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Comparative History of Political Systems

A comparative study of the role of civil society of Belarus and Georgia: a window of opportunity

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I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own independent scholarly work. All references contained within it have been correctly cited and the original authors acknowledged. No material other than that listed has been used.

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Abstract

The longevity of Belarusian authoritarian regime has surpassed that of similar regimes in other parts of the world. This is particularly surprising considering the regional context of post-communist countries, where color revolutions inflamed by electoral protests have led to the overthrow of authoritarian political systems (Burkhardt, 2015). Although Belarus encountered conditions that appeared to be favorable for a transition to democracy, yet it remains the last dictactorship of Europe (Wilson, 2021). The socio-economic contract that Lukashenka succeeded to stipulate with its people, the extensive repression of dissent and the strong Russian grip on the country have anaesthetised Belarusian people for more than twenty years giving rise to a sultanistic political system. However, during the pandemic and in occasion of the electoral turnover of 2020, Lukanshenko made some missteps shaking the former passive electorate and awakening a sense of *peoplehood* culminated in the Belarusian exiled opposition government represented by Svetlana Tichanovskaja (Korosteleva, 2023). On the other hand, Georgia in comparison with the political system of Belarus could be called apparently a successful example of democratisation of the post-Soviet region produced by the peaceful mobilisation of the Rose revolution of 2003. In that occasion, civil society played a pivotal role representing the primary driving force of change, succeding in expelling the incumbent and stabilising the political regime. In light of the successful case of Georgia, evaluating the potential of civil society organisations in Belarus appears as a necessary exercise to hypothesize future developments of Belarusian political system towards democracy. The investigation aims also at contribuiting to the expansion of the literature from where to start building hypothetical strategies on CSOs' inclusion within international fora. The hypothesis will build from the experience of the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSIPM) within the Committee of Food Security (CFS) at the United Nation, to then land to the design of a proposal of Belarusian and Georgian CSOs representation within the framework of the EU's Neighbourhood Policy. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is that of investigating the different trajectories that the two post-Soviet countries intraprended after USSR collapse and evaluate the impact of civil society and social movements in post-communist transition.

INTRODUCTION – Rationale

The Eastern European region has been described by professor Mary Kaldor (2003) as the original terrain of the creation of transnational civil society. Thanks to the social movements of West and Eastern Europe of the 1980s, the notion of self-organisation and autonomous spaces of representation were created against the Soviet regime, where authors such as the Polish Adam Michnik, the Czech Vàclavel Havel and the Hungarian George Konrad rediscovered the importance of individual dissent and human relations. Overall, Eastern Europe has been interested recently by several popular outbreaks, starting with the well-known Euromaidan protests of 2014 in Kyiv, as a powerful form of popular opposition against the philorussian government of President Yanukovych (Mossetti, 2023). As a consequence, unexpectedly the phenomenon also expanded to the last stronghold of Russian influence in Europe, Belarus. As a fact, Belarusian peaceful civic mobilisation of 2020 against the fraudulent elections of the incumbent Alexander Lukashenko reached an unexpected massive scale, awakening Belarusian civil society through the mushrooming of copious social movements throughout the country, opening a window of opportunity for social emancipation (Forrat and Batura, 2020). Similarly, in Georgia an alarming legislative proposal by Irakli Garibashvili's government to squeeze Georgian civil society's spaces sparked popular uprisings against the Parliament in March 2023, showing Georgian citizens determination in defending their right to civic spaces of participation and their propensity to halt any sort of democratic reversal (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Therefore, both post-communist countries were involved in massive popular uprisings, but moving in opposite directions: the former asking for spaces of fairer and transparent participation against the incumbent, while the latter fighting to prevent its shrinking by government's hands (Russell and Chkhikvadze, 2023). Furthermore, zooming out of the Eastern European region, it is relevant to recognise that the latest trends are showing worldwide attempts to severely limit broader social and political spaces of participation, also interesting regions which were traditionally considered as the emblem of democracy (Ginsburg and Huq, 2018). Consequently, discussing civil society's spaces, people's interests representation and mechanism of participation against the cumbersome stance of central governmental authorities has never seemed so relevant.

Moreover, the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has shed light on potential sinister consequences faced by post-communist countries, which being perceived as part of

the Russian geopolitical sphere, are facing growing pressure from the Russian neighbour to refrain from any sort of internal political emancipation and any kind of proximity with the European Union (Forrat, 2020). In particular, when analysing democratic backsliding in Georgia and the violent repression means deployed in Belarus, it immediately stands out that authoritarian regression endeavours are targeting specifically civil society organisations, that are attacked by national governmental threats, particularly linked to **international pressures**. Therefore, understanding civil society and its role in the political transition of Belarus and Georgia becomes crucial to comprehend the **destabilising potential of two key actors of the Eastern European region**. Indeed, given the strategic geographical position of these two states, being borderlands with two influential international powers - Russia and the European Union – makes the political configurations of both countries and their stability, a key driver to predict and, consequently, prevent future conflict escalations, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Indeed, Georgia and Belarus are both living period of tragic instability that could result in growing tensions with the Russian neighbour, especially if the relations with the EU will be further deepened, as demonstrated by Georgia's official status as candidate to the EU's membership and EU's support for a democratic transition in Belarus (Slunkin, 2020)(European Council, 2024). Therefore, the present research will be divided in two parts, presenting primarily the national contexts, investigating the rationale behind the two divergent political systems and the role that civil society played in both post-communist transitions. In particular, it will be analysed the turning point where the two different-opposing pathways of Georgia and Belarus' history diverged: producing, on the one hand, a parliamentary republic with a multi-party system, while on the other hand, what is defined by the majority of European and Western scholars as the last dictatorship of Europe (Wilson, 2021). Therefore, the comparative study of Belarus and Georgia will be used as a fruitful exercise to highlight how civil societies can contribute to shape political systems and the crucial importance that CSOs have come to play in the international arena of Eastern Europe, both as a stabilising and de-stabilising factor.

The first two chapters are dedicated to the exposition of the national background of civil society for both case studies. In both chapters, a special attention will be dedicated to the international implications that civil society's development has shown within the two post-communist transition processes. As a matter of fact, to comprehend truly the role played by CSOs within post-communist European countries, it becomes fundamental to explain the international attention that CSOs have attracted since the collapse of the Soviet Union both

from Eastern and Western players in the region. In fact, as it will be highlighted in the exposition of the two political contexts, Belarusian and Georgian CSOs displayed a fundamental agency in shaping the political culture and the shared values of the communities whilst being severely influenced by external actors. As it will be clear from the exposition, CSOs display a dynamic but hazardous power of political change on the broader society, being at the same time active and passive agent of change. In fact, being civil society an educative space that incentivise diffusion of ideologies, and learning political practices, the values and ideas can either originate spontaneously from its participants or can be virtually trasplanted and influenced by the external actors, especially from the political dimension. Taking into account the double nature of civil society, the first two chapters will analyse both aspects, showing on the one hand, how Belarusian and Georgian civil society have been profoundly influenced and instrumentalised by political internal and external actors in the first decade of the 21th century, differently from the Belarusian mobilisation of 2020 and the protests of 2023 in Georgia, which represent a virtous example of bottom-up emancipation and an active role of CSOs in asking for political responsiveness and change.

Following an inductive reasoning, the **third chapter** is dedicated to structurally organise the particular information gathered in the former two chapters and to wrap up the results of the comparative exercise. In the exposition, it will be evaluated the democratisation potential of both civil societies and their effective political impact on the social composition. As to provide a clear evaluation, the concept of civil society will be further explored and then, it will be explained its nexus with democratisation. In fact, despite the concept of civil society is not a novice, a clear definition of civil society’s notion is still a riddle, leaving wide room for speculation. To understand civil society, it is important to bear in mind that CSOs are interposed between central decision-makers and the broader population, positioning beyond the family, the state or the market and are a powerful legitimacy basin for decision-makers and political actors (UNDP, 2009). However, the loose definition allows a wide array of organisations to be considered part of civil society. According to the World Bank, CSOs assume various shapes, that range from “NGOs, non-profit organisations, social movements, labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable foundations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, and foundations”, which express the ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic interests and values of their members. As a result, CSOs act as the joining link between the political and the broader mass of population. Indeed, if CSOs’ position should be visualised within the Almond and Powell (1960) political system

traditional scheme, CSOs would be framed in the input section of the political process and could be found also in the output section asking for authorities' responsiveness for people's demands and requests. Consequently, CSOs are separated from the core political and bureaucratic state-system at the centre where political decisions are taken by policy-makers, showing more a consultative role. Nevertheless, despite not being direct decision-makers, CSOs' degree of influence on the political process remains consistent and undisputable, filling the legitimacy gap between the governors and the governed.

Image from: Verzichelli, il Mulino, 2014.

Logically, authoritarian political systems or transitioning systems such as Belarus and Georgia exhibit a wider gap between government and society than in democratic political systems, due to the lack of social accountability (Arrat, Forrat and Medow, 2020). As a consequence, even though its independence is severely affected by state-interference, the role of CSOs in these forms of government acquire particular relevance, given that it could represent the only effective participative space for citizens, beyond the precluded political space. In fact, although civil societies in authoritarian regimes struggle or are forbidden to shape the decision-making process, they still exert a high-degree of impact on the political culture of the broader population. This kind of power is important when conceiving the retroactive and cyclic movement of Almond and Powell scheme, where the final outcome cyclically shapes demands at the beginning of the political process, triggering change and new inputs.

However, for the purpose of the research, it will be sufficient to focus on two specific macro-typologies of civil society, which represent the product of the two different paths that Belarus and Georgia undertook from the 1990s onwards. Indeed, the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia and 2020 Belarusian mobilisation represented two crucial milestones in the post-communist transition of the two countries in exam and represent two specular ways of

expression of civil society's influencing potential on mass populations, representing a meaningful vehicle of ideas and values capable of provoking historical paradigmatic changes. In particular, the author decided to pick Belarusian and Georgian civil societies because they stand for two peculiar roles that civil society can play within the internal development of a political system as a result of interaction with international actors. The author decided to use the categorisation provided by eminent professor Mary Kaldor (2003), who differentiate between two typologies of civil societies' conception that can be broadly divided in *activist* civil society and *neo-liberal* civil society. The former term was used during the 1970-80s in Eastern Europe to define social movements that fought against the Soviet regimes to establish independent spaces of participation. The term circulated especially after the delusions of the Prague spring of 1968, which spread the ideas of a bottom-up movement to overthrow the Soviet regime, as it was represented by widespread mottos such as 'antipolitics' or 'living in truth' of George Konrad and Vaclavel Havel. At that time, the spreading of this typology of civil society spaces was supported internationally by a worldwide belief to expand the human rights agenda, as demonstrated by the affirmation of official international treaties such as the Conventions on Human Rights or the Helsinki Agreement and the Western peace and human rights movements' supports to Eastern social movements (Kaldor, 2003). On the other hand, the so-called neo-liberal concept of civil society became popular after the fall of the Soviet Union, and spread thanks to authors such as Robert Putnam and Francis Fukuyama, especially in the United States and in Europe. In these countries, civil society started to be conceived as a fundamental factor to obtain stable and fruitful relations between the government, the market and the society. Indeed, civil society became the first target of Western democracy promotion programs, of which Georgia is a classic example, where NGOs mushroomed throughout the country in 2003, leading Georgia to become known to the Western world as a "beacon of democracy".

However, the present research has not the purpose to argue whether non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or social movements (SMs) are the preferred form of organisation to achieve *democratisation* - intended as larger participation of local communities in the political and social life of a country. Instead, although throughout the research the two forms of organisations are considered as two separate entities with different aims, functions and approaches, the present paper takes into consideration *a priori* the recent phenomenon of fusion observed between these two formerly distinct entities, enabling the academia to discuss not only of "NGOisation" of social movements but also of a

"SMOisation" of civil society organisations (Della Porta, 2020). Indeed, for example in Belarus, social movements tended to institutionalise in non-governmental organisations to survive the gradual de-escalation of protests, given the violent repression implemented by the authoritarian regime (Chulitskaya, 2023). On the other hand, due to the progressive political apathy, the general invisibilisation of workers' representatives groups and minimal political participation from below lately, NGOs have tended to de-neutralise and politicise their discourses being physically engaged in the frontlines creating direct connections with social movements on the ground (Della Porta, 2020). Therefore, although Georgian and Belarusian CSOs are tendentially in one case more similar to NGOs' forms of organisation, while in the second case, more closely related to the SMs' forms of association, the actual distinction that will stand out from the dissertation will be focused on **the effective outreach capacity** of Georgian and Belarusian civil societies towards local population, which is what the author regards as the civil society's *democratisation* potential.

In fact, it is necessary to specify that for *democratisation* here is intended as not referring to a process of transition from authoritarianism towards democracy grounded in the Western sense of liberalism and constitutionalism. Indeed, whilst the academic literature on political science agrees that civil society could play a role in the transition to a democracy, it shall be recognised that civil society can interact also as a player in transitional processes that are not oriented towards *liberal* forms of democracy and are simply capable of interacting with broader masses of the population, activating movement and change. In particular, given that the present elaborate aims at analysing the role of civil society of Belarus and Georgia, it would be reductive to intend the term *democratisation* as only tied to the teleological objective of classical transitional justice, according to which the process entails a progressive evolution from an authoritarian regime to a liberal-democratic one. Rather, the present research builds on a minimal conception of transitional justice that conceive transition as a process of change from a context of abuses and traumas - such as the repressive authoritarian regime of Lukashenko - leaning towards the rehabilitation of these societies into the international system thanks to the reacquired moral stature in front of the other members of the international community, even though they are not founded on constitutionalism or liberal tradition (Gentile and Foster, 2020). In other words, when speaking of *democratisation* in the present text, it refers to that process of transition from abusive institutional arrangements imposed on the people of a territory, to a context of emancipation and revolution from below, where individuals organise and gather to alter their condition to reach a legitimate morally

accepted institutional arrangement by the community, participating collectively in change. Bearing the minimal conception of transitional justice in mind allows to include the Belarusian case under attentive examination, because, although civil society played a crucial role in fostering expression of disobedience against the regime of Lukashenko, it does not necessarily displayed a background of liberal tradition nor any liberal claims (Ekaterina, 2022).

Having exposed CSOs contribution to the two divergent post-communist transition outcomes that produced the recent events of the 2020 Belarusian mobilisation and the Georgian protests of 2023, it will stand out the importance of the international contexts where the two countries are framed. Therefore, given the relevance that international relations have played for the history of Belarusian and Georgian civil societies, the second part of the dissertation is dedicated to discuss a second sub-question that interests the **controversial relation between civil societies and international actors**, and what means can be implemented to frame these interactions. Indeed, once acknowledged the importance of civil society for the internal transition processes of Belarus and Georgia and the critical relation with external actors, it will be argued the need to represent CSOs within intergovernmental and international fora, as to frame the relation within specific and transparent channels of communication and consultation. The proposal has a twofold rationale for the specific case studies under exam. Indeed, for Belarus, empowering Belarusian CSOs created after the 2020 protests is regarded as fundamental both to return these organisations a space of representation and participation deprived by central authorities led by Lukashenko and to validate Belarusian powerful cry for change. On the other hand, in the case of Georgia, broadening the space for Georgian CSOs within the European Union decision-making processes is proposed as to escape past mistakes of the first 2000s' democracy promotion programs, which conceived CSOs as a panacea for democracy without effectively reaching out Georgian people's needs and voices. Overall, the last chapter of the research will focus on the need of CSOs to occupy and take physical spaces of representation within the European Union institutions, especially in the Eastern Partnership framework, breaking the tradition of treating these organisations as beneficiaries and not co-owners of their destiny. In order to improve CSOs' participation and involvement within the existent means of civil society's participation in the EU, the author decided to draw from the case study of a virtuous example of representation mechanism of Civil Society and Indigenous' Peoples (CSIPM) within the Committee of World Food Security (CFS) at FAO. Consequently, the dissertation will

discuss a prototype mechanism of direct representation of the Belarusian and Georgian CSOs within the Eastern partnership civil society forum (EaP CFS) enabling them to engage directly in meaningful ways within the decision-making bodies of the Eastern Partnership framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Civil society has acquired a role of prominence within political science studies since the late 1970-80s, allowing for an extensive literature review on the role, history, definition and relations between civil society and democracy. In particular, various scholars have contributed consistently to the literature on civil society, exploring the vast span of nuances that this fascinating concept exhibits. The concept of civil society was introduced in the first half of the 19th century by Alexis de Tocqueville in his work "Democracy in America", which is the milestone of civil society studies in Western academic literature that inspired numerous other scholars of the field. It is due to Alexis de Tocqueville that the nexus between democracy and civil society was introduced in political debate, from which concepts such as Putnam's social capital were introduced in the 1990s, acknowledging associationism potential in improving both governance and economic performance, given its extensive maieutic influence on popular political culture (Mouritsen, 2001). Furthermore, eminent scholars such as Larry Diamond and Francis Fukuyama have focused on the so-called *democratisation* potential of civil society, investigating whether and to what extent associationism can benefit the overall community, consolidating mutual relationship of trust, incentivizing the formation of stable democratic forms of government.

However, civil society's literature reflects the tremendous variability of the concept and the haziness of a loose definition. As a matter of fact, throughout the history of civil society, the word has assumed numerous meanings and referred to a plurality of forms of association that ranged from sports club to social movements, which was even complicated by the recent addition of the so-called third sector emerged under the forms of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Moreover, there is a stark distinction between literature on Western and Eastern European civil societies, given the different cultural and historical backgrounds and the political system where they play. Deepening civil societies' role within the political context of Belarus and Georgia, it will be clear that, for the former a classic Eastern European concept of civil society will be more adapt to describe the recent events of mass mobilisation, while for the latter, given its extensive relations with Western countries and liberal-democratic political culture, the literature will be more prone to identify Georgian civil society as closer to the Western sense of civil society. However, in both cases, it is frequent to recognise a trend in the literature that conceive civil society through normative lens, viewing CSOs as beneficial to the democratisation of a previous authoritarian or non-democratic state in transition, despite various critics by other scholars have already pointed out the controversy of the normative method (Kopecky and Mudde, 2003). In fact, especially a large

section of the Western literature is severely criticised by other academics for struggling to maintain a neutral stance towards the concept of civil society, assuming the nexus between CSOs presence and a democratic outcome, which is empirically disproved for example by the case of Georgia in 2003. Moreover, various scholars highlight the misconceptions derived from idolising and romanticising civil society, adding normative positive value to a concept which instead should be simply treated as a heuristic device or social vehicle of ideas, without any normative judgement.

Consequently, given the multiple meanings and the potential misunderstandings, in the present dissertation the author appealed to that part of literature, such as DeWiel (1997) which refers to a neutral meaning of the term that portrays civil society as a space of participation beyond the state, the market and the family, that presents a dynamic potential in influencing popular political culture both orienting society towards paradigmatic changes that could include a variety of forms of government, not only democracy. Although escaping any type of positive bias towards civil society and democracy nexus, throughout the dissertation the different interpretations of civil society by scholars are provided, given the extensive influence that they exerted on political decisions in the two countries under exam. Indeed, the prolific literature on democratisation and civil society nexus in the Western academia between 1980-90s reflected on strategies and policies of the late 1990s, especially implemented by Western foreign policies programs of the United States and European countries in post-communist countries, such as Georgia, which became the symbol of the so-called democracy promotion programs. After that period of time, although democracy promotion programs failed in effectively filling the gap between local communities and central authorities and results clearly showed few improvements in incentivising popular participation in the political dynamics, the literature attitude towards civil society continued to be prolific given the so-called colour revolutions that interested Eastern Europe, primarily Georgia (2003), then Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2006). On that occasion, civil society was pictured as being the driving force of the spreading revolutions, putting under the spot once again CSOs and their influential role in provoking mass mobilisation for institutional change and for democratisation, recalling memories of the 1989 movements of liberation against the Soviet regime. However, as few years later studies revealed the role played by grassroots movements of opposition and other civil society organisations was crucial but not decisive and their role was extremely exaggerated by the academia that arrived to talk of a second wave of transition in Eastern Europe (Way, 2008). In the specific case of Georgia, the expert of Georgian history and politics Stephen Jones (2006) well explained the overall case of the Rose Revolution of 2003 and the actual immaturity of Georgian society to be able to effectively challenge central authorities. Rather, Jones prefers to refer to the events of 2003

in Georgia as protests, affirming that calling it a revolution would be misleading and that a regime change occurred due to the weakness of Georgian authorities at that moment, and not thanks to the general popular mobilisation for democracy.

As generally shared within the literature, Belarusian preemptive authoritarianism was frequently perceived as the flip side of the coin. Severe restrictions and limitations to community gathering, associationism and civil societies were the first target of the measures adopted during the period of colour revolutions of the first 2000s in Russia and Belarus. Targeting measures, such as foreign agents laws, were directly aimed at blocking any type of foreign funding activities to organisations of the civil society which were usually related to democracy and human rights advocacy. However, finally the censorship methods worked in Belarus, making literature to completely disregard the region until recent times after the 2020 mass mobilisation. Indeed, while for Georgia it was relatively easier to get access to information, the Belarusian area is not surprisingly at the centre of Western academic literature, despite its geographic proximity to European Union members and its potential geopolitical strategic position, as lately demonstrated in Lukashenko's collaboration in the Russian invasion of Ukraine. From extensive research, usually the authors more devoted to study Belarus' political context come from the Eastern European academia and are Belarusians, leaving a major gap in Western understanding of the region's events. To investigate civil society's role within Belarus, the recent work of professor Elena Korosteleva, Irina Petrova and Anastasiia Kudlenko was crucial to gather information on the current state of affairs, being one of the few group of scholars to have organised a thorough discussion around the democratisation potential of the outstanding historical moment of 2020 in Belarus.

Overall, despite civil society being generally acknowledged by the literature as a fundamental topic, there is still a wide gap in covering the topic in Belarus, probably because the events were too recent and due to the extreme isolation of the country from European Union members. However, given the latest growing contacts between Belarusian government in exile of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, Belarusian civil society and the EU after 2020, a detailed analysis of the role of civil society in Belarus and its contacts with international and European actors represents an essential exercise to fill the vacuum in Western european academia (EEAS, 2023). Indeed, the present research proposes primarily a comparative analysis of the two countries' political contexts to grasp the role of civil society in national internal dynamics of post-communist transition to learn lessons from the previous events in Georgia for future Belarusian developments. Then, the dissertation will enrich the academic debate on empirical measures to improve CSOs relations with

international actors, in particular the European Union, in order to escape previous mistakes made during the democracy promotion programs of the early 2000s and incentivise the direct participation of civil society members in the decision-making processes that directly affect these communities.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology applied to **the first part of the present research** is inscribed within comparative politics studies deputed to investigate the transition of two post-communist countries, Belarus and Georgia. In particular, the focus of the research is centred around the analysis of the role of civil society in the transition processes of Belarus and Georgia since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1992 till the last years of 2020-2023. The scope of the first two chapters is to assess the role that civil society played within the two transition processes that led the two countries from Soviet Republics to two heterogeneous political regimes. In the first case, the Belarusian transition produced an authoritarian repressive regime, while in the second case of Georgia resulted in the troubled institutionalisation of a parliamentary democracy with a multiparty system. Comparing the two countries, the focus will be on the role of civil society, intended as a space where citizens' interests and instances are formed and shaped, and which, consequently, constitutes the social basis from which to build a successful institutional regime based on solid political legitimacy (Angi, 2009).

Renewed attention on Belarusian civil society has gained popularity after the events of 2020 peaceful mobilisation in Minsk paired with the infamous arbitrary violation of human rights and power abuse by Belarusian authorities. However, despite the continuous efforts of the regime to violently repress any bottom-up uprising, Lukashenka's legitimacy has severely sunk and Belarusian civil society awakening is now irreversible. Therefore, understanding Belarusian civil society potentiality in a future political transition seems currently compelling to grasp opportunities to realise an effective regime change in Belarus. In order to understand the role that civil societies can play within post-Soviet transitional processes, the author proposes a comparison of two different case studies: Georgia and Belarus.

The author decided to analyse Georgia's political system because it represents an antithetical example of post-communist transition respectively to the Belarusian case. The comparison could represent a fruitful exercise to understand the rationale behind the two different institutional arrangements and the agency of the respective civil societies, due to the fact that Georgian civil society has been frequently pointed out by Western scholars as a key driver in Georgian post-Soviet transition. In fact, among the transitioning countries of Eurasia and second only to Ukraine, Georgia is the most consistent in terms of the so-called "democracy score" (DS) observed by the renomated political scientific think tank Freedom

House. The DS is calculated on a scale from 0 to 7, which assesses the degree of democracy attributed to a state. The range score refers to five categories of regimes: between 1.00-2.00, the score refers to a consolidated authoritarian regime, as in the case of Belarus. Then, a semi-consolidated authoritarian regime is assessed between 2.01-3.00. While, from 3.01 to 4.00, it refers to a transitional/hybrid regime, as in the case of Georgia. Finally, when scoring between 4.01–5.00, it refers to a semi-consolidated democracy and between 5.01–7.00 a country is defined within the category of consolidated democracy. The DS is calculated according to the average score of seven features deemed necessary to define a state as *democratic*. These categories are considered: "national democratic governance", "electoral process", "independent media", "local democratic governance", "judicial framework and independence", "corruption" and "civil society".

Eurasia

Armenia	2.64	2.64	2.64	2.64	2.61	2.57	2.93	3.00	2.96	3.04	**3.11**	▲
Azerbaijan	1.36	1.32	1.25	1.14	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.14	1.07	1.07	**1.07**	
Belarus	1.29	1.29	1.29	1.36	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.29	1.18	**1.11**	▼
Georgia	3.25	3.32	3.36	3.39	3.39	3.32	3.29	3.25	3.18	3.07	**3.04**	▼
Kazakhstan	1.43	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.36	1.29	1.29	1.32	1.32	1.36	**1.32**	▼
Kyrgyzstan	2.04	2.11	2.07	2.11	2.00	1.93	2.00	1.96	1.86	1.75	**1.68**	▼
Moldova	3.18	3.14	3.14	3.11	3.07	3.07	3.04	3.11	3.11	3.11	**3.14**	▲
Russia	1.79	1.71	1.54	1.50	1.43	1.39	1.43	1.39	1.39	1.32	**1.11**	▼
Tajikistan	1.75	1.68	1.61	1.46	1.36	1.21	1.21	1.18	1.11	1.11	**1.04**	▼
Turkmenistan	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.00	1.00	1.00	**1.00**	
Ukraine	3.14	3.07	3.25	3.32	3.39	3.36	3.36	3.39	3.36	3.36	**3.36**	
Uzbekistan	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.11	1.11	1.14	1.25	1.25	**1.21**	▼
Average	2.00	1.99	1.97	1.96	1.93	1.90	1.93	1.94	1.91	1.88	**1.85**	
Median	1.77	1.70	1.57	1.48	1.41	1.39	1.41	1.39	1.36	1.34	**1.27**	

Table from: Freedom House report on Nation in Transit, 2023

In the period that goes from 2013 to 2023, according to the table of Freedom House of the *Nations in Transit* Report of 2023 Georgia attested an average final result of 3,26/7 (calculated by the author) which is higher both in the case of Moldova (3.12/7) and Armenia (2.97/7) respectively and second only to the Ukrainian score. Despite the result per sé is not sufficient to completely define Georgia as a full democracy if compared to other democracies of the world, it is a satisfactory result from a relative regional Eurasian perspective. Undoubtedly, the Georgian political system appears to have been more oriented towards a democratic path than the other ex-Soviet Republics of Eurasia in the last decade, gaining the title of *transitional* or *hybrid regime* and proving consistency and a pro-democracy attitude of the Georgian society (Freedom House, 2023). This specific typology of state-development refers to a constant transitioning status of perpetual and progressive change towards democracy (intended in this case in the liberal democratic sense) in which civil society and

political opposition retain the civil and political liberties and rights to thrive, but the government is generally controlled by a single group of politicians which extend their power within the main institutions, such as the parliament. Therefore, the second chapter will be centred on the role that civil society played in the 2003 Rose Revolution period onwards, which is claimed by a large majority of scholars to have represented a key turning point and political breakthroughs for the institutional development of Georgia towards democratisation.

The first part of the research investigates whether civil society represents a crucial intervening variable in the processes of transition from a type of institutional regime to another potential one, which is not necessarily a democratic regime intended in the liberal Western terminology. Therefore, the agency of the civil society of Belarus and Georgia will be stressed through the research as the **triggering factor** that acting in historical junctures for the two countries produced two different regimes and institutional arrangements. Certainly, to analyse the agency of the civil society, it is necessary to provide a framework of the political contexts where they move. Therefore, the comparison between Georgian and Belarusian political regimes' transitions will highlight the role played by the two civil societies in the respective countries in the "missed democratisation of Belarus" in Chapter 1 and in "the applauded democratisation of Georgia" in Chapter 2.

In the first two chapters, the comparative method will be employed to analyse the historical, cultural and socio-economic factors that intertwine with the agency of the Belarusian and Georgian civil society, causing two different institutional outcomes. In order to provide a complete well-rounded analysis, the comparison will be organised according to three units following the three branches of the neo-institutionalist approach of comparative politics (Fabbrini, 2011). Therefore, the first category of comparison will be based on a **historical institutional macro level theory** to give a general overview of the institutional processes that the two countries have experienced after the collapse of the USSR, proving that adopting a presidential form of government will result in a higher risk of authoritarian regression. Secondly, the analysis will descend into a meso-level investigation, using the **sociological institutional theory** of comparative politics to comprehend the cultural *humus* that generated the moral frameworks and internalised behaviours of the populations in exam, which affected tremendously the political organisation of the two countries in comparison. National identity and political culture will be given a leading role in the shaping of ideological frameworks, proving the dependence between national culture and civil societies'

performances. Thirdly, the research will complement the historical and political analysis, employing a micro-level explanation based on **rational-choice institutional theory,** where the individual/collective choices of the civil society produced different results on the institutional regimes and political contexts. Here, the third research hypothesis will be centred on investigating the direct agency of the Belarusian and Georgian population in shaping the government agenda and national political arrangement.

