on European issues. The organization is recognized by the Council of Europe. The article used is “*Repression and resistance in Belarus: A monthly chronology.*”. It is used to illustrate how the mass protests has played out, from the beginning in August 2020 and continuing forward, in monthly reports and also has a European perspective on the covering of the mass protests. The material is used to arrange the timeline, presented in the results. It is realized within the timeframe, highly related to the key words of selection criteriums, but it is not a European newspaper. I argue that this organization still plays a part of representing the European perspective, on the mass protests in Belarus. They have a recognized status from the Council of Europe and has a European focus on their reporting on the issue. This might be an implication for the material selection since it is not a European newspaper, but I reasoned that the content of the article was highly related to the subject of this thesis.

Lastly, one article from Belarusian state media is also used to highlight the major difficulties that the Belarusian people face in pushing for democracy. The article reflects the separation of the European perspective of the mass protests, and the Belarusian perspective of the mass protests. It is used to exemplify the need for independent media in Belarus, and why the civil society needs support from outside actors (e.g. the EU). The article is from the biggest state-owned newspaper in Belarus, The Belarusian Telegraph Agency, BELTA. The newspaper offers an English version of all their articles that I have used, since I don’t speak Belarusian nor Russian. English being the original language of the articles was an important selection criterion, to avoid misinterpretation and translational issues in the selected material. Since I wanted to use the material from Belarusian state-owned media to illustrate the differences between the European perspective and the Belarusian perspective, I decided to search for material that included the same key word presented earlier for coherence; EU, protests, opposition and Lukashenko. When the search was filtered according to the key words and the time frame in the search function of the BELTA website, 50 articles came up.

The article I chose is “*Lukashenko: Even Europeans are horrified by demands of Belarusian opposition fugitive*” BELTA (2021), because it had the most hits on the key words I used and was within the timeframe of the analysis. The other articles that showed up in the search, were not directly related to the issue of the EU’s reaction to the mass protests. Therefore, this article suited my analysis the best out of the selection criteria’s I formulated and my research question.

3.3.2. Demarcation

This thesis focuses on a short period between August 2020- April 2021, because that’s when the protests after the election arose. The protests are still ongoing, but the analysis needs an end date, and it is set to April 2021. News reports from the various organization were realized during April and new legislation affecting journalistic freedom was passed the same month. These are an event of importance and will be included in the case study of Belarus.

3.4. Operationalization

In this section, I will discuss the operationalization of the key terms of this thesis. To understand what results from my analysis can bring, when studying the EU’s reactions and involvement with democracy assistance in Belarus during the mass protests.

Democratization

I have chosen to rely on the definition on democratization, presented by Carothers (1997). The framing of the concept of democratization is presented in a clear way and is used to define *external* democratization (hereafter simply democratization), which also is the case for my thesis, studying the EU’s democracy assistance and democratization involvement.

Democratization is a process, where the long-term goal is to promote democratic principles. By seeking to develop the targeted countries political institutions, aiming to take after the structure of Western democracies. This understanding of democratization is based on the notion that there is a need for an opening up of the political system, either because of the

targeted countries declining power (legitimacy), or because of civil demand for political freedom, or a combination of the two. In an ideal situation, the political opening gets the civil movement involved. It is enabling new opportunities to replace the political forces not aiming towards democratization and electing a new government with democratic objectives. The next ideal stage is to gradually implement democratic structures onto institutions to boost the civil society activity supported by democratic principles.

Democracy assistance

The usage of democracy assistance to retrieve democratic development is a multifaced strategy and term. It therefore requires a specification to what it means in my analysis. I rely on the findings and definition of from Carothers (1997). A well-recognized researcher in the field of democracy assistance and promotion within and outside the EU's borders. Democracy assistance is a tool for external (often Western, and in this thesis the EU) democracy promoters' actors, to engage in aid efforts, towards a third part country. When engaging in regions with a strong driving force towards democratization, for example Eastern Europe, the overall objective is often to promote democracy for its own sake. To better the lives of citizens through promoting governmental accountability, political representation, liberty and seeking to establish democracy as a new political norm. It is also used to push for economic and social development, understanding that democracy is used as one element to achieve continual societal development.

