



**Democracy support ‘post-imperial-style’.
UK and democracy in EU’s Southern and Eastern
neighbourhood**

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Abstract

This contribution aims at uncovering practices used by the United Kingdom (UK) to support democracy in EU's Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods. The UK has actively employed its external policy to promote democracy in EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods. This has been influenced by its colonial history, internal democratic traditions, strategic interests, and also its relations with the EU, especially in the context of Brexit. In the South, particularly in the MENA region, the UK's engagement intensified after the 2011 Arab uprisings, balancing support for democratic movements with maintaining strategic partnerships with some of the authoritarian regimes for the sake of stability and security. In the Eastern Neighbourhood, the UK's influence has been shaped by historical relationships with Russia, its role in supporting EU policies, and post-Brexit ambitions. The UK prioritizes democracy support mainly in Belarus and Ukraine, emphasizing human rights, media independence, anti-corruption, and parliamentary capacity-building.

Introduction¹

The United Kingdom (UK) has been employing various external policies to support democracy both in the EU's Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods. Due to its historical, colonial involvement in parts of Northern Africa and the Middle East, it is clear that the EU neighbours in the south have been drawing significant part of UK's attention in this regard. More recently, this engagement was connected to the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing 'Global War on Terror', and the July 2005 attacks in London. The UK's New Labour government supported the United States by sending significant military forces to Afghanistan and Iraq. This, on the one hand, brought the UK closer to the messianic, neo-conservative approach of spreading democracy, where the totalitarian regimes are evil and need to be overthrown and the democratic ones are good. On the other hand, it also put the security issue high on the agenda – the UK government has been supplying armaments to some of the authoritarian regimes in the Southern Neighbourhood, so that they were stable enough in their ability to oppose radicalism (especially radical Islam). Additionally, at times, the UK Prime Minister had no problems with official visits to authoritarian Syria, Libya or Egypt. Both these considerations (i.e. the will to spread democracy and insecurity connected with terrorist threat), as we will show further in the report, influenced the way in which UK supported democracy in the MENA region.

This is not to say that the eastern dimension has been neglected by London, however, due to lack of former colonial engagement, it does not constitute a traditional area of influence for the UK. Decision makers in London have also been very consistent in their support for European Neighbourhood Policy in both southern and eastern directions. In the Eastern Neighbourhood, there have always been a potential to transform neighbours into future EU members, which, in line with British expectations, could be instrumental in widening the European integration rather than deepening it (Grant).

The UK is also a well-established nation-state and a former colonial empire. This brings about various strategic interests in different geographical areas. This might imply two issues connected to democracy support. Firstly, support for democracy might become subordinate to other strategic considerations, as would be the case in any national case study. However, particularly in the UK case, supporting democracy could invoke its colonial and imperial legacy, particularly in the former colonies. It is because, historically, the UK pushed for democratic elections as a

¹ Note: The content of this article was last updated on 15.02.2024

condition for the former colonies on their way to independence (Lee & Paine, 2019). This might be associated with an idea that the UK is a teacher of democracy from whom others should learn. This could be strengthened by the fact that the UK indeed is one of the longest-established democracies in the world, with very strong parliamentary tradition. After all, England is sometimes labelled as a somewhat mythical ‘mother of all parliaments’ (Miller, Column 483). This tradition is also exemplified by significant power of the UK House of Commons over the executive, even in the realm of foreign and security policy, where support for democracy can be (and is) often at stake.

Secondly, it is important to take into account the impact of Brexit for the UK’s foreign policy. Starting from 2020, the UK has left the EU structures, including the Common Foreign and Security Policy as well as the policies guided mostly by the European Commission (including the International Cooperation and Development). In its 2021 review of foreign and security policy entitled “Global Britain in a competitive age” (HM Government, 2021), the UK Government defined its new priorities, also with regard to democracy support (DS). Under the “Shaping the open international order of the future” section, the review not only puts emphasis on promoting the ‘usual suspects’ when it comes to DS such as human rights, rule of law, gender equality, media freedom and good governance, but also stresses the importance of boosting its own image, which would lead the UK to become a ‘soft power superpower’(ibid. 49). This report proceeds in the following fashion: first the general overview of the democracy support in UK’s foreign policy is presented. This includes both the rationale for undertaking democracy support tasks, as well as main instruments used. In the subsequent two parts the main focus is firstly on the UK’s engagement in the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhoods in which the most important areas of democracy support are indicated and differentiated across different ENP countries. Finally, some tentative conclusions are provided.

