Countering autocratization from the outside: evidence from Africa

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Democratization* on March 9th 2026, available at https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2026.2640037 as:

Corda, Tiziana, and Andrea Cassani. 2026. Countering autocratization from the outside: evidence from Africa, *Democratization*, online first. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2026.2640037

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Abstract: With a focus on the autocratization episodes that occurred in Africa during the 2000-2023 period, this article examines how effectively external actors help constrain the unfolding of autocratization. While the recent literature has primarily highlighted how domestic actors can resist autocratization, the role of external actors should not be overlooked, especially in a region such as Africa characterized by a peculiar high number and variety of external interventions over time. Accordingly, we focus on two main strategies of external protection of democracy – namely, democracy sanctions and democracy aid – and discuss how their combined employment could trap autocratizing elites in between two opposite pressures. From above, as sanctions restrict elites' access to revenue; and from below, as increased external democracy assistance empowers local democratic actors. To investigate empirically whether and how democracy sanctions and democracy aid interact with each other in countering autocratization, we apply regression methods and conduct a series of sensitivity analyses to confirm the validity of our results. Our findings show that such a combination of tools is an effective way in which external actors can help counter autocratization from abroad, provided that they are genuinely committed to accompany sanctions with substantial aid increases.

Keywords: Africa; autocratization; sanctions; democracy aid; resistance.

Introduction

While many regions around the world are experiencing a surge of autocratization attempts, their successful completion is not an inevitable outcome. A growing body of literature shows that autocratization can indeed be resisted, halted and even reversed.[1] While this strand of research has thus far focused predominantly on internal actors and factors – such as legislatures, courts, electoral management bodies and mass mobilization – this article investigates the role that external actors can play in countering autocratization.

The "external dimension of resistance" has only recently received scholarly attention.[2] Within the framework of international democracy promotion policies, in particular, Leininger distinguishes between democracy *support*, which aims at furthering democratization, and democracy *protection*, which seeks to counter autocratization. Democracy protection, in turn,

can be further distinguished in strategies to *prevent* the onset of autocratization and strategies to *respond* to an autocratization attempt. The latter represents the focus of our research. More specifically, we investigate the main external strategies to respond to an ongoing process of autocratization from the outside, which range from coercive means such as sanctions against autocratizing élites to delivering aid to enhance local pro-democracy actors and institutions, and ask: what are the most effective strategies to counter autocratization from the outside, if any?

To address this question, we focus on Africa and on the strategies enacted with the goal of defending democracy in African countries by extra-regional foreign governments such as OECD countries and inter-governmental organizations such as the UN and the EU. Africa is one of the world regions most severely hit by the contemporary global trend of autocratization. However, during the past two decades, this continent has also offered several examples in which autocratization attempts met resistance and, sometimes, eventually failed or got reversed.[3] Additionally, the African context looks particularly apt for an investigation of external initiatives to counter autocratization, given the high number and variety of external interventions that this region has experienced over time.[4]

From a theoretical viewpoint, we bridge the comparative politics literature on (predominantly domestic) resistance to autocratization with the literature on sanctions and aid,[5] which we reframe as tools through which foreign governments and inter-governmental organizations can help fight autocratization and thus "join" the resistance front. Specifically, we revisit the literature on sanctions and aid and the concerns it raises about their effectiveness as democracy promotion strategies,[6] and we argue that, rather than alternative strategies to be implemented independently from each other, sanctions and aid could represent parts of a more comprehensive strategy based on a mix of coercive and non-coercive initiatives. By combining sanctions and aid, in particular, external actors could, on the one hand, weaken the autocratizing

ruling elite of a country by restricting access to revenues and, on the other hand, empower local pro-democracy actors.

We proceed as follows. After an overview on autocratization in contemporary Africa, we review the literature on external democracy promotion, develop our theoretical framework on the opportunities and strategies that external actors have to counter autocratization from the outside, and derive from this discussion a series of hypotheses regarding the effectiveness of democracy sanctions, democracy aid, and their interaction. Next, we illustrate the research design and test our hypotheses using regressions on a sample of autocratization episodes occurred in Africa throughout the 2000-2023 period. The results of our statistical analysis show that, while democracy sanctions and democracy aid do not appear to significantly obstruct the unfolding of autocratization when considered independently, the combined employment of these strategies is indeed associated with autocratization slowdowns and reversals, provided that external actors commit to substantial democracy aid investment. We then focus on the cases of Madagascar and Malawi to illustrate the mechanism at work. Finally, in the Conclusion, we discuss the implications of our findings for the global prospects of resisting autocratization.

Autocratization in contemporary Africa

Africa's political landscape has changed dramatically during the past decades. After years of post-colonial one-man and one-party authoritarianism and frequent military takeovers, the last part of the twentieth century saw a majority of African countries transitioning to multiparty electoral politics, which was initially welcomed as the beginning of a new era for the continent, albeit in some cases change was only cosmetic.[7] Yet Africa has not been spared by the global trend in autocratization that has been unfolding since the beginning of the twenty-first century.[8]

With a focus on the past three decades (1991-2023), and from an aggregate perspective, Figure 1 displays yearly changes in the continent's average level of democracy, as well as in its share of countries experiencing a process of autocratization. As we can see, the overall democratic progress Africa has experienced since the early 1990s remains remarkable. However, the solid line in Figure 1 also illustrates that the diffusion of democracy in Africa has slowed down starting approximately from the mid-2000s and then regressed since the mid-2010s. Throughout about the same period, and in an even more vivid way, Figure 1's columns show that the share of African countries undergoing autocratization has grown remarkably.

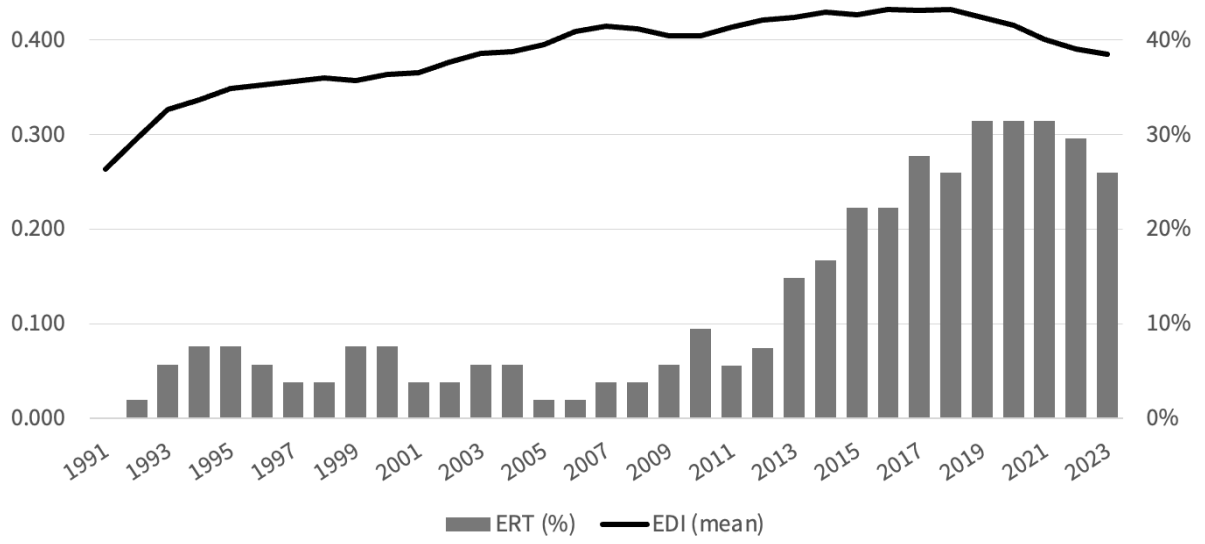

Figure 1. Democratic trends in Africa

Notes: Authors' own elaboration. The figure covers all 54 African countries from 1991 to 2023. The solid line (left-side vertical axis) tracks the average level of democracy for countries in the region, based on the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) from the Varieties of Democracy dataset (V-Dem). The columns (left-side vertical axis) measure the percentage of countries experiencing autocratization according to the Autocratization Episode indicator from the Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset (ERT).

The fact that Africa is among the world regions most severely hit by the contemporary autocratization trend is not surprising, if we consider that autocratization does not happen

randomly and that some democracies are more vulnerable than others.[9] Many countries in the African continent indeed display one or (often) more of the pre-conditions that scholars have identified as factors threatening the survival of democracy and increasing the likelihood of autocratization, such as state fragility, state capture/neo-patrimonialism, poverty, and ethnic cleavages.[10]

A closer look at the empirical evidence summarized in Figure 1, moreover, highlights a few key points that help get a better understanding of the autocratization trend that the African continent is experiencing. First, if we examine democracy diffusion trends across Africa's subregions, as reported in Figure 2, some geographical variations can be identified. While the graph records democratic regressions in all subregions, we can notice that in Southern and Eastern Africa this trend started around the mid-2000s and proceeded in a relatively slow and progressive way, whereas the declines that Northern and Western Africa experienced are more recent – in the wake of the so-called "Arab spring" and in the late 2010s, respectively – and steeper.