Civil society

I rely on the findings from Carothers (1997) and explains that the term civil society is in a general matter related to all the activities between a country's government, and the links to its citizens. This thesis focuses on civil society under external democracy assistance (here after simply civil society) and three main concepts are supported, independent media, unions and advocacy-oriented non-governmental organizations (NGO's). The support to NGO's is the most common format for external civil society assistance, such as assisting and funding human rights groups, election monitoring organizations, and environmental organizations.

The aim of supporting these organizations is to facilitate associations in line with democratic principles, or already pushing for political change in their own country, for the support of democratic principles. These civil society associations are seen as key functions for the citizens to express their political will to their government. By looking at the already existing civil participation in civil society associations, the external promoter hopes to pinpoint functions that can be progressive in reaching the public attention and increasing the interest of democratic participation in civil society.

Authoritarianism

I rely on the definition purported by Omelicheva (2016) and use their definition on authoritarianism. In their article they study how authoritarian governments operate to gain legitimacy. I find this suiting for my thesis, considering that Belarus is perceived as an authoritarian state and faces legitimacy issues during the mass protests (Freedom House, 2020).

An authoritarian state consists of a system of government with one power incumbent (or a small elite) who possess all economic, military, social and political power of the state. The people are often isolated from individual freedoms and political expression. The legitimacy of authoritarian states often appeals to a discursive agenda, focused on nationalism and religion. It is not a necessity but is very common for autocratic ruling. The government controls and exercises its citizens' power through ideological approaches to education, opportunities, beliefs, and so forth, and suppresses individual development.

3.5. Scheme of Analysis

This analytical scheme shows the steps used in process tracing method to study change, cited from INTRAC (2017:1).

Step 1: Identify the change or changes to be explained

Step 2: Establish the evidence for the change

Step 3: Document the processes leading to the change

Step 4: Establish alternative explanations

Step 5: Assess the evidence for each explanation

	Sufficient to establish change	
	NO	YES
Necessary to establish change	<p>1. Passing: Affirms relevance of hypothesis but does not confirm it</p> <p>Failing: Suggests hypothesis not relevant but does not eliminate it</p> <p>Implication for rival hypotheses: None</p>	<p>3</p> <p>Passing: Confirms hypothesis</p> <p>Failing: Does not eliminate hypothesis</p> <p>Implication for rival hypotheses: None</p>
	<p>2 Passing: Affirms relevance of hypothesis but does not confirm it</p> <p>Failing: Eliminates it</p> <p>Implication for rival hypotheses: None</p>	<p>4.</p> <p>Passing: Confirms hypothesis</p> <p>Failing: Falls short in establishing necessity and/or sufficiency</p> <p>Implication for rival hypotheses: Eliminates all other hypothesis</p>