In the third chapter, conclusions from the comparison of the two case studies are presented, drawing important lessons learnt from the two civil societies' analysis. As it will appear, Belarus and Georgia represent two different ways of conceiving civil society. In fact, the two categorisation of civil society provided by Mary Kaldor (2003) - neo-liberal and activist civil societies - will be used to define the results of the comparative research, respectively Georgia and Belarus. In particular, it will be clear from the Georgian case study that the Georgian civil society has been the object of growing attraction of international actors in the 2000s and a target of the neo-liberal democracy promotion programmes sponsored by the United States and the European countries. On the other hand, Belarusian forced isolation from Western external relations and dunk into Russian and Belarusian interference - as represented by the extreme case of the foreign-agents laws and GONGOs - produced a divergent outcome for Belarusian civil society, which erupted in 2020 in a form more similar to what professor Kaldor (2003) would call an "activist" or revolutionary civil society. From the comparative analysis, it will appear evident that civil society agency within transitional processes of post-communist Georgia and Belarus represent a powerful vehicle of international influence and dominant ideology that played a crucial role within the internal political dynamics of the countries in exam. As a result, civil society will result as a powerful space of social transformation that should be handled carefully by international actors requiring a precise and detailed political and juridical framework where to manage the constant interaction between CSOs of a country and its international partners.

In this regard, the last and fourth chapter exposes an existing institutional framework within the European Union - the Eastern Partnership Forum - which represents a potential instrument to enhance Belarusian and Georgian CSOs and EU relations, but presents a vast room for improvement. Consequently, the author proposes a **comparative exercise** with one of the most advanced mechanisms of civil society representation and participation within international for a, the Civil Society and Indigenous People Mechanism, in order to draw

lessons to learn that could be applied to the Eastern Partnership Forum case. Despite the widespread phenomenon of civil societies links with international organisations nowadays, the CSIPM stands as one of the few examples of detailed official institutionalisation of CSOs' permanent participation in the international decision-making of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) at the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of Rome. Indeed, the CSIPM contributes to the CFS delivering the voice of local communities and indigenous people at the international level, collaborating and discussing constantly with national and international delegations. In order to descend within the peculiar structure of the CSIPM mechanism, the author conducted an **on-field ethnographic research** on the functioning of the Civil Society and Indigenous People Mechanism (CSIPM) interviewing four actors that play different and crucial roles within the CSIPM and the Special Rapporteur to the Right to Food, in order to provide an eminent external standpoint to evaluate the CSIPM mechanism. Finally, the lessons learnt from the CSIPM virtuous case study will be applied to the Eastern Partnership Forum, proposing recommendations to enhance the Forum towards the institutionalisation of an official mechanism of CSOs participation within the EU decision-making.

PART I: THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

1. CHAPTER ONE - The Belarusian Political System: the *missed* democratisation of Belarus

To achieve a clear understanding of civil society organisations' agency within the Belarusian political system, it is deemed necessary to give a brief overview of the nature of the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenka in which they operate. A deeper analysis of the Belarusian authoritarian regime appears also as an essential exercise due to the exceptional longevity that characterises Lukashenka's rule differently from similar post-Soviet regimes and the apparent stability that it has achieved until 2020 due to the deemed passivity and apathy of the Belarusian population (Silitski, 2010). Lukashenka has been the President of Belarus since his victory at the presidential elections of 1994, and, even after the trembling events of the 2020 presidential elections protests, currently no sign of a potential overthrow of his regime is foreseen in the next future (Korosteleva, 2023). Although Belarus' history does not certainly start in 1994, this paper will focus on the period of Belarusian contemporary history which begins after the collapse of the USSR to have a clear overview of the current political system that is in place in Belarus. Therefore, firstly it will focus on the brief period between 1990-1994, the so-called "failed authoritarianism" and then, the research will proceed plunging into the regime of Lukashenka to understand the different rationales that led to the democratisation failure of Belarus, taking into consideration the three factors – institutional, cultural and economic - that made possible the stability and the longevity of Lukashenka's authoritarian system (Way, 2005).

1.1 Institutional explanations of Belarus missed democratisation

a. The 1991 - 1994: a Period of Failures

In the aftermath of the USSR collapse, Belarus went through potentially the only window of opportunity for a democratic transition in the history of the Belarusian political system since the forced exile of the *Rada* (government) of Belarusian People's Republic (proclaimed in March 1918) due to the following imposition of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (S.S.R.) by the Bolsheviks in 1919 (Marples, 2023). Therefore, the years of 1991 to 1994 represent a crucial moment to understand the failure of the democratisation opportunity of modern Belarus.

In 1991, Belarus, together with the other ex-Socialist Soviet Republics, was asked to hold a referendum proposed by Mikhail Gorbacev to decide on “the preservation of the USSR as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics” (Zietara, 2018). Whereas six of the ex-soviet countries boycotted the referendum and used it as an instrument to effectively affirm the independence of their countries, such as in the case of Georgia, Belarus posed the question to the Belarusian population to legitimise democratically Belarus’ will to stay within the USSR (*Ibidem*). Indeed, the result showed that 83% of Belarusian citizens did not agree for Belarus independence and voted for USSR preservation (Fedor, 1995). However, independence was then imposed on the Belarusian population on the 25th of August 1991, when the Prime Minister V. Kebich elevated Belarus' declaration of sovereignty to the level of a constitutional document and halted the activity of the Communist Party of Belarus (BCP) (Sierakowski, 2020). On December 8, Belarus, together with Russia and Ukraine, signed the Minsk Agreement to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which formally marked the conclusion of the Soviet Union (Fedor, 1995)·. In that moment, seizing the confusion caused by the sudden-unexpected historical changes, supporters of liberal and nationalist ideologies activated to bring their instances succeeding in the Parliament to alter the name of the state from the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) to the Republic of Belarus. The democratic opposition adopted a new national flag featuring three horizontal stripes in white-red-white, as well as a new emblem depicting a mounted knight, St. George the Patron Saint of Belarus, holding a drawn sword, the symbol of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

That summer marked the initial stage of Belarusian civil society formation, opening a window of opportunity that caught traditional leaders of the ex-Soviet *nomenklatura* as deers in headlights (Way, 2012). However, a more attentive analysis of the historical events of the 1994-96 brings to light that CSOs and SMs were not sufficiently mature to play a key-role within the transitional period that Belarus was experiencing in those years. Indeed, as originally argued by scholar Lucan A. Way, it was actually the leader Vyacheslav Kebich - Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Byelorussian SSR from 1990, and, automatically Prime Minister of the Republic of Belarus from the post-Soviet Belarusian independence in 1991 - political inexperience which it is deemed to have facilitated Lukashenka’s raise to the power due to several errors that could have been prevented if competences and know-how would have accompanied his insipid political personality. Indeed, as stated by Kebich himself, his political approach was characterised by a “traditional” and conservative style rooted in the Soviet norms, an environment that stimulated passivity, hierarchy and obedience

while inhibiting the formation of a strong political personality and persuasive oratory skills (Fedor, 1995). Kebich's rise to power was entirely internal to the Soviet system, being himself a member of the economic *nomenklatura* of the Minsk City Industrial faction and then, head of the state's economic planning agency, the Belarusian Gosplan, from where he was appointed in 1990 by the Belarusian Communist Party as the head of the Council of Ministers due to the illness of the previous officeholder. Therefore, as clearly shown by his biography, Kebich had no experience in dealing with electoral competition and popular mood-swings nor anyone on his team. Having formed in the Soviet bureaucratic ganglia, Kebich found himself unqualified for the leading position, lacking essential prerequisites such as communication skills, charisma and political personality for surviving in a transitional period. His inadequacy for the role was also demonstrated by the fact that there were several favourable conditions for Kebich to retain Soviet-style authoritarian power if he would have avoided several miscalculations. Indeed, both at national and international level, Belarus was not pressured to engage actively in a transition towards democracy. Within the country, the civil society and democratic opposition was weak thanks to the unchallenged control of the state over communication media – e.g. the central government retained nine mass media broadcasts - and instruments of electoral manipulation (Lukashuk, 2001). Plus, civil society organisations and opposition were extremely isolated from the Belarusian population which was profoundly marked by Sovietisation, which deeply hindered people's attitude towards democracy, freedom and political participation (Zietara, 2018). On the other hand, at the international level, surprisingly as it may seem, Belarus did not receive any substantial offer to join the European Union nor any Western influence to engage in a democratisation process as the same Belarusian government officials astonishingly reported in 1994 (Way, 2012).

Therefore, it shall be admitted that it was the incapacity of the incumbent to hold his power that led him to fall on his sword. Indeed, although Kebich could boast extensive state control capacity and an unchallenged power position, he was afflicted by a discrete quantity of overconfidence driven by his inexperience with public opinion and traditional soviet-style mentality. Kebich's miscalculations brought to an anticipated call for elections before duty time to establish a presidential form of government despite the exhortatory admonitions of the constitutional commission members who advocated for parliamentarism to avoid probable authoritarian outcomes (Burkhardt, 2016). Moreover, Kebich underestimated the electoral potential of the opponents' candidates. Lukashenka was labelled as a mere outsider without

any Soviet backup at the head of a small state farm and was considered by many as an erratic but harmless figure incapable of challenging Kebich's vantage position. Indeed, Kebich did not prevent Lukashenka's appointment to a critical anti-corruption commission nor changed the age-limit to 40 for presidential candidacy, which would have immediately disqualified his young opponent. As expected by several scholars, leveraging on the widespread corruption phenomenon in Belarus, Lukashenka used the technical commission as a trampoline to launch his political career, achieving in only one year 42% of votes in the first round of elections in June 1994 (*Ibidem*). Thus, on 10 July 1994, Lukashenka defeated Kebich with 80.6% against 14.22% with an estimated turnout of 70% of the population in the first and last democratic presidential elections of post-Soviet Belarus (Reuters, 1994).

Overall, it can be stated that the period of rapid change caused by the USSR dissolution caught the Soviet politicians of Belarus unprepared to respond to such a watershed moment and incapable of maintaining the lead of Belarusian government. Prime Minister Viachaslau Kebich did not display the necessary competences to face the Belarusian electorate making significant and preventable mistakes that ultimately resulted in his avoidable defeat in 1994 by the populist outsider Aliaksandar Lukashenka. Moreover, although the post-Soviet period saw a timid glimpse of democratic opposition and marked the initial stages of civil society formation in Belarus, it must be recognised that the apparent openness of the Belarusian political system was not driven by a wave of democratisation, but by the incapability of Belarusian leaders to hold the authoritarian grip on the forming political system. Indeed, Belarusian civil society *immaturity* was even proved by the inability of the civil society of that period to provide a concrete alternative to overcome the deep-rooted values and *forma-mentis* of the Soviet period, resulting in the election of the Soviet nostalgic populist Lukashenka as President of the Republic (Way, 2012). Therefore, it can be concluded that it is more appropriate to talk about a *missed* and not a *failed* democratisation, since a transition towards a form of liberal-democratic political system has never had the chance to begin in Belarus between 1991-1994. The next paragraphs will be dedicated to explain the reasons behind the continued *missed* democratisation of Belarus perpetrated during the power of Lukashenko.

b. *Lukashenko the Sultan*

Firstly, it is necessary to briefly describe the institutional organisation that characterises Belarus since Lukashenko's rise to power in 1994. Indeed, one of the possible explanations of

the *missed* democratisation of Belarus is certainly the transition towards a presidential form of government proposed by Kebich and the consequent consolidation of an authoritarian regime actualised by Lukashenka (Partlett, 2020). Indeed, whilst the 1994 Constitution provided the President with extensive powers, especially appointments prerogatives within key judicial bodies such as the Constitutional Court, the initial sections of the Constitution stated clearly the democratic foundations of the Belarusian political system on the rule of law. The checks and balances were fairly distributed between the presidency and the legislative organ of the Supreme Soviet, which *de jure* held the power to call referenda, to determine foreign and domestic policy and the impeachment power. However, once Head of the State, Lukashenko abused presidential decree power to overcome the legislature which represented still a substantive constraint to Lukashenko's power. Therefore, the incumbent announced a constitutional referendum to downsize the judiciary and the legislative organs (*Ibidem*).

Nevertheless, although it is known that Lukashenka manipulated state media and extensively drawn from state resources to finance the campaign for the referendum, the result can still be considered a litmus paper for the level of democratisation maturity of the Belarusian population. In 1996, 70% of Belarusians chose for a strong centralisation of executive powers in the president hands and agreed upon the formation of a renovated model of Soviet-style dictatorship, adopted despite the complete disrespect of the rule of law (Eke and Kuzio, 2000). Indeed, although the amendments of 1996 were rejected by the Supreme Soviet authority, Lukashenko called for the referendum completely bypassing its authority and adopting the amendments through unconstitutional means but no popular unrest was signalled after it (International Commission of Jurists, 2002). Indeed, as demonstrated by his electoral campaign discourses, Lukashenka support in 1994 was never driven by a plan of democratisation of the Belarusian system, but if anything, Lukashenko won the hearts of the Belarusian population wagering on a vigorous leadership able to restore public order after the USSR dissolution and fight state corruption (Eke and Kuzio, 2000). Clearly, the core goal of Lukashenka's political program was never a transition towards liberal-democracy rather the revival of the nostalgic memory of the Soviet era stability (Mihalisko, 1997).

The political product resulting from the 1996 amendments of the 1994 Constitution consist in a governance system provided with the traditional organs of a democracy: a Parliament, a Constitutional court, a Cabinet of Ministers, a judiciary and a fourth branch. However, these bodies play a cosmetic role representing only a façade for the factual

authoritarian populist system where the true protagonists are the President and his people (Eke and Kuzio, 2000). In this way, Lukashenka managed to institutionalise a **sultanistic regime**. In other words, a sort of patrimonial form of government built around the figure of its Sultan, in this case Lukashenka, who treats the state as his own dominion and the President is at the apex of every source of power. While this type of regime is more diffused in Central Asia, Belarus constitutes a unique case in Europe. The entire system is based not on an ideology or religious belief, and not even on the political savoir-faire or popularity of the incumbent, but on a measured carrot and stick method. Lukashenka succeeded in building such a regime creating a dense network of family relatives, favourites and close ties who occupy the highest levels of the governing bodies and strengthening extensive security forces which guard the regime through repressive means and persecution of any form of political pluralism or opposition to the Sultan. As backward and retrograde as it may sound, Lukashenka's regime is still in place and the only viable option to overthrow a Sultanistic regime is deemed to be through political violence, as observed by Eke and Kuzio (2000) as the seventh charachteristic trait of a Sultanistic regime.

1.2 Cultural explanations of Belarus missed democratisation: the unborn Nation

a. Belarusian national identity

Transitologists have nowadays identified four fundamental factors of a classic post-communist transition: beyond democratisation and the institutionalisation of a free-market system, it has been acknowledged the importance of including stateness and national identity as meaningful components in a transition process (Eke and Kuzio, 2000). While a significant transformation in each of the four domains of democratisation, marketisation, **stateness** and **nationalisation** has been reported in other post-communist countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, Belarus represents an exceptional case of regression in each of the cited components. Having analysed the relapse of Belarus into an authoritarian regime following the brief democratic parenthesis allowed by Kebich's incompetence, it is deemed urgent to investigate the rationale behind the incapacity and apparent immaturity of Belarus civil society to seize that brief window of opportunity between 1994-1996. Therefore, to explain the reasons behind the *missed* democratisation, this paragraph will deepen the understanding of the socio-cultural background to analyse *missed* nationalism in Belarus as one key

component of *missed* mobilisation of civil society. As demonstrated by various studies, the presence of a shared feeling of national identity foster democratisation towards a liberal form of government, since nationalism and democracy usually generate masses of people mobilising for freedom and self-determination both at national and individual level (Denes, 2015). Indeed, the lack of a feeling of common belonging for Belarusian people due to the perpetual occupation of the region and, to the possible most significant form of Sovietisation among the former communist republics, produced a *passive* civil society limiting or even extinguishing Belarusians aspirations for freedom, democracy, and independence (Zietara, 2018).

Belarus is in fact one of the several Central and Eastern european countries that could be defined under the term “hysterical nations" coined by Istvàn Bibo, the famous Hungarian author who applied psychoanalytic principles to discover the root of the democracy corruption in Central and Eastern European countries (Denes, 2015). According to the Hungarian author, the political hysteria derives from unsettled historical traumas caused by the fact that the territories of Central and Eastern Europe were invaded, occupied, dismantled and destroyed by other different nations numerous times, blurring their borders and hindering the formation of a “national political consciousness” contrary to the Western and Northern European countries (Bibo, 2015). Indeed, the region known as Belarus has experienced multiple partitions and frequent changes of ownership, making its history closely intertwined with that of its neighbouring countries. Belarus has a history of occupation that begins with the rule of Kievan Rus, the first East Slavic state that ended in the 13th century by the Mongol invasion of the Golden Horde. Then, it was progressively included in the expansion of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania which constituted a flourishing period for Belarusian national identity thanks to the extensive autonomy that was conceded to Belarus from the 13th until the fusion of the Lithuanian dynasty with the Polish ruling house. However, omitting the Grand Duchy period, Belarus has never enjoyed independence. Since the first partition of Poland in 1772 by Catherine the Great, Belarus was occupied by the Russian Empire, and then, by the Soviet Union in the 20th century - hampering any attempt of Belarus’ nation-building (Marples, 2023). Indeed, the proclamation of the Soviet Republic of Belarus in 1919 was not perceived as an imposition on national identity because there was “no national [Belarusian] identity as such” (Eke and Kuzio, 2000). Despite other post-communist States, Belarus exited the Soviet era because it was externally forced to do so: within Belarusian borders no national communist party was asking for independence, no

national language or religion was particularly prominent in the region, no historical independent region remained neutral and free from any Tsarist or Soviet occupation was existing and the transfer of the capital of Vilnius as a nationally Belarusian conscious city to Lithuania denuded Belarusians of any national symbol or common myth from which to build an historical political consciousness. In this way, the loss of Vilnius to Lithuania allowed for an alternative interpretation of Belarusian history as consistently linked with the Russian past. This kind of pan-eastern Slavist rhetoric nourished the belief of Belarusian people and also Ukrainians who identify themselves with a Russian identity or as *Homo Sovieticus*, intended as inhabitants of those Slavic branches, Belarus and Ukraine, conceived as mere regions part of the supreme Russian motherland (Eke and Kuzio, 2000). Lukashenka's discourse campaign was imbued with pan-eastern Slavist narrative who sought to tie the fates of Belarus and Russia together firmly denying Belarus' heritage in the Grand Duchy (*ibidem*). Indeed, Lukashenka can be deemed to be the only populist leader in Europe who did not appeal his rhetoric to nationalism but rather to myths of Soviet Belarus. Differently from any other post-communist state, Belarus is the only country where carrying the national flag has become a punishable offence. Moreover, the independence was changed with the anniversary of Minsk liberation by the Soviet army and the incumbent replaced national symbols with traditional Soviet ones of the hammer and sickle. To explain this anomaly, Lukashenka's concept of nationalism has been referred by scholar Anthony Smith (1990) as "bureaucratic nationalism". Therefore, an interpretation of nationalism focused on the consciousness of a country's independence and integrity of the territory and not on an ethno-cultural concept of nation founded on cultural, linguistic, historical and religious identity as proposed by the Belarusian People's Front (BPF). In fact, while at first Lukashenka's narrative was more focused on the Soviet nostalgia and Russo-centrism, acknowledging Belarusians demand for nationalist claims and Putin's proposal to assimilate six Belarusian regions within the Russian Federation, the incumbent shifted towards a more nationalist discourse resembling a civic nationalism. However, differently from the latter, **Lukashenka's nationalism** overlooks civil and political rights of the citizens and civil society formation to prefer stability and integrity of the state and territory.

Although from a European or Western liberal-democratic perspective might sound absurd, it may be the case that Lukashenka's political program centred on stability and prosperous economic high standards of living sounded to Belarusians people as the best option on the market after the unexpected and shocking USSR dissolution. Indeed, among the

creative constellation of national concepts of Belarus, Lukashenka’s option is by far one of the most appealing. Due to the confusion generated by the hysterical past of the Belarusian region, still nowadays there is no common understanding of a Belarusian national identity - not even within the opposition front - generating fragmentation and disunity that feed the authoritarian regime maintenance. Indeed, in Belarus four types of national concepts have been theorised by A. Kazakevich (2011). Firstly, the classical **ethno-cultural** conception which is by far the most active in the mobilisation of civil society and which invokes the Grand Duchy tradition symbolised by the white-red-white flag. Secondly, the **cultural-political** concept which views Belarus as a political and cultural community with civic orientation, grounded on values connected to the former Soviet republic, or Europe, disregarding the importance of a Belarusian identity. A third conception is the **state-political** national concept that advocates for a civic nationalism guaranteed by the state but without any kind of dependence from external actors and no interest for the building of a Belarusian national identity. Finally, a **Russo centric** concept of nation based on the belief that there exists a unified Russian people (*Russkii narod*) comprising Great Russians, Little Russians (Ukrainians), and White Russians (Belarusians), forming a tripartite unity and representing a super-ethnic Russian group (Burkhardt, 2015). Whilst the 'one Rus' approach aligned with Lukashenka's initial Russophile foreign policy, since the beginning of the 2000s the incumbent narrative has come closer to a state-political conception where the Soviet statehood narrative dominates on ethno-national claims fostering Belarus’ independence from external forces (Kazakevlch, 2005).

Overall, the apathy and passivity of Belarusian people that partially caused the *missed* democratisation of Belarus can actually be viewed in light of a more active agency of Belarusians citizens which showed a more accentuated interest in economic and state reform matters rather than in the formation of a strong common national identity. Indeed, the lethargy of Belarusian national movements is the logical result of the *hysterical* history of Belarus which has led the majority of the population of Belarus to think outside a national identity framework and to be more interested in pragmatic-politics and socio-economic stability. As a result, in the brief period of post-sovietisation, Belarusian social structure was fragmented and organised around personal and informal relations. Therefore, a strong civil society and social movements capable of organising resistance against an incumbent was not still in place in that historical moment. Indeed, whereas it cannot be denied the existence of civil society in Belarus before 2020, it shall be recalled that civil society organisations were

primarily limited to urban areas and heavily reliant on foreign financial assistance, severely alienated from the majority of the society (White, Lewis and Batt, 2013). Consequently, the civil society atomisation resulting from the absence of a shared feeling of national belonging produced by the *hysterical* history of Belarus may partially explain the survival of Lukahsenko's regime and its exceptional stability until 2020.

b. Belarusian "Russianness"

Since the aim of the paper is that of furnishing a potential design of policy within the context of the European Union, it is required to debrief Belarus relations with its two main external actors: the European Union and Russia. Lately, during the internal Russian crisis between Wagner warlord Yevgeny Prigozhin and Russian central government, Alexander Lukashenko presented himself to the media as the tiebreaker between Vladimir Putin and his ex-chef, taking the opportunity to rebrand his political influence from the so-called "Putin's docile satrap" to a Belarusian statesman, capable of brokering peace and restoring stability during a potential civil war within Russia (Hopkins, 2023). On this occasion, it has been possible to grasp Lukashenko's political approach towards its closer external partner, Russia. Indeed, whilst Belarus' dependence on the Russian economy has always been a fact, Lukashenko and Putin relations have not been linear looking at the past twenty years, especially in the apex of Russian aggressivity towards its neighbour, Ukraine. At the time Putin arrived in power in 1999, Lukashenko was already president of Belarus for five years. Lukashenko represented a model to follow for the newcomer and they launched their solid partnership becoming inseparable hockey teammates. However, sooner than later hockey matches were constantly won by Putin without playing by the rules and Lukashenko was relegated to a minor submissive role (Flammini, 2023). Notwithstanding Belarus' increasing submission to the Russian regime of Putin, there have been various occasions where Lukashenko expressed his intolerance for this state of affairs. Therefore, there have been times when Lukashenko showed unexpected autonomy in the foreign policy domain, resulting in erratic diplomatic relations with the European Union's member states, alternating periods of engagement and times of estrangement, especially in reaction to the sanctions imposed for severe violation of human rights. Potentially, if the European neighbours were less severe in pricey sanctions, nothing excluded that Belarus would have embarked in economic relations with the EU for pragmatic reasons, especially for a diversification of Belarus investments, which, deploying a

multi-vector foreign policy, would have loosen Russian grip on Belarus' economy. A scenario that would have certainly favoured Belarus when Russia started to reduce access to Belarusian products on its market and cut financial subsidies. However, having the EU as a tradition, a reputation of normative power and not being interested in a partnership with Belarus, EU-Belarus relations have never really departed (Pierson-Lyzhina, 2021). As a result, to guarantee a shred of autonomy in Belarus' foreign policy from Russia, Lukashenko choose to keep a foot in both camps resulting in a clumsy but strategic choice, generating a constant tension between attempting to maintain Belarus' independence while being semi-completely absorbed within a Russian confederation (Eke and Kuzio, 2000).

c. *CSOs linkages with external actors: Russian and European linkages*

The erratic foreign policy position of Belarus has reflected in uncertain relations between Belarusian civil society organisations and external actors. At this point, CSOs linkages with Russia and the Western countries will be analysed in detail. From the study of Mazepus et Al. (2019), it has been recorded that overall, Belarusian civil society organisations that share profound connections with Russia, differentiate from CSOs linked with the EU in their apparent non-political nature. Indeed, CSOs that are directly funded by Russia are usually cultural or religious organisations and university institutes, while CSOs with EU connections are generally tied to the development of a democratic and human rights tradition, forming CSOs intent on election monitoring or human rights advocacy. However, the intense and solid establishment of direct connections between Belarus and Russian founded organisations is fostered directly by Belarusian public officials which exchange constant relations with the Russian correspondents in the economic domain and also through the Belarus Orthodox Church that, being a religious province of the Moscow Church, maintains solid and constant relations with the Church of Kirill. Moreover, an indirect influence on the Belarusian population passes through the various institutes devoted to higher education which promote the Russian language, identity and tradition such as the *Russky Mir* foundation opened in the University of Brest. However, despite the existence of some paramilitary associations which explicitly refer to the Soviet past and are probably connected with the Russian government, these typology of organisations are probably the unique case of Russian-linked organisations not tolerated by the incumbent regime (Mazepus et Al., 2019).

By contrast, since the first years of 2000s, the Belarusian government has repeatedly shown explicit opposition to the CSOs connected to Western influence (Gilbert, 2020). The major founder of CSOs before 2001 was the United States, which was perceived by the Belarusian authorities as a political threat plotting the overthrow of Lukashenko's regime, promoting democratic values and emulating the colour revolutions. As a result, the majority of these organisations were suppressed through the above-mentioned limitations to the CSOs, which were facilitated by the integration of the Belarus system into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and finally resulting in an acute contraction of foreign funds to the CSOs (Gilbert, 2020). Moments of openness - frequently registered through diplomatic actions - were registered in the relations between Belarus and the EU especially when Lukashenko's regime was perceiving Russia as aggressive and fearing for the invasion of its territory. Indeed, when the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Ossezia were invaded by Russia in 2008 and Crimea was annexed to the Russian territory in 2014, Lukashenko's was in the frontline defending Georgia and Ukraine's right to defend and retake their territories. Lukashenko's opposition to the Russian invasion was welcomed by the Europeans as a demonstration of openness to the Western values. Consequently, the EU lifted economic sanctions in each of these stages bartering them with the release of numerous Belarusian political opponents resulting in a "critical engagement" of Belarus with the EU (Flammini, 2023; Pierson-Lyzhina, 2021). In this period, extensive financing was sent to the civil society of Belarus from the USAID to fund events and local associations arriving to involve 5.866 participants and numerous CSOs were opened and funded by the EU (USAID, 2023). The CSOs strongly connected with the EU are especially those organisations that operate within the research sector, such as policy advising think tanks and human rights defender organisations, such as the famous Human Rights Center *Viasna* or the Helsinki Committee of Belarus, which are directly engaged through the Belarusian National Platform in the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. Contrary to the Russian linked CSOs, Belarus CSOs connected to the EU originate from Belarusian citizens' and grassroots activists who aim at addressing the concerns of the local Belarusian people (Mazepus et Al., 2021). However, the superficial openness of Belarus foreign policy towards the European Union was limited to brief periods driven by Lukashenko's opportunistic decisions which were easily abandoned when the stable relationship with Russia was balanced again. Indeed, although Lukashenko's diplomatic relations with Putin have gone through ups and downs, as the American journalist affirmed, the European Union will never ensure the incumbent position nor his constant

private benefits differently from the authoritarian regime of Putin. Therefore, the EU will never be a credible alternative for Lukashenko (Applebaum, 2010).

1.3 Socio-economic explanations of the missed democratisation. A naive renounce of independence: the Rich Housewife

Therefore, the peculiar indifference that Belarusians have shown until 2020 has been compensated by other types of concerns that interested Belarusian individuals more than a romantic quest for identity or democratic institutions. Confronting their economic situation with the dramatic results of the sudden privatisation, deindustrialisation and free-market transition on the other ex-communist Republics, the Belarusian people did not push for overturning economic reforms and silently accepted Lukashenka's russification approach to facilitate access to affordable oil and gas resources needed for the energy and mining industry subsistence (Alachnovič and Korosteleva, 2023). Indeed, looking at Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, it can hardly be affirmed that the undertaken democratic transitions have encouraged a healthy economic development in these countries, which nowadays are deemed to be poor, plagued by corruption, territorially fractured and despoiled by oligarchs (Sierakoswki, 2020). Contrary to its ex-Soviet counterparts currently part of the European Union, Belarus shows a poverty rate of 0.5% and an outstanding economic growth: especially between 2000 and 2006, Belarus' GDP expanded around 40% - twice as much as the other Central and Eastern Europe members of the EU and industrial production grew even faster at a pace of more than 50% in the first years of 2000s surpassing Soviet levels (Adarov et al., 2016). Whilst there is no common agreement of scholars on whether the Belarusian socialist market economy should rightly be referred to as an "economic miracle", as supported by the incumbent and Russian illiberal scholars, it shall be recognised that the Belarusian economy has proved healthy and stable at least certainly until 2009 as demonstrated by the efficient industrial plants, the productive collectivised agriculture system and the consistent development of the information technology sector (IT) (Hervouet, 2013). Indeed, comparing Belarus GDP per capita at purchasing power parity with the other ex-Soviet countries such as Ukraine where GDP per capita reach only $10,000 against the $22,000 of Belarus shows that Lukashenka's success in securing a decent and respectful quality life for the citizens of Belarus has incentivised the stability of his personal authoritarian government despite the lack of civil and political guarantees, establishing a "social contract" between the incumbent and the Belarusian population (Sierakowski, 2020).