Second, differences also exist in the modalities through which autocratization has unfolded in the African continent. Arriola and colleagues identify the "weaponization of the law" as a frequent strategy through which African elected leaders such as Kenya's Kenyatta and Zambia's Lungu resorted to "incremental and piecemeal legal initiatives to weaken the protection of civil and political rights".[11] Several countries in the continent have also experienced the re-emergence of new forms of personal rule through the manipulation of presidential term limits, which paves the way for "de facto" life presidencies without suppressing elections.[12] Moreover, the menu of autocratization in contemporary Africa also includes the more 'traditional' military takeovers, which have resurfaced with increased frequency during the past few years especially in the Sahelian region and, differently from the

above-mentioned autocratization strategies, tear up all pretence of democracy, at least temporarily.[13]

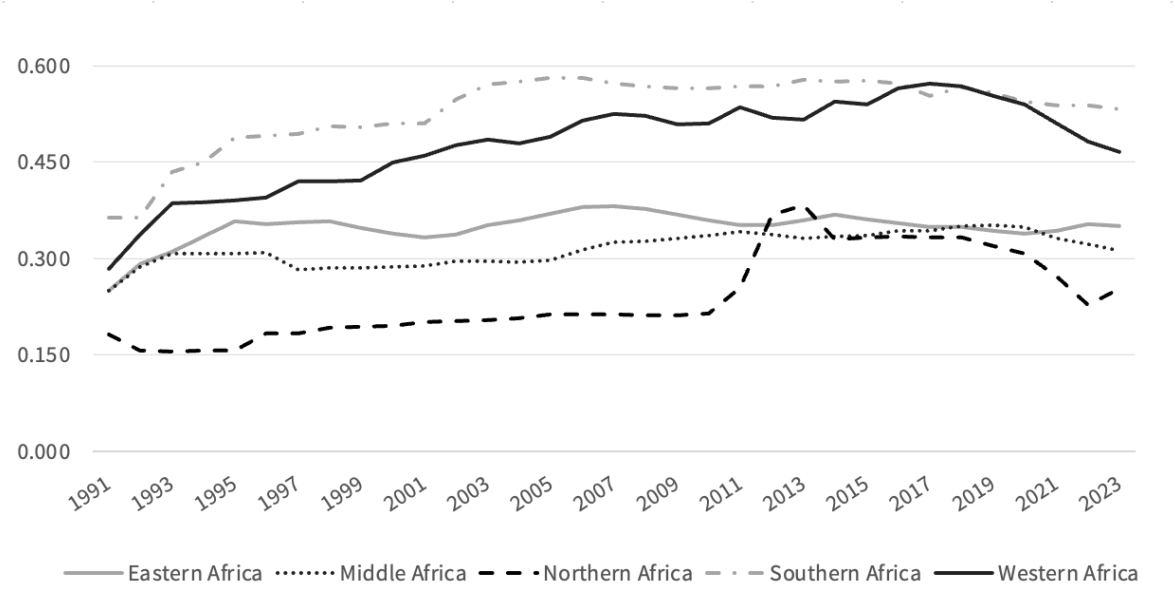

Figure 2. Subregional trends

Notes: Authors' own elaboration. The figure covers all 54 African countries from 1991 to 2023. Each line tracks the average level of democracy in a specific subregion, based on the V-Dem's EDI.

Countering autocratization from outside

While autocratization is an empirically relevant phenomenon of our epoch, both in Africa and in other world regions, we should refrain from considering the successful completion of autocratization processes as an inevitable outcome. A fast-growing body of comparative politics literature highlights that contemporary autocratization attempts can be resisted, pointing to a relatively broad range of actors who can fight them back, each with its own strategies.[14] For the most part, this literature has highlighted the role of domestic legislatures, courts, electoral management bodies and mass mobilization. On the contrary, the "external dimension of resistance" – that is, whether and how external actors such as governments of

other countries and international organizations could contribute to countering the process of autocratization that a given country is experiencing – has thus far received comparatively less attention in this relatively recent debate.[15] Yet several reasons suggest the need to recognize external agents as actors that could "join" the resistance front and complement (even if hardly substitute) domestic efforts to halt contemporary processes of autocratization.

First, the influence of external state actors is well documented in the literature on twenty-century processes of democratization and autocratization.[16] As much as external actors have historically influenced both democratization and autocratization, for better or for worse, the effectiveness of their strategies should be evaluated even in the contemporary world. In this regard, research has thus far mainly focused on external actors' ability to support (i.e., trigger, facilitate, or further) democratization abroad and, vice versa, how they could foster authoritarian resilience, whereas the effectiveness of international pro-democracy actors in defending democracy when it is at risk has only lately attracted scholarly attention.[17]

Second, investigating the external dimension of resistance against autocratization is all the more salient when attention focuses on countries characterized by less than fully democratic political regimes, as in the case of several African countries. As Arriola and colleagues pointed out, Africa offers several examples in which individual citizens, civil society groups and political parties mobilized for democracy and against autocratization, including Burkina Faso's *Balai Citoyen* and Senegal's *Y'en a marre* social movements against President Compaore's and President Wade's attempts to extend their times in office, respectively.[18] However, relatively weak and yet-to-be-consolidated democratic institutions (e.g., legislatures, constitutional courts, electoral management bodies, etc.) have often proved ineffective constraints to would-be autocrats' attempts to either take, expand or extend power, and thus offer little support to pro-democracy domestic actors that try to resist autocratization. In similar

contexts, countering autocratization *from the outside* can prove essential to complement similar such efforts *from within*.

Third, external actors can counter autocratization through a plurality of approaches, whose effectiveness should not be taken for granted. Below, we identify and discuss two main strategies that external actors can adopt to respond to an autocratization attempt, namely, democracy-related sanctions and democracy aid. These strategies differ in coerciveness and are among the most widely employed by external actors such as OECD countries, the European Union and the UN across the African continent over the past decades. In fact, when it comes to these two types of external pro-democracy interventions, Africa stands out as the most targeted region in the whole world. As shown in Table 1, 58% of all sanctions imposed with a goal related to democracy between 1990 and 2018 had an African target, whereas 37% of all external aid flows disbursed globally between 2002 and 2023 to support democratic actors and institutions were directed towards African recipients. Against this backdrop, Africa emerges as the most appropriate region for investigating the effects of external initiatives in countering autocratization.

Table 1. External pro-democracy interventions, by target regions

Regions of intervention	**Democracy sanctions**	**Democracy aid**
Europe	18 (10%)	9,197 (13%)
Asia	27 (15%)	23,644 (34%)
America	25 (14%)	10,383 (15%)
Africa	**104 (58%)**	**25,804 (37%)**
Oceania	6 (3%)	1,212 (2%)

Notes: Authors' own elaboration. *Democracy sanctions* refer to those sanctions that International Sanctions Termination dataset (1990-2018 aggregates) classifies as having democracy-related aims. *Democracy aid* (OECD, 2002-2023 aggregates) refers to democracy-related Creditor Reporting System codes 15150, 15151, 15152, 15153, 15160 (see more in the Research design section below), disbursed by all donors, reported in constant 2022 USD million dollars. Percentages refer to regional distributions.

Sanction-based coercive policies

Since the 1990s, major international actors such as OECD states, the European Union and (less frequently) the UN, have imposed so-called "democracy sanctions", namely, sanctions against governments responsible for democratic norms violations – such as abuses against political dissidents, electoral misconduct, coups d'état, and manipulations of executive term limits – "to induce the target to respect democratic rules".[19] Sanctions operate through a coercive logic that involves the denial of a product, a service, or a privilege and, as such, can take the form of asset freezes, travel bans, suspension or withdrawal of financial and economic assistance, and sectoral restrictions.

When applied to an autocratizing regime, sanctions can weaken the incumbent government in multiple ways. First and foremost, sanctions aim to restrict the targeted regime's access to crucial financial and political resources. Relatedly, sanctions represent a strategy through which external actors explicitly choose to withdraw from the international network of the autocratizing regime and, in so doing, they try to delegitimize it both in the eyes of the rest of the international community and domestically, encouraging protests against the targeted governments.[20] As such, sanctions work their effects by exerting top-down constraints directly on the autocratizing elites, but also indirectly through bottom-up pressure, by motivating citizens to mobilize against them.

In spite of this relatively straightforward logic, however, sanctions are not always successful, as confirmed by the mixed results offered by the literature.[21] One key limitation refers to the fact that, while sanctions can effectively weaken the targeted regime, such measures are not meant to actively empower – that is, to endow with additional assets – domestic pro-democracy actors.[22] Moreover, sanctions' delegitimizing intent can at times backfire, as they could be perceived (or portrayed by the targeted governments) as punitive measures imposed by foreign actors who are illegitimately interfering in the country's domestic

affairs. This in turn can trigger unintended "rally round the flag" effects, which ultimately end up bolstering rather than undermining the autocratizing government's domestic standing.[23] Such unintended effects are also fuelled by the selective application of democracy sanctions, whereby not all autocratizing regimes are equally targeted, thus creating the perception that democratic powers who impose them act inconsistently and with double standards.[24]

Aid-based non-coercive policies

External actors can also counter autocratization through non-coercive means, particularly through so-called democracy aid (or assistance). To clarify, democracy aid refers to a specific subtype of foreign aid consisting of economic flows provided by external actors such as OECD countries and EU institutions to support the functioning of democratic institutions in other countries. Hence, democracy aid follows a different logic than other subtypes of foreign aid, such as economic and financial development assistance, which can only indirectly promote democratization through conditionality, that is, by attaching political reform requirements to the provision of aid.

While democracy assistance has traditionally been analysed within the framework of democracy support, and thus concerning its effectiveness in *advancing* and *consolidating* democracy,[25] it can also be conceived as an instrument for *countering* autocratization. Following the onset of autocratization in a country, in particular, external actors can increase the provision of democracy assistance to strengthen from abroad those local institutions and actors that could contrast autocratization from within, such as electoral management bodies, parliaments, political parties, independent media, and civil society organizations.