4. Results

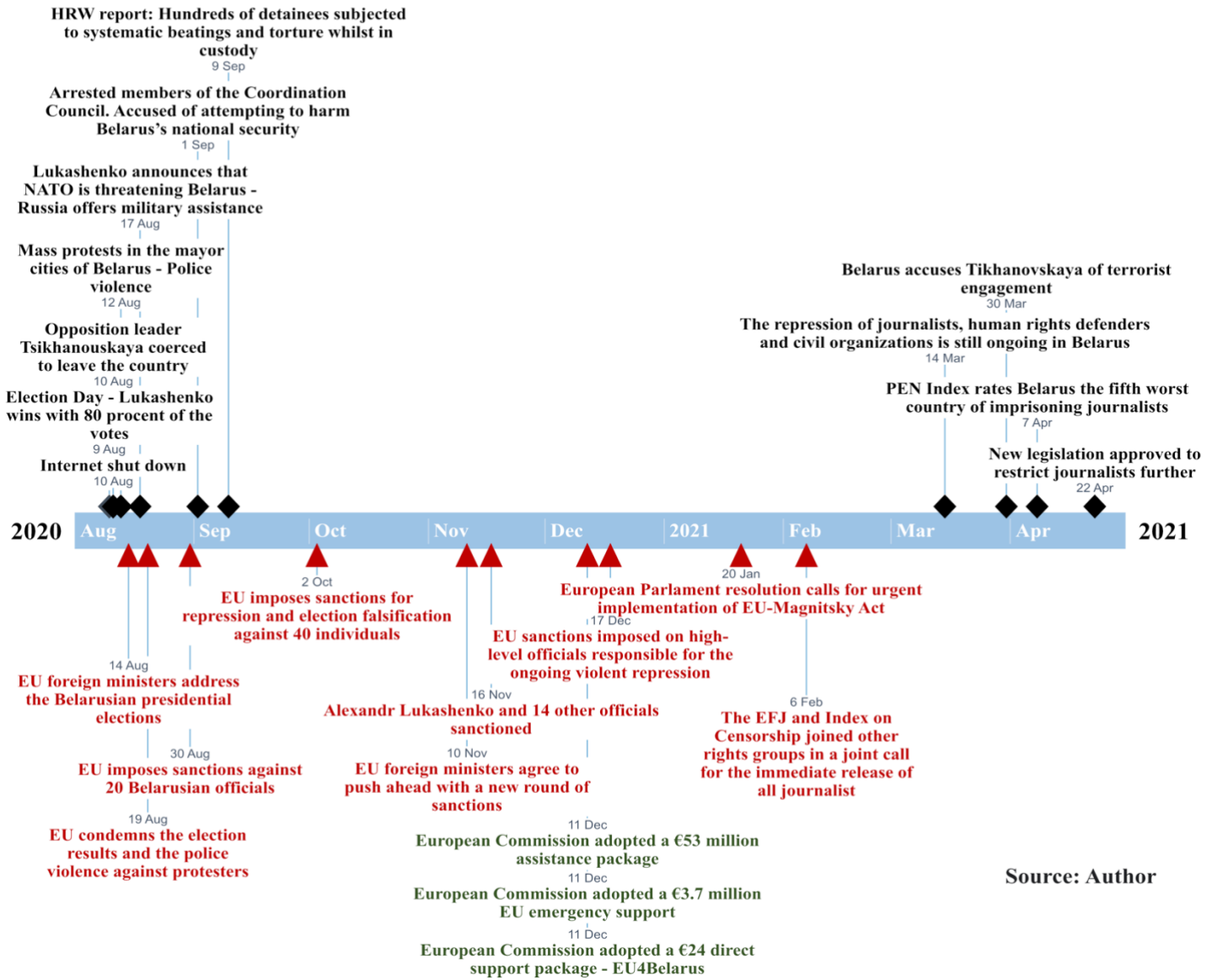
4.1. Case study of Belarus

As stated by scholars researching the same topic of mass protests in Belarus of 2020, the analysis is “in the heat of events” (Buzgalin, Kolganov, 2020:441). The results found in this thesis should be understood as preliminary results since the mass protests have not ended.

Through the process tracing method presented by Beach (2016) I display my findings from the selected material. I illustrate how Belarus and the EU (together with cooperating organizations) have progressed over time, by presenting a timeline over important events during the mass protests of 2020-2021 in Belarus. Actions made by the Belarusian government is marked in **black** and actions made by the EU (together with cooperating democracy promoting organizations) is marked in **red**. Actions from the EU targeted towards civil society is marked with **green**.

4.2. Figure 1.

Figure 1: Main incidents during the mass protests in Belarus 2020-2021



Source: Author

Source: Author

This timeline illustrates that the protest has been and is an intense period. It furthermore illustrates that the actions made by the Belarusian government towards its population have been brutal. Massive police violence during peaceful protests, imprisoning civil people, journalists, and civil rights attorneys that in any way can be linked to anti-government activity. The actions can be divided into two categories: the EU's reaction during the mass

protests and civil society and political opposition. They are presented in the following two sections.

4.3. The EU's reactions during the mass protests

The timeline is presented in Figure 1. Illustrate how and when the EU has acted during the mass protests to support the democratic opposition and obstruct the Belarusian government's range of control over the free civil society.

The first observance from the EU came on the 14th of August 2020, one week after the election. The once again victory of Lukashenko with over 80 percent of the votes, was not seen as a credible result. The election itself did not meet international standards. For example, administrators hired to eliminate the risk of election fraud were hindered to enter the voting stations. The EU foreign ministers met and publicly addressed the brutality of authority's actions towards peaceful protesters. The EU ministers support the democratic opposition of Belarus and see their need for democratic development (Consilium, 2020).

The first action from the EU came on the 19th of August where EU leaders discussed the Belarusian election and recognized it as being neither free nor fair. The EU leaders condemn the government's violence against peaceful protestors. The EU wants to see a transparent investigation of the allegations against the government and full support to the political opposition (Consilium, 2020).