It is also equally true that Belarusian economic development has been achieved at a cost. Belarus' GDP is disproportionately produced by the state - 80% of the economy is nationalised - and consistently supported by external financing from Russia (Hervouet, 2013). Belarus explicitly refers to its market economy as market socialist emulating the Chinese model within the Soviet heritage. Differently from the traditional Soviet collectivism, it is the State that guarantees the socialist nature of the market by controlling that every citizen may benefit from the wealth produced, and by preventing profits from being monopolised by a small minority. Following this logic, the State becomes the *democratic* guarantor of the market where for democracy is intended not as the protection of civil and political rights but as institutional protection of the basic economic rights and essential social needs of the population as a collective body (*Ibidem*). Therefore, economic development has been bartered with civil and political freedoms and with independence from Russian influence. Indeed, since Belarus is a small economy based principally on export revenues, Belarus' economic dependence on Russia consisted in direct and indirect subsidies that sustained Belarus' exports especially when the Russian economy was recovering after 1999 between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21th century. As a projection of the Soviet strict economic relations between Belarus and Russia and thanks to the official establishment of the Customs Union in 1995, Belarus had complete free access to the Russian market where it could sell non-competitive products, especially in the manufacturing sector, and obtain extremely convenient energy discounts and preferential prices in oil and gas, of one third below international prices (Alachnovič and Korosteleva, 2023). Indeed, tighten economic relations with Russia was perceived as the only available panacea to solve short-term necessities caused by the economic crisis that permeated Belarus from 1991 to 1995, when the GDP plunged 35% and the cost of natural resources - practically absent in Belarus - was unbalancing the balance of payments (Zlotnikov, 2009). After 1995, the political decision of tying Belarus destiny to Russia beared its fruits: squeezing to the core the Russian government through the financing of state-owned subsidies (SOEs) at Russian expenses and to which Belarus still holds today 1.4 billions of dollars of debt - postponed in 2022 for other ten years (Fabrichnaya, 2022). In other words, Lukashenka's Belarus acted as the stereotypical rich housewife who cynically marries a rich old man hoping that the arranged marriage will sustain its finances to ensure her economic stability but without planning any concrete active effort of reform to prepare for a potential rupture of the relationship. Disregarding the first rule of the international economy, that is diversification of investments and partners, Belarus tied its economy entirely with the Russian partner proving an

unsustainable strategy in the longer term, being Belarus at the complete dependence of the Russian economy. As a result, the confirm that the foundations of the Belarusian miracle were fragile arrived after the first five years of the 2000s, when Russia started to raise its energy export prices and Belarusian exports to Russia began to lose competitiveness plumbing of 10% than 2005 then worsened by the global financial crisis of 2008 reaching a external trade balance deficit of 18% of the GDP in 2009 (Zlotnikov, 2009).

However, Belarus was unprepared: the majority of Russian investments were allocated by Lukashenka to subsidised unproductive companies, inefficient agricultural sector and spent in increased salaries to reassure the quiescent citizens of Belarus. Indeed, frightened by potential instability and to avoid painful reforms, Belarusian society has been extremely wary of any attempt of economic modernisation. Several Belarusian authors suggests that by the mid-2000s Belarus appeared to have entered a "counter-revolutionary phase," in which the masses were unable to accept changes and reforms were demanded only by a small group of intellectuals and activists from the political opposition detached from the civil society (Baturchik et al. 2009). In this unique case, Belarus *missed* modernisation of its economy was partially due also to the *missed* democratisation of the Belarusian civil society, which used to the traditional Soviet dependence of Belarus to Russia did not exercise any political pressure against the incumbent to modernise the country's economy. Nevertheless, after 2008 the Belarusian civil society started to perceive what it means bearing the brunt of not choosing its own destiny and Russia started to reveal its real nature: the rich old man turned out to be actually a drunk ludopathic.

1.4 Reversing the Trend: the role of civil society in Renovated Peoplehood after the 2020 Presidential Elections

a. Belarusian Civil Society

As a result of the previous analysis, it is clear that the stability of the regime of Alexander Lukashenko is the product of a choice of the majority of Belarusian citizens to silently accept the enforcement of an authoritarian form of government based on three levels of control of the population. Firstly, lacking a credible alternative, Belarusians have apathetically endured the political status quo by inertia accepting the institutionalisation of a repressive sultanistic regime enforced through the use of coercion and threats. Secondly, Lukashenko took advantage of opposition division and a lack of a solid national tradition to claim legitimation

for his personal regime, mixing Soviet nostalgia and Russian identity with the denial of any form of Belarusian nationalism. Thirdly, through a strategy of cooptation, Lukashenko managed to establish a social contract between the Sultan and his people where economic benefits and financial stability are bartered with political and civic freedom while ensuring people's loyalty to the regime (Bedford, 2021). However, despite the exceptional stability of Lukashenko's regime, unpredictably the Belarusian population managed to reorganise and mobilise in mass against the incumbent on the occasion of the presidential elections of 2020, marking one historical moment in the political landscape of Belarus since the fall of the USSR in 1991 (*Ibidem*). Despite being one of the multiple manipulated elections of post-Cold war Belarus in the last thirty years, the literature agrees that the protests against Lukashenka's re-election of 2020 were triggered by a different factor: COVID-19 pandemic (Korosteleva, Petrova and Kudlenko, 2023). Nevertheless, given the revolutionary impact of the 2020 protests, the phenomenon cannot be circumscribed to Lukashenka's mis-management of the pandemic but it represents actually the result of years of attrition of the former three strategies which slowly were losing the sedative effect on the Belarusian civil society and brought massive change resulted in the development of CSOs and SMs.

b. *Preemptive Authoritarianism: Foreign Agent Law Restrictions and GONGOs*

As demonstrated so far, being Belarus an exceptional particular case in the landscape of the ex-Soviet Republics, the formation of a dense strata of CSOs as it developed in 2020 is an extremely specific and complex process. Indeed, Belarus was one of the few ex-Soviet countries which did not undergo any sort of "colour revolutions" in the 2000s. Popular peaceful uprisings triggered by fraudulent elections caused the mobilisation of mass movements fighting for the existing democratic constitutions in ex-Soviet countries at the beginning of 2000s as in the case of the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 (Mc Faul, 2005). However, as the democratic wave was mounting, Lukashenko as well as other incumbents such as Putin, activated to prevent any sort of *contagion* adopting pre-emptive authoritarian measures to hinder any formation of strong CSOs generating an autocratic wave of convergence (Silistki, 2010). According to the scholar Thomas Ambrosio (2007), autocratic rulers have been noticed to employ three methods of authoritarian resistance to democratic diffusion: "insulate", "bolster", and "subvert". The first strategy is explicitly directed towards civil society organisations and foreign/national NGOs opposing the authoritarian regime. The second strategy consists in

reciprocal support between illiberal regimes, such as Russia and Belarus; while the third strategy implies actively undermining any potential form of democratic transition in neighbouring countries, such as Ukraine. Whilst the latter two strategies implies decisions at the foreign policy level, the present research will focus on the first tactic of *insulation* which explicitly aims at disaggregating and preempting any form of grassroot movements and organisation, implicitly acknowledging CSOs' agency in a potential democratisation transition from an authoritarian form of government to an emancipated political system.

To block the so-called Orange scare, Belarus followed the example of Russia and Central Asian authoritarian regimes such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan eliminating any legal or institutional opportunities for opposition to develop, targeting civil society organisations as through the so-called foreign agents law (Mazepus et al., 2021). In Belarus, two main trends have been observed: the exacerbation of CSOs' criminalisation and persecution combined with the creation of state-managed NGOs, called GONGOs. As a matter of fact, even before the presidential decree of 2001, CSOs regulation in Belarus was tailored to restrict their room for manoeuvre as shown by the Law on Public Association of 1994 which hindered CSOs' official registration. However, pre-emptive authoritarianism was observed more specifically in the years of the colour revolutions. In 2001, a presidential order was proclaimed to impede any politicisation of CSOs receiving foreign support, which at the time was intense, especially by the United States, and to mandate foreign grants registration. Then, in 2003, decree n° 24 on the Receipt and Use of Free Foreign Aid required NGOs to obtain prior clearance before accepting foreign donations, as well as a list of political activities that such financing may not be used for (Christensen and Weinstein, 2013). In 2005, CSOs activities and existence has been criminalised with the introduction of article 193.1 of the Criminal Code which stated that those organisations, associations, political parties, foundations which have been liquidated, suspended or not obtained state registration were "punishable by fine or arrest for up to 6 months, or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years" (Venice Commission, 2011). Outlaw organisations included external monitoring organisations for election surveillance and human rights advocacy association and, in particular, it targeted youth movements of opposition to preempt the diffusion of mobilisation phenomena led by youth organisations such as Khmara in Georgia or the Ukrainian Pora and Serbian Otpor, which were active during the colour revolutions (Gilbert, 2020). The mentioned article was active until 2019, when it was suspended following the special opinion of the Venice Commission on the incompatibility of article 193.1 with

universal human rights standards (Venice Commission, 2011). However, on the 22th of January 2022, the article was restored and amended with the only exception that the article will not be applied in circumstances where the more severe Art. 423.1 of the Criminal Code shall be implemented, concerning extremist organisations (*ibidem*). Nowadays, Belarus is deemed to be an "open-air gulag" where interference with the work of independent journalists and CSOs members arrests are still being reported on a daily basis (Cau, 2023). In fact, according to the final opinion of the Council of Europe on the Constitutional Reform of 2022 of Belarus (2022), the arrests reached 32.000 and death penalty has been reintroduced in 2022 for "attempts to carry out acts of terrorism" (Amnesty International, 2022).

The second strategy deployed by Lukashenko to pre-empt Belarusian civil society to formation from below, was creating a preventive form of pro-regime CSOs (Matchanka, 2014). In 2015, Belarus registered a period of "controlled openness" where not-politicised CSOs specialised in social support grew throughout the Belarusian civil society, as in the case of *Imena*, a crowdfunding CSO. In this period, Belarus authorities instrumentalized the spreading of CSOs to control society, showing the international community an apparent political liberalisation. However, human rights defenders' organisations were still banned and struggled to obtain official registration within the country, as in the case of *Viasna* (Chulitskaya and Bindman, 2023). As of 2019, Belarus registered 2907 CSOs of which 227 had international status and the others were deemed to be the so-called GONGOs, "government-organised non-governmental organisations" controlled by the central power (Yeliseyeu, 2019). Inherited by the Soviet tradition, GONGOs are actually a powerful authoritarian tool to control the Belarusian population, distorting the basic concept of civil society and fragmenting the opposition. The two most famous GONGOs in Belarus are the Belarusian Republican Youth Union and Belaya Rusa, which differently from authentic democratic CSOs, instead of engaging in advocacy campaigns, workshops, lectures and seminars, are more centred around leisure activities, charity and social events such as festivals, sport contests and recreation activities, attracting almost a quarter of the youngest generations: the estimated figures according to the government reach around 500.000 people. Although these data are biassed by the regime, the high number of GONGOs' members represents a preoccupying phenomenon which distorts the formation of grassroot civil society organisations and provides easy access to the regime to manipulate younger generations, stifling the expansion of independent CSOs. As a consequence of these strategies, Belarusian authoritarian regime of Lukashenko succeeded through GONGOs to maintain monopoly over

the official political narrative, *insulating* civil society organisations from the majority of the population and reducing their space of representation and presence within the country through legal constraints and repressive means legitimised by the criminalisation of CSOs (Matchanka, 2014).

c. *Democratisation by mistake: the outburst of the 2020 election protests*

However, despite the extensive control of the authoritarian regime on the population, the inhibition of any development of Belarusian civil society and the extreme insulation both at national and international level of CSOs, thousands of Belarusian people bursted against the sixth re-election of Lukashenko in twenty-six years taking to the streets of Minsk in mass in the hot summer of August 2020 to lament fraudulent results and to sustain the candidacy of the opposition front-woman Svetlana Tsikhanouskaya (Bedford, 2021). Growing unpopularity of Lukashenko was building and his mis-handling of the pandemic caused by his negationist beliefs - condensed in the infamous motto “pandemic can be easily defeated by drinking vodka, visiting the sauna and working in the fields” - caused the overload of the public health sector due to the lack of restrictive preventive measures to face the COVID-19 exposing his population to unsafety and insecurity (Ganguly et al., 2021).

Meanwhile the three main factors that hindered democratisation until 2020 were crumbling under the eyes of the incumbent: the social contract between the people and the incumbent was breaking as poverty rate grew and economic growth was shrinking since the the financial crisis activated in 2008. Moreover, the financial stability of Belarus was worsened by the progressive degradation of the Russian economy due to the Western sanctions after the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 (Bedford, 2021). At the same time, after the invasion of Crimea, Lukashenko gradually absorbed the opposition narrative on national identity to distance Belarus from Russia in order to preserve independence and national integrity. However, the *Belarussisation* of Lukashenko’s political approach reconciled opposition with the population, depriving Lukashenka’s privileged position as the exclusive champion of the national identity narrative. As a result, the institutional arrangement of the Sultanistic regime, which was described by several scholars as a soft authoritarianism - despite violence was employed in each previous election session, through for example, the strategic disappearances of opposition leaders - began to deploy more

repressive means of violence against the protesters such as arrests, imprisonments, prosecutions and at least one execution (Bedford, 2021).

Therefore, even though the escalation extent that the 2020 protests reached could have not been expected, the combination of short-term and long-term factors indicated a fertile ground for the mounting of a potential revolution. Although Belarus lacked a solid civil society network between the Belarusian citizens, it has been observed that the brief period of timid liberalisation from 2015-2019 have allowed for Belarusians to build the basis for civil society consciousness which then suddenly activated in 2020 (Bedford, 2021) through a "spontaneous' ' and "informal' ' pattern of massive protest movement that escapes the logic of any politological study of political mobilisation of masses (Korosteleva, Petrova and Kudlenko, 2023). Indeed, according to professor Korosteleva (2023), the phenomenon observed in Belarus escapes the rationale of classical teleological transition from authoritarian regime to democracy or a traditional nation-building process, nor it could be analysed under the literature of democratic mobilisation studies which usually takes into consideration consolidated CSOs and institutionalised groups of protests. In particular, it is the informal and self-organisation nature of Belarusian individuals into masses of protesters which distinguishes and characterises uniquely the case of Belarus from the other colour revolutions such as the civil society-led democratic mobilisation of Georgia in 2003 (Korosteleva, Petrova and Kudlenko, 2023). As a matter of fact, Belarusian revolution could be more assimilated to the individual "existential shock" experienced by dissidents CS of the Soviet Republics prior to 1989 - such as the Polish People's Republic after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 - when the more diffused form of protest against the regime was the individual dissent based on demands for dignity and human rights' claims such as freedom of expression, information and association (Kaldor, 2003). Lacking a substantive strata of civil society consciousness, it would be more logical to suggest that Belarusian protests of 2020 where more likely driven by individual experiences of a common individual reset of their political consciousness, giving rise to a common feeling of "*peoplehood*", as originally described by professor Korosteleva (2023): a sense of belonging to a community without a central control, which has been described through the metaphor of "a flock of birds". More in detail, the process would have started through people insulation from the rest of the society and imposed atomisation by the authoritarian measures, which gradually led people to look after their "own backyard". In the concrete sense of the term, Belarusian people inherited from Soviet times a communist urban topography arranged in the

so-called "dvory", blocks of residential buildings facing a common square where Belarusians met to coordinate on logistic matters such as heating, water supply, common renovations similar to a condominium's meetings. During COVID-19 pandemic, these common urban spaces became essential to coordinate help between neighbours, becoming the epicentre of local self-organisation and producing cohesive protest communities called "microraiony", which basically were district made of multiple dvory. The peculiarity of the mobilisaiton was that, despite these communities were isolated from internationally known Belarusian CSOs and detached from the political opposition party of Tsikhanouskaya, they moved as a cohesive group. As the protests were mounting in summer 2020, as a bird in a flock, Belarusian citizens aligned their actions copying the spatially closer communities, activating primarily within each dvory and then, progressively propelling more microraiony against the central government, especially to support their members in prison and resist government violence. In this way, from the spontaneous and informal mobilisation of August 2020, the revolutionary movement proceeded towards more institutionalised grassroot communities and non-state actors under various form of association such as clandestine group activities or cyber association online, producing a common consciousness of a precise shared goal: achieve a sense of *dignity* of life, to be called *people* (Korosteleva, Petrova and Kudlenko 2023).

Therefore, it can be concluded that Belarus popular uprising of 2020 cannot be easily categorised within one traditional form of post-communist transition, nor nation-building or classic democratisation process rather it presents a proper specificity that requires an *ad hoc* policy design to support the survival of these horizontal self-organisation of civil society arrangements defined by Korosteleva as "community of relations" which resemble more the "networks of sympathy" of the Hungarian George Konrad than the CSOs of Georgian Rose revolution (Kaldor, 2003). Although they may not aim at achieving a classical liberal democracy form of government, nor they show any strong nationalist claims, they are still fighting on a daily basis against the violence and abuse of power by the regime of Lukashenko building solidarity among the variegated Belarusian political spectrum. The power of these movements shall not be allowed to be repressed by abusive authoritarian repressive forces and they deserve attention, respect and support especially by the European community (Quartapelle, 2020). In this paper, it is argued that the support of the European Union to grassroot movements in Belarus should not be founded on EU's claims to be a *normative power* nor on European realist strategies of foreign policy to prevent the spreading

of authoritarian waves into the European geographical region. Rather the European Union countries shall hear Belarusians claims and necessities on the fundamental principle of equal human dignity and allow for a space of representation within the European institutions that enable members of different arrangements of civil society to have a seat on the table of decisions that directly concern the interested stakeholders. Breaking the cycle of imposed paternalistic decision-making process on Belarusians citizens and allowing for an equal stand of Belarusian instances would constitute not only a fairer and more democratic decision-making process - recognising the agency of the citizens of Belarus in matters that directly affect them - but it would be also more efficient giving voice to the direct interested agents which have a more comprehensive perspective and are more aware of the necessities and support required by the regional and local population. Following another example of direct representation of civil society arrangements within an intergovernmental institution such as the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), the present paper advocates for the institution of a similar permanent representation of civil society within the European Union. In the fourth chapter, a suggestion of policy design for a theoretical representative body of civil society arrangements of Belarus will be provided. However, it is important to recall that the present research has not the aim of being exhaustive but has the goal of opening the discussion on a new stream of research within the existing academic literature on civil society proposing *ad hoc* public bodies to integrate non-state actors within intergovernmental bodies at the international level.

2. CHAPTER TWO - The Georgian Political System: the *applauded* democratisation of Georgia

Contrary to Belarus, Georgia has been acclaimed by the majority of Western scholars of post-communist transition studies as a *successful* case of democratisation and praised by relevant political personalities, such as US President George W. Bush, as a “beacon” of democracy in Eastern Europe (Dominioni, 2018). Indeed, Georgia witnessed its second revolutionary government transition since independence in November 2003, passing through what became known as the Rose Revolution of Georgia, the second Colour Revolution in Eastern Europe after the Serbian overthrow of Slobodan Milošević on the 5th of October 2000 (Jones, 2020). However, whilst the first transitional process occurred in 1992 when a coup d’état deposed

President Gamsakhurdia through a traditional military takeover, the Revolution of 2003 is deemed to have produced a second transition led by **civil society** prompted by the fraudulent results of the parliamentary elections of 2003 (Jones, 2020). In that occasion, the flagrant manipulation of electoral outcome provoked the gathering of civil society and opposition to peacefully mobilise in mass against the imposter Shevardnadze, obliging him to resign from the President of the Republic office in less than a month from his appointment (Mydans, 2023). The **revolution** was highly participated in and was moved by *democratic instances* of Georgian young people fighting to defend their constitution founded on the rule of law, democracy and fair and transparent elections (Broers, 2005). Therefore, the Rose Revolution appears to represent a crucial moment to understand the democratisation of the Georgian population through the role of the civil society.

In order to proceed in the analysis, it shall be recalled that the Georgian political system is currently describable as a transitioning state in an "uneasy, precarious middle-ground, between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship" (Carothers, 2002). Nevertheless, differently from the case of Belarus, since the dissolution of the USSR the civil society of Georgia has shown a more consistent and influential role in the promotion of democracy and Western values, radicating their instances in a strong advocacy for Georgia's adherence to moral, religious and identity values typical of the EU (Jones, 2020). The purpose of the research is to present the Georgian democratic context and to ascertain whether a factual development of the civil society sector has been observed in the Georgian political system as *applauded* by the Western public opinion. In this chapter, as it was for the case of Belarus, the various levels of explanations of Georgia's post-communist transition will be provided to have a clear vision of the political context where the civil society sector played and to prepare a basis from which extrapolate successful practices inherent to the civil society, potentially replicable in the context of Belarus (furtherly discussed in Chapter three).

Indeed, whilst Belarus and Georgia are two separate and distinctive entities that showcase their own subjectivities, the Caucasus region and the White Russian region can both be considered within the *hysterical nations* framework of Istvàn Bibo. As a matter of fact, both territories were invaded and occupied by numerous external forces in the past, of particular relevance for this paper, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, paving the way for unstable institutions and blurred national identities. Therefore, since Georgia has been acclaimed by a large majority of the academic literature to be a successful example of post-

communist transition and given the democratic performance of Georgia compared to Belarus, the present paper judges essential to investigate primarily, the rationale behind the divergent outcomes, focusing on the role played by the Georgian civil society in the production of the different political result. Thus, the chapter will proceed investigating more in detail the role played by the civil society in the transition process of Georgia, especially focusing on the Rose Revolution of 2003. The Rose Revolution was among the first popular mobilisations after the overthrow of Milosevic in Serbia that threatened authoritarian incumbents such as Lukashenka and Putin, eliciting the *preemptive* authoritarianism mentioned in the case of Belarus coined by Siliski (2010). The **rationale** behind the mobilisation of Georgian population in those years will be questioned and then, the paper will focus on the trend of the role of the civil society within the Georgian political context of the last decade, taking inspiration from the recent legislative attempts of the government of Irakli Garibashvili to introduce restricting regulations on the activity of foreign-funded CSOs, called Foreign Agents Law. However, the recent popular mobilisation of Tbilisi against the Foreign Agents proposal in March 2023, the firm support of Georgia's membership to the EU and Georgian population's positive attitude towards liberal-democratic values, demonstrate the local population's determination in defending constitutional democracy in Georgia (Kirby, 2023).

2.1 Institutional macro-level explanations of Georgia applauded democratisation: a Tormented Institutional Transition

As in the case of Belarus, Georgian people lived within a Soviet Republic and in the spring of **1991**, the people of Georgia were called to express their opinion through a referendum to decide on its separation from the USSR, before its dissolution (Berglund and Blauvelt, 2016). However, differently from the Belarusians, Georgian people caught the referendum as an opportunity to finally achieve the independence of their country, escaping the Soviet system and affirming their will to build a Georgian independent republic (*Ibidem*). Indeed, although the post-communist period was not painless for Georgia, due to the spreading of regional independence movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian people did not show any sign of Soviet melancholy contrary to the Belarusians (Nodia and Atilgan, 2016). As a fact, the referendum of 1991 reported a clear-cut result with **99.6 percent of favourables to the secession of Georgia from the USSR**, showing no sign of hesitation in declaring a strong commitment for Georgia’s independence (Nodia and Atilgan, 2016) (Lang et Al., 2023).

However, as in the case of Belarus, Georgia's independence was achieved after centuries of oppression and occupation by external dominant powers. The first were the Mongols in 1220. Then, the Turkish occupants invaded Saqartvelo at the end of the 14th century and soon afterwards the Persian dominated the Georgian territory. **Historically**, the Russian external imposition was the last of numerous occupation forces and the incorporation of Georgia within the Russian Empire of Alexander I at the beginning of the 19th century was accepted by the impotent Georgian governors as the last chance to maintain a trace of Georgian territorial integrity (Lang et al., 2023). As a result, except for the brief parenthesis of the independent Republic of Georgia between 1918-1921, having experienced **eight centuries** of external occupation led inevitably Georgia to an infant status of institutional development and it shall be no surprise that Georgia's post-communist state-building was slow and intermittent (Nodia and Atilgan, 2016).

Therefore, while analysing Georgia's past chronicles, it is evident that Belarus and Georgia share an *hysterical* common past of traumatic invasions of their territories, tying inextricably the destinies of these two crucial borderlands. However, it is important to recall that a remarkable difference between Georgia's transition period from the Belarusian post-communist transition is that, whilst Belarus experienced two defined moments of transition - the failed democratisation of 1994-1996 and the popular recent uprising of 2020 – it can be said that Georgia experienced a *perpetual period* of *revolution* since the reinstitution of the 1921 Constitution into the system in 1991 (Kakachia and Lebanidze, 2016). Indeed, despite the revolution of 2003 being a vital moment of democratic outburst for Georgia, it also showed the instability of the weak political **institutions** that were established after the fall of the Soviet Union (Broers, 2005). That is the reason why, in order to obtain a clear vision of the Georgian political system, an attempt at a brief description of the chaotic institutional development of Georgia shall be provided. In truth, although Georgia's form of government is generally defined as a **parliamentary democracy** provided with a **multiparty system**, Georgia has percurred a long road before achieving this final institutional result (Jones, 2020).

a. 1990-1995: a Period of Chaotic Transition

Georgia's transition towards democracy started before the end of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Georgia was the first, among the ex-Soviet Republics, to announce multiparty elections in 1990. In fact, although the Soviet Union was still in place at that moment, the elections were

won by the ***nationalist*** political party of “Round Table-Free Georgia” led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, replacing the Communist party. Once independence was declared after the referendum of 1991, a *presidential form of government* was instituted, headed by President Gamsakhurdia, elected by more than **80 percent of the population** (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). However, once elected through the first democratic elections of Georgia, it would be false to state that the democratisation process was the principal goal of the newly independent Georgian presidency (Jones, 2020). Rather, it would be fair to say that the presidential system was instituted in Georgia without a consultation of the public. Moreover, President Gamsakhurdia rejected fair competition, resorting to authoritarian Sovietic means of repression to deal with the opposition political parties and imposing a unitary nationalist agenda (*Ibidem*). His presidency repeatedly denied ethnic diversities, imposing a policy of assimilation and proving incapable of satisfying the ethnic nationalist requests, unleashing the disastrous ethnic clashes that brought to the civil war (Berglund and Blauvelt, 2016). Indeed, his mismanagement of the country led warlords and militia to take control of the Georgian regions that exiled Gamsakhurdia in Armenia in 1992 (McCauley, 1994).

The period between 1991 and 1994 in Georgia has been called by scholars as the “period of chaos” (Aprasidze, 2016). Indeed, after Georgia plunged in the civil war, the situation was worsened by the institution of a military triumvirate, composed by the leader of the Mkhedrioni paramilitary band, the National Guard head which controlled the armed forces and the Prime Minister under Gamsakhurdia’s mandate. Amidst the tornado context of Georgian political landscape of those years, a still-standing figure was summoned by the Military Council which needed a *primus inter pares* capable of legitimising the decisions of the Council. That man was Eduard Shevardnadze, former First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party (GPC) from 1972 to 1985 and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, in the last years of the USSR before the dissolution (1985-1990). From that moment until 2003, Shevardnadze dominated the political system of Georgia: firstly, as the Chairman of the Parliament until 1995, elected through parliamentary elections in 1992, and then, as the President of Georgia, after Gamsakhurdia was physically eliminated as an alternative. In 1993, Shevardnadze brought stability brokering with Russia the end of the civil war, in exchange for Georgia's return within the Russian Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Berglund and Blauvelt, 2016). As a factual result, Gamsakhurdia was found dead in still unknown circumstances on 31th december 1993, the

civil war ended and Shevardnadze became President of the Republic of Georgia (McCauley, 1994).

b. 1995-2022: a Period of Intermittent Transition

However, the intermittent and irregular transitioning process of Georgia persisted even amidst the delirious years after the USSR dissolution. The 1992 elections, along with the **Constitution** adopted in **1995**, were considered **the first concrete institutional steps** towards state-building and democratisation of the country (Broers, 2005). The new constitution of Georgia of 1995 replaced the **1921 Constitution** resumed by the Military Council, which despite the progressive social democratic values contained - such as empowerment of the citizens, independence of the judiciary and secularism - was considered among the several causes of Georgia's civil war due to its anachronistic inadequacy to respond to the "matryoshka" ethnic nationalist requests of the fragmented identity of the Georgian territory (Aprasidze, 2016) (Berglund and Blauvelt, 2016).

The constitutional reform of 1995 introduced a **presidential model**, reinforcing the already powerful position of the President during Gamsakhurdia's rule. The choice for a presidential form of government has been interestingly interpreted by scholar Stephen F. Jones (2020) as a "post-Soviet disorder". In other words, a powerful single leader is the automatic preference to answer the common alienation shared by the ex-Soviet population since the institutions and the political system are deemed corrupt and distant from the public, as in the case of Georgia and Belarus. Overall, judging **the 1995 Constitution** through institutional theoretical lens, that document represented undoubtedly a further step towards democratic values for Georgia. It recognised formally key principles of liberal democracy such as representativeness, separation and balance of power, human rights and fundamental freedoms. Effectively, in the second half of the 1990s, despite the Abkhazia, Adjara and the Tskhinvali detachment from the central government control, the Georgian political landscape gained sufficient stability allowing the parliamentary and political institution to acquire leverage and scatter the militias throughout the territory (Aprasidze, 2016).