As tools to counter autocratization from the outside, democracy assistance and democracy sanctions differ considerably from each other. Similarly to sanctions, democratic assistance aims to influence resource distribution within an autocratizing country. However,

while democracy sanctions constrain resource access for the autocratizing elite in the attempt to weaken it, democracy assistance is meant to provide additional resources to, and enhance the operational capacity of, those actors and institutions that could oppose autocratization. Because of this non-coercive logic, moreover, democracy assistance is less likely than sanctions to be perceived as a punitive and illegitimate form of external interference.[26]

Despite these differences, however, even the effectiveness of democracy assistance remains disputed.[27] As much as sanctions can weaken the autocratizing ruling elites but fail to empower those who can oppose them, democracy assistance can empower some potential domestic resistors but by itself falls short of directly weakening the autocratizing elites. Moreover, not all democracy aid is directly delivered to those pro-democracy institutions and actors that it is meant to empower. Some democracy aid is channelled through the governments of the recipient countries and thus may end up strengthening the autocratizing elite rather than the resistance front.

Can external actors counter autocratization? And how? Hypotheses

The preceding discussion has identified democracy sanctions and democracy aid as two main tools through which foreign governments and inter-governmental organizations can contribute to countering ongoing processes of autocratization. At the same time, several caveats have been highlighted concerning the effectiveness of both tools. To assess whether these strategies achieve their intended effects and under which conditions they are most effective, we proceed in two steps.

We start by considering democracy sanctions and democracy aid as distinct tools that can be employed to counter an ongoing autocratization process, in line with most of the relevant literature.[28] A first set of hypotheses thus addresses how, respectively, the imposition of democracy sanctions on an autocratizing government and an increase in democracy aid toward

domestic democratic institutions may independently influence an ongoing autocratization process.

H1: During autocratization, imposing democracy sanctions on a country's autocratizing government is associated with reversals in the autocratization process.

H2: During autocratization, increasing assistance to domestic democratic institutions and actors is associated with reversals in the autocratization process.

Next, in light of the mixed evidence from the literature on sanctions and aid as instruments of democracy promotion, we reconsider the limitations of these instruments and the ways in which these could be overcome.[29] As previously discussed, when applied in isolation, sanctions and aid each address only part of the problem. On the one hand, sanctions may constrain elite resources but fail to empower pro-democracy domestic actors and institutions and even risk backlash effects. On the other hand, democracy assistance can effectively support local democratic actors and institutions, but often lacks the force to shift the domestic balance of power between autocratizers and resistors by itself. The respective limitations of these instruments underscore the need for a more integrated approach. Indeed, we argue, democracy sanctions and democracy assistance should not necessarily be viewed as alternative strategies. Instead, they can be thought of as complementary tools that can be deployed jointly as parts of a broader and possibly more effective comprehensive strategy to counter autocratization from the outside through a mix of coercive and non-coercive logics.

Sanctions scholars have long discussed how sanctions are hardly ever used in isolation, and rather often come with companion policies such as diplomatic action or military force.[30] However, the returns of coupling sanctions imposition with democracy aid have only recently been investigated, with a focus on democracy support.[31] Shifting attention from democracy support to democracy protection and specifically to the countering of an ongoing process of autocratization, we argue that, by both imposing sanctions and increasing democracy

assistance, foreign governments and inter-governmental organizations could enact a combined approach against autocratization that creates dual pressure. On the one hand, sanctions weaken the autocratizing elites through top-down constrains in the form of economic restrictions. On the other hand, expanding democracy assistance generates additional bottom-up pressure through the empowerment of domestic pro-democracy actors and institutions.[32]

Based on the above reasoning, therefore, democracy sanctions' and democracy assistance's effectiveness in countering autocratization should be examined not only by looking at their respective effects independently, but also by paying attention to how these two otherwise different policies could interact with each other. Specifically, we can expect that responding to autocratization through a combination of coercion against authoritarian-leaning rulers (democracy sanctions) and empowerment of pro-democracy local actors and institutions (democracy aid) can enhance the overall effectiveness of these strategies. Accordingly, the third hypothesis that can be derived from the above reasoning and that we aim to investigate in our empirical analysis, is that:

H3: During autocratization, a combination of democracy sanctions on the autocratizing government of a country and increases in assistance to domestic democratic institutions and actors is associated with reversals in the autocratization process.

The idea that sanctions and democracy assistance interact with each other in countering autocratization demands paying further attention to the various specific scenarios that can result from this interaction. In practice, we also need to ask what happens when external actors choose not to intervene against autocratization through a combination of sanctions on governments and increased assistance to local pro-democracy actors and institutions. For instance, we should consider the implications of external actors' decision to respond to a democratic violation by imposing sanctions on the government responsible of such violation either without

concurrently increasing democracy assistance or, even more critically, in combination with a reduction or withdrawal of such flows.

Building on neighbouring literatures documenting the negative human rights implications of sanctions and aid suspensions for the populations of targeted countries, we may expect a similar scenario to tilt the previously described dual pressure mechanism, potentially even leading to detrimental effects.[33] Indeed, cutting democracy assistance means, from a practical viewpoint, depriving domestic pro-democracy actors and institutions of the resources necessary to contrast autocratization and, from a symbolic viewpoint, "leaving them alone". As a result, rather than hindering autocratization, such an approach may inadvertently let it continue. These considerations lead us to formulate the following additional hypothesis to be assessed in the empirical analysis:

H4: During autocratization, the imposition of sanctions coupled with reductions in democracy assistance is associated with the continuation of autocratization.

Research design

To investigate empirically the effectiveness of the above-discussed external strategies to counter autocratization and test the hypothesised effects, we rest on regression analysis and a sample of African autocratizing countries observed in the 2000-2023 period. In this section, we discuss how we identify autocratization episodes, record the unfolding of autocratization in a country, measure the two main independent variables, and further specify our models.

Measuring autocratization: case selection and dependent variable

Considering that both the conceptualization and the measurement of autocratization are surrounded by considerable scholarly disagreement, we spell out and justify the criteria that we followed for the case selection and the measurement of our dependent variable.[34] Concerning

case selection, we select a case of autocratization if, between 2000 and 2023, an African country classified either as "free" or as "partly free" by Freedom House has experienced an autocratization attempt according to the V-Dem's Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset (ERT).[35]

ERT has the advantage of identifying not only "successful" cases of autocratization, but a broader set of autocratization attempts, which is consistent with the focus of this research on countering autocratization. Moreover, we only consider "free" and "partly free" countries because our theoretical discussion refers to autocratization attempts occurring in countries with either democratic or at least semi-democratic (or hybrid) regimes.[36] Considering the advantage of working on a relatively small number of cases, moreover, we validated all the autocratization cases fulfilling the above criteria using other datasets more specifically focused on African politics and political institutions, such as the Africa Executive Term Limits dataset and the Africa Leadership Change dataset, as well as other secondary sources, such as Freedom House's country reports, the Incumbent Takeovers Data, the Cline Center Coup d'Etat project, and the Varieties of Political Regimes reports.[37]

The above-described criteria lead us to identify 29 autocratization episodes occurred in Africa between 2000 and 2023, in countries such as Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Republic of the Congo, Senegal, Tanzania, Tunisia, and Zambia. The autocratization episodes that we recorded include attempted – yet not necessarily successful – cases of manipulation of constitutional rules, election rigging, irregular leadership changes, and restrictions to civil political liberties. The recorded episodes also differ in their duration, and some countries experienced more than one autocratization episode throughout the observed period. Our dataset includes a total of 239 autocratization country-years.

Concerning the operationalization of our dependent variable, *Autocratization*, we measure changes in the "quantity" (or level) of autocratization that an autocratizing country progressively experiences, consistently with evidence that contemporary autocratization processes tend to unfold in gradual and incremental ways.[38] Specifically, we rely on the V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI),[39] which for ease of interpretation we reverse so that higher values indicate higher levels of autocracy, simply defined as the opposite of democracy, in line with the conceptualization of autocratization as the opposite of democratization.[40]

Using the reversed EDI, for each country-year of the autocratization cases meeting our previously described selection criteria, we calculate the yearly change in a country's level of autocracy. When the yearly change is null (i.e., equal to zero), it means that the level of autocracy remains unchanged and that autocratization has neither advanced nor receded; when it is positive, it means autocratization is progressing; when it is negative, it means the level of autocracy is lower than the previous year and that autocratization is reversing. As this research investigates external actors' ability to counter autocratization, the latter scenario (i.e., the reversal of autocratization) is the one we are specifically interested in.

Independent variables

To operationalize extra-regional actors' democracy sanctions, we create variable *Democracy sanctions*, using data from the International Sanctions Termination (IST) dataset,[41] which we update for the years 2018-2023 relying on public sources, as documented in the Appendix (Table A1). This variable dichotomously codes if sanctions specifically aiming at inducing the target to respect democratic norms (goal "Democracy Support" in the IST dataset) are imposed by individual governments or inter-governmental organizations such as OECD states, EU institutions and the UN against a given autocratizing African regime in a given year.

To operationalize democracy assistance, in turn, we create variable *Democracy aid*. For each autocratization year, it calculates the yearly change of democracy assistance in terms of logged per capita values that OECD countries and EU institutions disburse towards an autocratizing country. Measuring the difference in the amount of aid disbursed in two consecutive years, instead of yearly absolute levels, allows us to capture the very reaction of external actors to autocratization over time, consistently with our theory and hypotheses.

Moreover, because of our theoretical interest in funds specifically aiming at strengthening local pro-democracy institutions and actors who can counter the unfolding autocratization, following Gafuri we select only flows whose aim falls within the OECD's Crediting Reporting System (CRS) purpose codes that approximate this mechanism, namely: 15150 Democratic Participation & Civil Society, 15151 Elections, 15152 Legislatures and Political Parties, 15153 Media and Free Flow of Information, and 15160 Human Rights.[42] While this purpose-oriented operationalization does not entirely rule out the risk of recording democracy aid flows that are at least in part captured by autocratizing governments and their allies, it remains the most valid available strategy to measure aid earmarked specifically for democratic purposes. Below, we discuss other ways in which we try to address this risk further.