For two months the EU suffered from internal conflicts on how to target the Belarusian government and support civil society (Deutsche Welle, 2020). This was a fragile time for the EU members, but finally, a decision to impose sanctions came on the 2nd of October 2020. The European Council targeted 40 individuals who were connected to the over violence used on the peaceful protestors, journalists, and opposition of the falsified election. The measures included a travel ban, meaning that the individuals could not pass through EU territories and asset freezes were employed on these individuals. Which meant that they could not reach their financials and forbid companies and EU citizens to offer economic support to these individuals (Consilium, 2020). The Council also called for an open dialogue with Belarus and

said they would re-evaluate their relationship with Belarus. The EU will not further engage in bilateral connections and instead develop their support to the Belarusian people. The EU4Belarus assistance package is in line with the promise from the EU to further engage in civil society. The European Commission also states that they are ready to commit with multiple instruments and resources if the Belarusian government is ready for a democratic transition (European Commission, 2020).

On the 16th of November the president himself, Lukashenko, and 14 other high-ranked officials were sanctioned by the European Council. Among the high-ranked officials exposed to sanctions was Lukashenko's son, he is the National Security Advisor of Belarus. They were targeted due to their involvement in the still ongoing protests and the repression of protestors and journalists during these events. The police used harsh methods against the civic engagement of the streets and I writings. They were interpreted by the EU as an act to intimidate the democratic oppositions' fight for freedom, leading to this second round of sanctions against Belarus (Consilium, 2020).

On the 11th of December 2020, the European Commission adopted a new assistance program "EU4Belarus: solidarity with the people of Belarus" (European Commission, 2020). A €53 million support package, included by an emergency support package of €3.7 million, also included a €24 million assistance package. Targeted to support the civil society, especially the youth that focuses on university studies, through independent media investments. Health care, to fight the COVID- 19 pandemic, and support to small privately owned business companies (SMEs) to strengthen the economic independence of the government (European Commission, 2020).

On the 17th of December the European Council decided to impose a third round of sanctions. The brutality from the Belarusian government, implemented by the police, was not coming to an end. 36 people of economic and social ties to Lukashenko were added to the list of sanctioned individuals, for the same reasons as prior. The peaceful protestors, journalists and opposition members were still subjected to violence and intimidation tactics (European Commission, 2020).

The timeline of events illustrates several occasions where the EU has reacted to support civil society, by using the methods (both direct and indirect) of leverage under democracy assistance. This section is in line with the hypothesis, establishing evidence for the EU's character of reaction.

4.4. Civil society and political opposition

Actions towards civil society from the Belarusian government is the most substantial question during the mass protests. Since they are the ones searching for more democratic principles in the country of Belarus. They are also the ones taking risks by actively opposing the government. Historically and even so in this case, the protesters have faced harsh consequences for their anti-government activity. One of the first actions taken by the government affecting the people, is the internet shut down during election day. The government to control internet access, blocking social media and platforms connected to oppositional views, in an attempt to minimize the interactions between voters for the oppositional leader Svjatlana Tsichanoŭskaja. But the blockage was quickly disrupted by civil society engagement. The government denies using censoring equipment (Bloomberg, 2020).

The EFJ pushed the EU to impose sanctions on individuals with strong linkage to the Belarusian government in August 2020. By late August sanctions were imposed by the EU on high-level officials. Several journalists aiming to promote democratization have been replaced by government-friendly journalists from mainly Russia. It was leading to a media following that depicts the protesters as western actors, operating as a threat to the Belarusian way of life. In December both PEN Belarus and IFEX demanded further examinations of the human rights situation in Belarus, referring to the still ongoing violence towards oppositional democracy defenders (IFEX, 2021).

The civil society received support from the Human Rights Council (HRC) 42 states recognized and criticized the actions against the independent media in Belarus. But regardless of these actions from established journalists' groups and internationally recognized organizations, journalists and access to independent media have drastically been negatively targeted by the authorities. In April 2021 Belarus approved new legislation that further

undermines journalistic freedom. Journalists can now be faced with charges for dishonouring the state, and they might lose their journalistic license if they perform illegal activity during duty. These illegal activities refer for example to live sending mass protests with anti-government motives (IFEX, 2021).

The political opposition has been harshly targeted by the Belarusian government since they oppose a threat to the stability of the Lukashenko presidency. The opposition has been active in trying to highlight the lack of independent media and showing the Belarusian people that the international community is supporting their struggles for democracy. It is therefore important to address the struggles of the opposition in Belarus, on their quest for democratic principles. This showcases the difficulties of being in opposition in an autocratic state and the hinders for further civil society engagement in Belarus if they do not receive support from the EU.