Therefore, **the adoption of the 1995 constitution** and the stabilisation of the Georgian regional context, led the majority of the political scholars to describe Georgia as a success story of post-Soviet democratisation. However, under President Shevardnadze's rule, the international expectations did not reflect the actual political situation of Georgia and

democratic changes did not go far more than placing Georgia among the list of hybrid regimes. In fact, whilst the former President was instrumental in restoring Georgian sovereignty after the civil war, during his mandate a *neo-patrimonialist state* emerged, failing the liberal-democratic title that was attributed to the Georgian apparent transitioned government (Aprasidze, 2016). The institutional arrangement of those years actually sustained previous 1992 practices, distant from the rule of law and the constitutional check and balances. Rather, it encouraged the persistence of Soviet arrangements including continuity within the ruling elite itself, restricted spaces of citizens representation, personal rather than normative loyalties among officials, and, overall, the reduction of a meaningful public sphere (Broers, 2005). As affirmed by Aprasidze (2016), the actual presence of **consistent civil society actors** which characterised the political landscape of Georgia of those years was a sort of “Achilles' heel” of Georgia. From an external point of view, the perception was that civil society was vibrant, independent information circulated and political actors were free to move within the political competitive space. However, a *de facto* influence of the population on the decision-making process was hampered by **the dominant political party** logic, according to which the change of power is possible only when a larger section of the political elite do not sustain the former government (Nikolayenko, 2007). A sort of grey area was created within the Georgian political arena that allowed Shevardnadze’s presidency to acquire international legitimation and acclamation for the apparent achieved steps towards democracy from the third superficial eye of the Western partners, ensuring the dominant party to retain power (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009). As a result, in the aftermath of the USSR dissolution, Georgia became **the most corrupt post-communist state** in terms of public administration, while receiving public acclamation for a so-called *applauded* democratisation of Georgian political institutions (Broers, 2005). The phenomenon interested specifically the collusion of politicians and public functionaries with several enterprises buying laws and regulations to favour their companies or otherwise bribing politicians to avoid legal barriers, interesting in particular functionaries of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, energetic companies, the police department and academic personalities (*Ibidem*).

The growing popular discontent with Shevardnadze’s rule bursted once civil society felt directly threatened by the central power after the episode of **Giorgi Sanaia’s murder**, a famous presenter of the independent TV channel Rustavi-2 and the first attempt to banish foreign funded NGOs through the first “foreign agent” proposal of the Georgian parliament

(Broers, 2005). In that moment, CSOs and independent media decided to abandon neutrality and engage directly into politics to defend the representation space of civil society's and the democratic space they achieved in the previous years (*Ibidem*). Indeed, although the growing presence of civil society actors has been described by some authors as an instrumental tool exploited by the incumbent to lure foreign legitimation and investments, with time it revealed to be a *double-edge sword* in the hands of Shevardnadze's presidency. As it was for Belarus, once opened the space for civil society to thrive and spread, it became difficult for the incumbent to defuse the post-Soviet generation, as demonstrated by the Rose Revolution of 2003.

The tragic economic context and the high levels of corruption created the basis for general society discontent which brought the *vibrant* civil society of Georgia to mobilise into protest in the aftermath of 2003 parliamentary elections manipulated results (Khodunov, 2022). A crucial role was played by the monitoring bodies within Georgian territory (Broers, 2005). The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) denounced the evident gap between the fraudulent results published by authorities from the electoral polls obtained through ISFED Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) (Kandelaki, 2006) (ISFED, 2014). The news on overt interference of the electoral results were spread through awareness programs by the Rustavi-2 TV channel which was one of the primary driver of mobilisation, to the point that the broadcast channel was accused of staging the revolution, especially in the first days after the elections on the 3rd of November 2003 (Broers, 2005). Despite these accusations, other scholars recognise in the Rose Revolution a "genuine Revolution" to cut any linkages with the Soviet past (Aprasidze, 2016). Indeed, it involved more than hundred thousand people gathering in the Freedom Square of Tbilisi to defend and protect the Georgian Constitution and provoked a sudden change of power, obliging Shevardnadze to resign and yield his post to the younger Saakashvili (Broers, 2005) (Kandelaki, 2006).

However, from an **institutional** point of view, the actual transformation towards a more democratic political system did not immediately follow the aftermath of the Revolution. Indeed, Saakashvili focused more on the *modernisation* of the Georgian system before *democratisation* of the Georgian institutions, bringing consistent reforms to reduce corruption levels both within the public administration and public armed forces, while setting aside institutional democratic changes (Aprasidze, 2016). Indeed, the political form of government remained a **semi-presidential system** where power remained concentrated in the president

hands due to the absence of political competition, allowing state-building to proceed through effective top-down and government-led reforms (Elgie et Al, 2014). The Prime Minister had a mere support role to the President and the Constitution experienced a period of intense malleability since it was regularly modified at the dominant party's will (Aprasidze, 2016).

Overall, it is more appropriate to define **the Constitutional Reform of 2010-2013** as the pivotal moment of institutional development and state-building of Georgia (Godoladze, 2016). Indeed, that reform activated the constitutional transition from a **semi-presidentialism** to the current **parliamentary system**. Indeed, it is possible to define Georgia's political system from 2004 until 2012 as a *President-Parliamentarism* because the Prime Minister assumed a double duty of accountability both to the President and to the Parliament, while the actual transition towards parliamentary democracy happened from 2010 onwards. Before 2010, as enshrined in Art. 73.1 par. *c* of the Georgian Constitution, the President of the Republic had the power to call for the Government dissolution, while at the same time responding to the Parliament, as stated in Art. 78.1 (Godoladze, 2016). As of 2010, Georgia started a process of institutional development towards a more parliamentary form of government (Taghiyev, 2006). The Constitutional Reform initiated in 2010 in strict collaboration with the Venice Commission - the advisory body of the Council of Europe for constitutional matters – was the turning point that brought consistent changes in the institutional arrangement of Georgia (Menabde, 2020). In fact, since 2013, Georgian political system presents a divided executive branch where the main key political player is the Prime Minister, while the President of the Republic has mostly symbolic functions, even though it retains popular direct elections. The Prime Minister has direct accountability to the Parliament and not to the President, as in a classical parliamentary democracy, balancing the dominant power and preventing power concentration (Aprasidze, 2016).

2.2. Cultural and Historical Meso-level Explanations of Georgia Applauded Democratisation: between Stars and Crosses

a. Georgian National Identity

On the contrary to Belarus, Georgia's history of civil society and political activism has its origins in a strong connection between Georgian culture, democracy and Europeanness (Nodia, 1995). Indeed, the leader of the Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili, who became

President of Georgia in 2004, was obsessed with the glorification of Georgian historical past stressing in particular the heritage of David IV the Builder, symbol of the Golden Age of Georgia in the 11th century a.C. (Jones, 2013). Moreover, Georgia's most evident specificity differently from Belarus is the ethnic cleavages that characterise the entire territory which make the nationalist discourse more present and necessary than in Belarus to ensure the unity and stability of the region (Broers, 2008). Indeed, Georgia, as other various regions of former communist occupation, can be comprised within those emerging post-communist nation-states that experienced different conflicts and tensions generated by interethnic diversity and strenuous nation-building (Zaslavsky, 1992).

The presence of this distinctive feature has strongly affected the development of Georgian nationalism which has assumed **various shapes** throughout the post-communist transition period. Indeed, each leader of post-communist Georgia has represented a different type of **nationalism** and national identity programme. First of all, **Zviad Gamsakhurdia** became famous because he succeeded in recalling the myths of a glorious messianic past of *Georgianess* which strongly advocated for Georgia's independence and rejection of the former Soviet invader, in stark contrast to the first post-Soviet Belarusian administration. As already demonstrated by the referendum results of 1991, the goal of the Georgian people was to build an independent state separated from the occupying forces of Russia, capable of representing Georgian culture, religion, tradition and language (Jones, 2013). Therefore, initially, Georgian nationalism was intended in the classical twentieth century sense of the term: unity, ethnic homogeneity and assimilation of minorities were key to ensure Georgia's political stability (Zaslavsky, 1992). However, the nationalist trend changed with the advent of **Edoeard Shevardnadze** who pushed for a reconciliation among Georgia's ethnic groups in order to re-establish a sort of stability (Berglund and Blauvelt, 2016). The nationalist narrative actually changed with the leader of the Rose Revolution, **Micheil Saakashvili** (Jones, 2013). The veer was led by the new generation of Georgian political leaders, often referred as the *Missisipians* counterposed to the old Soviet intelligentsia of the sixties, who formed in Western universities, interiorised liberal-democratic values, spoke fluently English and worked mainly within the civil society sector of Georgia, especially within *Western-funded NGOs* (Shatirishvili, 2003). Saakashvili was the product of this generation and became the first promoter of a sort of "civic nationalism" (Berglund and Blauvelt, 2016). Combining nationalist and liberal instances - as during the European insurrections of 1848 to affirm the right of auto-determination of peoples - was functional to separate Georgia from

the Soviet occupier force, but dangerous for the stability of the country due to the deep ethnic cleavages of Georgia (*Ibidem*). Therefore, a balance between ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism had to be researched and Saakashvili managed to satisfy both requests. Once at the head of the country, the new young leader managed to bring at the same time modernisation and past Georgian identity, recalling Georgia's mediaeval glory while signing the Convention for the protection of National Minorities in order to affirm Georgia's multiculturalism (Berglund and Blauvelt, 2016).

b. Georgian Europeanness

As a matter of fact, the reaffirmation of Georgia's national destiny apart from the old-Soviet system, represented by Shevardnadze, has constituted one of the drivers of the mobilisation of the Rose Revolution (Cheterian, 2008). Nonetheless, efficient state-building and modernisation, identified with the European model, showed equal footage in the claims of the Georgians' protesters (*Ibidem*). According to the journalist of Rustavi 2 Natia Zambakhidze, the interest of the Georgian population was essentially focused on the **overthrow of a corrupted and inefficient regime** that was unable to address the economic dire situation of poverty, which impeded the provision of basic infrastructures - such as electric furniture for example (Crosby, 2018). In this light, Georgia's trend towards the EU or other Western organisations can be read as the reaction of a large majority of the population to reject the misery of the Soviet occupation, identified with the Russian underdevelopment (Cheterian, 2008) (Sabanadze, 2020).

Besides, historically, Georgian identity has been profoundly characterised by a **mixture** of traditionalist narrative and **European identity** (Jones, 2013). As the expert of Georgian history Stephen Jones says in his book *Georgia, a political history since independence* (2013):

"*Georgians want their **religion**, their **traditions**, their **heroic past**, their **patrons**, and a **powerful president tough** on crime, but they also want to be **European**, **modern**, and **culturally sophisticated**. Georgia's five-cross flag, introduced in 2004, is a symbol of the country's new religious identity* [but] [i]*t flutters alongside the starry flag of the European Union above all Georgia's public buildings, expressing Georgians' **persistent cultural dualism***".

As a fact, as collected in the Georgian chronicles, it is clear that Georgia's orientation towards the West has permeated every moment of Georgia's history (Sabanadze, 2020). The conversion to Christianity of the Kingdom of East Georgia (*Kartli*) in the Middle Ages was the first attempt to look West, to escape the geographical vulnerability and isolation of its territory, surrounded by invaders, internalising the narrative that defines Georgia as the Western/European outpost of the Caucasian region (Jones, 2013). Today, as yesterday, Georgia self-identifies as European despite thousands of miles of distance from the first borders of the European Union, in clear denial with the evident geographical, political and cultural distance from Europe (Nodia, 1995) (Sabanadze, 2020).

Nevertheless, the strong Georgian orientation for **Western influence** and its continuous demands for NATO and EU memberships has naturally incentivised the intervention on the Georgian soil of disparate Western actors (Sabanadze, 2020). Among the main contributors in terms of humanitarian aid, financial and technical assistance stand out the European Union and its member states, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), not to mention the copious economic agreements between Western energy companies and Georgian governments (Sabanadze, 2020). As a result, the blatant presence of Western influences in Georgia has played a substantial role in the **definition** of the **civil society space** and, logically, in the **mobilisation** of Georgian people during the Rose Revolution.

c. Civil Society linkages with external actors: Russian and European linkages

According to Laurence Broers (2005), the rationale behind the strength of Georgian civil society is partly explicable through the intrinsic self-identification with the European political tradition of democracy. However, Georgian appropriation of Western narratives and liberal-democratic demands were not the sole elements that contributed to the civil society mobilisation in the Rose Revolution of 2003. As a fact, thanks to the regular positive relations between Georgian civil society and Western countries, the majority of CSOs in Georgia are predominantly funded by Western countries: e.g. around two thousand Georgian CSOs receive contributions from the European Union, which delineates the agenda of the organisations (Lidén et Al., 2016). Moreover, as reported by Broers (2005), the monitoring activities of 2003 elections were made possible by a staggering increase of Western donors' funds and a strong on-field endorsement of international organisations bodies such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the **Council of Europe** and the International Election

Observation Mission (Broers, 2005). In particular, in 2003, **the United States** contributed around three millions of dollars into election monitoring systems as well as one million received by the entire international community (Mitchell, 2008). Furthermore, Western-funded organisations such as the GYLA and the Open Society Foundation of the American-Hungarian billionaire George Soros played a crucial role to encourage people mobilisation in 2003 (Broers, 2005). Whilst the former organisation - whose main donors are European member states - handled the legal procedures to contest the election manipulated results, the latter contributed actively to train Georgian civil society members to mobilise against the incumbent (Mitchell, 2004). The practice consisted in encouraging a consistent share of information between the Serbian protesters, especially members of the *Otpor* movement of students that disposed of President Milosevic, and the Georgian students participating in the movement *Kmara*, which consequently were the main active participant at the Rose Revolution of 2003 (*Ibidem*). As a result, there have been several allegations on Western interference in the Rose Revolution, accusing Western-funded NGOs to have established close linkages with the political opposition leaders, which then became part of the new government (Stewart, 2008).

2.3 Socio-economic explanations of Georgia applauded democratisation: focus on international economic ties

Therefore, from the analysis of Georgian history of institutional development and political tradition, despite the geographical distance from Europe, Georgia has shown far more points of connection with the Western culture compared to Belarus which, contrary to Georgia, borders directly with some member states of the EU - Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Thus, it can be said that logically the geographical factor seems to be superfluous when analysing the status of transition towards democracy of the two countries in question (or the degree of authoritarianism) (Nodia, 1995). Rather crucial has been revealed to be the economic context and the relations of the country with its partners on the levels of *democratisation* - intended as the development of democratic institutions. In the case of Belarus, as shown in the previous chapter, the acquiescence of the population to the regime of Lukashenka has persisted until the economic benefits of the people overcame the drawbacks of an authoritarian rule. Logically, when the economic premises started to lack, the population started to mobilise against the lack of freedom to decide their destiny. Plus, the population accepted the authoritarian rule of Lukashenka because its predominant economic partner was

interested in maintaining financially the regime and actively supported it throughout the moment of crisis (Minder, 2023).

In Georgia, the economic context is fairly different from the Belarusian one. First and foremost because as stated by Broers (2005), in Georgia, the possibility for any dominant political power to own any natural resource is unthinkable, due to the lack of oil or gas basins and the transient nature of the Georgian region, which imports oil and gas from Azerbaijan, Turkey and Russia (IEA, 2023). In other words, Broers explains the positive state of Georgian civil society using the famous *resource curse* theory, according to which the presence (and possess) of natural resources would allow a dominant group/or the incumbent to guarantee the regime an independent financial sustenance from the taxation of the population and allow for the co-optation of the political opposition (Wenar, 2008). In the case of Georgia, since the raw material is lacking, Broers argues that the resource curse cannot be applied, favouring the presence of a vibrant civil society and the establishment of democratic institutions (Broers, 2005). On the contrary, it appears that the resource curse can be applied to the case of Belarus, which possessing 27 metric tons of crude oil reserves and 30 metric tons of recoverable resources, specifically in the basin of Pripyat, allow Lukashenka to sustain an authoritarian regime, independently from the support of Belarusian citizens (IEA, 2020).

Moreover, as demonstrated in the former chapter, the degree of *democratisation* depends also from the diplomatic and economic relations that a country entails with international partners. Georgia's diplomatic relations with **Russia** in the post-Soviet period have been **intermittent**, but the Russian military interference and recognition of independence of the two territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have hindered any stabilisation of diplomatic and consequently, economic ties with Georgia (MacFarlane, 2020). Indeed, the harsh separation of Georgia from Russia since the symbolic date of April 9th of 1989 - the day of the Soviet raid in the square of Tbilisi where nineteen Georgian peaceful protesters were killed - permeates still nowadays Georgian economic strategy towards Russia (Cheterian, 2008). Probably, the raid and the dramatic economic state during the Soviet time contributed significantly to persuade Georgia to distance from the Russian influence, convincing Georgian political elite to diversify economic partnerships (Stefes, 2008). Rather, Georgia has oriented the economy more towards the EU, as demonstrated by its access to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) since 2014 (European

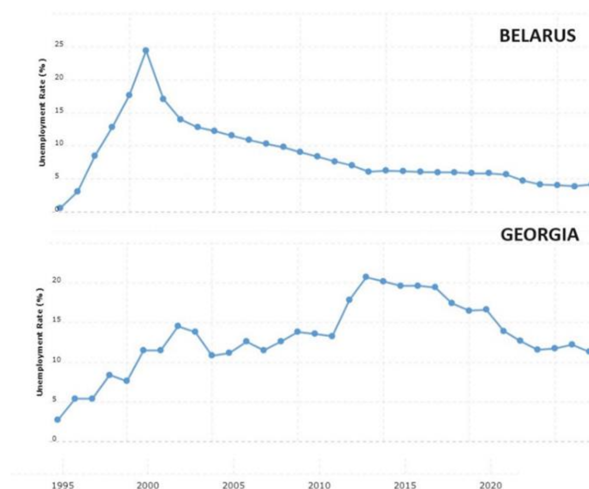
Commission, n.d.). As a matter of fact, the post-Soviet Georgian administration policies engaged in enhancing **sovereignty**, **opening** to foreign direct investments (FID) and **integrating** Georgia into the international market, leveraging the strategic position of the country for oil and gas export companies (Tsereteli, 2020). Indeed, analysing the balance of payments of Georgia, it stands out from the graph that Georgia has engaged in a consistent **diversification of its economic partners** differently from the ex-Soviet Belarusian Republic, creating a larger room of manoeuvre for the Georgian leaders free from the Russian grip. However, it is important to recall that the first economic partner for Georgia is the European Union which accounts for 21% of its transactions, followed by Turkey (15%) and Russia (11.4%). In 2021, EU exports to Georgia totalised €2 billion, especially exporting chemicals, minerals, and equipment and appliances; while Georgia's export to EU is mainly constituted of mineral items, chemicals goods, and foods, since the agriculture is still the predominant sector, importing a value of €812 million (European Commission, n.d.).

However, in a stark difference with the stability of Belarusian economy throughout the post-communist transition period, Georgia struggled to achieve positive economic results and a stable growth: between 1990 and 1995, Georgia's annual growth rate dropped to -42.40% as a logical consequence of the chaotic civil war that exploded between Gamsakurdhia's supporters and separatists regional movements (Macrotrends, 2023). Georgia's GDP growth rate started a consistent recovery after stabilisation was achieved with the Shevardanazde's government and it assumed a positive trend from 1995 until nowadays, excluding interruptions in 1998, 2008, 2014 and 2020 coinciding with territorial instabilities in the Abkhazia region, the war between Russia and Georgia during the economic global crisis that worsened FDI flows, the Russian occupation of Crimea and the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Wolff, 2023).

Source image: Macrotrends.

Moreover, as reported by the statistics of the World Bank, Georgian citizens living under the national poverty ratio amounted in 2006 to 36.9% but the trend has improved over the years and, currently, it is estimated around 15.6%, showing evident signs of progress and modernisation after the Rose Revolution of 2003 onwards (World Bank, 2023). Indeed, in the last decade, Georgia has achieved significant economic development, notably driven by reforms to achieve a greater European integration. As a consequence, gross national income per capita grew from $3,048 in 2010 to $4,608 in 2021 and thanks to the reforms introduced by Saakashvili, the levels of public corruption significantly decreased (World Bank, 2023). Nonetheless, structural issues still persist nowadays. Notably the most significant sector remains agriculture which occupies more than 1/3 of the employable population while featuring low levels of productivity (World Bank, 2023). Poor learning results and low levels of education hinder the private sector, resulting in a low rate of high-skilled percentage of employable subjects, extensive reliance on tourism and external savings. Yet, the rapid recovery after the pandemic has proved the Georgian economy resilient and its higher flexibility to external political shocks compared to the Belarusian economy.

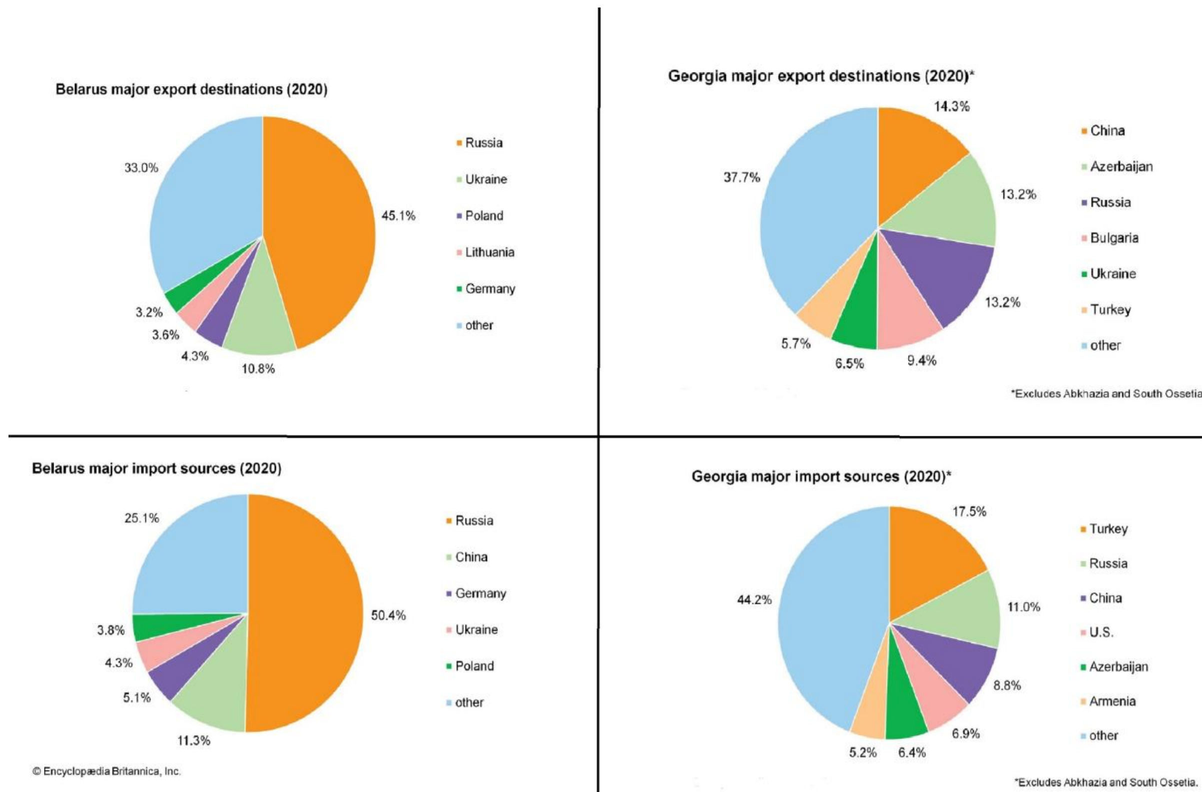
Overall, it is interesting to compare the economic development of Belarus and Georgia. Indeed, comparing the poverty per capita ratio at 2.15$ per day from the 2000s until 2022 of Belarus, the current poverty per capita ratio at 2.15$ per day for Georgia is comparable to the value Belarus showed in the first months of 2001. The same reasoning is doable for the poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines which in Georgia has reached 15.6% of the population, while Belarus achieved the same result late in 2004 (World Bank, 2023). Therefore, it is clear from the comparison that the poverty gap between the two countries is conspicuous, as well as for the unemployment rate from 1991 to 2023. From the comparison of the two diagrams of Belarus and Georgia, it can be highlighted that, on the one hand, Belarus has followed a linear decreasing trend in the unemployment rate. On the other hand, in Georgia is visible a varying trend generally oriented towards an increasing value of the unemployment rate which today attest to 11.31%.



Source image: World Bank data for Georgia and Belarus. Diagram comparison by the author

As a result, it appears that the diversification of the economic partners, the modernisation of Georgia's economy through reforms, and the support of the United States and the European Union still prove insufficient to reach the economic development levels of the authoritarian Belarusian regime, leading to question the economic efficiency of a more democratic political system. Therefore, from the general analysis of the economic context of both countries, it would be logical - in the specific case - to conclude that the authoritarian regime sustained by Russia is a wealthy country, while the democratic political system free from Russian dependence, a poor country. Consequently, it would mean that the price to pay to gain independence and a democratic form of government is an unstable poor state of the economy. However, this statement is only true if the stability of an economy is considered as the unique factor that determines the success of an economy and if we do not take in consideration Belarusian energetic resources. In this case, the Belarusian economy has shown more stability throughout the last thirty years compared to the shaky trends in Georgia. However, despite the Georgian economy’s instability, nowadays Georgia is defined as a free market economy integrated in the global market ranking 13th in the Economic Freedom Index of 2017, which is a consistent satisfying result if considering the recent emancipation of the country from mere appendage of the USSR and former territory of occupation (Tsereteli, 2020). Moreover, thanks to the diversification of its economic partners and the progressive integration with Western countries, Georgia can show a higher degree of flexibility and independence from the external political shocks, mostly derived from Russia's aggressive stance towards the Caucasian region.

Source image: graphs from Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023. Comparison made by the author.



2.4 Reversing the Trend? The meaning behind CSOs threatening legislative proposal by the Georgian Parliament in 2023

a. *Georgian Civil Society*

Having exposed the institutional, cultural and economic context of Georgia, it is now an easier task to assess the role that the Georgian civil society played throughout the post-communist transition period from the dissolution of the USSR until the current days. As it was for the case of Belarus, the Georgian civil society sector remained dormant during the Soviet rule, and it began to surface during the late period of Gorbachev (Reisner, 2018). However, due to the stark difference with Belarus in its relations with Russia, Georgian civil society formed in strong counterposition with the Russian influence, enabling the Georgian civil society to grow stronger, and more vibrantly, immediately after the dissolution of the USSR. Therefore, the anti-Russian sentiments initially were embodied by the nationalist movements for independence which pushed for the election of Zviad Gamsakhurdia activating large sectors of the civil society to vote for his election (Muskhelishvili and

Jorjoliani, 2009). However, the mobilising power that ignite the nationalist protests resulted in the chaotic ethnic conflicts of 1992-93 which brought the country on the brink of a semi-failed state (Cheterian, 2008).

b. Georgia's Rose Revolution of 2003

Thus, since the re-establishment of the order with Shevardnadze, the civil society sector was enabled to thrive, but it assumed the form of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) funded by international donors, pursuing civic engagement to develop democracy (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009). Nonetheless, these organisations, composed of Western-educated young elites attracted by the financial remuneration, remained fairly detached from the Georgian population, concentrating their activity mainly in the urban areas of the capital, proving inefficiency to reach the larger part of the population and thereof lacking substantial legitimacy from the public opinion (Reisner, 2018). Indeed, the NGOs sector became in Georgia a pool from where the future political leaders were launching their careers as happened to the leader of the Rose Revolution, Mikhaeil Saakashvili who became President after the resignation of the illegitimate President Shevarnarze (Jones, 2013). As a result, the role of the NGOs became crucial for the channelling of the mobilisation force of 2003, through the work of various associations, in particular: Kmara, the Open Society Georgia Foundation, the Liberty Institute, the Association for Legal and Public Education, the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy and the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy, and Development (Angley, 2013). However, the majority of these organisations have been the object of harsh critiques and showed **two main problematic aspects**: firstly, the overlapping between the political opposition and some part of the civil society sector, especially concerning the Soros Open Society Foundation and the Kmara movement, which worked in strict collaboration with the United National Movement (UNM) of Mikhaeil Saakashvili. Secondly, due to the extended degree of influence on the CSOs' agenda of the Western donors, the NGOs were criticised to instrumentalising civil society to promote direct interference of Western countries in the power shift from Shevarnanzde to Saakashvili, complying with the political preferences of the Western partners (Broers 2005) (Mitchell, 2004) (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009).

In fact, contrary to the mainstream public opinion of the West influenced by the Bush administration of those years, eminent scholars such as Georgia's expert Stephen Jones

(2006), proceed to define the Rose Revolution of 2003 a so-called “Revolution without revolutionaries”. As said by the words of one of the moderate leaders of the revolution, Georgian people certainly did not want instability and social unrest after the chaotic transition period of the 1990s and were not expecting an overthrow of the regime nor the establishment of the rule of law (Karumidze and Wertsch, 2005). The demands of the majority of the Georgian population consisted in the improvement of the economic conditions, the reduction of the corruption levels and the modernisation of the state-system (Jones, 2006). Consequently, several scholars are questioning the revolutionary nature of the protests of 2003 and the effective role of the broad civil society in it, inquiring on the definition of the historical event as a mere revolt instead of a revolution (Jones, 2006) (Nikolayenko, 2023). Some radical critics have arrived to dispute whether the Rose Revolution was a staged coup d’état by the extensive independent media coverage of Rustavi 2 channel, accusing the media of exaggerating the protesters at the beginning to build the protests throughout time (Broers, 2005). The conclusion that the expert of the South-Caucasus conflicts Broers (2005) reached is that the UNM led by Saakashvili, hardly would have overthrown Shevarnazde from his post without the *civil society* intervention. In this case *civil society* meant the NGOs elite, the political opposition parties, the anti-establishment media and the youth student movements which intervened to denounce the blatant frauds of the elections, in order to reclaim their democratic right to choose their President and government. However, the Rose Revolution cannot be reduced to a democratic mobilisation of grassroots movements of people from below demanding for democracy, because it would be a false statement. As wisely underlined by the Ukrainian Professor Nikolayenko (2007), in the case of *hybrid regimes*, the democratic-authoritarian dichotomy shall be abandoned because it will mislead the results of the research: in the case of Georgia - a transitional/hybrid state - it is necessary to never forget the mixture of authoritarian and democratic features within the political system which in the particular case of Georgia has been characterised by the dominant party logic and centripetalism, elements that cannot be overlooked when analysing the Rose revolution.

Indeed, while the protests activated the mobilisation of the people against the former regime of Shevarnazde, which represented the Soviet past and the corrupted status of the Georgian political system, it was not the civil society which was the main player of this change of power nor it was *democratisation* - intended both as the institutional development towards a liberal-democracy or an enhancement of participation and representation of the Georgian civil society - the main goal of the new political dominant party. Saakashvili and its

partners fought for *modernisation* - economic growth, fighting corruption, state-building, security-reforms - which should not be confused with *democratisation* (Jones, 2006). Consistently, after three years from the Rose Revolution, Jones (2006) defined the Georgian political system as a modernised state, as well as a strong centralised presidency with a tighter grip on the region of Adjara, a President-dependent judicial system, an inexistent parliamentary opposition and a civil society sector contaminated with the government.