Control variables

Our regression models include both year and case fixed effects to account for time-specific factors common to all African countries in given years, hardly observable factors specific to each autocratization case, and other case-specific time-invariant (or nearly invariant) factors. Besides fixed effects, we consider other potential confounders that can influence the unfolding of autocratization itself as well as external actors' ability or willingness to intervene. Specifically, we include the following control variables that vary both across countries and over time and relate to the international and domestic contexts (see also Appendix's Table A1).

Starting from the international context, while our attention is mainly focused on extra-regional actors such as OECD countries, EU institutions and the United Nations, we use two variables to account for the fact that also regional organizations and neighbours can at times exert pro-democracy pressure.[43]

The first one concerns the African Union (AU). Although the AU is not endowed with the uniquely broad set of democratic enforcement tools that the European Union can use in its own member countries, it is often regarded as one of the most advanced regional organizations in terms of adopting legal instruments to safeguard "good governance".[44] The AU's primary such instrument rests in the ability to suspend a state's membership, although their effectiveness remains limited, as suspensions only follow blatant disruptions of constitutional order, such as military or rebel takeovers. More subtle but frequent autocratization tactics, such as electoral manipulation and term limit extensions, generally fall outside its enforcement mandate.[45] Accordingly, we create variable *Regional suspension* that, based on our updated IST dataset, codes dichotomously the years in which an autocratizing regime is suspended from the African Union for unconstitutional changes of government.

A second regional variable records the level of democracy in the sub-region of each autocratizing country. This variable helps account for, on the one hand, the existence of processes of diffusion and learning in which principles of democratic governance and defence circulate in a more or less deliberate way among regional neighbours, and, on the other hand, the potential role of neighbouring autocratic regimes in inspiring autocratization attempts.[46] Accordingly, based on Africa's sub-regional clusters (Eastern, Middle, Norther, Southern, Western), variable *Regional democracy diffusion* measures the average democratic level of a country's sub-regional neighbours, using the V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index.

We also account for the external support that autocratizing governments may obtain or continue to receive from autocratic countries that do not condition their ties on the respect of

democratic principles. Accordingly, we create variable *Autocratic ties*, which measures the potential economic support African autocratizing regimes may receive from autocratic global or middle powers such as China, Russia, Türkiye, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates. We focus on these countries as those who, among autocratic powers, exert the most influence in Africa.[47] Using the Foreign Bilateral Influence Capacity dataset,[48] we calculate the weight of bilateral trade between each African autocratizing country and these autocratic powers as a share of the former's GDP.

Finally, we consider the following domestic features of an autocratizing regime. *GDP growth*, which calculates the percentage growth of a country's GDP (World Bank), is a proxy for the domestic population's tolerance of autocratization when it unfolds at times of economic growth. *Clientelism* is instead a variable sourced from V-Dem (indicator "v2xnp_client") to measure the pervasiveness of the autocratizing ruling elites' clientelist network and thus the extent to which they can count on local support during an autocratization attempt and capture external aid flows supposedly aimed at strengthening democratic institutions. In turn, *Pro-democracy mobilization*, similarly sourced from V-Dem (indicator "v2cademmob"), records the frequency and scale of citizens' pro-democracy mobilization events and thus the extent of grass-root opposition to autocratization in a country undergoing such a process.

Model

As a reminder, with a focus on Africa and the 2000-2023 period, we use statistical regressions to estimate the effectiveness of democracy sanctions and democracy assistance in countering the unfolding of autocratization in countries that are already experiencing autocratization. In light of the operational rules previously described, these external strategies can be considered to effectively counter the unfolding of autocratization if the corresponding independent variables have a negative effect on the dependent variable, that is, on the quantity of

autocratization that a country progressively experiences throughout the process of autocratization.

To test our first and second hypotheses, we include both main independent variables, namely, *Democracy sanctions* and *Democracy aid,* in the same regression model. This allows us to estimate the effect of each strategy net of the other (i.e., while holding the other constant). To examine the actual performance of the interactive mechanisms anticipated in our third and fourth hypotheses, in turn, in subsequent regression models we include an interaction term multiplying variables *Democracy sanctions* and *Democracy aid*.

The analysis is conducted using OLS regression with robust standard errors clustered at the case level and with case and time fixed effects. To ensure temporal precedence with regard to the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable, we lag all independent variables by one year. However, autocratization onset years are excluded from the models to address concerns that, regarding observations related to onset years, the lagged independent variables would capture more the inability of external actors to prevent autocratization rather than their (in)ability to counter it.

Robustness checks

To investigate the robustness of our results, we also conduct a series of sensitivity analyses. First, despite the inclusion of several control variables and fixed effects and the lagging of our independent variables, endogeneity remains a concern, especially in the case of sanction imposition. We thus employ a matching approach, specifically entropy balancing, and then also estimate an endogenous treatment effects model.[49]

With entropy balancing, we address the concern that sanctioned countries remain systematically different from unsanctioned countries even after accounting for key control variables, by reweighing observations across treatment (sanctioned) and control (unsanctioned)

countries to achieve covariate balance between such groups. With the endogenous treatment effect model, instead, we include a selection equation (Y=sanctions incidence) containing covariates that can influence sanctions imposition to jointly model the probability of sanctions assignment and the outcome process. A more detailed discussion of how we performed these robustness checks is available in the Appendix's Table A2 and A3.

Second, we check if our results are confirmed also on a broader sample of cases, by replicating the analysis on a sample that includes also autocratization episodes that occurred in African countries classified as "not free" by Freedom House even before the onset of autocratization, such as Chad, Egypt, and Sudan.

Third, we remove the case fixed effects to control for four specific case-invariant variables that can influence the mechanism under examination (see also Appendix's Table A1). *Ethnic fractionalization*,[50] can influence the ability of local resistors to coalesce against the autocratizing elite. *Natural resource wealth*, in turn, may affect the autocratizing elite's ability to defy external economic pressure. We measure it by dichotomously coding whether more than 25% of a country's total exports derive from non-renewable natural resources such as oil, minerals, and metals, following the International Monetary Fund's definition. *Pre-onset aid* is the amount of democratic aid received the year before the autocratization onset and accounts for the potential influence that external assistance prior to autocratization could have on the unfolding of the autocratization episode itself and on the possibility to further expand external assistance in the subsequent years. Using another dichotomous *British colony* variable, we also control for a country's colonial past on its political development.

Fourth, we conduct a bootstrap analysis. Assessing the sensitivity of our results to individual cases is important, considering that the combination of democracy sanctions and democracy aid (i.e., the dual strategy of countering autocratization whose effectiveness we want to assess) was applied in about 40% of them. Finally, in the Appendix, we include other

replications of the analysis using the EUSANCT dataset, which codes both imposed and threatened sanctions, although for a shorter period and a more limited number of senders.[51]

When and how democracy sanctions and assistance counter autocratization: findings from Africa

To investigate the effectiveness of the previously described external strategies in countering autocratization, and test our hypotheses, Table 2 displays the main outputs of the regression analysis. The first four models assess the independent effects of the two main external strategies (i.e., democracy sanctions and democracy assistance), first alone (M1), then incorporating domestic-level controls (M2), other external factors (M3), and domestic and external controls together (M4). The fifth model (M5) introduces the interaction between our main external strategies, making it our full reference model.

The results from the first four models indicate that, overall, neither of the two primary external strategies – democracy sanctions and democracy assistance – can significantly counter autocratization in the African continent when considered independently. This finding disconfirms H1 and H2 but is overall consistent with the ambivalent results offered by previous research on external democracy promotion. The weak relationship between democracy assistance and democracy consolidation in sub-Saharan countries emerges, for instance, in Gafuri's work, while sanctions' mixed historical record is well documented in Peez.[52]

Table 2. Regression table

DV: Autocratization	(M1)	(M2)	(M3)	(M4)	(M5)
Democracy aid$_{(t-1)}$	-0.010	-0.010	-0.009	-0.009	-0.000
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.005)
Democracy sanctions$_{(t-1)}$	0.006	0.020	0.001	0.013	0.013
	(0.027)	(0.022)	(0.033)	(0.030)	(0.025)
Dem. aid × dem. sanctions$_{(t-1)}$					-0.117***
					(0.026)
Regional suspensions$_{(t-1)}$		-0.044		-0.037	-0.042
		(0.043)		(0.046)	(0.040)
Regional democracy diffusion$_{(t-1)}$		-0.639***		-0.711***	-0.470*
		(0.209)		(0.249)	(0.251)
Autocratic ties$_{(t-1)}$		0.001		0.000	0.001
		(0.002)		(0.003)	(0.002)
Clientelism$_{(t-1)}$			0.108	0.109	0.021
			(0.119)	(0.136)	(0.111)
GDP growth$_{(t-1)}$			0.000	0.000	0.002
			(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Pro-democracy mobilization$_{(t-1)}$			0.013	0.014	0.018
			(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Pre-onset aid					
British colony					
Natural resource wealth					
Ethnic fractionalization					
Constant	0.017***	0.290***	-0.054	0.260**	0.195*
	(0.004)	(0.102)	(0.070)	(0.094)	(0.099)
Observations	211	211	211	211	211
R-squared	0.185	0.215	0.202	0.231	0.352
Case-FEs	✓ (29)	✓ (29)	✓ (29)	✓ (29)	✓ (29)
Year-FEs	✓ (20)	✓ (20)	✓ (20)	✓ (20)	✓ (20)

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10. Robust standard error estimates clustered by case in parentheses. M1-M4 enter control variables stepwise (none; external; domestic; external and domestic factors). M5 introduces the interaction term.