1 The UK’s approach to democracy support

The democracy support theme features very strongly in the UK’s foreign policy. According to Mr Neil Holland, Head of the United Kingdom’s Delegation to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the UK is committed to promoting democracy and defending democratic freedoms (GOV.UK, “Promoting Democracy and Defending Democratic Freedoms). UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), which in its 2020 annually published report entitled ‘Human Rights & Democracy’, pointed out that ‘[p]romoting democracy and defending democratic freedoms are fundamental to the UK’s foreign policy’ and that ‘strong democratic institutions and accountable governments, which uphold universal rights and the rule of law, are key building blocks for secure and prosperous states’ (FCDO, 2021: 2). In its Outcome Delivery Plan, the newly established Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCDO)² set out as a first priority to ‘shape the international order and ensure the UK is a force for good in the world by: supporting sustainable development and humanitarian needs; promoting human rights and democracy; and establishing common international standards’ (GOV.UK, Outcome Delivery Plan).

These democratic overtones in UK’s foreign policy have been present in the political discourse also before, sometimes voiced in a very decisive way and to certain extent militarised. This is visible in Tony Blair’s “Chicago doctrine” which introduced the idea of humanitarian intervention in a situation where human rights and democratic values are in danger (Atkins, 2006). It is based

² In 2020, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) was merged with the Department for International Development (DfID).

on the broader pre-emptive approach and moral responsibility to act in the name of democracy, as also expressed in the concept of the Responsibility to Protect – R2P (Doe, 2006). The Chicago Doctrine values democratic principles and the protection of human rights over the sovereignty of states, making sovereignty conditional to the degree which these states adhere to democratic values. However, as Blair claimed, ‘our actions are guided by a more subtle blend of mutual self-interest and moral purpose in defending the values we cherish. In the end, values and interests merge. If we can establish and spread the values of liberty, the rule of law, human rights and an open society, then that is in our national interests, too, proposed’ (Global Policy Forum, 1999). Afterwards, he introduced several conditions for a military intervention, such as abuse of human rights – including genocide –, acting in the name of security and supporting democratic forces against oppressive governments (Freedman, 2017). That was very much in line with ‘just war’ theory, which allows the use of force to overthrow dictators.

Tony Blair’s conservative successor – David Cameron (PM 2010-2016), assumed a similar, yet less adventurous position regarding the value-based approach to foreign policy. He labelled it as ‘Liberal Conservatism’, where unlike in the ‘*unrealistic and simplistic*’ approach of the New Labour (e.g. in Iraq), Britain should not impose democracy from outside without understanding the actual threat. Instead, it should work with other members of international community and not limit itself to military action (The Guardian, 2011).

There are various, non-military instruments through which UK realises these commitments. Some are embedded within the development policies, and some are explicitly labelled as democracy support tools. The UK is the 5th largest Official Development Aid (ODA) spender from among the DAC countries. Overall, this is about GBP 12bn annually and around GBP 700 million is allocated to ‘Government and civil society’ (FCDO, 2023) sector, which might be attributed to democracy support perhaps more directly than in case of other sectors. This allocation benefits the Middle-Income Countries (MIC), as it constitutes about 25% of all bilateral ODA donated by the UK for government and civil society (ibid. 36). The UK also declares commitment to other actions conducive towards democracy support. According to the ‘UK support for Democracy’ policy paper (Cabinet Office, 2022) delivered for the Summit of Democracies meeting, the UK, under the ‘defending against authoritarianism’ label, has been acting in the following six domains:

- Creating security partnerships, mainly through boosting the presence of armed forces ‘to maintain stability and freedoms in key regions and increase opportunities for other actors to undermine international security and values’. Additionally, this support is further channelled through NATO and UN missions.
- ‘Building back better’, mainly through helping the developing countries to make use of green technologies, financial services that are conducive towards inclusion, consumer protection and economic growth, and more efficient and accountable use of public finance.
- Trade pacts that support ‘free enterprise democracies’, through establishing standards for transparency and accountability in collaboration with open economies that share UK’s values, implementing effective measures to address and counteract corruption risks while solidifying partner countries’ commitment to the multilateral and Rules Based International System.
- ‘Technology for democracy’, through working with “governments that share democratic values” on issues such as open, transparent, secure and inclusive media.