Tsichanoŭskaja was forced to leave the country only days after the election and fled to Lithuania. She claims that the election was rigged, and her support was much greater than what the results showed (Euro News, 2021). Together with other members from the opposition, she encouraged the people of Belarus to protests against the election results. Her support was strong at first on both the streets and on social media, but her support has faded since her following has decreased. The price to pay for protesting in Belarus is too high. Close to the election, protesting could lead to 15 days in custody, but the situation has escalated, and protesters can now in the begging of 2021 lead to prison sentencing for up to five years. Few people are willing to jeopardize multiple years of their lives in the fight for democratic principles (Euro News, 2021).

Tsichanoŭskaja has received great support from the international community, but the events during the protests have even hurt the confidence of the opposition members and higher profiles. Many of the previously active figures in the movement have fled the country, leaving the opposition disorganized and not strong enough to push further. The government continues to target oppositional profiles, and many are still in 2021 imprisoned. Multiple members of the political opposition group, the Coordination Council (formed shortly after the 2020 election) are accused of having intentions to jeopardize the national security of Belarus and

Tsichanoŭskaja is accused of terrorist engagement. This has to a high degree restricted opposition to organize themselves (Euro News, 2021).

This depicts that the political opposition faces major difficulties in Belarus, in their search for democratic principles. Because many oppositional members are coerced to leave the country, the civil society loses their spirit to protests for democratic principles, due to the over violence by the authorities and the leaders of the movements cannot offer a stable political ground. This weakens the influence of the political opposition in the Belarusian society and therefore need help from the EU to reach the civil society's attention and their belief in the change.

The difficulties of the opposition and the tightening of the measures used against the political opposition is not in line with the hypothesis. Based on the material from various human rights organizations and European newspapers, the reactions and measures taken from the EU have not been meaningful to the civil society in this regard, but they have reacted.

4.6. EU reports – EU4 Belarus

In the European Commission (2020) *ANNEX of the Commission Implementing Decision on the special measure 2020 in favour of Belarus Action Document for: EU4Belarus: Solidarity with the People of Belarus*. The document states that the European Commission will initiate a special measure program, due to the vulnerability of the state during the protests and the Covid-19 pandemic. The program has four main objectives: “*Strengthen civic resilience, support to youth resilience, support to economic resilience and support to health resilience*” (EU Commission, 2020:3).

It articulates that one of the specific objectives of the initiative EU4Belarus is to “*Foster people-to-people contacts by increasing access to scholarships and stipends for studies and professional exposure and retraining in the EU.*” (EU Commission, 2020:12). Mobility and people-to-people contacts are one of the four main thematic areas of the special measures taken under the initiative (European Commission, 2020c). These objectives combined are designated to empower the Belarusian society from within, with extern help from the EU. This section affirms the relevance of the hypothesis, and partly illustrates the usage of democracy assistance tools (direct and indirect approaches).

The report also presents that the mass protests arranged through civic mobilization have according to the report engaged civil society in a way never seen before. This seems to be related to the mistreatment of the COVID-19 pandemic. Causing more people to join organizations to express their dissatisfaction. It is also interesting to note that the youth of Belarus, students and women have taken a new role in the civic engagement for a more open society. They are especially focusing on accessibility to independent media on the internet, which has been increasingly important during the pandemic. But may also had a positive effect on the call for access to independent media concerning the election (European Commission, 2020:4).

4.7. Belarus State Media – BELTA

As of this point, this research paper has only focused on how outside actors has spoken and reacted to the mass protests in Belarus. Now follows a short review of how the Belarusian biggest state-owned newspaper reports about the mass protests and the oppositions call for sanctions against the government. The Belarusian media shows an alternative view of the mass protests of 2020-2021. This is included in this thesis to show the lack of independent media in Belarus, how they speak of the international support to the anti-government civil society engagements and why it is important for the EU to reach the civil society. Based on the state media in Belarus, the supports to protesters and the oppositional is articulated to be non-existent, when in fact the international (specifically the EU) support for the opposition in Belarus is great.