By introducing an interaction term between sanctions and aid, in turn, Model M5 offers a first test of H3, positing that sanctions and aid can help counter autocratization when they are considered in combination. The analysis reported in Model M5 seems to support our intuition regarding their combined effect, as the interaction between *Democracy sanctions* and *Democracy assistance* is statistically significant and negative in sign, as suggested by H3.[53]

To illustrate the substantive implications of this interaction, and to provide a more thorough assessment of the hypothesised effect, Figure 3 draws on this model (M5) to present the predicted effects sanctions and aid have on autocratization when they are implemented jointly. Specifically, the black solid line (and the corresponding light-shaded confidence interval area) represents the impact of varying levels of democracy assistance when democracy sanctions are present. The downward slope of the line shows the constraining effect that the combination of democracy sanctions and democracy assistance can have on autocratization, thus providing empirical support to H3. More specifically, focusing on the right-side of the graph (after the 0 in the horizontal axis), Figure 3 shows that coupling sanctions with increases in democracy assistance is associated with negative values in our autocratization measure, meaning that autocratization in the targeted country tends to recede. Importantly, the graph clarifies that this effect is statistically significant only when external actors increase democracy assistance in sizeable ways, that is, by more than 0.5 logged per capita value, roughly a 65% yearly increase.

Conversely, when sanctions are applied but the level of democracy assistance either remains unchanged (i.e., equal to zero in our variable recording changes in democracy assistance) or experiences only minor increments, the constraining effect on autocratization is either null or not statistically significant. The same holds true when, vice versa, external actors choose to counter autocratization only through democracy assistance and without imposing sanctions to the autocratizing elite, as shown in Figure 4. In particular, the graph shows that a one-unit increase in democracy aid has a statistically significant negative effect on autocratization (i.e., autocratization recedes) only when sanctions are concurrently imposed, in line with what we discussed concerning Figure 3. In the absence of sanctions, the effect is null.

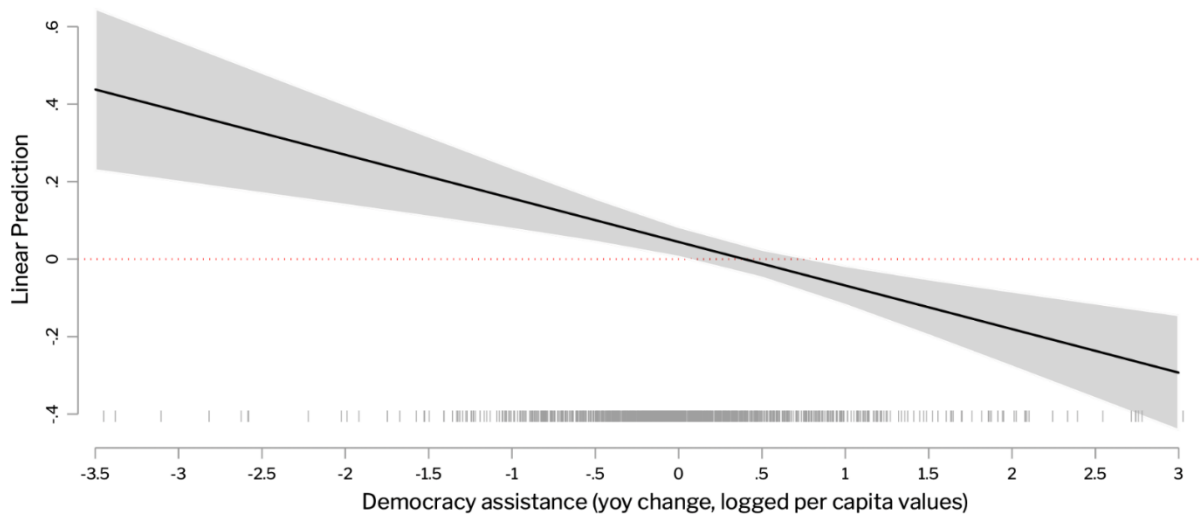

Figure 3. Interaction plot of extra-regional economic sanctions' and democracy assistance's effects on autocratization levels

Notes: The black line and shaded area (95% CIs) are estimated on M5 (Table 2) when *Democracy sanctions* are present. The barcode plot along the horizontal axis represents the distribution of *Democracy assistance*'s values.

Figure 4. Average marginal effects of a one-unit increase in democracy assistance

Notes: Estimated on M5 (Table 2), without sanctions (left-side) and with sanctions (right-side). 95% CIs displayed.

Shifting attention to the left side of Figure 3, the pattern of the solid line offers empirical support also to our fourth hypothesis. That is, for values lower than zero in our democracy assistance variable, imposing sanctions is associated with positive values in our autocratization measure. From a substantive viewpoint, the analysis thus suggests that imposing sanctions and concurrently reducing democracy assistance tends to have counterproductive effects, letting autocratization advance rather than contrasting it. This is consistent with the idea underlying H4 that a similar strategy may ease the work of autocratizing elites, which will confront with a weakened and possibly more submissive domestic resistance front.

Sensitivity analyses are reported in Table 3's models M6-M10. Models M6 and M7 check for endogeneity issues and selection effects through an entropy balancing re-weighted regression and an endogenous treatment effects model, respectively. They both confirm the robustness of our findings about the interaction effects, although with expectedly wider confidence intervals than M5, which set the statistical significance of democracy aid increments at higher values (in the Appendix, see Figure A1 for their graphs, and Table A2 and A3 for details on how we performed these checks).

Model M8 applies the same estimation technique of M5 but focusing on a larger sample, including also autocratization episodes that originated in already fully authoritarian countries, whereas Model M9 removes case fixed effects and incorporates additional case-invariant controls for pre-autocratization democratic aid levels, colonial rule, natural resource wealth, and ethnic fractionalization. As we can see, our findings hold even when working on a larger sample of cases and choosing different model specifications. Model M10, in turn, shows that our findings are confirmed also running bootstrap analysis to check for influential cases. Appendix's Table A4, finally, provide additional supporting evidence using EUSANCT as an alternative source for sanctions-related variables.

Concerning control variables, regional factors appear to have a constraining effect on autocratization, both through the AU membership suspension policy and through the presence of a democratic neighborhood, although these effects are either not or weakly statistically significant depending on the model specification. This underscores the critical role of extra-regional actors, whose engagement proves far more crucial given the inability of regional initiatives to counter autocratization effectively. Our findings also suggest that former British colonies are better equipped to counter autocratization than other countries.

Other factors, instead, do not by themselves seem to help constrain autocratization in a systematic way, but do play a role in increasing the chances of external pro-democracy intervention in the form of democracy sanction imposition. Indeed, in the selection equation of the endogeneity treatment effects model (see Table A3 in the Appendix), the pre-existence of domestic mobilization for democracy, regional suspensions, the clientelist-personalist nature of the target, as well as the deterioration of democracy levels, have a positive and statistically significant impact on the likelihood of democracy sanctions incidence by extra-regional actors.

Table 3. Regression table

DV: Autocratization	(M6)	(M7)	(M8)	(M9)	(M10)
Democracy aid$_{(t-1)}$	-0.016	0.000	0.001	0.000	-0.000
	(0.019)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.008)
Democracy sanctions$_{(t-1)}$	0.046	-0.032	0.014	0.006	0.013
	(0.054)	(0.045)	(0.025)	(0.020)	(0.036)
Dem. aid × dem. sanctions$_{(t-1)}$	-0.088***	-0.073**	-0.075**	-0.077**	-0.117***
	(0.031)	(0.034)	(0.028)	(0.031)	(0.034)
Regional suspensions$_{(t-1)}$	-0.14***	0.020	-0.040	0.009	-0.042
	(0.034)	(0.040)	(0.031)	(0.042)	(0.052)
Regional democracy diffusion$_{(t-1)}$	-1.46	-0.015	-0.474*	-0.036	-0.470
	(1.428)	(0.049)	(0.236)	(0.033)	(0.291)
Autocratic ties$_{(t-1)}$	0.009	-0.000	0.000	-0.000	0.001
	(0.006)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.003)
Clientelism$_{(t-1)}$	0.001	0.017	0.081	-0.010	0.021
	(0.271)	(0.038)	(0.116)	(0.024)	(0.124)
GDP growth$_{(t-1)}$	-0.001	0.000	0.001	0.001	0.002
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.002)
Pro-democracy mobilization$_{(t-1)}$	-0.021	0.005	0.017	0.006	0.018
	(0.029)	(0.005)	(0.011)	(0.004)	(0.014)
Pre-onset aid				-0.007	
				(0.004)	
British colony				-0.021**	
				(0.009)	
Natural resource wealth				0.008	
				(0.011)	
Ethnic fractionalization				0.002	
				(0.016)	
Constant	0.615	0.018	0.164	0.037*	0.195
	(0.676)	(0.029)	(0.103)	(0.019)	(0.127)
Observations	211	207	232	211	211
R-squared	0.872	0.419	0.311	0.215	0.352
Case-FEs	✓ (29)	×	✓ (35)	×	✓ (29)
Year-FEs	✓ (20)	×	✓ (20)	✓ (20)	✓ (20)

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10. Robust standard error estimates clustered by case in parentheses. M6-M7 check for endogeneity using entropy balancing and endogeneity treatment effect model; M8 includes autocratization episodes in 'not free' countries; M9 removes Case-FEs and adds four time-invariant controls; M10 uses bootstrap resampling with 5,000 iterations.