- Strengthening international trust in democracy, especially in the post-pandemic context, through enabling like-minded international partners to develop evidence-based approaches to strengthening and defending inclusive democratic systems.
- Strengthening democracy within the UK.

Other structures which carry out democracy support in UK's foreign policy can also be identified. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) can be deemed as a prominent one as well. It is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the FCDO. There are also other instruments, though less prominent:

- Human Rights and Democracy Department (promoting human rights through funding and monitoring programmes);
- Magna Carta Fund for Human Rights and Democracy (funding schemes for projects promoting human rights and democracy);
- Rules Based International System Fund (supporting international law, institutions and democratic norms);
- The John Bunyan Fund for Freedom of Religion and Belief (protection and promotion of freedom of religion through funding campaigns).

Lastly, especially in the post-Brexit context, the UK seems to be finding its new role in the world paying special attention to democracy support and human rights. One of the ideas put forward by the UK-based Foreign Policy Centre (FPC) think tank is for the UK to become a 'library of democracy' to be used and learned from by others (Hug, 2020). This would mean acting 'as an important resource and meeting place for the community of democratic nations' as well as providing 'asylum to human rights defenders, independent journalists and other dissidents seeking a place of refuge from persecution' (Ibid., 6).

1.1 UK's support for democracy in the Southern Neighbourhood

Because of the colonial history, the Southern Neighbourhood seems to a more prominent area of expertise and action for the United Kingdom. It however needs to be noted that UK's role in North Africa and in the Middle East has been declining, at least since 1956 nationalisation of the Suez Canal. It is still a region of strategic significance though in the context of energy, terrorism and migration, among others. Just like it has been with other actors, the 2011 Arab uprisings seemed to constitute an important opportunity for the UK to adjust its policy towards democracy support and opened a possibility to reconcile London's strategic interests with a value-based approach (Leech & Gaskarth, 2015). According to evidence given in front of House of Commons (HoC) Select Committee, the UK had accepted authoritarian governments as 'guarantors of 'stability' and dedicated opponents of 'Islamic fundamentalism' (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2012). In a written evidence given in front of the same Committee, but a year earlier, Amnesty International clearly indicates that human rights and democracy considerations had been of secondary importance and subordinate to commercial and security interests of the UK, and sometimes within outright contradiction with democratic principles, e.g. when the UK sold crowd control vehicles to the dictatorial regimes in MENA, mainly to Libya, but also other equipment to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Egypt (Foreign Affairs Committee "Written Evidence from Amnesty International UK").

In his 2011 speech in front of the Kuwaiti National Assembly, Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron somewhat acknowledged UK's unclear attitude towards democracy support in the region by stating that:

“[f]or decades, some have argued that stability required highly controlling regimes, and that reform and openness would put that stability at risk. So, the argument went, countries like Britain faced a choice between our interests and our values. And to be honest, we should acknowledge that sometimes we have made such calculations in the past” (GOV.UK, 2011).

The rest of his speech has however been very much focused on the significance of democracy, and, quite importantly, that these democratic processes or reforms need to be locally owned and meet aspirations and expectations of the region's population, albeit supported with good will by the UK (Ibid.).

Interestingly, even though after 2011 Arab uprisings, there has not been a significant change in allocating resources and setting priorities of the democracy support policy, especially when it comes to the civil rights (and particularly human rights) aspect³. Since 2007, Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Syria were the only MENA countries on the list of priority countries regarding their human rights record. In 2010, Libya was added to this list, and in 2015 also Egypt. In 2021 Israel was removed, and only the Occupied Palestinian Territories remained. This has a practical implication as, according to the 2015-2016 Human Rights and Democracy Programme strategy, it is mostly the priority countries which are entitled to receive support for such sectors, including the abolition of the death penalty, business & human rights, democratic processes, freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, preventing sexual violence and women's rights.

From the MENA region support for Tunisia in the areas of freedom of expression, including capacity building, better quality reporting, research and analysis, lobbying and campaigning and that lead to action and improved advocacy at the national, regional or multilateral level, legislation regulating civil society, media, and the internet is brought into line with international standards, providing individuals with greater access to information or with the ability to express legitimate viewpoints (FCO, 2015:5).