In an article from the state-owned paper The Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BELTA, 2020) the Belarusian leader Lukashenko responds to the criticism from the opposition and the international community. From the Belarusian perspective, the call for sanctions from the international community and the opposition of Belarus is hard to grasp. Lukashenko questions why the opposition would want to sanction its own country in the first place since the effects are irreversible. If the opposition is willing to lead the country, they should show respect and gratitude, not seek to sanction their national industries. Lukashenko refers to the opposition

group Coordination Council, as ‘fugitives’, since they have fled the country because of the political climate in Belarus. He also states that the European community views the opposition as mad, and their demands on the government are not realistic.

Lukashenko speaks of the mass protests 2020 and accentuates that this is nothing new, protesters have often tried to shake the political situation during his presidency. He claims that the protesters are the same as previous protests and the support is not getting bigger. The protesters only increase because they are paid to be a part of the movement and include their relatives in the protests to drive up the number of protesters participating. The Belarusian government is strong, and no further attempts will be made to jeopardize their power. If the protesters cross the line, they force the government to respond. Lukashenko is not scared by the protesters and their attempts to shake the political situation is futile.

This article highlights the importance of assistance to the civic society in Belarus. They are not supported by any means by the society promoted by the Belarusian government. This can also illustrate the importance of access to independent media, since the information broadcasted by the government provide a twisted view of the existence of domestic opposition and the international communities support to the Belarusian civil society.

5. Analysis

5.1. The EU's actions

The timeline presented in the Results (page 18) illustrates that the EU reacted during the protests in Belarus 2020-2021. This emphasizes that the actions of external parties can be meaningful to support democratic assistance in autocratic regimes. By withdrawal from sports events and promoting active freedom organizations, restricts the Belarusian government's illusion of a free Belarusian society. The EU's individual role during the protests is on the other hand harder to distinguish, since multiple external actors have been active. Therefore, the hypothesis that the EU has reacted and acted to support the mass protests, cannot be confirmed. There is not enough evidence to support the argument that the actions from the EU were the single actor to have a key functioning, to the support of the civil movement.

It is difficult to state that the EU has had an influence on their own, or even that the EU was a driving force during the mass protests. Many international organizations actively showed support to the people and democratic opposition of Belarus. Here are some examples of organizations that made efforts during the same period: International Exchange of Expression Exchange (IFEX), Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Belarus Free Theatre, and the UN. Many organizations were awarded internationally for their risk takings to support the democratic opposition of Belarus, creating an external focus on the current events in Belarus. Joe Biden, the US president invited Tsikhanouskaya to his inauguration at the beginning of 2021 (IFEX, 2021).

To support civic engagement is an important measure because a well informed and active civil society is a step towards developing an alternative path for Belarusian development. To question the government and oppose the truth presented by the dictator Lukashenko. The need for support to civil society through independent media sources is demonstrated by the BELTA (2020) article earlier presented in the results. Lukashenko shows no support to the oppositional powers in Belarus and dismiss the interest from the international community and especially the EU. Therefore, the EU and other actors must keep displaying the ongoing struggles in civil society in Belarus. In this regard, the EU has reacted to the human rights

violations during the mass protests. However, the rival hypothesis of other actors being involved on pressuring the influential external to get involved, cannot be dismissed.

5.2. EU Reports – EU4 for Belarus

The Annual Action Reports has a weakness in this study, as they only discuss the potential effects and outcomes of their actions. The reports do not present how successful their previous work has been, but they present a risk evaluating board of their actions. Hence, I only use these reports to discuss *potential* effects and political will to engage in democratic assistance.

The Action Program Report states that the EU will continue their engagement in Belarus through civil society, by supporting several NGO's, the youth's university studies (Erasmus + scholarships), supporting small businesses (SMEs), women's movements financially, to create economic prosperity. The EU uses the term *special measures*, because of the critical situation in Belarus and emphasize that they will actively support civic engagement as one of their main objectives. This objective is also supported by the actions of the EU during the mass protests. They have repeatably reacted during the protests, not only in words but with action, for the support of democratization. They have sanctioned the government numerous times, openly criticized the actions of the regime, restricting their access to EU territory and further cooperation, if they do not respect the EU's demands for change and respect for democratic principles.

This showcases that the EU uses a civil society approach to offer democracy assistance towards Belarus in both direct and indirect approaches. But this cannot be used as evidence for the hypothesis, since it is not directly targeted to address the political situation in Belarus of the mass protests, instead it is focused on potential outcomes.