Hence, as noted by Reisner (2008), although the NGOs sector was effectively vibrant and active in the first years of the 2000s, it is misleading romanticising the *democratisation* of the Georgian civil society, described as a "beacon" for the other post-communist countries, because it leads astray from the actual goal of CSOs: conceiving the citizens of a people as "the subject and not as an object of politics". The NGOs of Georgia of that period *failed* to activate the actual *democratisation*, that can also be called, the grassroot participation of the Georgian citizens, because the protests of 2003 were led by Western-educated political elite detached from the political reality of the Georgian people, fostering liberal values, flaunting the word *democracy* and presenting themselves as the young avant-garde democratisers (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009). As stated by the Georgian political analyst, Ghia Nodia (1995), "speaking of *democracy* in Georgia is another way of saying" and "pragmatic support for democratic institutions as such [is] not the point". Perhaps, the young protesters of Kmara were the only ones who believed in the meaning of democracy, but certainly not the personalistic triumvirate composed by Zhvania, Saakashvili and Burjenadze which led the new dominant political elite after 2003 (Fairbanks, 2004). As a result, the vibrant CSOs of Georgia of 2003 encouraged "the remainder of society as the object, rather than the subject, of their activities" declaring themselves the leaders of the civil society, rather than favouring bottom-up participation and blurring the lines between the civil society sector and the political domain (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009).

c. *The path towards democratisation: the reforms of 2012 and the Foreign Agent Law proposal of 2023*

Indeed, elitism has traditionally been a characteristic of the Georgian civil society, a feature inherited by the so-called *Tergdaleulebi*, a group of Georgian intellectuals educated in Russia that strove for building a Georgian nation on the European model in the 19th century

(Reisner, 2009). Indeed, even though they set up a *Society* to educate Georgians and spread national language, the Society's membership cost excluded the rest of the people, reinforcing class inequalities and social exclusion (Reisner, 2018). Thus, the *Tergdaleulebi*'s heritage still reflects its limits on the Georgian civil society of the 2000s, but assuming the forms of politicised NGOs which aim at modernising the country while neglecting any "culture of participation" (Jones, 2006). In other words, the Georgian CSOs overlook the vital issue of Georgian society: bridging the gap between the Georgian population and the political/politicised elite, summarised by Jones as a political system affected by "limited access" due to "poverty, inequality, and systemic hierarchies" (Reisner, 2018).

Nevertheless, the role of the NGOs sector in Georgia was undeniably successful in the *democratisation* of Georgian public institutions, intended as obtaining the reforms to realise a liberal-democracy based on the rule of law. However, as assessed in the previous paragraph, these results were achieved not with the protests of 2003, but primarily with the parliamentary elections of 2012, which brought the "first peaceful democratic transition" concluding the government of the UNM (Tsereteli, 2020). Namely, the first reforms tackled by the new political force - the Georgian Dream - concerned the basic democratic nature of the public institutions. The independence of the judiciary was one of the first goals of the new government and the reform was designed in strict collaboration between the Venice Commission and the CSOs, changing the appointment rules of the judges (Menadbe, 2020). Plus, the electoral legislation was changed towards a more proportional system, checks and balances between the executive organs were strengthened and a new section on local self-government was established (Godoladze, 2016). Then, the institutional democratisation of Georgia was finalised with constitutional reforms of 2017-2018 finally establishing a parliamentary democracy according to the European standards (Nakashidze and Sirabidze, 2020).

However, a 2011 study effectuated among different Georgian generations showed that people still lacked trust in the political institutions, participation in the NGO sector was low and perceived their voice as incapable to exert influence on the decision-making process (Simecka, 2009). Therefore, since the CSOs were still recognised as distant - apart from the urban population of Tbilisi - and its close ties with Western donors, the civil society sector was easily attacked by conspiracy theory of Western interference through subversive agencies - the NGOs - spreading *anti-national* ideology (Broers, 2005). These allegations

started to emerge around the last years of Shevardnadze's rule and still persist these days. However, the intense five days of protests in March 2023 showed a fierce opposition by Georgian population to the bill requiring foreign funded NGOs to register as “foreign agents” (Sauer, 2023). A similar reaction was registered for a legislation launched by the finance ministry under Shevardnadze, to introduce an assessment of the NGOs’ budget in order to block the foreign funds (Broers, 2005). On both occasions, the population reacted boldly to oppose any types of restrictions to the work of NGOs, probably for two main reasons. On the one hand, Georgian recognise NGOs’ worth as watchdogs of democracy, valuable instruments of guarantee from potential authoritarian turn, essential to defend the democratic institutions and practices - as proved by their effectiveness in monitoring election manipulation in 2003, for example. On the other hand, the protesters waved European and Ukrainian flags to oppose what is perceived as not merely as a law against NGOs, but as a “Russian law” (Sauer, 2023). Therefore, it appears that rather than protesting to protect the NGOs, people were mobilising mainly by their desire to fiercely reject any possible interference of the Russian government into the politics of Georgia and preserve their independence from the cumbersome neighbour.

Finally, to conclude the discourse on Georgian civil society, exemplary is a survey of the Caucasus Barometer of 2020 showing the diverse positions of Georgians’ perception of CSOs: 24% of the Georgian people trust NGOs, 22% distrust NGOs and 21% have not a clear position on the matter (USAID, 2021). Consequently, it could be stated that there is a part of the population which regards the NGOs’ work as valuable and essential, while there is another section that actively distrust their work - probably as a result of the political connections that NGOs have established and the allegations with foreign partners - and finally, another part of the population that completely disregards the CSOs’ activity as a whole due to the NGOs incapability to reach out a broader public. As a result, the reported data prove that CSOs in Georgia experience difficulty to outreach larger audiences of the population and neutrally conveying the legitimacy of their work outside the political domain, demonstrating that CSOs have still to undertake significant steps to shift their purpose from a *top-down* approach towards a *bottom-up* approach. A suggestion would be that of commiting more to the engagement with the local people, which constitute the essential conditions of existence of a so-called civil society sector (Stewart, 2008).

3. CHAPTER THREE - A Comparative Study of CSOs in Georgian and Belarusian Political Systems

INTRODUCTION

Once analysed the political systems of both Georgia and Belarus and the role that civil society plays within both political contexts, it is time to compare the two experiences in order to draw lessons and good practices that can be derived from the two case studies. Indeed, contrary to the mainstream narrative which describes the civil society sector of Belarus as inactive, inefficient and dormant differently from the vibrant, influential civil society sector of Georgia, applauded as a key-player in Georgian political decision-making process, the former two chapters have exposed the complexity and the inaccuracy of the dominant discourse on the civil society in the two post-communist countries analysed.

Perhaps, the general confusion on the matter derives also from the common indefinite character that the terminology "civil society" stands for, having the term not a clear meaning but referred to general forms of associationism beyond the state and the market sectors (UNDP, 2009). However, although it is no ambition of the present research to reach a final consensus on a common agreed definition of civil society, it is clear that, as stated by Salamon and Sokolowski (2016), the focus of any type of civil society organisation is serving the "public interest". In other words, the interest of the people - the social interest - is the core purpose of any type of organisational activity under the umbrella of the civil society sector. As affirmed by Michael Walzer (Walzer, 1991), civil society means *associationism*: "a space of uncoerced human association" which gather around "relational networks", as a direct consequence of the growing incapacity of the liberal-democracies to allow participation (and often also, representation) of large section of people who feel unheard and unable to impress any sort of impact on the political decision-making process (Ghosal, 2014). Therefore, civil society proposes as a compensation for a structural weakness of the representative democracy model, and logically, it should be envisioned as complementary to the state (Ghosal, 2014). As a result, according to the former concept CSOs shall pursue the aim of bridging the gap between the people of a country and the political institutions that govern that country. Therefore, the focus should be on people's agency: people's voice, people's needs, people's participation. Drawing from the basic conception of people as the central subject of the CSOs

and SMs activity, the present chapter will evaluate the validity of this statement for the case of Belarusian and Georgian civil society.

3.1 A brief recap of the main differences and similarities of Belarus and Georgia's CSOs

As seen in the former two chapters, in order to understand the rationale behind the different typologies of transition that Georgia and Belarus have undergone from the 1990s onwards, drawing conclusions on the basis of a singular factor would be erroneous. It is usual to fall into the error of considering just one factor as the main driver of the divergent outcomes of two case studies in question. It could be affirmed that Belarus and Georgia have taken two different directions - one towards autocracy while the other towards democracy - because they are *culturally* related to their cumbersome neighbour in opposite trends: the former has never severed its osmosis with the Russian state while on the contrary, Georgia has affirmed firmly the willing to cut with Russian culture and domination. Then, the analysis will proceed *deductively* from the cultural domain to the institutional representation of the cultural context, concluding with an economic review of the country. However, the author believes that to grasp effectively the complexity of the rationale behind the different transitional paths, it is deemed necessary to consider the three levels of the analysis as equal drivers impacting on the dependent variable: the divergent outcome. Therefore, considering the three levels as equally influential factors it can be understood that the different result of the two political contexts can be summarised in the *international relations* that Belarus and Georgia have pursued with their main partners: Russia, the European Union, and the United States. In this specific case, the international relations that those two countries have entertained are crucial to understand the different political development since both countries are geographic borderlands, severely influenced by other more powerful states as two buffer zones (Giordana, 2018). Both countries represent the borders between the Russian Federation and Europe, constituting geographically strategic regions to exert European or Russian influence at need. Therefore, the diplomatic relations can be deemed the fundamental driver to have produced institutional, cultural and economic consequences resulting in the process of transition that brought the Georgia of today to achieve an hybrid/semi-democratic state while producing in Belarus, a repressive authoritarian regime. On the one hand, the economic stability achieved throughout the post-communist transition of Belarus has allowed the authoritarian sultanistic regime to grow supported by the Russian neighbour, which was facilitated by the cultural affinity of the Belarusian population with the Russian language and

religion. On the other hand, the strong conviction of the Georgian people to detach from the Russian occupier identified with economic instability and poverty, brought Georgia culturally closer to Europeanism and national independence, establishing more democratic institutions modelled on the European prototype of liberal-democracy resulting in the parliamentary democracy of today.

Certainly, the civil society sector has played different but crucial roles in the transition processes of Belarus and Georgia. In Belarus, due to the stability and strength of the authoritarian repressive regime which permitted direct interference of the regime within the civil society sector and legal barriers to the development of spontaneous bottom-up CSOs, the civil society of Belarus has been conceived as dormant until the current events of 2020. Social movements have started to mobilise and self-organise when the economic agreement with the Belarusian people started to falter, and continue, until nowadays, to grow in order to respond to the violent repression of the 2020's protests. In Georgia, on the other hand, the civil society sector has started to expand its role since Shevardnadze's rule, diffusing liberal-democratic values and mobilising people to demand democratic institutions. The constant growth of the civil society sector in Georgia was allowed by the consistent financing coming from the European member states and the United States, which allowed the third sector to play a crucial role in the protests against Shevardnadze's manipulation of elections of 2003, acting as watchdogs of democratic institutions and practices.

Logically, the different context in which each civil society sector is analysed changes the main features of the subject that adapts to the political scenario in which it plays. Indeed, remarkable differences between the civil society sector of Georgia and Belarus can be observed. Primarily, the civil society organisations which formed in the **Belarusian** political context assume a ***form*** which is predominantly described as **social movements**. Indeed, those self-organisations groups of people gathered on a spontaneous national basis, displaying no specific institutionalisation nor a precise hierarchy. Therefore, there is no defined leader and usually an horizontal governance can be observed - the author is excluding from the discourse the leader of the political opposition, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya and the organisations which depend on her (Chulistkaya and Bindman, 2023). Indeed, the protesters' mobilisation after the manipulation of the electoral results of August 2020, can be included in the definition given by Scott and Marshall (2009) which describes social movements as an "organised effort" to achieve or to resist a defined, specific usual political objective. In this precise case,

resist the regime of Lukashenka and/or achieve a political revolution and the overthrow of the sultanistic regime. On the other hand, given the less authoritarian means in the hands of the Georgian President, the unrestrained attitude of the government (also of Shevardnadze until the 2000s) and the stable relations between **Georgia** and the Western states, especially the US after the chaotic period of civil war 1991-1994, the civil society sector of Georgia was allowed to grow into a pool of well-structured NGOs sustained by foreign funds with the aim of spreading liberal-democratic values and defending democratic institutions (Mitchell, 2008). Indeed, differently from a social movement, a **Non-Governmental Organisation** is by definition a structured organisation, usually an institution which is independent from the government and displays a hierarchical structure of governance. Theoretically, NGOs do not include in their repertoire active political engagement during mobilisation protests. However, Georgia might have been a case of the so-called *SMOisation* of the NGOs civil society sector because it has been noticed the active intervention of the NGOs into "disruptive forms of collective protest" during the protests of 2003 (Della Porta, 2020).

Consequently, since participation by definition shall be at the core basis principle of each civil society organisation, it is important to understand who is taking part in these organisations and who is an active ***participant*** of the work of each association. In **Belarus**, the participants to social associations go beyond the activists of the well-known *Viasna*, the Human Rights Center (NGO), *Imena*, and other important names dissolved by Minsk' authorities on the 23 of April 2021, as it happened to the European Youth Parliament, the Youth Labour Rights and Human Constanta human rights group and others (Amnesty International, 2021)(Chulistkaya and Bindman, 2023). In Belarus, thousands of **regular citizens** participated in the mobilisation of August 2020 to protest spontaneously against the electoral manipulation and thousands of them experienced the violence of the regime, reacting collectively against the repressive means of Lukashenka's. The participants were not activists or members of any institutionalised organisation. Rather, they were citizens ranging from various generations and categories who participated collectively in solidarity to help and support other **dissident citizens** fighting against the regime, organising marches, such as the "Women's Marches", hiding protesters in private houses during repression in the backyard community, gathering funds through online campaigns managed by the IT sector workers to support people jailed by the dictator's forces etc. (Kryvoi, 2020). Those initiatives were carried out through *grassroots civil society initiatives* which formed both during the pandemic and after the protests of 2020, starting as non-political associations oriented at the

resolution of a single-issue (Covid-19 mismanagement by Lukashenka's regime) and then, reactivated during the protests of 2020 to sustain actively the entire population against the repression (Chulistkaya and Bindman, 2023). In **Georgia** instead, although the Rose Revolution succeeded in gathering various thousands of protesters, especially young post-Soviet generations, as in the case of the student movement of Kmara (Enough!), the majority of the civil society sector was formed by numerous NGOs mainly composed of the upper-class and well-educated young elite living in urban areas, able to reach good working positions due to remarkable income distribution inequalities that characterise the economic status of the Georgian population, strongly affected by structural unemployment issues (International Monetary Fund, 2005). Indeed, especially during the Rose Revolution of 2003, the state of poverty was one of the worst of the ex-Soviet republics, and the economy of Georgia was predominantly sustained by and severely dependent from the IMF, the World Bank, the EU and the US (Kraan and Bergvall, 2006). At the same time, since the third sector was growing faster than other economic sectors and unemployment rates were still high, working for NGOs was usually perceived as the main source of revenue, attracting new employees not for the purpose of directly representing the local communities, but for the sake of improving personal financial stability, which frequently were already privileged by a high financial status (Muskhelishvili and Jorjoliani, 2009). Plus, since Georgian NGOs and CSOs are heavily concentrated in the urban areas of the major cities such as Tbilisi, CSOs reach is limited to urban areas, overlooking the actual poorer rural regions where civil society work would be more needed and grassroot organisations would effectively help the local population. Therefore, it could be *generally* said that the rationale moving people into associating to CSOs in Georgia and SMs in Belarus are starkly different: leading the former to participate into CSOs in order to improve their personal financial situation and promote democratic values detached from the real needs of the local population while the latter, moved by solidarity against the regime's repression and demand for change.

Furthermore, it is necessary to recall that while Georgian civil society's demands frequently are centred around European Union's membership and NATO's accession, in the case of Belarus these requests have never been posed by the civil society, not even in 2020. As it has been shown in chapter two, the cause is probably the long tradition that Georgia has historically established with the West in order to escape the fragile and vulnerable geographical condition of borderland with Russia. On the other hand, rather sporadically the West and Belarus have shown interest in connecting, leaving Belarus profoundly isolated

from the other EU's members, despite its geographical position at the gates of Europe. Descending from the two opposing political traditions, but united in the previous Soviet past, two specular ambitions at the international relations level were produced: both were searching for stability, modernisation and economic growth but one was convinced to find it within a prolonged relation with Russia while the second one was convinced that Europe would be the answer to the economic and institutional problems that faced. Therefore, the closer relations of Georgia with the West paved the way for the programs of democracy promotion - especially during the interventionist administration of George W. Bush 2001-2009 - giving birth to numerous CSOs, especially NGOs, creating a vibrant civil society sector in Georgia heavily funded by foreign actors. On the other hand, it has been analysed that Belarus civil society sector has been predominantly occupied by the regime's initiatives through the activity of GONGOs, hindering associationism of any kind of grassroot participation until 2015. After that period, the regime allowed the formation of local non-politicised organisations. However, any association funded by foreign actors remains legally prohibited within Belarus, with the exception of Russian CSOs. The results of the two different approaches brought significant differences in the **role of media** in the mobilisation of people during the respective two revolutions observed. Indeed, protesters in **Belarus** organised the participation and coordination of the mobilisation protests through social media channels such as Telegram, now controlled and blacklisted by the Belarusian police force (Murphy and Zogg, 2020). Therefore, Belarusians' spontaneous grassroot movement preferred a decentralised way of mobilisation which derives from the lack of a vertical organisation since there was no leader to conduct or arrange the protests/marches. Indeed, activism in a decentralised form has been "the protests' greatest strength, but also their greatest weakness", because decentralisation means difficult coordination which hinder any form of institutionalisation of these civil society expressions, wasting a chance to bring effective political change to complete the revolution transition (Murphy and Zogg, 2020). On the other hand, the media involved in **Georgia**'s Rose Revolution has been predominantly television - probably due also to the technological context of the first 2000s - having independent channels from the mainstream government television, such as Rustavi 2, as the main means of transmission of electoral results frauds and revolutionary discourses (Broers, 2005). However, the narrative of Rustavi 2 channel was fiercely criticised of exaggerating protesters flow, especially at the beginning of the demonstrations and to be positively biassed in support of the opposition, as then confirmed by the channel administrator Eros Kitsmarishvili (2003). Indeed, Rustavi-2 channel was explicitly part of an alliance with the

CSOs sector and the political opposition against Shevardnadze, forming the so-called "NGOs community" which was politically counterposed to the establishment elite and strictly connected to Western funds and assistance (Anable, 2006). In this way, the mobilisation of the Rose Revolution was conducted by a vertical organisation dependent on the affluent and high-educated political elites of Georgia, detached from the local communities and the ordinary citizens, which were involved in the protests certainly to a lesser degree compared to the Belarusian case.

3.2 Theoretical considerations: a modern definition of a *genuine* civil society

Therefore, comparing Belarusian protests of 2020 to the Rose Revolution of Georgia of 2003 has revealed to be a fruitful exercise to understand deeply the difficulty to grasp the effective creation of a *genuine* civil society in the ex-Soviet Republics. Genuine is a terminology frequently used by eminent scholars critical of the "colour revolutions" and experts of the Eastern European region, such as Andrew Wilson, senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations and Professor of Ukrainian studies at the UCL (2006) and Stephen Jones, Director of the Program on Georgian Studies at Harvard University (2006). Thus, for a civil society to be *genuine,* it is intended as compatible with the modern definition of civil society, which is not derived from the Greek etymology, meaning political association, *koinonia politike*, but from the modern "idea of society as a people [...] as a unique entity apart from the state" (DeWiel, 1997). The modern conception of *civil society* emerged in the 18th century in reaction to the universalistic rationalism of the Enlightenment with the Romantic idea of people as cultural communities. However, the concept of civil society as *associationism* has been introduced especially by Alexis de Tocqueville at the start of the 19th century (Tocqueville, 1840). Tocqueville recognised the *maieutic* value of associationism of civil society in spreading democratic tradition and forming social capital - through participation, a conscience of democracy is reached - distinguished between associations for civil purposes and associations for political purposes, recalling a mutual relation between the two dimensions (DeWiel, 1997). Indeed, civil society is conceived to connect with local communities and incentivise grassroot participation of a broader part of the population through a bottom-up process. However, although CSOs can act as representatives of the instances of the population, it is important to highlight their difference from the political representatives as they do not share accountability of the political decisions taken at the governmental level. Therefore, it shall be clear that the CSOs have no purpose of

acting as an alternative to political decision-makers. Rather, for civil society *to exist* there is a necessity to entrust **political accountability** in the political institutions, otherwise the marker between the political and social dimensions would blur forming a complete adherence of the political structure to social life, which is only possible in a totalitarian state - every form of social life becomes political (Brighenti, 2019). Indeed, behind Marx's final project, there was essentially Rousseau's idea of a direct democracy, a community free from the "special apparatus for coercion called the state" governed through the direct participation of the totality of members of a society - a "totalising participatory democracy" - eliminating any separation between the state and the social life: the final phase of the Communist society (DeWiel, 1997). As Lenin and Stalin executed the Communist blueprint in the 20th century, the civil society sectors of Eastern Europe were absorbed into the statal Soviet structure leaving **no trace of free spontaneous forms of associationism**, as it is visible from the ongoing struggle of the civil society's regeneration in the post-communist countries, such as Belarus and Georgia. As a result, the recreation of a tradition of associationism in Eastern Europe is deeply hindered by mistrust in CSOs due to the osmosis between political and civil dimensions (Howard, 2003).

However, also on the other side of the Atlantic, the *nexus between civil society* and *the political dimension* was reinterpreted following the lead of Tocqueville's value of associationism in incentivising democracy. Neo-Tocquevillian theories, such as Putnam's, appeared recognising the importance of associationism in creating *social capital*: social trust is encouraged through civil society, leading to collective action for a common good, generating democracy (Edwards, Foley and Diani, 2001). However, **democracy promotion programs** funded by the US and EU at the end of the 20th century applied neo-Tocquevillian theories, acting on the belief that strengthening civil society would have been *propaedeutic* for the establishment of democracies (Ishkanian, 2007). Consequently, enhancing the civil society of every post-communist country will favour the expansion of democratic values and institutions, such as the state of law and human rights, completing the transition from authoritarian regimes to democracies (Putnam, 1995) (Perez-Diaz, 1993). As a result, at the end of the 20th century, civil society became the main funded sector within democracy promotion programs of the USAID, focusing in particular on the Eurasia region, leading to the diffusion of several NGOs, as in the case of Georgia (Ishkanian, 2007). However, as observed in the case of Georgia, the phenomenon of NGOs' diffusion proved effective in defending democratic practices and institutions, as in the denunciation of electoral

manipulation, but did not achieve *genuine* direct connections with larger sections of the population, generating a technical elite of expertise detached from the civil society, provocatively summarised by Timothy G. Ash (2004) catch phrase: "we dreamed of civil society and got NGOs".

On the other hand, more recent theories such as the interpretation of Ghosal (2014), conceive civil society as a social space (in practice, various social spaces) deputed to the practice of direct participation of common people to react to "the inadequacy of the modern democratic state". Therefore, the civil society nexus with the political dimension is interpreted as functional to supplement a structural deficit of representative democracies, which are incapable to reproduce the direct democracy that Rousseau had envisioned in the Social Contract of 1762 and solve the alienation caused by individualistic societies (Fukuyama, 2001). Indeed, representative democracies are, by definition, structured to entrust democratically the power to a restricted part of the population - a political elite - to govern and take political decisions on behalf of the larger population, due to technical reasons of organisation. According to this interpretation, civil society becomes functional to protect the political system from the *tyranny of the majority*, filling a structural gap between the elected representatives and the electoral system (DeWiel, 1997). However, conceiving civil society through Ghosal's interpretation, CS is generally intended as a reaction to a specific form of government: representative democracies. Logically, in the case of an authoritarian form of government, CS cannot exist because the concept of **civil society** is strictly linked to **democratic forms of government.**

In fact, both positions produce a misinterpretation of the modern civil society definition. The neo-liberal misinterpretation perceive civil society exclusively as a *mean* to achieve democracy, overlooking CSOs' agency potential as a *spaces* where democracy *could* be created. Whereas the second interpretation could mislead to conceive civil society as a space limited only to democratic forms of government, tying inextricably civil society with the democratic form of government. However, the link between civil society and democracy is *not consequential*. As demonstrated by Berman (1997), civil society can also be detrimental to democracy, as in the case of the Weimar's Republic of 1919 where, through activism and associationism, illiberal *ideals* were spread among the frustrated German middle-class, leading to the creation of Nazism. As professor Berman suggests, to properly understand civil society is necessary to escape the *normative* definition of civil society as

"good or bad" for democracy, understanding that civil society is dependent on the political context where it is analysed and it is a space where values and ideas are diffused and learnt, independently from the typology of ideas spread (Ishkanian, 2007).

In addition to that, according to Berman (1997), being civil society a dynamic space of learning, it could play not only a crucial role in influencing the political landscape where it acts, but also be profoundly influenced by it, displaying both a passive and active agency simultaneously. Indeed, civil society is shaped by the form of government, the political institutionalisation of the specific country analysed and the overall political context. According to this reasoning, the theory of Ghosal that conceive civil societies as a reaction to representative democracies is a valid interpretation. It is in fact true that, when analysing civil society in liberal-democracies, as in Northern Europe for example, the civil society sector can act as functional to face the individualistic alienation between political institutions and citizens (Ghosal, 2014). However, it is important to not limit the scope of civil societies only to a particular form of government. In fact, the peculiarity of civil society is that being a space of expression between the state (public, political, institutional sector) and the market (private, economic sector) its application is not exclusive to representative democracies, but to all those forms of government that allow a minimal presence for this space to exist (DeWiel, 1997). The statement is proved by the case study on civil society's role in the authoritarian state of Belarus. Certainly, in order for the civil society space to subsist in physical terms, the government should allow a margin of participation, in Belarus, various CSOs were created between 2015-2020 by Belarusians (without political scope) because the government legally allowed that margin of movement. However, the existence of an authoritarian form of government does not exclude people's virtual *desire* to create participative space of citizenship (as demonstrated by the active virtual participation and organisation on Telegram of SMs), a factor that shall be borne in mind when defining civil society. Indeed, the presence of a space of civil society participation depends practically/physically on the political institutions, but it depends ***existentially*** on the participants' decisions and desire to create and take part in that space of civil participation. Therefore, the civil society and the political dimension nexus can be explained not considering the specific form of government where it plays, but the common political culture of a people and its aspiration to build a common space of participation beyond the state and the market.

Finally, to clarify the *civil society* and *democracy nexus*, it is necessary to remember that CS is a *space* and, consequently, can be the *humus* where democratic values can start to circulate and democratic conscience can be reached thanks to the sharing of ideas and concepts between the people that participate actively in the space. However, as evidently demonstrated by the case of the Weimar Republic, the democratic or non-democratic outcome of associationism strongly depends on the ideas that circulate within that space, not on the space itself. As a consequence, treating civil society as an artificial *mean* that can be installed to achieve democracy, hoping that opening civil society's spaces, democratic values will spread and reach the broader population is inefficient *if* the population at the basis does not aspire to democratic values, due to the dependence of civil society on the political tradition of the country in question, which in the case of post-communist countries is severely affected by the previous Soviet tradition (Howard, 2002). Therefore, *promoting* democracy as such is fruitless because people should aspire to democracy and build democratic institutions by their own ambitions, not being convinced by promotional programmes conceived by external actors, which have proved to be non-performing, as in the case of Georgia (Pokleba, 2016). However, the failure of democratisation programs does not mean that the strengthening of civil society spaces in post-communist countries shall be abandoned, but it shall be reformed according to the modern conception of a *genuine* civil society, focusing more on closer links with the local communities than on the *promotion* of democratic liberal values (Howard, 2002). In conclusion, civil society is neither a panacea for democratisation nor the exclusive result of democratisation. Therefore, to repair the misconceptions derived from the mismanagement of CSOs promotion programs, civil society should be reconceived as originally in the Tocqueville's sense of *maieutic* space of participation and not as a *propaedeutic* mean of democracy promotion, where civil society is intended as dependent on the political context and where for democracy, it is intended a process of consciousness and not a lesson to teach.

3.3 Lessons to Learn From the Comparison of Belarus and Georgia's Civil Societies

In this regard, the comparison of the 2003 Rose Revolution of Georgia and the Belarusians' Revolution of Dignity of 2020 show precisely the effects of misinterpreting the genuine definition of civil society. Both theoretical assumptions of Ghosal and neo-Tocquevillians are disproved by the two case studies on civil society. Primarily, the two countries in exam differ for the **form of government**, which in the case of Georgia is a parliamentary multi-party

system while in the case of Belarus, is an authoritarian regime based on a sultanistic structure. However, the presence of a *genuine* civil society does not appear to depend on the form of government in question. In fact, it has been proved that Georgian CSOs, despite being more structured and institutionalised than Belarusians, usually assuming the form of NGOs, receiving consistent funds by like-minded countries, are severely isolated and detached from the majority of the population, incapable of bridging the gap between local communities and the political elite. Whereas, in Belarus despite the form of authoritarian government, it has been observed the diffusion of spontaneous forms of participation through forms of collective self-organisations by the citizens since 2015, with an intensification during the pandemic and during the mass mobilisation of protests in occasion of the fraudulent presidential elections of August 2020.

Therefore, if the degree of associationism is conceived as a criterion to evaluate the effectiveness of a genuine civil society, the comparison of the two case studies prove that civil society's existence does not necessarily depend on a democratic form of government. In this way, the case of Belarusian associationism from 2015-2020 in a definitely illiberal undemocratic form of government disproves **Ghosal's thesis** defining civil society as a mere consequence of the liberal representative democracies. However, despite Ghosal's thesis cannot be used as a general definition of civil society, it does centre an important point that it is essential to bear in mind when defining civil society: *civil society exists in reaction to the political sphere of power in order to pressure the political to provide accountability of its actions*. **Indeed, civil society exists to affect the political realm and at the same time, civil society is influenced by the political dimension**. As a consequence, it should be no surprise to observe that where there is more necessity to reproach the political sphere which is not responsive to the accountability of its political decisions - e.g. Lukashenko's mismanagement of the covid pandemic - the citizens of a country tend to aggregate and associate to compensate for the inaction or failures of the public sphere.