Syria has been supported in the area of preventing sexual violence, including advocacy and action at the community and national level is taken to tackle sexual violence. Greater women's – but also men's – participation and engagement as partners in actions to reduce the likelihood of sexual violence taking place. For example, actions that aim to change attitudes and behaviours and aim to work with state and local institutions, such as schools, churches or national authorities, grassroots awareness of the issue, and how to overcome the challenges in tackling sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations (for example, outreach and training for civil society and state actors on legal and other rights), is built (Ibid., 7).

Egypt has received support in the area of women's rights, including removing or reforming discriminatory laws and policies, developing constitutions, legislation and policies tackling violence against women and girls in line with regional and global commitments, tackling structural causes of violence against women and girls, in particular by challenging societal attitudes, behaviour and practice, increasing participation of women in political and public

³ Based on the review of the Human Rights and Democracy Reports

affairs (Ibid.), as well as Libya and Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories in unspecified areas (Ibid., 8).

It seems that the aspects of democracy 'relating to political participation and horizontal accountability, and also to some extent the effective power to govern are better implemented in the (part of) the MENA region by the WFD. One of its flagship programs launched in 2012 and still active is entitled 'Enhancing women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa', and it focuses on Libya, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Palestine. It aims at elevating the participation of women in political leadership roles, create opportunities for women to engage in politics, and fortify legal frameworks to safeguard women and girls against violence. There is a number of on-going and completed projects in many Southern Neighbourhood countries, such as for example: MENA Women Inclusive and Accountable Politics, which assisted parliamentary bodies, female leaders, regional institutions, and civil society organisations in enhancing their capacity to effectively champion the rights of women and girls. Among the activities of these initiatives are 'training a cadre of women election observers in the region in collaboration with the Arab Women's Organisation, peer-to-peer exchanges on recommendations for women's electoral success in the Arab region, developing research on the Economic Cost of Violence Against Women' (WFD, "Enhancing Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa"). This was accomplished by fostering greater public debate, crafting legislation that provides enhanced safeguards, enhancing parliamentary scrutiny, and bolstering political representation and leadership both regionally and nationally (Ibid.). Additionally, through this program the electoral component of democracy has been tackled through creation of a group of female election observers from Arab countries to be deployed to monitor elections in the region.

Apart from the gender perspective, there are also other initiatives focused on:

- increasing knowledge and usage of public policy analysis by Members of Lebanese Parliament and committees in the region by supporting the production of evidence-based, accessible, and relevant policy analysis
- strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations in advocacy, monitoring, and evaluation of public policies for transparency and anti-corruption in Morocco.
- supporting the modernisation of parliamentary support services by working with members of Algerian parliament and trained staff in core functions of the parliament.

This is just a sample of projects done at WFD, but they have a common denominator of being rather focused on the participation of various actors, especially the civil society, in the political processes; women empowerment; as well as horizontal accountability with special emphasis on reinforcing the transparency in the decision-making process.

Another scheme, with a slightly different focus is the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) of which North African and Middle Eastern countries are significant recipients (HM Government, "Conflict, Stability and Security Fund: Annual Report", 20-23). Although the main aim of this fund, which was created in 2015, is to "prevent conflicts and tackle threats to UK interests that arise from instability overseas" (Ibid., 3), it is stated that it is supposed to contribute mainly to two Sustainable Development Goals: 16 and 5, which are promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies, and achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (Ibid. 4). The CSSF is present in all the MENA countries and is cross-departmental, with main financial input from the FCDO and the Ministry of Defense. In 2019-2020 ca. GBP 140 million were spent on the region,

although in reality it was probably more, as other spending categories are also cross-regional (Ibid. 27). The top beneficiary of this Fund is Afghanistan, and from the Southern Neighbourhood region Lebanon and Occupied Palestinian Territories. In case of Lebanon, this contribution is related to UK's participation in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) mission (Ibid. 23).