6. Conclusions

In this thesis, I conducted a case study of Belarus through the method of process tracing. I studied the relationship between EU democracy assistance and the development of civil society engagement, during the mass protests after the 2020 election. I choose the method of process tracing since it is useful in research papers that focus on analyzing some sort of change, in my case, the change of democratic development during the mass protests from a civil society perspective. Previous scholars have not examined the effects of EU democracy assistance on civil society in neighbouring countries that are not EU candidate countries.

I relied on the theoretical findings from Levitsky and Way (2005, 2007, 2014) and Beichelt et al., (2014). They purport that linkage and leverage approaches are helpful to understand the processes of democracy assistance in autocratic states. The EU is the largest aid donor to Belarus since their bilateral cooperation started under the ENP in 2004. Therefore, I reasoned that the EU would be the most influential actor during the process of democracy assistance during the mass protests in Belarus, in the quest for democratic principles. I hypothesis the relationship between the EU's reaction and involvement and correlation with democracy assistance, through civil society, during the mass protests after the 2020 election.

By reading selected material from European newspapers formulated in a European perspective, material from the EU Commission, a civil society perspective (focused on political opposition) and a Belarusian perceptive, I analyzed the character of the reactions and involvement of the EU during the mass protests from the time period August 2020 to April 2021. Searching for evidence that could support my hypothesis, the EU has reacted during the mass protests, and actively used democracy assistance instruments, targeting civil society in Belarus. *How has the EU's reaction been characterized during the mass protests of 2020-2021 in Belarus?* Aiming to illustrate how the EU was involved and how the civil society, human rights organizations and the Belarusian authorities have acted during the mass protests.

I conducted a timeline that illustrates that the EU has reacted and been active during the mass protests with multiple instances using direct and indirect approaches of linkage. For example, public announcements criticizing the Belarusian government, repeated sanctions against high-level officials, financial support packages directed to civil society and calling for the EU to

adopt new legislation to target human rights violations more effectively (Magnitsky law). Multiple organizations engaged in the freedom of speech has also been very active during the protests to elevate the human rights violations in Belarus, pushing for influential actors (EU and UN) to target the government further.

Given the scheme of the analysis presented, the hypothesis that the EU reacted to support the democratic mass protests in Belarus 2020-2021 cannot pass since a rival hypothesis exists and cannot be dismissed. The evidence that the EU's actions are characterized by linkage approaches to democracy assistance, during the mass protests is not strong enough to eliminate alternative hypotheses. The Annual Action Reports and the selected news articles do demonstrate that the EU has actively supported the civic movement during the course of events, but that is not enough evidence necessary to support the hypothesis and establish caution. The results cannot determine that the EU's action on their own, was the most vital and most influential actor during the mass protests and since the results of the ongoing mass protests are not clear. Therefore, it is not sufficiently apparent that the EU's usage of democracy assistance through direct and indirect approaches has been the driving force of change during the mass protests, since it demands elimination of all other possible hypotheses.

However, one could argue that the human rights organizations participating in the quest for democratic principles has had a more successful approach, and instead been the driving force for the reactions seen from prominent external actors, such as the EU. It is possible that the EU felt pressured from the medial reporting on the human rights violations in Belarus, and were forced to act, because of their high devotion to democratic principles.

In summary, the EU has reacted, and has been characterized by a continual support to civil society. The EU has managed to cooperate with organizations with close ties to the civic movement of Belarus and has in that regard been involved in democracy assistance through civil society, during the mass protests. However, it is not sufficiently clear that the EU's reactions were characterized by the democracy assistance tools, using the direct and indirect approaches. Despite the involvement from the EU, the violations of human rights have in no way stopped in Belarus, and the political climate is still extensively controlled by the

Belarusian authorities. Making the prospect of the democratic future of Belarus challenging to state as positive. This thesis has focused on the EU's reaction and support to civil society during the mass protests, showing that the EU has been involved. Still, it cannot determine because if it was to support their claim on offering democracy assistance to civil society in third part countries, or if they felt forced to act because of the medial reporting. These measures are not rigorous enough to determine the long-term effects of the EU democracy assistance activity, without more research on the topic.