Secondly, the neo-Tocquevillian theories envisioning civil society as a *propaedeutic* space that would create the social capital capable of establishing democracy has proven ineffective by the results of the democracy promotion programs of 1990s-2000s in **Georgia**. However, a sample of that can only be visualised in the case of Georgia since in Belarus the programs were prohibited by the incumbent regime (Stewart, 2009). Indeed, although positive results have been observed in strengthening state institutions, they cannot be deemed

successful for the creation of a *genuine* civil society, in other words, incentivising associationism and civic participation. As clearly exposed by Pokleba (2016), analysing the Georgian civil society sector, mainly composed by NGOs or third sector, it cannot be said to be compatible with the original *genuine* definition of civil society given by Alexis De Tocqueville because NGOs fail to reach broader sections of the population, being unable to involve larger sections of the population and to effectively embody citizens' interests. Moreover, the third sector tends to establish networks of elitist associations based on personal trust rather than shared principles and formal regulations, revealing unsuccessful to bring effective change in the Georgian political culture and in incentivising the active grassroot participation of citizens (Pokleba, 2016). As a result, it is still possible to categorise Georgia's political system under the label of "**delegative democracy**", meaning that citizens tends to delegate their power in the hands of a restrict pool of politicians and, due to the weakness of the civil society sector, citizens are unable to demand for government's accountability (Pokleba, 2016). Indeed, due to the poor quality of civic associationism, the last chance of demanding government's accountability take place through intermittent disorganised "revolutions" or protests, usually during election time or in occasion of consistent reforms, as it was for the fraudulent elections of 2003, or potentially, also the "foreign agent law" protests' of March 2023 (Pokleba, 2016). Consequently, the Rose Revolution of 2003 should be more conceived as a litmus test of Georgian civil society debility, rather than a beacon of democracy.

a. Lessons learnt from Belarus applied to the Georgian case study

Paradoxically, it can be said that from the aforementioned analysis the results show that, although the repressive authoritarian regime has actually hampered the formation of a proper civil society until 2015-20 in Belarus, Georgian civil society could still learn several lessons from the Belarusian case. Certainly, it does not mean that the imposition of an authoritarian regime is desirable to obtain a *genuine* civil society in Georgia. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe the fact that in a country such as Belarus - where the repressive means of the regime concretely undermine daily the right of free expression and associationism, posing concrete obstacles to the development of a grassroot civil society - the citizens succeeded to mobilise spontaneously in masses of participants for months, unleashing an unprecedented revolution. In Georgia instead, contrary to the expectations generated by the Western perception and mainstream narrative of the description of the Georgian civil society as a

vibrant civil society, the practical results are more delusional if evaluating the concept of civil society from the perspective of a *genuine* definition. Although defining the CS of Georgia as *vibrant* is not untrue, as observed by the rapid growth of the third sector between the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, stimulated substantively by the Western partners' funds, the practice of so-called *mushrooming of NGOs* gave birth to top-down forms of organisations inadequate to establish any tradition of associationism as originally intended by Tocqueville, and of having a real impact on the centripetal decision-making process within the dominant political party dynamic, typical of the Georgian political system (Ishkanian, 2007). As a result, if we intend *democratisation* as a transition of a country towards *people's government*, in the sense of a major participation from below of larger sections of the population and an improvement trend of associationism able to produce "the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals" it is incorrect to *praise* the transition of Georgia in the first years of the 2000s as democratisation (Dahl, 1972)[1]. On the other hand, if *democratisation* is intended as an increment of liberal values, efficient governance, state-building and modernisation of public institutions (such as fighting corruption and reforming the police force), then, it can be stated that the *applauded* democratisation of Georgia has succeeded efficiently in the achievement of these goals (Ishkanian, 2007).

However, *democracy* is by definition more than efficient *governance* and to effectively achieve the transition of a country towards democracy, evidently the *people's participation* factor cannot be overlooked (Vitualno, 2021). As a consequence, the expectations are that the programs of democracy promotion sponsored especially by Western countries to democratise numerous countries of Central and Eastern Europe and ex-Soviet Republics in the late 20th century and early 21th century - among them Georgia - were supposed to take into account precisely that factor. However, as observed by a wide section of the literature, the failures of these programs are attributable effectively to the negligence of the **people's factor** within the democracy promotion programs (Carothers, 1999; Wedel 2001; Carothers and Ottaway 2010; Sampson, 2002; Ishkanian, 2007; Stewart, 2009;

[1] R. A. Dahl stated in *Polyarchy: participation and opposition* that the basic precept of democracy is "the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals" . Thus, according to this interpretation, in an ideal type of democracy the capacity of responsiveness of the policy makers to the requests and inputs of the policy takers is the fundamental criteria to assess the quality of a democratic system. Participation of the people to the political debate represents the link of conjunction between citizens and government, allowing the former to exercise popular sovereignty and the latter to be responsive to the interests of society.

Schwandner-Sievers, 2013). Moreover, similar inefficient programs have been implemented also in Albania, Bosnia, Romania, and Kosovo, leading a part of the literature to refer to these programs as "benevolent colonialism" (Sampson, 2002). Indeed, as observed in Kosovo, since the promotion of democracy programmes are severely detached from the local population, they are perceived as an imposition from external alien agencies of a "bureaucratic–universalist culture and language" which are extremely distant from the actual grassroot discourse, which in the case of Kosovo for example is centred around nationalist and anti-Serbs resistance, topics disregarded and ignored by the international NGOs dimension (Schwandner-Sievers, 2013). As a result, the European, Western and bureaucratic elite is identified by local constituencies as an elitist group isolated from the real civil society, exactly as it happened in Georgia during the Rose Revolution of 2003. However, a specific problem of Georgia is that not only the Western programs aided the creation of a civil society elite detached from the population, but the same activists of Georgian Western funded NGOs became the new political leading class of the country after the plebiscitarian elections of January 4, 2004, that saw Saakashvili won with 96.2 % of the vote, severely blurring the distinction between the political and the civic dimensions. As it is said by Antonio Gramsci in his "Quaderni del Carcere":

"*Despotic structures are those where civil society merges with the political society, meaning that an oligarchic minority claims to be the entire society*." (Quaderno 6 (VIII)1930-1932).

In fact, civil society is expected to interact and engage with the political dimension, presenting people's interests and pressuring the decision-making process, asking for political leaders' accountability and attempting to influence the allocation of resources. Nevertheless, at the same time, civil society is also expected to counterpose to the state and the public sphere acting as a *check-and-balance* to state-power, constantly confronting the state "at arm's length" (Lewis, 1992). Evidently, Georgian NGOs connection with the new political group breached the fundamental rule of civil society. Therefore, the intrinsically legitimacy of civil society of Georgia has been endangered, opening the discussion around the effective people's control and influence on the so-called Rose Revolution and the effective democratic *revolutionaire* reach of the event (Tudoroiu, 2007).

Moreover, the strict link between foreign donors, civil society elite and the political elite could disclose serious implications at the level of international law. In the end,

Shevardnadze's downfall was ultimately triggered by the decision of Georgia's military and security institutions not to intervene against the protesters. Therefore, despite the narrative proposed by the NGOs and Western countries which depicts the Rose Revolution as a legal and gradual transition, many Georgians and a number of foreign journalists appear to share the view that, given the unconstitutional means used by the opposition and the plebiscitarian results followed by a transfer of power without a significant public protest, the Rose revolution might be interpreted as a coup d'état (Fairbanks, 2004). However, alleged involvement of external actors within the internal political process of a country would breach the principle of non-intervention which is recognised by international law within the UN Charter, in the preambles of the 1969 and 1986 of the Vienna Conventions and it is the corollary of the sovereignty principle as stated by the International Court of Justice in 1986 in the judgement on the case *Nicaragua v. U.S.* (Maziar and Wood, 2009). Indeed, the severe accusations of American imperialism and Western interference that Georgia's Rose Revolution, altogether with the Orange, and Tulip protests have attracted after the 2005, strengthened Vladimir Putin's narrative of the US-led unipolar world, strongly criticised in Putin's speech of 2007 at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy (Putin, 2007). As in fact affirmed by Sylvie Kauffman (2023) editorial director of LeMonde, the "colour revolutions" represented the basis from which the violent escalation of Russian aggressive and paranoid attitude towards Georgia and Ukraine in the following years built-up, representing the premises firstly of Georgia's invasion in 2008, then the Crimea's invasion in 2014 and finally, of 24th of February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, the legitimacy of the civil society of Georgia, both at national and international level, is fundamental not only to establish a *genuine* democratic political system but to *delegitimise* the Russian propaganda discourse which claims as *legitimate* the invasion of its bordering territories, narrated as necessary to protect Russian sphere of influence from NATO's expansion, in countries such as Georgia.

In conclusion, as stated firmly by McFaul and Fukuyama (2007), the US-led programs - of which Georgia was one of the beacon - were incapable of listening to the needs of the people that they tried to aid and excessively arrogant "to compare the product the United States is offering to the actual aspirations of democratic publics around the world". Therefore, it is essential to restore the links with the *local population* following the example of the Belarusian civil society, which can be considered healthier because it formed on a spontaneous national basis provided with a more direct contact with the people of Belarus.

b. Lessons learnt from Georgia applied to the Belarusian case study

On the other hand, the ineffective connection with the local population does not mean that NGOs' efforts in Georgia should be condemned as a whole. Indeed, the example of Georgia showed also that despite its deficiencies, a large pool of CSOs can help in precarious contexts of power manipulation by incumbents, eventually holding authoritarian rulers at least partly accountable, as in the case of Shevardnadze's resignation. Indeed, CSOs were fundamental not only in portraying the electoral manipulation results, but also in avoiding the establishment of an incumbent regime of Shevardnadze and the potential regression towards an even more authoritarian regime. As stated above, it is important to bear in mind that the hybrid form of the Georgian political system in fact does not allow for a tranchant categorisation of successful and unsuccessful results, but it requires constant careful detailed analysis. Therefore, during the Rose Revolution of 2003, despite the unsuccessful establishment of a genuine democracy, it can also be said that the goals of the American and European *democracy* promotion programmes, which were more aimed at the establishment of institutional modernisation and efficient governance were partially achieved according to President G. W. Bush's Freedom Agenda (The White House, n.d.). Indeed, also McFaul and Fukuyama described Georgia and Ukraine in 2007, as two examples of countries where the American intervention succeeded in paving the way for the progressive development of a future democracy. As a result, as of today, and especially after the constitutional reforms of 2011 which have seen a closer involvement of the Venice Commission, the rule of law and democratic institutions have entered the political system of current Georgia, although they remain fragile (USAID, 2021). Indeed, it is still claimed to be present within the political dynamics of Georgia a consistent detachment of the rest of the population from politics and the centripetal dynamic of the dominant party-logic, convening that Georgia is still a work in progress.

However, the case of the Georgian civil society represents an exemplary case for the **three topical criticisms** that democracy promotion programs, especially those comprehended within Bush's foreign affairs strategy after 11 September 2001 received Overall, the three criticisms generally concluded that having evaluated the ineffective democratisation impact of the country involved in the programs, democracy as such cannot be promoted and the programs should be abandoned for good. However, given the recent uprising of the Belarusian civil society and the mass mobilisation protests ignited by Lukashenka's

fraudulent electoral results and repressive regime, the discussion on the eventuality for an *external support*, especially from the European Union and EU's MSs has reopened (Council of the EU, 2023). As a result, given the EU's factual involvement within the Belarusian situation as demonstrated by the creation of a new Consultative Group with the Belarusian civil society, it seems that evaluating past flaws of Western external policies of intervention in support of local civil societies has earned renewed attention at the international and, especially at the European level (EEAS, 2023). Therefore, starting from the three main criticisms moved to the democracy promotion programs of the first decade of the 2000s, of which Georgia is a perfect example, and analysing the feedback provided by two eminent scholars, such as Francis Fukuyama and Michael McFaul, an attempt to extrapolate **crucial lessons to apply to the Belarusian case** would be provided.

The first general criticism moved by various realist authors against the democracy promotion programs of the Bush administration originated from the wider critique that envisions *democracy not as a universal neutral product*, but as *a specific political configuration derived from a specific culture*, enshrined in Western Christian values. Therefore, culturally limited to a specific region of the globe and inapplicable to countries outside the Western scope (Fukuyama and McFaul, 2007). However, Fukuyama and McFaul (2007) objected the cultural critique affirming that the cultural limitation of liberal democratic tradition is not relevant because democracy programs would intervene only in assistance to a broader part of the population which is actively *demanding* for liberal democratic institutions, consequently avoiding any *imposition* of an alien political tradition into a non-Western country. Fukuyama and McFaul's objection (2007) is theoretically valid because, rationally, democracy is based on people's government, so if people's decisions or "people consensus" are actively asking for democracy support and assistance, then democracy promotion programs would be legitimated by a democratic choice by the people escaping any type of external imposition. In other words, *the popular consensus constitutes the premises of any active assistance in democracy development programs by an external actor*. However, despite its linearity, the above statement presents various complexities in the praxis. Above all, while saying that an external intervention within the internal political affairs of a country is legitimate if *proved* by general consensus of the population is logical and naturally easy to comprehend, but in practice is **difficult to evaluate** the expectations and **consensus** of a specific population, especially of a population living within an authoritarian regime which is actively hampering the freedom of expression of its citizens and impeding

the creation of any space of representation of the civil society's interests, as in the case of Belarus for example. Secondly, although the values promoted such as human rights guarantees can be deemed to be virtuous certainly by a majority of countries of the international community, in the praxis especially of the USAID programs, differently from the European Union's ones (before 2007-2008), usually **the scope was wider than basic human rights promotion**, and more focused on the democratic institutional development of the state structures, sometimes doubtfully pertinent with the people's real necessities of those areas (Ishkanian, 2007). Indeed, analysing the mere definition of these programs, in various cases the aim was not focused on assistance and support to already existent democratic institutions but had the purpose of exporting democracy beyond the Western borders "promoting" the democratic form of government (Fukuyama and McFaul, 2007). Indeed, democracy promotion programs were carried out after 9/11, especially in the Middle East, such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt (The White House, n.d.). However, the long-term impact of the programs cannot be deemed to be successful in *democratising* these areas, as evidently shown by the case of Afghanistan, where the Taliban's recovery of power was incentivised by the complexity of establishing durable institutions and consistent economic growth or Iraq's failure in building solid democratic state-institutions (Fukuyama and McFaul, 2007). Moreover, in the cited cases, usually the theoretical aims of the programs did not correspond to the actual implementation, showing an evident hiatus between the declared democratic aim of the policies and the effective praxis, as in the case of Afghanistan where democracy promotion programs were used as a façade to legitimise military operations to weaken Al Qaeda in Afghanistan overthrowing the Taliban regime (*Ibidem*). Certainly, the case of Georgia is a different example from the democracy programs conducted by the US in the Middle East and probably, it did was the different context of Georgia that made the democracy programs at least partially successful in protecting democratic institutional mechanisms, such as the case of parliamentary elections in 2003. Indeed, Georgia was already historically oriented towards Western values and democratic institutions, so displaying traditionally an explicit anti-Russian attitude and a strong advocacy for NATO and EU's membership. Therefore, the case of Georgia supports the thesis which envisions the liberal democratic tradition limited to those countries that share **Western Christian roots**. On the other hand, Fukuyama and McFaul's reply, according to which the external intervention to protect Georgian democratic institutions through the NGOs' players in the electoral fraud emergency of 2003 was legitimated by *popular consensus,* faces a more complex adaptation in the case of Georgia.

Indeed, the case of Georgia is exemplary of the **difficulty to assess the effective opinion/will of the population**, constituting a debatable issue still in the present days which is crucial to assess the *legitimacy* of the alleged intervention of the US and the European countries in the Rose Revolution and the other colours revolution of the first 2000s (Afzal, 2005). Therefore, in order to avoid the previous *caveats* of the USAID's and EU's democracy programs in Georgia in the current case of Belarus, it would be necessary to remember that a tradition of liberal democratic values is still not present among the Belarusians people, which during the mass protests of the Belarusian *Revolution of Indignation* of 2020, were not asking for democracy, but for dignity, respect and a good life (Kudlenko, 2023). As a result, in order to support the people of Belarus protesting against the regime would be fundamental to tailor potential assistance programs of the European Union on the real necessities of the protesters, avoiding "one-size fits all" programs and escaping idealistic model which overlooked the importance of taking into account local domestic context and local demands (Stewart, 2008). Moreover, the inclusion of the civil society as agent of change and active participants of the decision-making process would allow for solving the dilemma of assessing the actual demands of the local population, directly legitimating the external support of the EU.

Furthermore, the second criticism towards Western democracy programs unfolds around the **contentious infringement of the sovereignty principle** at the basis of the Westphalian international order based on singular statal units which act according to the principle "*cuius regio, eius religio*" and are based on the principle of non-interference. According to realist theorists of international relations, especially Henry Kissinger, democracy programs infringe the basic principle of non-interference within the political internal process of each country and therefore, they should be abandoned for good (Fukushima and McFaul, 2007). Fukushima and McFaul (2007) counterstroke the criticism highlighting the growing importance of non-state actors within the international order, the progressive *dereliction* of the Westphalian order and consequently, of the attached principle of sovereignty and non-interference. However, the author argues that still in the XXIth century, the world order is still predominantly based on the respect of the principle of sovereignty of each state given the absence of a supranational world government or federation which can absorb the sovereignty of each singular state structure (Focarelli, 2023). Therefore, a solid justification to the alleged juridical infringement of the principle of non-interference by democracy promotion programs should consider the relevance of the sovereignty principle in the modern international order. An alternative response could point

out the right of self-determination of a people enshrined in the Charter of the UN as a *jus cogens* principle with *erga omnes* coverage enshrined in Art. 1.2 of the UN Charter, according to which each people of each country has the right to decide for their destiny explicitly interpreted by the UNSC as "the right of peoples to decide their own government, which may relate to the questions of independence, autonomy, referenda, elections, and the legitimacy of governments" (United Nations, 1945). As a consequence, the reformed *democracy* programs should take explicitly into account the fundamental norms enshrined in the UN Charter. An example is the case for the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) that through the Regulation (EU) No 235/2014 adopted by the EU Parliament and the Council of the EU, established a financing instrument for democracy and human rights worldwide, explicitly referring to the power to provide assistance "*regardless* of the consent of the governments and authorities of the third countries concerned" abiding by the principles enshrined within the UN Charter and the international law (European Parliament and Council of the EU, 2014). Although the present research has no time nor space to face the vast juridical consequence of the present example, it is needed to show the necessity to provide an explicit juridical justification when conceiving such a delicate instrument of support oriented towards the internal institutional, cultural and economic development of a third country. As for the case of Belarusian civil society, a first step towards the legitimation of any sort of European support could be that of strengthening a form of mechanism which put in direct contact the various civic stakeholders of the Belarusian population and the entity interested in the support, in this case the EU. In this way, the directly interested subjects/agents could have a space where they could provide their popular consensus for a potential external support from the European Union and a space where they could pose specific requests that are tailored to the necessities and expectations that the stakeholders demand from the external supporter. As a result, Belarusian citizens could display a direct agency in influencing the decision-making process of the EU towards their country through a transparent **mechanism of representation of the Belarusian people's interests** at the international level, abiding by the self-determination principle of the United Nations. Indeed, a mechanism of representation of the major NGOs operating in Belarus and Georgia is active within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), through the mechanism of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and is aimed precisely at providing a space of active exchange between the policy-makers of the EaP and the civil societies representatives of Georgia, Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Ukraine (EaP CSF, n.d.). As a result, the transparent representation of civil society interests

at the EU level could provide a first step of legitimacy within the framework of the *non-interference principle* backing only those countries where the EU's support is directly requested by the population through the direct connection between the European policymakers and the civil society representatives of the population, respecting the popular consensus of the country under exam, in this case Belarus.

Finally, the third criticism addresses **the complexity of the political process** that took European countries to achieve democracy in the modern form that is now famously known and occurred without any artificial intervention of external forces (Fukuyama and McFaul, 2007). Therefore, the realists would conclude that the internal political process of any country should be allowed to progress self-sufficiently without any kind of external support (Beran, 2005). However, as suggested by Samuel Huntington (1991), an alternative would be that of concentrating the external support on the economic development of the recipient country, letting the rest of the political process develop autonomously but guided by a democracy-oriented political leadership equipped with the technical skills to carry the transitional moments, before of the state-building, then of the endorsement of the rule of law system and finally, democracy. Indeed, the case of the Georgian Rose Revolution, if analysed beyond the narrative of the Bush's administration which exalted Georgia as a beacon of democracy, can be interpreted underneath Huntington's approach: the USAID and other Western donors concentrated their efforts on the formation of a Western-oriented political elite which took the form of various NGOs and various associations from where a new political elite was created provided with high education, high technical skills and well-equipped to activate the state-building process, effectively carried out by the internal reforms of Saakashvili after 2004. However, the first stages of the process - state-building and the rule of law - are phases which do not require the establishment of a more democratic government, and the final phase of the establishment of democracy is postponed at better economic conditions (Fukuyama and McFaul, 2007). Indeed, the modernisation of the state structure obtained through a more centralised power in the hands of the President of Georgia after the Rose Revolution proved to be effective in achieving the expected result in the state-structure development, but not for any effective *democratisation* of the political institutions. Then, thanks to the constitutional reforms of 2011, the political system of Georgia would have developed towards the reformation of the political governance of the Georgian political system, primarily establishing a solid rule of law, and then, in the long-term achieving democracy as the final result. As of today, the long term effects are still not recognisable but the present outcome

shows a country eligible within the liberal government category facing hybrid political organs dominated by a single-party dynamic and a highly alienated population who is incapable of trusting their institutions and of demanding for accountability of the political figures which take decisions on their behalf, through their intermittent popular consensus.

Therefore, the Georgian case can teach various lessons in terms of the democratisation approach supported by external actors, as for example the reality of the complexity of an internal process "crafted" through the support of an external aid (Ishkanian, 2007). On the one hand, Georgia is a successful case of liberal institutional development: the first two technical stages of *state-building* and establishment (and progressive stabilisation) of liberal institutions and *rule of law* overall can be deemed a positive example of democracy promotion programs' impact. On the other hand, Georgia shows that the first two stages are more achievable goals than the effective establishment of a *genuine democracy*, because for the latter to exist, it is not sufficient a pool of technical experts of political science or well-intentioned activists but the active engagement of each singular citizens which should be aware that the democracy is "the least bad form of government for their societies and for themselves" (Huntington, 1991) (Groppi, 2020). Therefore, in order for a democracy - intended as the power of the people - to exist there should be a process of achieving a *popular consciousness*, which usually takes place in collective forms of self-organisation from below, in other words within the civil society of a country (Dirik, 2020).

As a consequence, conceiving democracy as a collective consciousness phenomenon, it could also be said that the Belarusian case would be paradoxically closer to the goal of acquiring a collective conscience than the Georgian case. As reported by the work of Korosteleva, Petrova and Kudlenko (2023), during the protests of August 2020 the Belarusians have developed a sort of "peoplehood" which is defined as a spontaneous and long-coming "transformative force, that intensely rejects previous order arrangements and enables new ideas for bottom-up governance to take hold and shape a community's direction for future development". Therefore, the spontaneous collective movement of citizens has generated an exuberant force channelled through various types of informal civil society associationism, theoretically ascribable to the so-called social movements given their disorganised and leaderless nature, which have generated *self-consciousness of belonging to a specific collective group*, the Belarusian people. Therefore, it could be the case for Belarus that, contrary to the case of Georgia, its transition is coming from the last stage of the

process, therefore from the construction of a collective identity and of a political community as counterposed to the repressive regime of the incumbent which may conduct in the future to progressive steps of people's emancipation from the authoritarian repressive structure into more democratic forms of government (Shadurski, 2023).

3.4 CONCLUSION

Therefore, important lessons have been learnt from the comparison of the Belarusian and Georgian case studies. The main lesson that it has been learnt from the Georgian case is that the *promotion* of democracy coming from external support can be functional in order to establish a liberal form of government, free-market and rule of law, potentially defining the Georgian case as a successful example of liberal institutional development. However, given the weakness of Georgian civil society and its detachment from the citizens of Georgia, the case study of Georgia can be also considered a failure of democracy transition, in the sense that Georgia is still lacking in present days a cohesive and collective democratic consciousness, marking Georgia as a liberal incomplete democracy, so as a country presenting the liberal credentials related to the liberal institutional development but deprived of the fundamental social cohesion and civic participation from below, to be labelled as a democracy. Indeed, the political community of Georgia can be summed up in the political elite governing the country and that part of *vibrant* civil society composed by numerous NGOs severely detached from the local population, cutting out the rest of the Georgian population who feel alienated from the decision-making process unfolding within the political institutions.

On the other hand, the case of Belarus shows a total opposite example where despite the dictatorial institutions and autocratic forms of market relations, Belarusian civil society has awakened and is willing to break any link with the incumbent regime, probably due to the erosion of the solid socio-economic contract silently stipulated between the population and Lukashenka, and recently also for Lukashenka's direct involvement into the Ukrainian invasion of Russia (Coakley, 2022)(Krawatzek and Langbein, 2022). Therefore, it seems that a window of opportunity for a genuine democratisation of the Belarusian population is opening - at least from a theoretical and political point of view - given the mushrooming of various forms of associationism, which channel people's desire to active participation in a new Belarusian political community, as also demonstrated by the reinvigoration of Belarusian political opposition, fiercely led by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya who is preparing with her team a

short-term and long-term programs towards a democratic form of government (Shadurski, 2023). Indeed, Belarus is experiencing a collective momentum of political transition in which civil society is playing a fundamental role that should not be overlooked by the European community due to the potential implications that a similar phenomenon can bring on the European continent. Therefore, the civil society of Belarus should be given more space within the European policies of the ENP's framework. However, past mistakes as apprehended from the case of Georgia demonstrate that in Belarus there would be no terrain for the mushrooming of top-down organisations such as NGOs, because it would be impracticable from a legal point of view, dangerous and inefficient. As a potential alternative, the European Union should ride the Belarusian civil society's momentum by providing a space of expression and representation at the European level to the representative of the civil society. Providing representation spaces to CSOs in addition to the State representatives at the diplomatic level and so, linking directly CSOs' representatives to EU's policy makers is an efficient way to **solve the dilemma of the popular will's assessment.** Indeed, EU's policy makers would have the chance to investigate in detail the effective demands of larger sections of the population in addition to the political representation. Secondly, instead of concentrating on the "promotion" of values alien or external to the tradition of a country, the policies to aid and support the protests in Belarus should focus more on the values that have been produced during the Revolution which according to Korosteleva, Petrova and Kudlenko (2023) are centred around the concept of "identity, good life and peoplehood". In this way, democracy promotion programs encouraged by Western countries at the beginning of the 2000s would be reformed according to an empowering logic that conceive *people's as the main agent within the decision-making process* that interest directly the supported population, limiting the external intervention to the demanded assistance and support to already existing structures and avoiding any imposition of artificial interests which are not compatible or not spontaneously originated from the local communities of Belarus.

PART II: THE EMPOWERMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

4. CHAPTER FOUR - Rethinking *democratisation* beyond borders: the role of CSOs at the International Level

INTRODUCTION

From the comparison of the role of civil society organisations and social movements in post-communist transition processes of Belarus and Georgia, the relevance that civil society plays both at the national and at the international level becomes undeniable. Indeed, at national level, civil society can play distinct roles within the internal political process of a country and can assume different shapes. As the case of Belarus has demonstrated, civil society can act according to the traditional contemporary model which envisions CS as a space where political collective conscience and consequently, action, is encouraged and created. Belarusian civil society indeed coincides with what Professor Kaldor (2003) defined as "the activist" usage of the term, which recalls the revolutionary nature of change towards the central authorities of George Konrad and Vaclav Havel. On the other hand, the case of Georgian civil society of the Rose Revolution adequately represents the alternative neo-liberal concept introduced in the 1970s-80s, especially in the US, which conceived civil society more as third sector comprising NGOs, non-profit organisations, charities and voluntary associations that grow to replace the state and perform institutional development duties (Kaldor, 2003). At the international level, civil society acquired a preeminent role in political theory, especially in the 1970s, thanks to the renovated attention on the non-state actors' agency within the protest movements in Latin America and Eastern Europe (Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor, 2001)(Kaldor, 2003). Progressively, the theoretical debate reflected on the political practice, as shown by the introduction of the concept within foreign policies of Western countries which tended to deploy the neo-liberal concept of civil society. As a result, Western security strategies incorporated the civil society term within the democracy promotion programs at the beginning of 2000s. Simultaneously, authoritarian regimes started to grow particular attention on the role of civil society as demonstrated by the *preemptive authoritarian measures* adopted from the start of the XXIth century explicitly against foreign funded CSOs, restricting civic spaces and civil and political rights (Green and Pandya, 2016). In particular, the comparison of the national Georgian and Belarusian political system and relative civil societies' roles, *represent two specular case studies of the impact of the international renovated attention on civil society within the internal political processes of the*

respective countries. Georgia was indeed among those countries involved within the democracy promotion programs, consistently funded by the USAID, showing the pros and cons of the international programs of the 1990s and, consequently, of the Western influence on the Caucasian country. On the other hand, the analysis of the Belarusian political system and associational context, clearly presented the impact of the Belarusian and Russian interference programs within the civil society through the GONGOs or repressive means.

Therefore, from the comparison of Belarusian and Georgian civil societies, it is clear that one of the major factors which contributed to the development of two specular political outcomes, lies in the different external influence that the two countries have experienced. In both cases external interference succeeded, in the Belarusian case, to hamper associationism and control it internally through government structures, while in the Georgian case, to direct, orient, and manage the civil society spaces from within, overlooking the grassroot participation of the citizens of the local communities. As a result, it is logical that a coherent and complete assessment of the civil society role in both countries should comprehend both critical aspects of the two specular case studies. Consequently,, it is necessary to discuss not only the evident blatant attempts to shrink the spaces of civil society worldwide progressively, but also the frequent governmental interference in CSOs' internal affairs, contrary to the non-governmental and civil nature of these associations dedicated theoretically to the needs of local communities (Green and Pandya, 2016). In fact, although the Georgian case displays a democratic institutional arrangement in comparison to the Belarusian counterpart, NGOs' civil society is not effective at reaching a broader public nor at encouraging grassroot participation and it negatively affects the decision-making process. On the other side, the Belarusian repressive regime has suffocated any attempt of grassroot participation through violent means until 2015, when only non-political organisations were allowed to emerge, holding a tight grip on the civil society sector of Belarus and substituting genuine spontaneous local communities organisations with GONGOs, organisations created by the regime capable of occupying almost entirely the space of local CSOs. Therefore, in different ways, *in both cases, CSOs were distant from the local population and detached from the real purpose of civil society spaces*.