It is also worthwhile to come back to the question of military action in support of democracy. As already stated in this report, this is one of acceptable tools to be used by the UK, however its use has been somewhat inconsistent in the Southern Neighborhood. In the 2011 intervention in Libya, the UK participated as a member of NATO coalition, which did not spark significant contestation. In 2013 Syrian case, where Syrian regime allegedly used chemical weapons against civilians, the UK government planned a military intervention, however, it was vetoed (by a rather close margin) by the House of Commons, apparently for the first time in over 200 years. Then, in 2015, on the extension of UK's military involvement in Syria through airstrikes, the Parliament gave its approval. Finally, in 2018, in connection to similar atrocities in Syria, the PM has not sought House of Commons approval at all and authorised additional airstrikes (Mills). Various outcomes in all those cases should be rather explained by internal factors (e.g. public opinion, war weariness regarding intervention in Iraq), rather than democracy support considerations.

To conclude on UK's involvement in democracy promotion in the Southern Neighbourhood, it is possible to claim that London is able to employ tools and mechanisms which can support all the aspects of embedded democracy as defined by Merkel and Kneip. These aspects include free and fair democratic elections held regularly; political liberties such as freedom of speech, of expression, of association; civil rights (e.g. rule of law, constitutional equality); horizontal accountability (e.g. separation of power, independent judiciary; and effective power to govern, meaning transparency and lack of corruption. The tools are employed across the whole MENA region and intensified after 2011. However, it is also possible to claim that at times UK democracy support activities (including those in the MENA region) can be subordinate to other political goals and hampered by 'not wanting to lose access to partner governments' (ICAI, "Approach paper"), and thus support authoritarianism. This is however less visible after 2012. According to Leech and Gaskarth, the UK government was driven by various concerns and differentiated its approach to the Southern EU Neighbours by showing significant support to pro-democratic protesters in countries like Libya and Syria, while not being as much committed in cases of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine or Tunisia. In case of Bahrain (which is beyond scope of this report) the UK actually supported the authoritarian government. The explanations for this may vary. Daddow and Schnapper explain a more decisive action against the Libyan dictator through the lens of legitimacy to intervene, inevitable regime changes and also a long-standing idea in the British foreign policy stating that the dictators should not be appeased. With regard to Syria, Leech and Gaskarth claim that the connections between the UK and Syrian state were loose enough, so that acting against the undemocratic regimes did not bring any costs for the UK (unlike in the case of Bahrain).

1.2 UK's support for democracy in the Eastern Neighbourhood

London's relationship with the EU Eastern Neighbourhood differs from that with the Southern Neighbourhood. For historical reasons, this region has been a traditional area of influence of other actors – Russia and Germany. The UK has been particularly connected to Russia through economic interests, yet since 2006-2007 started to be critical towards the regime in Moscow and

in one of the reports has been labelled as a 'frosty pragmatic' (Leonard & Popescu), as it was not afraid to criticize Moscow for human rights abuses and rule of law and then to support the idea of the European Neighbourhood Policy aimed at democratisation of eastern neighbours. On the other hand, the UK has not tackled the problem of 'Londongrad' – a situation in which many Russian oligarchs who were close to Putin had invested their own money into real-estate and financial assets in UK's capital and the UK government tacitly accepted this situation even after the 2014 Crimea annexation. However, after the full-scale invasion of Russia against Ukraine in 2022, the assets of many Russians have been frozen (The Economist, 2022).

The UK's democracy support in the Eastern Neighbourhood varies from country to country. The only country from the region that was given priority is Belarus. It has been on the list since 2007, then crossed out in 2015, just to be deemed priority again in 2020. According to Ayers, the UK wanted to reassert its global role 'by exhibiting to the world and its allies that it is proactive in protecting human rights and by demonstrating to Belarus that it is still a strong actor and relevant without the EU'. Supporting human rights in Belarus, but also free media and press were the main strategies used. These were coupled with high level bilateral meetings with Belarusian ministers to foster economic and military cooperation. Even though these activities had been however suspended after the 2020 fraudulent elections and crackdown on the opposition, it can be claimed that they were difficult to reconcile with democracy support and rather conducive towards legitimising the autocratic rule. According to the 2021 Human Rights and Democracy report, the UK in Belarus is supporting democracy through anti-regime sanctions and boosting financial support to free media and civil society. There were also high-level meetings between the UK officials (including the Prime Minister) and the representatives of the Belarusian democratic opposition – Sviatlana Tskikhanouskaya and Alex Bialiatski (FCDO, 2022). Interestingly, the WFD has never conducted any democracy support activities in Belarus, perhaps due to lack of possibility to operate on the ground in the country.