Case-study evidence: how external actors helped counter autocratization in Malawi and Madagascar

To corroborate the findings from the statistical analysis, we zoom in on two African countries, namely, Madagascar and Malawi, and illustrate how the combination of external coercive and non-coercive initiatives (democracy assistance, sanctions, but also other forms of pressure that can hardly be "measured" and considered in statistical analysis) helped counter autocratization in practice. Piecing together evidence drawn from official communications as well as academic secondary sources, these two cases are representative of two different but similarly frequent modalities of autocratization in Africa, namely, coups d'état and term limit violation attempts.

During the early 2000s, Malawi experienced autocratization as President Muluzi attempted to extend his rule beyond constitutional limits. In response to his attempt, major extra-regional donors decided to sanction the Malawian government by suspending direct budgetary support.[54] Concurrently, they redirected resources towards what Nowack and Leininger defined as the "anti-third-term camp", that is, those civil society actors that were campaigning in defence of the constitution, including non-governmental, human-rights, and faith-based organizations such as the Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation, the Public Affairs Committee, the Malawi Congress of Trade Unions, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian.[55]

Empowered by such strengthened external support, these groups were able to mobilize effectively against the government, by raising public awareness, organizing protests, and conducting independent investigations into human rights abuses and government overreach. Crucially, they built strong networks and large coalitions that enabled effective coordination and resistance against the government's autocratic ambitions and against attempts to portray them as selected foreign agents. Ultimately, the concerted efforts of civil society actors and opposition groups, bolstered by strengthened international support and the concurrent

application of restrictive measures on the government, helped thwart this attempt to circumvent executive term limits. Although democracy assistance showed many limits in deepening and consolidating democracy in Malawi over time, it did contribute to countering its regression during this episode.[56]

A similar pattern emerged in Madagascar between 2009 and 2013, when a military-backed coup following civil unrest ousted President Ravalomanana and installed a transitional authority under opposition leader Rajoelina. The international response, albeit poorly coordinated, was substantial.[57] Most bilateral partners sanctioned the unelected government by suspending their regular development cooperation programmes, and several international and regional organizations appointed special envoys for mediation and imposed targeted economic sanctions.

In parallel with pressure and coercion, international donors supported financially the civil society-led mediation efforts and election-related capacity building.[58] This support ensured the organization of the 2013 elections, won by Rajaonarimampianina, which were recognised by external observers as a "completion of the transition process" and a peaceful, if imperfect, step toward the restoration of constitutional order.[59] This minimal yet crucial result was eventually instrumental for the country to embark in the following years on a more solid democratic process that reestablished the pre-crisis level of democratic governance in the country.

Despite the several differences, Malawi and Madagascar both showcase the beneficial role of external actors' decisions to respond to autocratization through a combination of sanctions and democracy assistance. While external actors' intervention was eased by pre-existing domestic pro-democracy mobilization, both these cases highlight that such intervention supported the coordination and success of the domestic efforts.

Conclusion

This article investigated whether and how external actors – in particular extra-regional actors such as OECD countries, EU institutions and the UN – can effectively contribute to countering autocratization abroad through democracy sanctions and democracy assistance. We focused on Africa, a region severely affected by the contemporary global autocratization trend and a site of numerous and varied external interventions, which provides multiple instances where autocratization attempts have met resistance, with varying outcomes. However, the implications of our findings extend beyond Africa, especially to other regions where, similarly to Africa, domestic actors face significant limitations in resisting autocratization without external support.

Overall, our analysis offers three main takeaways for global democracy defenders. First, fighting autocratization from the outside can be a meaningful and potentially effective endeavour. Second, and relatedly, this is not easy. External actors, assuming they are genuinely committed to countering autocratization in another country, should carefully calibrate their strategy. Our analysis shows that coercive measures alone, such as sanctions against the autocratizing elite, would likely prove insufficient. And choosing a diametrically opposite approach, focusing all the effort in assisting local pro-democracy actors and institutions, can similarly fail to achieve the desired goal. The biggest mistake highlighted by our analysis, however, would be to impose sanctions and concurrently cut assistance to local pro-democracy actors. It risks spurring rather than contrasting autocratization, by undermining their resistance efforts and possibly fuelling resentment against foreign intervening countries and triggering "rally around the flag" effects ultimately easing the job of the autocratizing rulers.

Reassuringly, besides what *not to do*, this article also sheds some light on what external actors *could do*. The third and, in our view, most important message from the analysis is that a combination of coercive and non-coercive measures from the outside can effectively contribute

to countering autocratization. Specifically, external actors should make sure that sanctions against the autocratizing elite are accompanied by a sizeable increase in support for local pro-democracy actors and institutions. Put simply: hit the usurpers and empower those fighting them.

To be sure, the broader significance of these findings for current and future international efforts to defend democracy and countering autocratization remains to be fully assessed. Recent shifts in the balance of power between democratic and autocratic regimes, the former's declining appetite for democracy support and development cooperation (most notably the Trump administration's decision to cut USAID, but also similar initiatives in European governments to address increasing defence budget needs),[60] and a general trend toward replacing soft power with coercion, inevitably raise serious concerns about the viability of external democracy support in the years ahead. Furthermore, while our analysis has focused on the short-term effectiveness of external responses to autocratization, future research should examine whether and how such interventions can foster lasting democratic resilience, which depends not only on immediate support from external actors but also on the sustained consolidation of domestic democratic capacities over the long term.[61]

[1] Boese et al., "How democracies prevail"; Laebens and Luehrmann, "What halts democratic"; Nord et al., "Democracy Report 2025"; Tomini et al., "Standing up"

[2] Leininger, "International democracy"; Grimm et al. "Democracy promotion"

[3] Arriola et al., *Democratic backsliding*; Gyimah-Boadi, "Democratic backsliding in West Africa"; Rakner, "Don't touch my constitution!"

[4] Carothers, *Aiding democracy*; Del Biondo, "Donor interests"

[5] Pospieszna and Weber, "Amplifying and nullifying"; Early and Jadoon, "Using the Carrot"; Mertens, "Carrots as Sticks"

[6] Peez, "Re-examining the effects"

[7] Cheeseman, *Democracy in Africa*

[8] Luehrmann and Lindberg, "A third wave"

[9] Nord et al., "Democracy Report 2025", 21; Croissant, "Democracies with"

[10] Williams, *War and Conflict*; Sigman and Lindberg, "Neopatrimonialism and democracy"

[11] Arriola et al., *Democratic backsliding,* 261

[12] Cassani, "Autocratization by term"

[13] Akinola, *The resurgence*

[14] Boese et al., "How democracies prevail"; Laebens and Luehrmann, "What halts democratic"; Gamboa, *Opposition at the margins*; Tomini et al., "Standing up"

[15] But see Grimm et al. "Democracy promotion"

[16] Huntington, *The third wave*; Whitehead, *The international dimensions*

[17] Bader, "Propping up dictators"; Tolstrup, "Black knights"; Tansey et al., "Ties to the rest"; Leininger, "International democracy"; Leininger et al., "Strategic responses"; Hern, "Visibility

of autocratization"; Rakner, "Don't touch my constitution!"; Gyimah-Boadi, "Democratic backsliding in West Africa"

[18] Arriola et al., *Democratic backsliding*

[19] Attia and Grauvogel, "IST Dataset Codebook", 8

[20] Grauvogel et al., "Sanctions and Signals"

[21] Peez, "Re-examining the effects"

[22] Escribà-Folch, "Authoritarian responses"

[23] RezaeeDaryakenari, Ghafouri, Kasap, "Who rallies"

[24] Corda, "In-group we trust"; Schneider et al., "Discriminatory coercion"

[25] Bader and Faust, "Foreign aid"; Blanken et al., "From aid to empowerment"

[26] For exceptions see Tokdemir, "Winning hearts and minds"

[27] Dietrich and Wright, "Foreign aid"; Finkel et al., "The effects of"

[28] Peksen and Drury, "Coercive or corrosive"; Gafuri, "Can democracy"

[29] Dietrich and Wright, "Foreign aid"; Peez, "Re-examining the effects"

[30] Hufbauer et al., "Economic sanctions"

[31] See especially Pospieszna and Weber, "Amplifying and nullifying"; more broadly on the relation between sanctions and aid: Early and Jadoon, "Using the Carrot"; Mertens, "Carrots as Sticks"

[32] Complementing sanctions with assistance can also benefit external actors' policymakers in their own domestic political terms, and mitigate potential audience costs. Indeed, exclusive reliance on sanctions as a foreign policy tool often triggers criticism even within senders' home constituencies when it is perceived to escalate crises while offering no tangible support to civil society.

[33] For clarity, here we specifically focus on democracy aid cuts, and not on economic and financial aid flows, which are at times restricted as part of sanctions packages (so-called "aid sanctions"). Cheeseman et al., "Foreign aid withdrawals"; Gibson et al., "Sanctions and humanitarian outcomes"

[34] Pelke and Croissant, "Conceptualizing and measuring"

[35] Maerz et al., "Episodes of"

[36] We choose Freedom House's freedom status indicator instead of, for instance, V-Dem's Regimes of the World to avoid over-relying on the same data source.