However, it would be misleading to interpret the Belarusian and Georgian civil society comparison's outcome as a suggestion *to completely isolate the civil society from any kind of external influence*. A free and independent development of Belarusian CS and a revision of the Georgian one towards a major connection with the local population are evidently essential. Yet, the *isolation* of civil society from the national or international

political dimension is neither *feasible* nor *desirable*. As seen in previous chapters, the constant connection between CS and politics at *national level* is not detrimental when the two dimensions are not in an osmosis relation. Rather the constant dialogue, discussion, even dispute between politics and civil society is beneficial to shape, adjust and influence the decision-making process according to the citizens' demands who, through the civil society spaces, can demand continuous *accountability* and *responsiveness* from the policy-makers (Kaldor, 2003). The same logic could apply at the international level. In fact, if the relation between the external countries and the civil society is on an equal footing, in other words the external agents and civil society relation presents no power imbalance and no contamination between the two, the external interest within internal political affairs of a country could be considered as not detrimental *per sé (*Jamnejad and Wood, 2009). Cooperation between the civil society and international actors should be fostered but at the same time monitored and regulated. Therefore, rather than suggesting a complete disengagement of external countries from the internal affairs of a third country (Belarus or Georgia in this case), it would be wiser to regulate the relations between the actors in order to *structure a constant dialogue framed within a regulated political and juridical mechanism*. As it happens in the case of Belarus and Georgia, external powers are extremely interested in the internal dynamics which concern institutional, economic and cultural development of neighbouring regions. However, when external political interference translates into political asymmetrical relations, the development of an autonomous political process is endangered, especially in borderlands (Jamnejad and Wood, 2009). In fact, both the EU and Russia consider the countries of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus through a mutually exclusive and securitarian logic, for which both players strive to maintain the neighbouring nations within their spheres of influence: commitments to European integration are perceived as a political loss for Russia, as well as reconciliation with Russia as power limitation of the EU (Dias, 2013). Therefore, calling for total disengagement of the European and Russian powers in these regions, would be rather idealistic and unfeasible. Secondly, the external countries' disinterest from the civil society development of Belarus or Georgia is not desirable for the internal actors of these countries which might require funding and technical assistance in order to accompany the institutional, cultural and economic development of their countries, calling for tighter cooperation in times of need (Brinkerhoff, 1999).

Therefore, *it is necessary to rethink international cooperation between civil society actors and their neighbouring stakeholders through monitored, controlled and multilateral mechanisms*. Indeed, as shown in the previous chapters, civil society is the civic basis where

political ideas are spread and shared, a sensitive space where the political and civic conscience of a citizen is formed and shaped, representing a powerful tool of influence on the political decision-making of a country and lately, on the political collective conscience worldwide. As a result, in order to protect the autonomous development of national civil societies while encouraging cooperation with external stakeholders, various mechanisms of representation and participation have been introduced within the international fora, especially within the frameworks of the United Nations agencies. Thanks to the opportunity to work directly within the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) at the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of Rome, the author have been able to conduct an on-field ethnographic research on the functioning of the Civil Society and Indigenous People Mechanism (CSIPM) which aims at contributing to the decision-making process of the CFS, delivering the voice of local communities at an international level. Drawing good practices and learning from the experience at FAO, a comparison will be provided with the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility which is a forum dedicated at the EU level to the civil society organisations spread among the countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), among which Belarus and Georgia.

4.1 Learning good practices from the model of the Civil Society and Indigenous People Mechanism (CSIPM) within the CFS

The Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM) works within the framework of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and constitutes the largest worldwide platform for civil society organisations (CSOs) striving to tackle food insecurity and malnutrition. The CSIPM was established on occasion of the reform of the CFS in 2009, which introduced a multi-actor platform of participation, enabling CSOs direct participation in the CFS's decision-making processes together with other mechanisms, such as the private sector (CSIPM, 2023). The author has decided to analyse the case of the CSIPM due to its virtuosity in involving not merely non-governmental and institutionalised organisations, but to manage to include also social movements and non-institutionalised associations. Therefore, it succeeds in creating a space of discussion between the state-representatives and the local communities' people who are directly affected by the decisions taken within the CFS plenary. As the analysis will show, the CSIPM succeeds in balancing ***efficiency*** and ***representativeness*** which generally afflicts the different typologies of CSOs, as demonstrated in the case study of Belarus and Georgia. Indeed, despite Belarusian CSOs being more linked

with local people and citizens' direct participation in the movements, the horizontal governance and leaderless structure eased a scattering effect of people's long-term mobilisation. On the other hand, in the Georgian case, the usage of top-down management and solid funding structures, enabled the NGOs sector to thrive vibrantly throughout the 2000s, mostly in urban areas, whilst cutting out larger sections of the population and local rural communities. On the contrary, in the case of the CSIPM, the author observed a *peculiar structure* capable of combining both forms of CSOs, including within its structure both types of organisations. In order to assess the efficiency and representativeness of the CSIPM and to prove the author's thesis, several interviews have been conducted on the field, analysing the structure and the potentiality of the CSIPM's successful model which could serve as a model for the future institutionalisation of civil society multilateral mechanisms. In particular, the interviews have been conducted to present the experience of five different roles which collaborate strictly with the CSIPM mechanism: the first interview with Giulia Simula, policy officer at the CSIPM Secretariat, was aimed at deepening the analysis of the **mechanism's structure**. A special focus on the governing body of the CSIPM, the Coordination Committee (CC) will be provided through the words of one of its members, representing the West Asian region within the CC[2]. Secondly, **the relations between NGOs and SMs** will be expanded through the interview of Andrea Ferrante, European coordinator of one of the largest social movements represented within the CSIPM, La Via Campesina. Moreover, the direct experience of a German rural worker will be presented, Valentin Friedl, who contributed to the debate for the CSIPM within the "Data collection and analysis for food and nutrition security" CFS workstream. Finally, the external point of view of Paola De Meo, Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food at FAO on the CSIPM efficiency and representativeness will be provided. Since the questionnaire posed to the interviewees followed a definite structure proposed similarly to each individual, in order to provide more details and information on the case study, the various interviewees will be mentioned throughout the paragraphs.

a. The CSIPM Structure

Giulia Simula's interview, policy officer and coordinator *ad interim* of the CSIPM Secretariat, presented a detailed analysis of the CSIPM **structure**. According to her "the

[2] The name cannot be disclosed for privacy reasons.

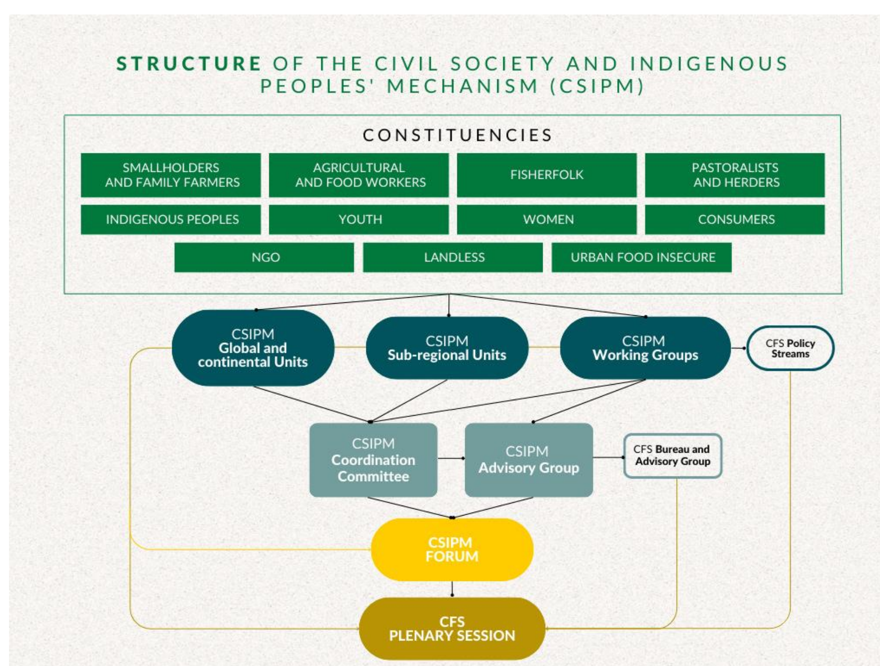
CSIPM is a *unique* space of direct participation of CSOs, which include various sectors and indigenous peoples' organisations in the processes. Within the United Nations, there is no other comparable formally recognised space to facilitate CSOs' participation. This space is unique because it was explicitly recognized in the 2009 reform of the CFS as an official participant of political processes of the CFS and an integral but autonomous part of the CFS, differently from other UN spaces, such as Nutrition and Financing for development, etc., where there are mechanisms that facilitate civil participation, but they are not officially recognised". According to Simula, the CSIPM is transparent and inclusive, abiding by the principle of representativeness, because it follows "the principle of direct participation [aim at representing especially] small producers, women and the landless who have always been discriminated and do not have the opportunity to represent themselves in political spaces." Therefore, the CSIPM *ensures the representation* of various categories through its structure which is divided into global categories, called *constituencies,* and *regional units*, in order to ensure the effective involvement of national, regional and global levels. Totally, there are **11 constituencies**: Smallholders Farmers, Pastoralists/Herders, Fisherfolk, Indigenous Peoples, Consumers, Urban Food Insecure, Agricultural and Food Workers, Women, Youth, Landless, NGOs; and **17 sub-regional units**: North America, Central America and Caribbean, Andean Region, Southern Cone, West Europe, East Europe, North Africa, Central Africa, East Africa, West Africa, South Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, Australasia and Pacific (CSPIM, 2023). According to Simula, to be defined as a "regional" civil society organisation, a CSO should have a minimal outreach in the region of a minimum of states, while it should expand into at least three continents to be defined as a global "constituency".

Moreover, the governing body is represented by the **Coordination Committee (CC)** which proceeds by consensus, when possible, or alternatively by vote (CSPIM, 2023). According to the information gathered from the interview of one of the CC member, in particular the representative of West Asia, and from Simula's interview "each member of the CC is elected by the 11 constituencies and 17 sub-regions, following the ***principle of autonomy***: each region or constituency decides autonomously which electoral method to implement, but under the supervision of the Secretariat which ensure that each method chosen would be "inclusive, open, informed and democratic". Giulia Simula brought me a practical example to better understand the election functioning of the CC: each "Coordination Committee member from the region has an email list shared with the Secretariat, which is used for **consultation processes** to inform the region of a potential renewal of the CC." In this way, "all the participants in the email list which are regional civil society organisations

that are specialised in food security, Nutrition, Right to food etc can decide to take part in the electoral process" both NGOs and Social Movements. Then, a certain typology of **electoral process** is proposed and agreed by the participants of the region/constituency. "For example, in some regions, it is through a vote: everyone can step forward if they want to take on the responsibility of being coordinator. The roles and expectations of a Coordination Committee Member are communicated to the region and then, precisely, a trial is proposed. Some, for example, invite participants in the region to propose themselves if they are interested, and then arrange a regional [remote] call in which it is decided *by consensus* who will be Coordination Committee Member. Others instead take a vote, or for example, do interviews." For example, when the Youth Constituency in 2021 had to choose the CC member between four candidates, they decided "to create an independent selection committee to interview the four candidates and subsequently gave the feedback to the working group and then to the constituency. Finally, once the process had finished, the youth constituency decided who to select by giving its reasons. The Coordination Committee Member must write a report on what type of process was followed, how the process went and must inform the Secretariat. At the end, it is required to also forward all process emails to the Secretariat, through which an accountability mechanism within the CSIPM is ensured". The whole electoral process proceeds progressively and gradually from the internal structure of each CSO, which is composed by local farmers, fishers etc, to the Coordination Committee which takes the decisions which are then passed to the CSIPM forum and finally, to the CFS annual plenary session.

As a result, Giulia Simula defined the CSIPM structure as "an horizontal organisation, made up of several consultation processes". One of the fundamental steps of the consultation process is the division in **Working groups**. Generally, the work of the CFS is divided into Work Streams delineated by the Multi-Year Programme of Work (MYPoW) of the CFS. Based on the different workstreams, the CSIPM forms several Working Groups where political inputs to CFS are articulated, debated, constructed, analysed and confronted. Once the CSIPM members delineates a solid CSIPM position within a specific working group, they then participate actively in the debate within CFS' meetings, which are usually predetermined weeks where CSIPM and the other actors, such as states' delegations and the private sector, take part in the discussion around the topic of the particular workstream. As said by Simula, the working group composition is formed by "anyone who has interest in participating in the Working Group" but in "each working group there shall be at least two coordinators of the CC who have the responsibility that a link is constantly maintained between the other

Working Groups and the Coordination Committee. However, each working group functions autonomously, because the topics are often very specific". Finally, there is another sub-category which is called the **Advisory Group**, elected by and within the CC every two years, which takes part in the meetings of the CFS Advisory Group. The AG is composed of eight members who then attend CFS AG meetings on a rotational basis. Its main scope is that of providing advice within the CFS Bureau on its policies by sharing the CSOs common positions on CFS policy issues, and within the CC by informing the policy discussion taken within the CFS Bureau in the inter-sessional period.



Source: CSIPM official website. https://www.csm4cfs.org/what-is-the-csm/

As concluded by the Committee Coordinator of West Asia, the CSIPM is "an **efficient mechanism to democratically represent the instances of CSOs at the international level** and it could apply to most organisations, especially those that deal with civil society, that could be enhanced to include people and their voices". Certainly, the CC reported several flaws of the CSIPM structure which firstly are connected to the need for a more consistent team to work on the logistical affairs managed by the CSIPM Secretariat. As the CC interviewee noted, due to lack of fundings the Secretariat work is restricted to a small team which is not always able to organise more in-person meetings and to provide for the adequate understanding of the context from which every participants is coming from, which are culturally different, hampering a complete realisation of the principle of representativeness. However, from the bigger picture it is fair to say that CSIPM ensure a

democratic system of representation which, according to the CC, is extremely dependent on: "the responsibility of the people who take the seats facilitating for the constituency or the regions". In fact, the regional or constituency facilitators have to present specific capabilities. The CC interviewee said that they had to be "in touch with the people on the ground. They need to have expertise, and be capable of interacting with people from different cultural and different contexts [, in other words] they need to be skilled in public relations, because they need to be able to build conversations, to discuss and to come up with tactical and strategic plans. So, they need to have multiple skills and to be able to truly facilitate for their region and or constituency".

b. CSOs within the CSIPM: NGOs and SMs relation

As answered by the five interviewees, the CSIPM is considered by the entire sample as an effective mechanism of representation of civil society organisations' requests at an international level. The governance of the CSIPM succeeds in combining both the principle of efficiency and representativeness due to the engagement of both NGOs and SMs. Indeed, despite the general blurring distinction that affects NGOs and SMs recently, according to Andrea Ferrante of La Via Campesina, SMs and NGOs conduct different tasks within the CSIPM, deputing to the former more representative competences, while to the latter, more logistic competences which ensure the efficient participation of the SMs' actors. Indeed, on the one hand, actors coming from **SMs have "preeminence"** as stated by Andrea Ferrante and "priority" as cleared by Giulia Simula. Indeed, within the CSIPM and usually are SMs members which are spokespersons in plenary. However, as stated by Andrea Ferrante, even though SMs maintain an horizontal governance, they are extremely organised internally. For example, he said that his organisation, La Via Campesina has its own internal organisational form that can be associated more with a "trade union" than to a "pacifist movement" or to a mass mobilisation - such as that of Belarus for example. On the other hand, NGOs participate as one of the constituencies to the CSIPM process and carry out a particular role: NGOs and therefore, professional activists, operate in support of social movements. Andrea Ferrante explained that: "while for a very long time and still today NGOs usually take the place and speak on behalf of social movements. In the CSIPM happens exactly the opposite. The NGOs act in support of the preparatory work, but then those who speak are always SMs. Indeed, each Working Group [...] is always coordinated by two people who are always two representatives of SMs, for example a farmer or a fisherman. In the case of the Working

Group on Data negotiations there are two female farmers who are Patty Naylor (US) and Pèr Alvarez (Paraguay). [Juxtaposed] there is a facilitation team composed of NGOs, such as FIAN, that support the Coordination Committee." In this way, CSIPM achieves a balance of organising efficiently the representation of local instances managing to deliver the voice of civil society and indigenous populations on any CFS workstream.

As furtherly reported by Giulia Simula, the CSIPM does not simply secure "a seat for the various people who are interested in participating in these political processes, but there is a whole **facilitation** process to ensure their **effective** participation". Indeed, Giulia Simula explained that, if *representation* of the categories is guaranteed through the direct participation of local actors, the *effective* participation is ensured through the work of various NGOs which are called "facilitators" and are engaged in providing technical assistance needed. Together with the Secretariat, NGOs are entrusted with information, update, translation tasks and manage the gender, cultural, regional and constituencies balance of the participants. However, Simula specified that "even though NGOs can participate in the political debate", "priority is always given to SMs" and to the "directly affected actors". For instance, the Secretariat gives priority to SMs in budgeting allocation. As said by Giulia Simula: "when funds are limited, they are managed as to ensure the participation of directly affected people in negotiations, so the funds available are used only for SMs, given that it is understandable that NGOs have a more consistent level of resources compared to the SMs". Moreover, she added that NGOs consistently sustained CSIPM during financial gaps. CSIPM is indeed severely affected by a lack of funds - which comes especially from states such as Germany and France - and is often unable to cover the entire budget planned by the Secretariat. On those occasions, Giulia Simula observed that NGOs play a key role in providing financial support.

As a result, as reported by the words of a directly affected actor, the German farmer Valentin Friedl, part of La Via Campesina (ABL) Germany, and a member of the CSIPM Data Working Group, NGOs do not dominate the process but are necessary to compensate for skills and capabilities required to answer to certain complex and specific issues debated within the CFS. Indeed, he brought the example of the difficulty of writing a statement about data governance that local farmers, fishermans, pastoralists or herders could encounter when facing intergovernmental fora such as the CFS. The barrier regards not only the skills but also the availability, the necessary time to dedicate, the resources or maybe the language used which hamper an inclusive direct participation. NGOs compensate for the skills and capabilities requested by the complexity required by the CFS intergovernmental governance

and are essential to obtain an *efficient* inclusive *representation* of CSOs and Indigenous People. Therefore, it can be said that within the CSIPM internal governance NGOs and SMs work in parallel achieving both the principle of representativeness and efficiency.

c. *CSIPM status within the CFS: combining representativeness and efficiency*

At the international level a similar governance is obtained within the CFS to combine the two principles and obtain both efficiency and representativeness' goals. In particular, the balance is achieved through a decision-making power differentiation between the actors that engage in the policy design process. Therefore, it is important to focus on CSIPM status within the intergovernmental forum of the CFS. The CSIPM shows a status which is not comparable neither to a state delegation nor to an observer status. Indeed, the CSIPM is not a political subject but an "international space [...] hence does not have formal members", its components are constituted by every CSOs interested and competent on food security and nutrition (CSIPM, 2023). As stated by Ferrante: "CSIPM is a **political space and not a political subject** [...] it is a mechanism, so fundamentally CSIPM is not an organisation: CSIPM is a method, a methodology that ensures that a common position can be found through consensus among the many CSOs that represent the directly affected actors". In particular, within the CSIPM, CSOs contribute actively to the decision-making process presenting their position through the Working groups. However, as explained by Simula and the West Asia Coordinator, in order for a CSIPM's proposal to, for example, change a paragraph of the text of discussion (usually recommendations or guidelines), consensus is not sufficient. At least one state delegation shall endorse the CSIPM intervention, otherwise CSIPM input will be taken into account but it will not produce any formal effect. Certainly, the reduced powers of the CSIPM compared to the states put the mechanisms in a weaker position. However, as explained by the **Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Paola De Meo**, the state prerogatives on decision-making powers originates from an important and essential rationale: "states are the ones who then will have to implement any recommendation or voluntary guidelines. Indeed, voluntary guidelines can inspire legislation and regulation at a local national level" but accountability remains entirely to the public authorities. As stated by both Simula, Ferrante and De Meo, states' responsibility on the implementation entails concrete financial implications which explains states' reluctance to accept CSIPM's requests and the importance to maintain the differentiation between states and civil society. As cleared by De Meo, within the CFS, the governments represent the **duty bearers** and the ones responsible

for carrying out the implementation phase. While, the CSIPM represents the **right holders**, who bear rights - citizens and noncitizens alike. Nevertheless, the decision-making power of the states does not undermine the CSIPM impact on each level of the discussion. In this regard, De Meo observed that "the fact that states often tend to spend a lot of time and energy, so many resources in rethinking, reworking, modifying what is proposed by civil society is in some way also a *guarantee of seriousness, because it means that they are taking seriously into consideration the responsibilities that they then assume in approving those recommendations or guidelines* and they know well that they may then be held accountable for them and may be required by civil society to follow up on the commitments they have made". Hence, there is a precise meaning for CSIPM decision-making status and as reported by Simula, "CSIPM is a convinced champion" of a distinction of powers between CFS actors. As stated in her interview, it is important to differ the various typologies of actors within the CFS, which are States, civil society and indigenous people right holders and the private sector mechanism. In fact, the PSM represents corporations which are totally different actors that have a responsibility "to abide by fundamental rights of every human being". Furthermore, the risks of introducing a multi-stakeholders system instead of remaining within the intergovernmental framework such as the CFS, would be that empowering also the private sector with veto-power on the decision-making and the shaping of the agenda.

To sum up, the CSIPM as well as other actors such as the private sector, do not show the same status as state delegations because they do not share with them the accountability that States or governments display on their societies. As a result, it can be said that also within the CFS a confrontation of the two principles of representativeness and efficiency is in play. On the one hand, the former principle is strengthened through the direct participation of local communities and individuals on which the international decisions produce an effect. On the other hand, the principle of efficiency is ensured by the states held accountable for the decisions taken. The duty bearers secure the efficient outcome evaluating and filtering only those decisions that can be efficiently implemented.

d. The replicability of the CSIPM model

The ethnographic research produced a clear result which leads to conclude that the CSIPM mechanism is a successful example of civil society empowerment at the international level. In addition to that, all interviewees agreed on the ***desirability*** to replicate the model within other international fora. In fact, they believe that enabling the participation of the directly affected

individuals and communities in spaces where national and state delegations usually sit would favour the discussion around practical and concrete issues faced by the former. As stated by Ferrante, CSIPM model's replicability is desirable because civil society is capable of efficiently orienting the decision-making processes towards more effective goals, shaping the agenda to focus on vital issues which are usually overlooked by the state delegations. Indeed, although CSIPM is not the sole example of civil society collaboration within international spaces, it is a rare case of official institutionalisation of the mechanism which, through its detailed structure, produces a good combination of participation, representativeness, and efficiency.

However, as observed by La Via Campesina member, the political conditions that led to the introduction of the CSIPM mechanism within the CFS reform of 2009 have extremely changed in the past decade towards a severe restriction of democratic spaces for participation worldwide. Therefore, the replicability of a model similar to the CSIPM currently is desirable but hardly feasible to achieve. A global democratic regression is also affecting Europe which is incapable of defending its model. As a matter of fact, the normative power of Europe is severely at risk and what should represent the strength of Europe, the respect for human rights, the democratic model, and the rule of law are under threat. According to Ferrante, the risks of retrogression in Europe comes from the internal inability of Europe to effectively safeguard these rights and live up to the expectations created by Europe's projection to the world as a normative power. However, Ferrante recalls that the focus should be recentred on the human rights' agenda instead of promoting commercial relations as the EU's strength, given that other competitors have far more to offer in this domain. On the contrary, it seems that the political context of the last decade is severely diverging from that of the first years of the 2000s that led to the 2009 CFS' reform. Therefrom, the author asked the necessary conditions of existence of that political context to Ferrante, who resumed his answer in three main points:

1. "The general recognition that the [human] rights agenda had to be an international agenda.

2. A significant number of progressive governments, which tended to implement the international [human] rights' agenda.

3. A greater ability of civil society to be organised".

On the contrary, the international scenario that is currently unfolding presents fewer states willing to provide spaces of participation to enhance democratic forms of government. In addition, the CS is progressively more disunited and disorganised and the Covid-19 pandemic worsened the situation by increasing the weaknesses of civil society structures. Last but not least, the general international issue lies in a severe *retrogression of the rights agenda*.

As a matter of fact, Ferrante's statement about a progressive retrogression of democratic forms of government worldwide is also supported by distinguished scholars such as Tom Ginsburg and Haziz Huq (2018), who have recognised a general phenomenon of democratic “deterioration”, concerning also liberal-democracies in the European continent. In this regard, also the EU received numerous criticism for its technocratic nature and its severe detachment from the European citizens, proving that the debate on the representativeness and efficiency trade-off is still a sensitive issue in the present days (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2017). However, the author argues that one possible way to reverse the democratic regression course within the European Union would be that of introducing innovative systems of governance, pushing for a *democratisation* of the European institutions and policies. In particular, including civil society in the EU's governing bodies through institutionalised mechanisms of participation - such as the CSIPM model - could significantly improve the democratic nature and legitimacy of the European decision-making processes.

4.2 Empowering Belarusian and Georgian Civil Society within the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood Policy: the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum

After having analysed the civil society representation and participation at the United Nations level, the present text proceeds into examining closely the question at the level of the External Action of the European Union, narrowing down the research to the **Belarusian and Georgian civil society participation status within the EU**. Indeed, offering a permanent space of consultation and constant communication of Belarusian and Georgian CSOs would bring an added value to the decisions taken at the intergovernmental and ministerial level, given their experience on the field and the direct connection with local communities, efficiently orienting and shaping the policies. In this regard, the European Union is engaged in the Eastern European region through the joint initiative of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) launched in 2009, framed within the well-known bilateral framework of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy. The following paragraphs will be dedicated to a brief exposition of

the EaP, and then, a particular relevance will be dedicated to the specific case study of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, which is the existing organisation that is in place to facilitate civil society and states collaboration.

a. *The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum within the Eastern Partnership joint initiative framework*

The EU bilateral relations with Belarus and Georgia are framed within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The ENP was introduced in 2004 to manage the European Union external action towards its neighbouring South Mediterranean and Eastern European regions (EEAS, 2021). In particular, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched in 2009, on occasion of the Prague Summit, to develop closer relations between the EU, the Member States (MSs) and six Eastern European countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (EEAS,2022). The purpose of the initiative is to extend political and economic relations**,** as well as accompanying "sustainable reform processes" within the six partners (*Ibidem*). The joint initiative was advanced through the Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA/DCFTAs). The AA/DCFTAs were successfully concluded in 2014 between the EU and **Georgia**, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The first two agreements were modelled on the guidelines of the Ukrainian AAs, mainly consisting of two separate domains, dividing economic and political chapters (Van der Loo, 2017). In the case of Georgia, from July 2016, the AA entered into force, deepening EU-Georgia relations, especially through the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which was conceived as to facilitate the access of Georgia into the European single market (European Commission, n.d.). Conversely, the political part of the AA with Georgia, as for Moldova and Ukraine, aimed at cooperating for the institutional development to promote stability and peace in the region, by entailing significant reforms and by aligning legislation and standards to the EU ones, such as the Visa-free arrangements agreed upon (Van der Loo, 2017)(EEAS, 2022).

On the other hand, the relations between **Belarus** and the EU have notably followed a different path. Following the violent repression by the Belarusian authorities - including intimidation, arbitrary arrests and detentions - of the 2020 peaceful mobilisation for the fraudulent presidential elections, the EU has adopted restrictive measures from October 2020 onwards (European Council, n.d.). However, as reassured in the "October 2020 Council Conclusions", the EU will maintain cooperation with Belarus within the Eastern Partnership

multilateral framework at *non-political* level and intensify cooperation with key *non-state Belarusian stakeholders* (EUCO 13/20)(EEAS, 2022). Moreover, sanctions have been extended in reaction to Belarusian collaboration with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, involving restrictions on trade, SWIFT ban and sanctions targeting 233 individuals and 37 entities (European Council, n.d.). As of June 2021, Belarus suspended its participation from the Eastern Partnership, but as declared in the Joint Declaration during the sixth Eastern Partnership summit in Brussels on 15 December 2021, the EU will continue "to support the Belarus citizens, civil society and independent media [allocating] EUR 3 billion [...] to support the democratic choice of the Belarusian people".

Veritably, CSOs involvement and collaboration within the EaP's architecture displays a key goal of the EU, especially after the EaP Summit of 2017 which marked a turning point for the EaP (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2020). As a matter of fact, the above-mentioned statements are in line with the "20 deliverables of 2020", an ambitious work plan promoted by the 2017 Eastern Partnership Summit, that defined the priorities of the Eastern Partnership for future cooperation, putting at the first place "more engagement with civil society organisations" (European Council, 2020). The concept has been reiterated also in the joint communication for Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020, titled "Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all", which constitutes a fundamental testimony to understand the current direction of the EaP in matters of civil society engagement within the decision-making process. Indeed, the joint communication asserts that the EU institutions commit to strengthening the effectiveness of the existing structures of the EaP architecture, among them in particular the **EaP Civil Society Forum**, which "will continue to be a key partner in advancing the role of civil society in policy dialogue" (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2020). Finally, it is recognised the importance of CSOs, in particular grassroot organisations, in spreading EU-positive values in rural areas, as well as securing a meaningful participation of citizens in the policy-making process and improving services for people on the ground. As a result, the EU has developed framework cooperation agreements with the most influential CSOs to better channel financial support and re-granting, improving the outreach of smaller, local groups that operate in the local language (*Ibidem*). As a result, it appears that the EU conceives Eastern European CSOs as crucial actors within the EaP policies, requiring necessarily a detailed discussion of the existent EaP structures that

facilitates CSOs' engagement within the Eastern Partnership, in particular the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF).

b. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum: the internal structure

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) was introduced by a Communication of the European Commission of December 2008 and reunited in November 2009 for the first time (Jituaru, 2017). Differently from the CSIPM case study analysed in the previous paragraphs, is a *multi-layered regional* civil society platform or CSOs network (EaP CSF, 2023). The Forum regroups on the platform CSOs coming from the six Eastern Partnership countries, among them Belarusian and Georgian ones (EaP CSF, 2023). The EaP CSF declared goals are that of "promoting European integration, facilitating reforms and democratic transformations [at national level]" (EaP CSF, 2023). Moreover, among its objectives, it aims at strengthening civil society *in the region*, boosting pluralism in public discourse and policy-making, by promoting participatory democracy and fundamental freedoms" in the partner countries (*Ibidem*). In addition, differently from the CSIPM, the EaP CSF defines itself as a "non-profit, non-government, non-partisan civil society organisation", and as "the largest umbrella organisation of NGOs from the EaP region and the EU" (EaP CSF, 2023). On the EaP CSF Statute (2019), it is described as a network of civil society organisation, so not properly as a space or mechanism of participation of CSOs within an intergovernmental fora, such as the CSIPM. However, the EaP CSF's declared mission is defined as "to ensure *effective participation of civil societies* of Eastern Partnership and the EU in the *process of planning, monitoring and implementation of the Eastern Partnership policy* in constructive *dialogue with the EU and EaP decision-makers"* (EaP CSF Statute, 2019). In order to carry out its tasks, the Forum works through a variety of different entities.