Regarding Ukraine, according to FCDO, the 'UK has a good track record of support for governance, economic, and social reform in Ukraine, particularly on anti-corruption, judicial reform, and elections' (GOV.UK, 2023). Since after the 2022 Russian aggression, the main activities are concentrated on Ukraine's resilience and the effective power to govern under armed conflict realities, as well as preparation for post-war reconstruction under democratic conditions. Therefore, the priority is given to judicial reform and anti-corruption activities (over GBP 38 million in the last 3 years), but issues such as inclusive elections, decentralisation, gender equality (around 8% of allocations) and LGBTQ rights are also supported (Ibid.). Despite these activities, there has been some criticism, similar to that connected to the Belarussian case, in which the UK's very strong and robust support for Ukraine right after the 2022 invasion has rather been dictated by a willingness to be perceived by Brussels as nimble and untied and as an assertion of Britain's post-Brexit global role. That kind of strong reaction was however missing during the 2014 Crimea annexation, when London was one of the main places for money-laundering by Russian oligarchs (Kampfner).

Currently (as of late 2023) within the EFD framework, there is only one program being implemented in Ukraine, namely the Rada Next Generation (RANG). The program places its emphasis on enhancing the institutional capabilities of the Ukrainian parliament - Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (VRU), particularly concerning accountability and oversight procedures. It is actively producing reports that offer suggestions for enhancing support to civil society engagement in various areas, including legal drafting, parliamentary research services, the entire

policy development process, and post-legislative scrutiny. In response to the outbreak of war, WFD also provided guidance to the VRU on utilising hybrid and online procedures for policymaking in conflict situations (WFD.ORG, 2023). Before the war, there were other EFD program active in Ukraine focused on the parliament's democratic capacity, accountability, transparency and inclusiveness, such as 'Inclusive and accountable politics in Ukraine (2018-2022)', 'Ensuring effective COVID-19 legislation (2020-2021)' or 'Ukraine MPs Partnership Scheme (2016-2017)'.

Moldova seems to be the least important country for the UK from the non-Caucasus EU eastern neighbours. The WFD is not active there, and the main instrument used by London is the Good Governance Fund (GGF) through which ca. GBP 2,3 million was spent since 2020 on purposes such as 'supporting the development of an independent, professional media, support to anti-corruption and judiciary reform and enhancing democracy in Moldova through inclusive and transparent elections' (GOV.UK, 2021). Moreover, UK's support is focused on activities such as: the implementation of the university curriculum on electoral education; carrying out informational campaigns on the importance of women's political and electoral participation in all levels of government; supporting local civil society organisations in applying a human rights-based approach in the process of public budgeting and consultation; capacity development of the Moldovan Central Electoral Commission (CEC) in the field of public communication during elections; conducting research to assess the level of civic involvement of vulnerable groups and carrying out information campaigns at national level. These projects are done together with the OECD and USAID (UNDP.ORG, 2022).

From the Caucasus region, out of the three partners, Georgia seems to be most important target of UK's democracy support initiatives. This is the only country of the region, in which London is actively involved in all three elements of UK's regional strategy towards the Caucasus: security, governance and prosperity (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2019). Although, similarly to the Ukraine's case, Britain was not too active in 2008, when Georgia was attacked by Russia. Nonetheless, there are several democracy support initiatives active in Georgia, mostly ran by the WFD. These include programs on environmental democracy aimed at boosting oversight and scrutiny powers of the Georgian parliament, especially vis-à-vis country's environmental policy; parliamentary pre and post budget scrutiny, support for newly elected parliamentarians, and reform of the parliamentary International Relations Department (WFD.ORG, 2023).

There are two more instruments with significant focus on the Caucasus region. Of particular importance for Georgia is the Eastern Partnership CSSF, as it is administered from Tbilisi, but operates in all the South Caucasus countries. It has an annual budget of ca. GBP 3,5 million and deals with issues somewhat similar to those tackled in the Southern Neighbourhood, such as improving the effectiveness, transparency and accountability of regional governments and security sectors; reducing the effect of destabilising disinformation and conflict narratives; increasing the space for constructive dialogue on conflict resolution by supporting dialogue mechanisms, inter-community initiatives and confidence-building measures for officials and civil society; reducing the isolation and vulnerability of conflict-affected societies by addressing socio-political and economic challenges affecting communities in conflict-affected areas (Ibid.). It is then a tool that brings together the governance and security pillar of UK's strategy in the South Caucasus.