[37] Cassani, "Autocratization by term"; Carbone and Pellegata, "Political leadership"; Baturo and Tolstrup, "Incumber takeovers"; Kailitz et al., "Varieties of"

[38] Gerschewski, "Erosion or decay"

[39] Coppedge et al., "V-dem dataset"

[40] Cassani and Tomini, "Reversing regimes and concepts"

[41] Attia and Grauvogel, "International sanctions"

[42] Gafuri, "Can democracy aid"

[43] Hellquist and Palestini, "Regional sanctions"

[44] Souaré, "The African Union"

[45] Abebe and Fombad, "The African Union"

[46] Debre, "The dark side"

[47] Kamp, "Authoritarian donor"

[48] Moyer et al., "Foreign bilateral"

[49] Hainmuller, "Entropy balancing"

[50] Alesina et al., "Fractionalization"

[51] Weber and Schneider, "Post-cold war sanctioning"

[52] Gafuri, "Can democracy"; Peez, "Re-examining the effects"

[53] As anticipated, the combination of democracy sanctions and democracy aid was applied in about 40% of the autocratization episodes occurred in Africa between 2000 and 2023 and included in our sample. In about 56% of the relevant observations, we recorded reversals in the autocratization process (i.e., negative changes in our *Autocratization* index).

[54] BBC, "Malawi denies"; Gloppen et al., "Malawi democratic"

[55] Nowack and Leininger, "Protecting democracy", 175-176; Dulani and van Donge, "A decade"; Nowack, "Process tracing". See the latter for a detailed timeline of events.

[56] Resnick, "Two steps forward"

[57] Nathan, "A clash of"; Witt, *Undoing coups*, 113

[58] Witt, *Undoing coups*, 155 and 173. See for a detailed timeline of events.

[59] African Union, *Communiqué*

[60] Hyde, "The forum"

[61] Bianchi et al., "The myth of"

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Declaration of interests: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Funding: We do not have any funding to acknowledge.

Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics

Sample of free and partially-free countries

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	Median
Dependent variable						
Autocratization (year-on-year)	239	.015	0.062	-.315	.33	.008
Main external strategies						
Democracy aid (log pc, year-on-year)	204	.026	0.760	-3.378	3.027	.029
Democracy sanctions*	239	.18	0.385	0	1	0
External control variables						
Regional suspensions	239	.092	0.290	0	1	0
Regional democracy diffusion	226	.434	0.103	.22	.591	.377
Autocratic ties	239	9.393	8.597	.37	51.215	6.842
Domestic-level control variables						
Clientelism	239	.582	0.172	.163	.912	.586
GDP growth	226	3.774	3.483	-14.597	12.27	4.02
Pro-democracy mobilization	239	.575	1.042	-1.914	3.388	.534
Case-invariant controls						
Pre-onset aid (log pc)	238	-.256	0.856	-4.173	.855	0
British colony	229	.368	0.483	0	1	0
Natural resource wealth	229	.172	0.378	0	1	0
Ethnic fractionalization	239	.598	0.247	0	.879	.691

***** *Democracy sanctions* (IST): sourced from the IST dataset (1990-2018) and integrated for 2018-2023 with the following procedure:

- Identification of candidate sanction episodes from international press agencies, including Africanews, AFP, BBC and Reuters, to detect public announcements suggesting democracy-related objectives
- Verification against primary official documents where available, including:
    - African Union's Peace and Security Council Documents Archives: https://www.peaceau.org/en/resource/90-organ-peace-security-council
    - European Council Decisions and press releases on sanctions: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/topics/sanctions/
    - United States Department of State and U.S. Treasury sanctions lists: https://www.state.gov/division-for-counter-threat-finance-and-sanctions/economic-sanctions-programs and https://ofac.treasury.gov/sanctions-programs-and-country-information
    - UN Sanctions app: https://unsanctionsapp.com/

Table A2 – Entropy balancing

Entropy balancing consists of reweighting observations across treatment (sanctioned) and control (unsanctioned) countries to achieve covariate balance between such groups. It has been growingly used in the literature on sanctions and, unlike other matching techniques (nearest neighbour matching or propensity score matching), entropy balancing does not discard unmatched units in the non-treatment group, rather assigns different weights to different units (Hainmueller 2012), and ensures a high covariate balance even in small samples (Gutman et al. 2021).

We implement entropy balancing in two steps. First, we compute weights to assign to units which are not subject to treatment. We consider the imposition of democracy sanctions our treatment. Consequently, following Gutmann et al. 2021 and Biglaiser et al 2024, we define the country-years in which democracy sanctions were in place as the treatment group, while observations without democracy sanctions constitute our control group. Our measure of interest is the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT), which is defined as follows:

$$\tau_{ATT} = E[\Delta le(1) |\ T = 1] - E[\Delta le(0) |\ T = 1]$$

where $\Delta le(\cdot)$ is the outcome variable, that is, the yearly change in autocracy level. T indicates whether a unit is exposed to treatment ($T = 1$), or not ($T = 0$). Consequently, $E[\Delta le(1) |\ T = 1]$ is the expected outcome after treatment and $E[\Delta le(0) |\ T = 1]$ is the counterfactual outcome, namely, the outcome a treated unit would have experienced if it had not received the treatment. As this counterfactual outcome is not observable, we need a suitable proxy to be able to identify the ATT. The average outcome of units not exposed to treatment would represent a proper counterfactual only if the treatment is randomly assigned. However, as discussed before, the imposition of sanctions and, thus, selection into treatment is likely endogenous. Employing a matching estimator addresses this problem.

Still following this literature, we impute the unobserved counterfactual outcome by matching the treated units with untreated units that are as similar as possible regarding all observable pre-treatment characteristics that are associated with selection into treatment (that is, the likelihood of being exposed to democracy sanctions) or influence the outcome of interest (autocratization). As such, we balanced our sample on the mean of all the covariates that are

already present in our main models: *Democracy aid*, *Regional suspensions*, *Regional democracy diffusion, Autocratic ties*, *Clientelism, GDP growth*, *Pro-democracy mobilization*.

In the second step of our entropy balancing implementation, the weights obtained in the first step are used in a weighted regression analysis (M6) which includes the treatment variable (*democracy sanctions*) as an explanatory variable together with, following Gutmann et al. 2021, the same set of pretreatment characteristics employed in the matching procedure as its inclusion there is "equivalent to including control variables in a randomised experiment and enhances estimation efficiency" (2021, 144). In this second step, we also control for both case- and time-fixed effects as in the main model (M5). This analysis yields an estimate for the average treatment effect on the treated.

The covariate adjustment results of the first step are shown in the table below. It first shows the mean values of our control variables in sanctioned (column 1) and non-sanctioned (column 2) countries, before weighting. We see that sanctioned countries are significantly different regarding many of our variables, thus suggesting a need to balance the sample between treatment and control groups. Columns 3 and 4 present the means on each of our control variables in our treatment (column 3, a repetition of column 1) and synthetic control group created with entropy balancing (column 4). Comparing the means on all variables in the treatment and synthetic control groups (3-4), we can see they are now identical.

	Before weighting		**After weighting**	
	Sanctions	**No sanctions**	**Sanctions**	**No sanctions**
Democracy aid (lagged)	0.18	0.02	0.18	0.18
Regional suspensions (lagged)	0.41	0.01	0.41	0.41
Regional democracy diffusion (lagged)	0.42	0.45	0.42	0.42
Autocratic ties (lagged)	7.29	10.76	7.30	7.30
Clientelism (lagged)	0.63	0.56	0.63	0.63
GDP growth (lagged)	2.31	4.41	2.31	2.31
Pro-democracy mobilization (lagged)	0.88	0.59	0.88	0.88
Observations	**34**	**177**	**34**	**177**

Note. Column 1 shows the country-year mean for observations with imposed democracy sanctions, while column 2 shows the mean for observations without such sanctions. Column 3 shows the same country-year mean for the treatment group (sanctions) presented in Column 1, while column 4 shows the country-year average in the synthetic weighted control group, created by entropy balancing.

Table A3 – Endogeneity treatment effect model

	coef	se
Outcome equation		
Democracy aid	0.0000	(0.0046)
Democracy sanctions	-0.0320	(0.0447)
Dem. aid *x* dem. sanctions	-0.0731**	(0.0335)
Regional suspensions	0.0202	(0.0397)
Regional democracy diffusion	-0.0152	(0.0493)
Autocratic ties	-0.0004	(0.0005)
Clientelism	0.0168	(0.0380)
GDP growth	0.0004	(0.0015)
Pro-democracy mobilization	0.0051	(0.0048)
Constant	0.0178	(0.0291)
Selection equation (treatment=democracy sanctions)		
Autocracy levels (yearly change)	11.6227**	(5.0436)
Democracy aid	0.0239	(0.1354)
Regional suspensions	9.9283***	(1.3041)
Regional democracy diffusion	-2.4556	(1.8960)
Autocratic ties	-0.0583*	(0.0321)
Clientelism	2.8616***	(1.1014)
GDP growth	0.0426	(0.0771)
Pro-democracy mobilization	0.3404**	(0.1337)
Total global democracy sanctions	0.1238*	(0.0650)
Constant	-2.8904	(1.8288)
Observations	207	
R-squared	0.4186	

Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. All covariates are one-year lagged with regard to the dependent variable.

Formally, this model consists of:

- an outcome equation:

  $y_i = x_i\beta + \gamma t_i + \epsilon_i$

- and a treatment/selection equation

  $t_i^* = z_i\pi + u_i$

where:

y_i is the outcome variable,

t_i is the treatment indicator (1 if treated, 0 otherwise),

x_i are covariates in the outcome equation,

z_i are covariates in the treatment equation (these include an instrument not present in x_i),

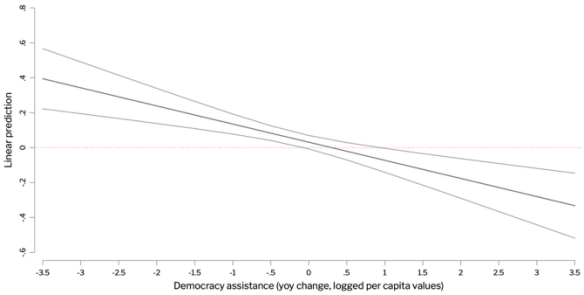
t_i^* is the latent treatment variable, such that $t_i^* = 1$ if $t_i^* > 0$, and $t_i^* = 0$ otherwise,

ϵ_i and u_i are the error terms, which are assumed to be jointly normally distributed with correlation ρ.