The entities are precisely five: the General Assembly, the Steering Committee, the Secretariat, the National Platforms and the Working groups. According to the official Statute (2019) of the EaP CSF, the first entity is composed of delegates who are CSOs coming from both the EaP countries or the EU. In order to be selected as delegate of the **General Assembly**, each representative shall present an *expression of interest* through a formal application and the candidate will be selected by the current Members of the Forum and non-members. The process is repeated every two years according to selection criteria based on gender, geography and thematics and the right to vote is exclusively reserved to the delegates, who have one vote each. The General Assembly meets once a year at the Annual Assembly

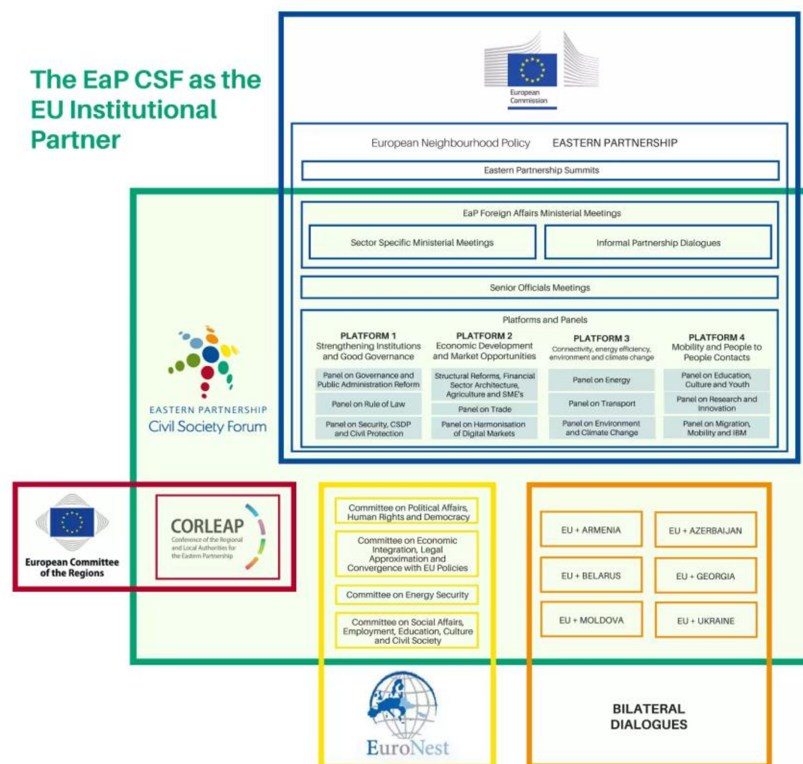
and has deliberative, representative and elective functions and is considered "the highest decision-making body in the EaP CSF" (EaP CSF, 2023). The Annual Assembly gathers to discuss Forum and EaP's accomplishments but also the civil society achievements in the national institutional reforms within the six partner countries.

Then, the **Steering Committee** composes the **Board**, which is the second decision-making body, or governing body, as stated within the main internal document of the Forum "The Articles Of Association Of The Secretariat Of The Steering Committee Of The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum" of 2012, from now on called, Articles of Association. The Steering Committee is formed of up to 13 members: six of them are elected by their respective National Platforms' delegates and are called the Six National Facilitators; five Working Group Coordinators are elected from the delegates of the Working groups; finally, two EU facilitators are elected from the EU Working Group Coordinators. Then, the Steering Committee appoints two Co-Chairs, one from the EaP region and one from the EU (EaP CSF Statute, 2019). The main scope of this entity is to orient the discussion and the activities of the Forum. Then, the **Secretariat** is an administrative entity which sustains through its technical support and organisational work the Steering Committee and the Forum and is legally represented by the Director (EaP CSF, 2023).

A similar division analysed within the CSIPM between regional and thematic division is present also within the EaP CSF, where the National Platforms work at the national level while the Working Groups work at the thematic level. A key role is entrusted to the National Platforms of the six partner countries. According to the Statute (2019), the national platforms shall be responsible for the effective engagement of each national CSO in the reform process. While the Working Groups are five general divisions regrouped according to a thematic, under which the work of the EaP CSF is organised. The five groups are divided for 1) Democracy, human rights, good governance and stability 2) Economic integration and convergence with EU policies 3) Environment, climate change and energy security 4) Contacts between people 5) Social & Labour Policies and Social Dialogue. Last but not least, the **Compliance Committee** (CC) is an independent body that refers to the General Assembly and is entrusted with safeguarding a democratic and balanced division of power, accountability and resolutions for conflicts. The CC monitors the decisions taken at the level of each entity that composes the EaP CSF (EaP CSF, 2023).

c. The Policy Dialogue: EaP CSF and the EU

Beyond the peculiar organisation of the EaP CSF, what is particularly relevant for the present discussion is the level of CSOs' effective participation in the EaP decision-making processes. The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) has a **permanent observer status** in the official multilateral EaP architecture. Due to the various levels of the EaP structure, each stage presents a different type of civil society engagement. The multilateral architecture is composed of: EaP Ministerial Meetings, EaP Senior Official Meetings, the EaP Platforms and Panels, CORLEAP, EURONEST, Bilateral Dialogues and Association Agreements.



Source Image: the EaP CSF as the EU's institutional partner. https://eap-csf.eu/policy-dialogue/

As it can be observed, civil society is included almost in every stage of the policy-making process. At the Ministerial level, the meetings are chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission and the Commissioner for EU Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, reuniting the EU **foreign ministers** and the respective counterparts coming from the six partner states. However, the EaP CSF participates in the ministerial meetings

with one representative, who is invited to represent the civil society view by **delivering a speech** on behalf of civil society (EaP CSF, 2023). At the level of the civil servants meetings, the so-called EaP Senior Official Meetings, the exact same procedure is repeated, limiting the contribution of the EaP CSF representative to the delivering of a speech on behalf of the civil society (EaP CSF, 2023). Two EaP CSF are then sent to represent CSOs to the meetings of the Eastern Partnership Platforms and Panels and one of the Co-Chairs of the Steering Committee represents at the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly of the EU and Eastern European parliamentarians meet. Then, civil society participation ends with the CORLEAP, which is EaP CSF's institutional intersection with the European Committee of the Regions. The civil society is excluded both from Bilateral Dialogues and not mentioned within the Association Agreements framework (EaP CSF, 2023). Indeed, the main mission of the EaP CSF for the 2018-2020 strategy remained centred around potential recommendations to reinforce the participation of the CSOs, especially "at the high-level official events". The concept was then recalled also during the 2021 Joint Declaration of the EaP Summit by the Council of the European Union in Brussels, highlighting the need for enhancing multilateral architecture efficiency of the EaP, emphasising the role of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum.

As a result, although the existence of such a space of meeting has a positive impact for Eastern European CSOs, it is clear from a deeper analysis that the effective participation of the EaP CSF to the Eastern Partnership and the civil society's active influence on the decision-making process is still limited and restricted to a coordination and monitoring role of the EU level decisions within national frameworks (Kaca, Kucharczyk and Łada, 2011). As recognised by a CSO, Recharging Advocacy for Rights in Europe (2022), despite the fact that the EU and its MSs have internalised the crucial role played by CSOs, they have not yet satisfactorily enabled the access to the decision-making processes and policy discussions of Eastern European CSOs, resulting in an urgent need for a massive enhancement of the consultation mechanisms currently in place. As a consequence, strengthening the Forum's potential could be included among the future challenges that the EU has to face in order to improve the EaP decision-making, legitimacy and democratic accountability.

d. *Enhancing the EaP CSF: learning from the example of CSIPM*

The present dissertation suggests to face the above-mentioned challenge by drawing from the good practices of a successful model of civil society participation mechanism, the CSIPM.

Drawing from the CSIPM mechanism exposed in the previous paragraphs, the author proposes a comparison between the two spaces of CSOs engagement, in order to underline the good practices visualised within the CSIPM mechanism. First of all, starting from the basic definition of the two spaces can help in clearing the difference between the two subjects of the research. As a fact, while the CSIPM is by definition a mechanism of participation, the second one, the EaP CSF is a forum, therefore a platform conceived for discussion.

It is important to specify that the CSIPM **ultimate goal** is declared as the *direct* participation of the directly affected people within the intergovernmental organisation of the Committee on World Food Security, as stated by the totality of the interviewees, the CSIPM role is "to facilitate civil society, social movements and Indigenous Peoples' **engagement** and **participation** in the policy work of the CFS" (CSIPM, 2023). The official mission of the EaP CSF seems similar to the CSIPM purpose. In the Statute of 2019, it is reported that the EaP CSF aims at ensuring "**effective participation** of the civil society of the Eastern Partnership and the EU in the process of **planning, monitoring and implementing** the Eastern Partnership policy in ***constructive dialogue*** with the EU and EaP decision-makers, in the direction of the democratic transformation and European integration".

However, although it is unclear what *planning* nor *constructive dialogue* stands for, evidently a major gravity is attributed to the monitoring and implementation stages, which are evoked also in the second and last point of the mission. A leading role is bestowed to the National Platforms, which are entrusted with the main responsibility of monitoring the commitments of the EaP governments' vis-à-vis the EU" (EaP CSF, 2019). As it results from a closer analysis, differently from the CSIPM, the Forum seems more focused on the national monitoring and implementation of the EaP decisions taken at the bilateral and ministerial levels (Kaca, Kucharczyk and Łada, 2011). Indeed, among the six **functions** declared in article 2.3 of the official Statute (2019), five are dedicated to the promotional nature of the organisation and its duties of implementation and monitoring of the EaP commitments agreed upon by the EU and its six Eastern partners. Only one point envisages the CSOs contribution to the policy-making, limited to the "early stages" of the process through the "submission of opinions and recommendations". On the contrary, the CSIPM varies greatly on this point from the EaP CSF. As exposed by the interview of Ferrante (La Via Campesina), the implementation stage is not part of the CSIPM responsibilities because the CSIPM is not an organisation nor a network of CSOs. It is a space and a mechanism of participation where the

subjectivity of each CSO is respected and contributes singularly and collectively to the decision-making process (Ferrante). However, as said by Ferrante, “[the CSIPM] is not an organisation that has a territorial branch”. As a result, although both entities operate towards the same declared purpose of civil society engagement, the different perspectives could represent the origin of the two divergent outcomes which view the CSIPM more able to affect the policy-making, while the EaP CSF more focused on the final executive stage of the process. In particular, the CSIPM focuses on the CSOs direct contribution within the sessions at the diplomatic level, constantly enabling the direct participation of directly affected subjects at the high-level negotiations. Whilst, the EaP CSF assumes a **coordination role** between the EaP policies and the CSOs activities in national areas (Kaca, Kucharczyk and Łada, 2011)(Kostanyan and Vandecasteele, 2013)(Bosse, 2014)(Jitaru, 2017).

Indeed, as observed by Jitaru (2017), the EaP CSF has been claimed to be effective in integrating the six partners with the economic and political European standards and coordinating EaP CSOs action and collaboration. However, as reported by Kostanyan (2014) - within a CEPS report commissioned by the EaP CSF and, until nowadays one of the few comprehensive reports on the matter - the **organisation’s influence on the Eastern Partnership intergovernmental decision-making processes** was labelled as scarce and its lobbying potentiality on EaP and EU officials as underestimated. One of the reasons behind CSOs’ ineffective participation was, for example, the need for a specific EU officials’ invitation to participate in high-level meetings (Kostanyan, 2014). Nowadays, the EaP CSF has improved its position gaining a permanent observer status within the multilateral structure of the EaP, but, as highlighted by the recommendations contained within the “Policy Beyond 2020” programme of the EaP CSF (2019), the Forum is still not considered a “third and equal player in policy design”. On the contrary, for the CSIPM, the status within the CFS at FAO is permanent in the sense that the participation mechanism is active in each session of negotiations where the CSIPM contributes in the drafting of the adopted final document.

Overall, a stark difference between the CSIPM and the EaP CSF lies in the **hierarchisation** of the respective structures. As stated within the EaP CSF Statute of 2019, the body responsible to represent the Forum at the highest levels of the EU and EaP is the Steering Committee, while the General Assembly reunites once in a year for “thematic policy dialogue” decided within the Steering Committee. However, the General Assembly during the annual meeting at the end of each year has the power to dissolve the Steering Committee

if not satisfied with its work (EaP CSF Statute, 2019). Thereby, the EaP CSF is divided according to a sort of parliamentary system, where the Assembly is "legislative body" that adopts resolutions, while the Steering Committee is the "executive organ" entrusted with the representation and internal decision-making prerogatives (Kostanyan, 2014). However, the election of the Steering Committee members is independent from the General Assembly, as stated in article 6 of the 2019 Statute. On the contrary, the CSIPM follows a horizontal structure where the Coordination Committee (CC) operates as an organ entrusted with a linking role between the Working Groups and the CC that maintain constant dialogue between the various bodies of the mechanism. Therefore, the direct representation of the local communities and social movements passes through the Working Groups, where both regional and constituencies' representatives can participate freely according to their competences and interests, following "the principle of **self-organisation**" or also "the principle of **autonomy**" (De Meo, Simula). The EaP CSF Forum and National Platforms are also organised in Working Groups, but instead they are composed of usually 160 delegates that need to pass a selection committee, as affirmed in Article 11.1 of 2019 EaP CSF Statute and, according to Article 11.2, the WGs are "invited to take part to the multilateral platforms to provide expertise". Therefore, it is clear that the different structures of the two entities appear to serve two different scopes which, in the CSIPM case is to bring to the multilateral negotiations, the voice of the directly affected people, while in the EaP CSF organisation, the Eastern European CSOs are supposed to deliver the expertise and the know-how of NGOs experts.

Consequently, the word *participation* in the two case studies assumes a different connotation. Indeed, the crucial difference between the CSIPM and EaP CSF is located in the diverse **typology of CSOs** operating within the two entities. As it has already been presented in the case of the CSIPM, a neat predominance of SMs has been observed by the interviewees, preferring the direct participation of the directly affected as to increase the legitimacy and credibility of the CSIPM representativeness (Ferrante, Friedl). However, NGOs were not excluded from the mechanism. Somewhat, their competences and potentiality were allocated efficiently in roles and responsibilities which were more indicated for the specific typology of association: entrusting them with tasks related to technical expertise, translation and logistical competences, which ensured an efficient representation of the directly affected (as the interviewee Friedl). In the case of the EaP CSF, the CSOs participating in the Forum and Steering Committee are usually NGOs from the six partner countries and the EU, omitting any reference to social movements within the Forum 2019

Statute (Kostanyan, 2014).In fact, as denoted by the CEPS report, the Forum participating CSOs reflect a significant vulnerability, namely their estrangement from the Eastern European wider population. As a result, the primary objective of the Forum should orient towards an increased connection with the broader societies (Kostanyan, 2014). As apprehended from the CSIPM model, the inclusion of social movements and the direct participation of EaP citizens could strengthen the legitimacy and accountability of the EU and EaP Partners' decisions and reduce the gap of representativeness between the EaP CSF CSOs and the broader populations of the six Eastern European countries. Hence, the EaP CSF should draw from the positive example of the CSIPM including in its structure both NGOs and SMs, understanding and differentiating their potentiality in order to achieve both the principle of efficiency and representativeness.

4.4. General Overview

Overall, the present chapter has focused on the role of CSOs at the international level, proving that CSOs collaboration within multilateral frameworks presents a profound potential impact on the national transition of countries towards institutional development while reinforcing the legitimacy of the decisions taken at the intergovernmental level. As seen in the case of Belarus, the grassroot mobilisation of 2020 is a clear sign of Belarusians' intolerance towards the authoritarian government of Lukashenka. Thus, ensuring a space of representation within the EaP framework for the Belarusian social movements, that mushroomed after the 2020 historical turning point, can represent an opportunity for supporting change and pressuring Belarusian authoritarian institutions. In the case of Georgia, given the extensive relations between the EU and Georgian NGOs within the Forum, the goal would be that of working towards the construction of a space of representation for the directly affected citizens of Georgia, preferring the latter to perform representative roles while the former to carry out those responsibilities that requires high skills and know-how competences, usually provided by NGOs members.

The Eastern Partnership Forum is one of the means identified by the EU to deliver its civil society's participation goal (20 deliverables 2020). In order to achieve so, the EaP CSF represents a potential space where these changes could take place, but a comprehensive reform of its internal structure is required. The research has shown how the EaP CSF is recommended to enhance its policy-making competencies in the shaping of Eastern Partnership at the ministerial and civil servants levels, especially by enlarging the access to

directly affected communities and individuals coming from the six Eastern European partners whose stands are often overlooked and neglected. In order to improve the Forum's impact on the EaP decision-making, the virtuous example of the CSIPM has been presented and compared to draw relevant good practices that could apply to the EaP CSF. Namely, the EaP CSF macro-areas of improvements to achieve its declared mission - effective participation of the civil society within the EaP - are: an extension of the EaP CSF competences on the decision-making process stages; a decentralisation of the power structure towards a less hierarchical and "parliament-like" architecture; the introduction of the principle of autonomy to diffuse the principle of representation and achieve more inclusivity; the facilitation of directly affected subjects' participation through a more efficient allocation of competencies between the different typologies of CSOs, differentiating the roles according to the principles of efficiency and representativeness.

To conclude, the reform should interest the underlying assumption that orients the EaP CSF organisation and its relation with the EU authorities. Within the EaP, civil society shall be conceived as a *space of participation*, not as a vehicle for democratic promotion nor as a panacea for the democratisation of the ex-Soviet countries. In fact, CS can realise its peculiar transformative democratisation potential only when democratic values and democratic institutional demands are diffused in the national social fabric of each EaP partner. Therefore, for the democratisation of countries such as Belarus or Georgia to take place, it is necessary to actively listen to people's interests on the territory, in order to abide by the principle of self-determination. In order to do so, a space for constant dialogue with the local populations directly concerned shall be fostered and enhanced. The EaP Forum displays a high-potential within the EaP multilateral architecture. However, it should be remodelled according to the principle of self-organisation and direct participation of the directly affected within the decision-making process, if aiming at a successful transition of Belarus and Georgia towards institutional development. Basically, in this way the EaP CSF would reverse its scope, from promotion of EU values through a top-down process, to a bottom-up mechanism of CSOs enabling their active participation in agenda-shaping and decision-making process, providing more efficient results and credibility to the Eastern Partnership policies. As a consequence, the EaP CSF structure would be reformed into a more accessible, inclusive and participatory mechanism that could effectively represent the local communities of Georgia and Belarus. Achieving the direct participation of local communities through the enhancement of the EaP CSF and its constant collaboration with EU officials will

reinforce the democratic legitimacy of EU's external action within its neighbouring countries and empower civil society at the international level.

CONCLUSIONS

The present research has examined the role of civil society in the post-communist transitions of two key players of the Eastern European region, Georgia and Belarus. In particular, the comparison of the two critical historical junctures of the Rose Revolution of 2003 and the peaceful mobilisation of August 2020 has highlighted the unprecedented singularity of the mass uprising of the Belarusians, which is beyond the categorisation of "colour revolutions" that spread throughout the 2000s in Eastern Europe. Rather, the Belarusian demonstrations can be defined as a proper revolution from below, which are more akin to the anti-communist revolutions of 1989-91 against the Soviet dictatorship (Daniel, 2000). As proved throughout the research, the different revolutionary products come from divergent **typologies of civil societies**, which represent the cultural basin from where dissidents and protestors organise and learn political practices. The two typologies of civil societies differ in particular on the relation established between civil society itself and the political dimension. As recalled in the theoretical section, although civil society is a space of participation beyond the state, the market and the family, it is constantly in contact with the political dimension. However, **its** relation with the political is simultaneously active and passive: capable of both influencing the political context and being the product of the political dimension. The comparison of the two civil societies has revealed that Georgia and Belarus were two very different and specular ways of organising civil society, and two specular typologies of interactions between the political and civil dimensions.

On the one hand, for Georgia, the civil society was organised following an external model, imported through the democracy promotion programs funded by Western donors. Consequently, the organisation of civil society in Georgia followed a top-down management, where NGOs were sustained by a strong third sector, directly influenced by external actors and liberal-democratic values developed among the upper educated classes (passive). However, NGOs were also capable of influencing and shaping the political Georgian system, as proved by Shevarnadze's resignation after the Rose Revolution and the new government led by Saakashvili (active). On the other hand, the analysis of Belarus case study showed that, being the society of Belarus atomised and hampered by the authoritarian government, the organisation of the CSOs had to inevitably follow a more independent and spontaneous path.

This paved the way for the eruption of various dissident groups, isolated and detached from the political parties, organising civil society through a bottom-up movement where singular groups mobilised and influenced other groups through a cascade reaction, reaching a massive scale (active). However, the violent reaction and the extensive repressive means implemented by central authorities have succeeded in deterring, at last, new independent groups to move against the regime, hindering any institutional change of the authoritarian political system (passive). In other words, it seems that both revolutions have revealed a *democratisation* potential, but of two very different kinds. In the former case of Georgia, although the revolution of 2003 did not immediately lead to the institutional reforms of 2011, it paved the way for the modernisation of the state apparatus, improving state institutions such as the judiciary or the police, which are the fundamentals of a functioning democratic form of government, allowing for the democratisation of Georgian institutions that has brought to the hybrid/transitioning status of today. However, although the reforms improved the political system of Georgia towards a liberal-democratic form of government, the larger population is still severely detached and alienated from the central authorities, allowing for the dominant groups' logic to seize power without having to confront a powerful opposition. In Belarus instead, the *democratisation* outcome has been of another kind. In fact, given the extreme violence of the governmental repressive means and the historical isolation of the population from the external Western liberal world, the Belarusian society was forced to organise independently, pushed by the necessity to survive against the regime's violence. Experiencing the violent trauma as a group has activated a sense of peoplehood and trust between the Belarusian citizens, which could represent a strong premise from which to build a democratic form of government. Unfortunately, the perpetual repression of the Belarusian population is not allowing for the actual realisation of a regime change, but still it is important to acknowledge the democratisation potential that a sense of belonging to a specific group of people - not necessarily linked by a national or patriotic feeling - could have activated for Belarusians.

To investigate the rationale behind the two different political outcomes, civil societies' backgrounds were analysed to understand the processes that led to the current state of affairs. Therefore, building from the growing literature that conceives civil society behind normative lenses, the present discussion interpreted its role as an educative space where values and ideas are shared, highlighting the powerful vehicular agency of civil society on the political culture. Logically, to understand the political traditions of both countries, the

institutional, cultural and economic variables of each case study have been analysed. Following an inductive reasoning, the results of the comparison clearly pointed out the massive influence that the history of international relations played in the two post-communist civil societies, being the key driver that shaped the political culture of the two countries. That is why the research has been organised between a first part dedicated to the comparative exercise of the two countries' civil societies at the national level, and a second part that is dedicated to the analysis of **the relations between civil societies and international players**. In fact, the two revolutions moved from two different political contexts that were heavily determined by the peculiar international relations entertained. As a matter of fact, Georgia's successful example of institutional democratisation could be summed up as a result of the cultural, economic and historical proximity that Georgia showed to Western partners, which actively supported the Georgian state transition towards a more democratic form of government. On the other hand, Belarusian economic, cultural and historical proximity with the Russian partner reinforced the authoritarian form of government and actively hampered any sort of regime change, at least until 2015-2020. In both contexts, civil society played a pivotal role in sharing and spreading values, that in the first case mobilised and, in the second case, inhibited, the social capital of Georgia and Belarus towards the two different political outcomes. However, the mobilisation against the fraudulent election of 2020 in Belarus signals the beginning of a potential democratisation process in Belarus, proving that the regime's grip on the Belarusian society is no longer working as before. Therefore, it can be said that a window of opportunity has opened in the Belarusian civil society towards a regime change attracting the European Union attention in the region.

Given the high impact of international relations on the political culture of Belarus and Georgia that framed the role of the two civil societies, and the potential opportunities that the Belarusian events have opened, a further investigation on how to organise the relations between the civil society and international actors was necessary. Veritably, the crucial but controversial **agency of external actors within the internal dynamics of the two civil societies outlined the need for a thorough rethinking of the relations' management between the two actors**. As a matter of fact, the geographical peculiar location of the two borderlands have allowed high exposure to external influence, becoming an essential factor in both transitioning processes after the USSR's dissolution. In fact, even though both countries are ex-Soviet Republics, their experience within the Soviet Union has been totally different. In the Belarusian case, this has produced an historical, cultural and economic attachment to

Russia, while for Georgia, activating the opposite process, pushing the small Caucasian state to look for alternative partners, in particular the European Union and the United States. In fact, the population's attitude towards the international partners was clearly distinct and fully oriented, in the Georgian case, even before the USSR's dissolution happened. Being civil society a space of participation that is in constant contact with the political dimension, it reflected clearly the specular stances of the two countries towards the political international context where they played. As a result, civil society influenced the two specular transitioning processes, playing a determining role as a powerful vehicle of dominant ideologies' affirmation, contributing to the formation of the two current different political systems of Belarus and Georgia. Therefore, since the international political stance of Belarusian civil society is changing after the 2020 mobilisation, the Georgian example was analysed as a model to extrapolate methods and mechanisms to manage the EU and Belarusian civil society relations. In particular, the Georgian model has been analysed in the present dissertation as to represent both the benefits and drawbacks of that particular model, in order to learn successful practices and prevent previous mistakes. Indeed, the successfulness of the model has been critically analysed following the modern definition of a genuine civil society. The definition was specifically meant to indicate the extent to which the larger population was being involved within the civil society and its active participation in the regime change of the Rose Revolution of 2003. The results of the comparison showed clearly that Georgia is a successful case of institutional democratisation but still lacked the capacity to actively reach local communities and Georgian citizens, which remained alienated and detached from the overall political transitioning process. The research has shown that the flaws of Georgia democratisation process were found in the top-down management of Georgia's civil society. Georgian civil society in fact was able to actually act as watchdogs of constitutional liberal democratic features, such as checking the electoral results and calling out the illegitimate incumbent. However, given the top-down management of the Georgian CSOs, they remained severely limited to urban areas and rich educated classes, able to easily acquire Western education and consequently, adopt Western values. As a consequence, when applying the Georgian case study to Belarus, a special attention was given to the formation of Belarusian civil society and its outreach capacity. As demonstrated by the research, in Belarus, the phenomenon is actually the opposite. Given the peculiar isolation that Belarusian civil society underwent at the hands of the authoritarian regime and the tragic atomisation of Belarusians' communities, when confronted with the Covid-19 pandemic, these communities organised independently, parallel to the mismanagement of Lukashenko's regime. On the

occasion of the fraudulent presidential electoral results of August 2020, these various groups of dissidence, formed against the regime during the pandemic, spontaneously activated. Therefore, it was clear that the Belarusian case presented opposite features compared to Georgia: the civil society was organised through a bottom-up management, presenting a higher outreach capacity to larger masses of the population, but it lacked the solid organisational features present in Georgia. Indeed, one stark difference between Georgia and Belarus is the typology of the predominant organisation: NGOs in the former and social movements in the latter.

Therefore, to combine the successful features of both organisations, the present analysis proposed a reform of the European Union framework where both Belarusian and Georgian civil societies are involved, to improve, through the European Union support, the organisation facility of both organisations. In fact, through the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), the European Union decision-makers and the civil societies' members could collaborate to improve the features of their on-the-ground organisations, as they did for Georgia during the Rose Revolution, but taking into account the necessary modifications resulted from the present research. In order to combine the successful aspects of the Georgian and Belarusian case studies, the author conducted an experimental comparison of the EaP CSF with a successful example of civil society mechanism, the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism (CSIPM). The CSIPM was taken as a model for the EaP CSF improvement because it presents a good balance between the successful features of both NGOs and SMs. Indeed, the author carried out an ethnographic research interviewing both NGOs and SMs' candidates to analyse the combination of both civil society organisational models. As resulted from the interviewees' experience, the two types of organisations are assigned in the CSIPM different tasks according to their purpose and strengths. For instance, given NGOs' members' high-skills levels, such as high-education and technical expertise, the NGOs' members are assigned with logistical competences which are fundamental to ensure the *efficiency* of the organisation and the *effective* participation of local communities. On the other hand, the social movements' members, who are directly affected by the political decisions, conduct *representative* and *consultative* roles, participating directly at the decision-making processes, bringing their valued on-field experience and connecting with local communities to ensure the larger outreach of isolated or non-urban areas. The fourth chapter then delineated recommendations for the EaP CSF, derived from the successful example of CSIPM, possibly enhancing the overall organisational capacity. In

particular, the proposed recommendations aim at bringing concrete improvements in the relations between the European Union, Belarusian and Georgian civil societies and local organisations on-the-ground.

In conclusion, recalling that civil society is a space of both passive and active learning and participation, a change of these kind to the EaP CSF could ensure a neutral and positive influence of external actors on the passive-receptive aspect of CSOs, while ensuring to maximise the active-participative potential of CSOs. In this way, the EaP CSF reform could serve as a platform to value the Belarusian civil society democratisation potential and to seize an opportunity for a long-term democratic post-communist transition. Similarly, an enhanced participation of the Georgian CSOs within a mechanism like the Eastern Partnership framework, could improve the outreach capacity and the representativeness of Georgian NGOs at the local, national and international level.

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