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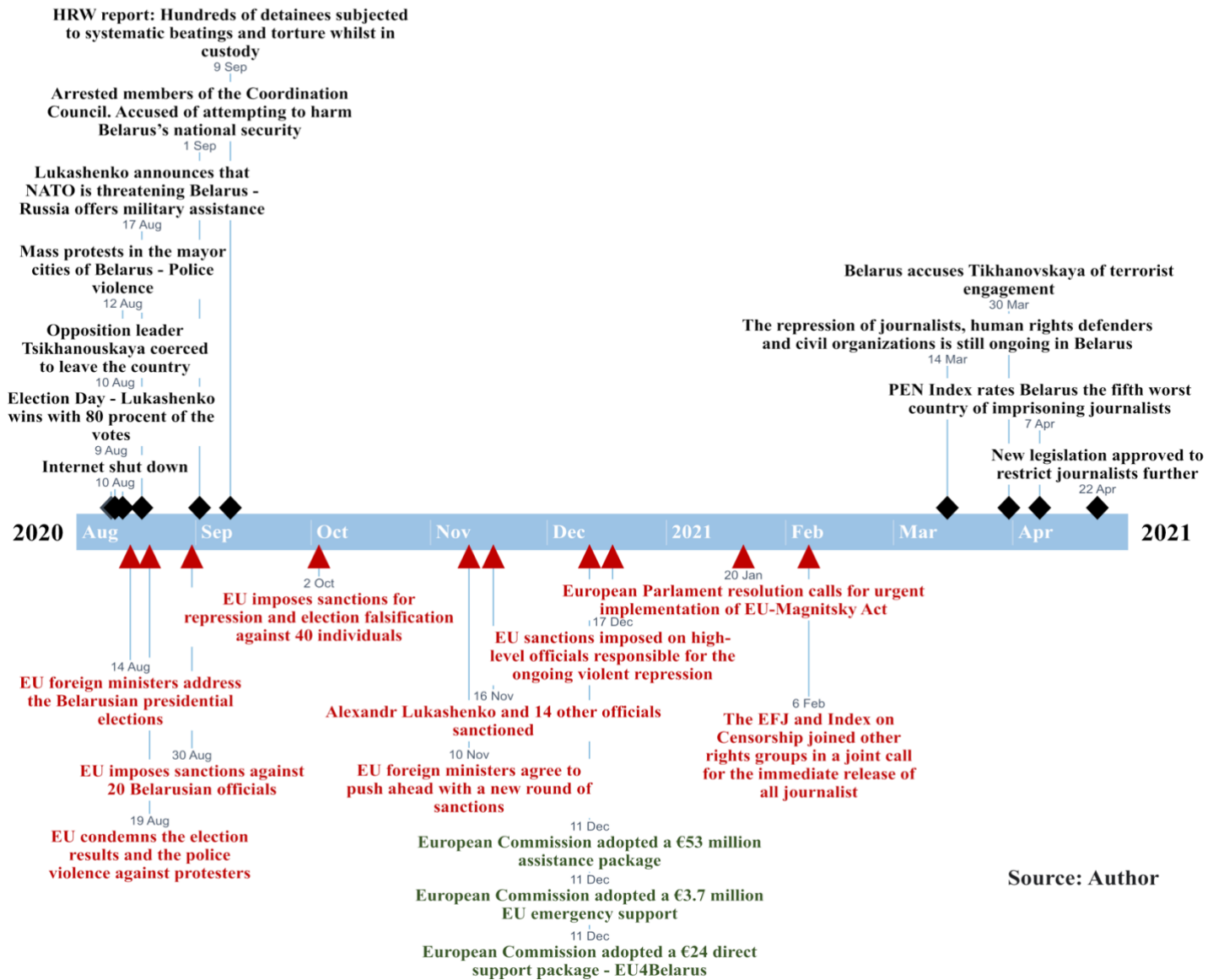
Appendix

Appendix 1.

	Sufficient to establish causation	
	NO	YES
Necessary to establish causation	<p>1. Passing: Affirms relevance of hypothesis but does not confirm it Failing: Suggests hypothesis not relevant but does not eliminate it Implication for rival hypotheses: None</p>	<p>3 Passing: Confirms hypothesis Failing: Does not eliminate hypothesis Implication for rival hypotheses: None</p>
	<p>2 Passing: Affirms relevance of hypothesis but does not confirm it Failing: Eliminates it Implication for rival hypotheses: None</p>	<p>4. Passing: Confirms hypothesis Failing: Falls short in establishing necessity and/or sufficiency Implication for rival hypotheses: Eliminates all other hypothesis</p>

Appendix 2.

Figure 1: Main incidents during the mass protests in Belarus 2020-2021



Source: Author

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