Similarly to Moldova, there is also the GGF scheme present in Georgia, although with a slightly higher budget of GBP 5,5 million (2019-2023) with initiatives aimed at supporting public

administration reform; building more inclusive and responsive governing institutions and already mentioned before advancing environmental democracy (GOV.UK, 2023). Lastly, there is a small subprogram under the CSSF entitled Counter-Disinformation and Media Development (CDMD), with a very small annual budget of GBP 1 million for Southern Caucasus aimed at countering Russia's misinformation campaigns and supporting independent media and their plurality and balanced ways of conveying news. This is done in cooperation with the BBC World Service.

Armenia has been the 2nd most fertile ground for UK's democracy support activities in the region. The footprint seems to be however much weaker than in Georgia's case. The WFD is present in Armenia in a similar capacity – to boost parliamentary scrutiny and oversight capacity, with special focus on energy policy and gender-responsive budgeting practices in Armenia's case. The WFD also launched 12 short-term and 2 long-term missions to monitor parliamentary elections in Armenia in December 2018 (WFD.ORG, "Supporting Public Financial Management and a Modern Parliament for Armenia"). The GGF is also active in Armenia with ca. GBP 4,7 million (2019-2023) budget implementing project on parliamentary support and political empowerment of women and promoting youth leadership in local communities (Ibid.). Finally, there is Azerbaijan, which is the most important economic partner for the UK in the region. Yet, when it comes to democracy support there are no concrete projects carried out.

London's relationship with the EU's Eastern Neighbours differs from its links with the Southern ENP partners due to historical and geopolitical factors. While the Eastern Neighbourhood countries have never been under British colonial rule, the UK has maintained economic ties with Russia but adopted a critical stance toward Moscow's human rights abuses since the mid-2000s. Belarus seems to have received priority attention, with the UK aiming to demonstrate its post-Brexit global role by supporting human rights and free media. Similar strategy seems to be at play vis-a-vis the Ukrainian case. In Moldova, the UK primarily utilizes the Good Governance Fund to support media independence, anti-corruption, and electoral education. In the Caucasus region, Georgia has been a significant focus of UK democracy support initiatives, with programs aimed at parliamentary oversight and environmental democracy. Armenia also receives support for parliamentary capacity building, while Azerbaijan, despite its economic importance, has not been targeted for democracy support policies.

2 Concluding remarks

It is clear that the theme of democracy support features very strongly in UK's foreign policy, both discursively and behaviourally. One could perhaps identify two pivotal moments when these actions were redefined. The first one seems to be the 2011 Arab uprisings, when despite the lack of additional funding, the UK has somewhat strengthened its policy of democracy support over committing to supporting stable, but authoritarian, undemocratic regimes in this region. Also, at that time, the UK was still a member of the EU and thus followed the general policy line of the bloc. Moreover, between 2009 and 2014 British national, Catherine Ashton was in charge of Union's foreign policy, as she occupied the post of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) and was actively involved in EU's diplomacy in the region at that time.

In the Eastern Neighbourhood, it was neither the 2008 Russian aggression on Georgia nor 2014 annexation of Crimea that constituted a certain shift in London's democracy support policy in the east. However, it is apparently the Brexit that pushed UK policymakers for a more active approach in this regard. Britain was supposed to play a role of another great power, one which

would employ “invoking norms and values such as democracy, freedom and the rule of law” (Opperman et al., 2019: 9). Having left the EU, Britain has been looking for a more distinct approach towards the region and decided to take a more active approach in criticising Russia for trying to impose undemocratic solutions in Ukraine, as well as Belarus. Through such a stance, the UK was able to differentiate itself from the most powerful EU players – France and Germany, who seemed to be more appeasing vis-à-vis Moscow’s aggressive actions. This has been very well visible after February 2022 and the Russian invasion, when the UK has significantly boosted its support for Ukraine and decided to overcome the ‘Londongrad’ problem.

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