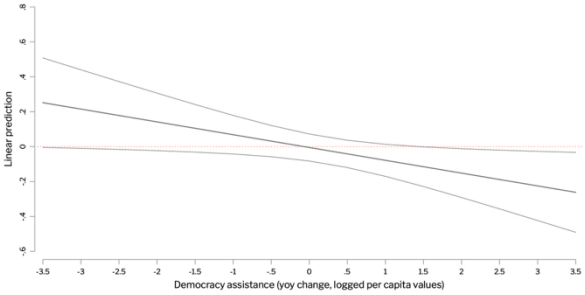
The outcome equation is made up of the same dependent (y) and independent (vector x) variables of our main model (M5). The selection equation has as a dependent variable our latent treatment variable – democracy sanctions – while the vector of covariates (vector z) includes factors that can affect the likelihood of being targeted by extra-regional powers' democracy sanctions. All such factors are lagged with regard to the selection equation's dependent variable. Among them, we include the one-year lagged values of our autocratization indicator, as we expect that such democracy sanctions are more likely to be imposed after declines in the democracy levels. We then add all the other covariates of the main model. In this regard, we expect autocracy ties and GDP growth to be negatively correlated with the likelihood of democracy sanctions imposition, given that a target's ties with authoritarian powers and a growing economy (limited economic vulnerability) correspond respectively to weaker linkages and leverage between democratic powers and the target. This can dissuade democratic powers from imposing sanctions outright. On the contrary, we expect the pre-existence of regional suspensions, domestic pro-democracy mobilization, and clientelism (clientelist-personalist regimes are known to be more likely to concede under pressure in the sanctions literature) to increase the likelihood of democracy sanctions imposition. Pre-existing increases in democracy aid and the presence of democratic neighbours can be expected to both deter and encourage sanctions imposition. Endogenous treatment models require an instrumental variable that affects the likelihood that a target African country will be sanctioned without affecting its democracy status, except through its effect on sanctions (Angrist and Pischke 2009). Following Lektzian and Mkrtchian 2021, as an instrument for sanctions against African countries, we use the global pervasiveness of democracy sanctions, measured as the sum of all countries in the world under democracy sanctions, net of African targets. When democratic powers are turning to democracy sanctions more frequently, an individual African country becomes more likely to be targeted by democracy sanctions for its democratic norms violations. However, an increase in the overall usage of democracy sanctions worldwide is unlikely to have a direct effect on an individual country's autocratization process. It can affect it only through the imposition of democracy sanctions against that individual country.

Figure A1 – Predictive margins for M6-M10

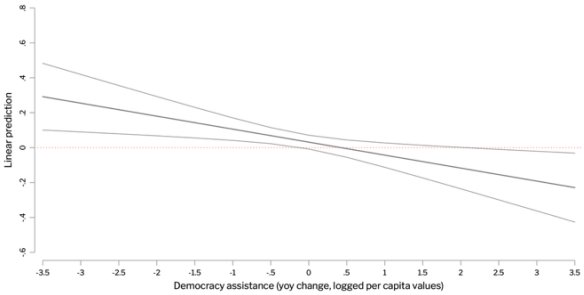
M6 – Entropy balancing



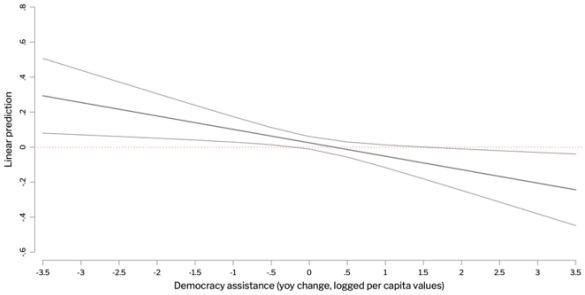
M7 – Endogeneity treatment model



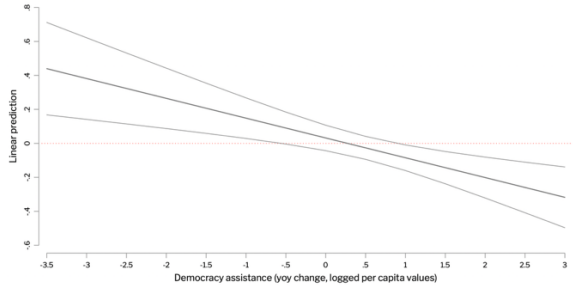
M8 – Non-free sample



M9 – Additional controls, without case FE



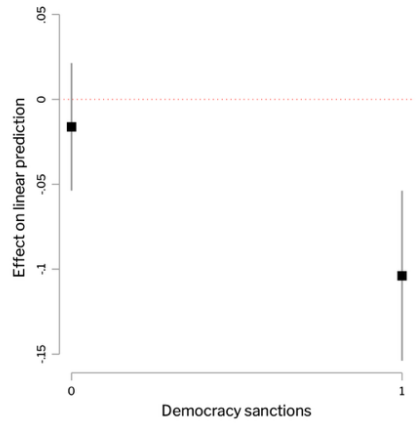
M10 – Bootstrapping



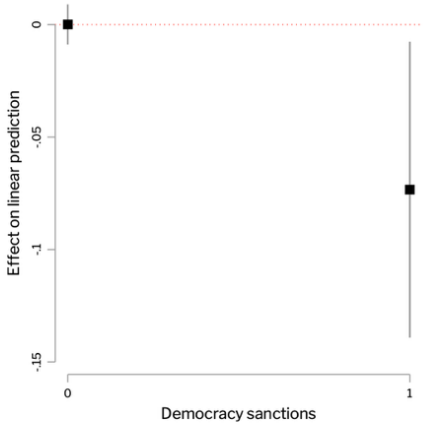
Note: 95% CIs displayed

Figure A2 – Average marginal effects of one-unit increase in democracy assistance, with and without democracy sanctions (M6-M10)

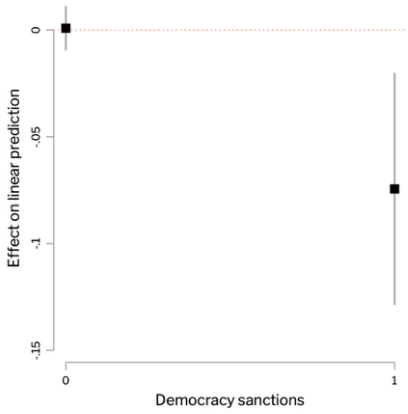
M6



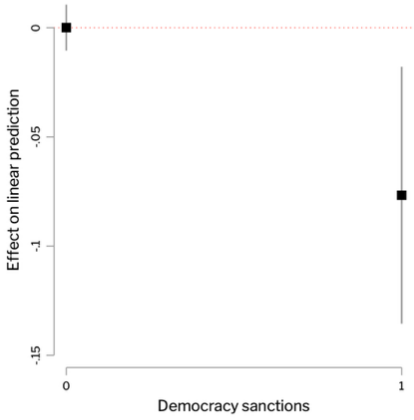
M7



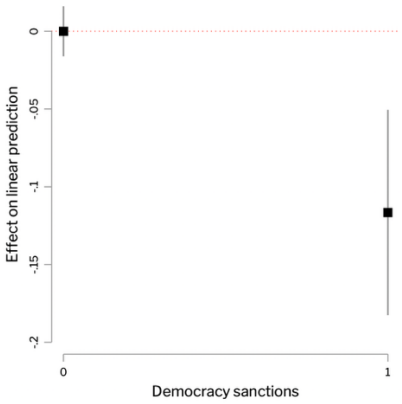
M8



M9



M10



Note: 95% CIs displayed

Table A4 – Replicating M5 with EUSANCT sanctions and EUSANCT sanction threats

To operationalise these EUSANCT-related sanctions variables, we select only sanctions and sanction threats with a democracy-related aim, namely EUSANCT issue codes 3, 8, 12, 13 (Weber and Schneider 2020).

DV: autocracy levels (yearly change)	(1) § imposed sanctions	(2) § imposed sanctions & threats
Democracy aid (log pc, yoy change)	-0.0077	-0.0072
	(0.0179)	(0.0172)
Democracy sanctions§	0.0410	0.0646**
	(0.0301)	(0.0277)
Dem. aid × dem. sanctions	-0.1663***	-0.1685***
	(0.0313)	(0.0280)
Regional suspensions	-0.0902***	-0.0998***
	(0.0265)	(0.0233)
Regional democracy diffusion	0.6045	0.3990
	(0.9282)	(0.9240)
Autocratic ties	0.0022	0.0019
	(0.0030)	(0.0029)
Clientelism	-0.1174	-0.0763
	(0.2160)	(0.2210)
GDP growth %	0.0040	0.0037
	(0.0039)	(0.0036)
Pro-democracy mobilization	0.0254*	0.0210
	(0.0138)	(0.0125)
Constant	-0.1976	-0.1319
	(0.4289)	(0.4047)
Observations	74	74
R-squared	0.6743	0.6884
Country FE	✓ (17)	✓ (17)
Year FE	✓ (12)	✓ (12)

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10. Robust standard error estimates clustered by case in parentheses. All explanatory variables are lagged by one year. EUSANCT data is from Weber and Schneider 2020.

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