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Research Report

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IDOS Policy Brief, No. 16/2025

Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

Suggested Citation: Sinanoglu, Semuhi (2025) : Communicating strategic interests in humanitarian aid may help counter authoritarian propaganda and build trust in Europe, IDOS Policy Brief, No. 16/2025, German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn, <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb16.2025>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/325846>

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Communicating Strategic Interests in Humanitarian Aid May Help Counter Authoritarian Propaganda and Build Trust in Europe

Semuhi Sinanoglu

Summary

- **Humanitarian aid is increasingly guided by strategic interests rather than humanitarian needs.** Europe's humanitarian commitments are under strain as geopolitics reshapes international solidarity. Rising nationalism, debt pressures and great-power rivalry have pushed European governments to prioritise strategic interests over humanitarian needs. European politicians are increasingly justifying aid disbursements to their public through the lens of national security and strategic influence.
- **Authoritarian regimes weaponise these geopolitical trends to stoke distrust in the international community.** They often label humanitarian actors as foreign agents, while state propaganda delegitimises international assistance as self-motivated and hypocritical, reframes aid as interference to justify crackdowns on the humanitarian space.
- **That is why the way European donors talk about humanitarian aid matters as much as how they provide it.** My experimental research in Turkey shows that transparent communication about the realpolitik behind humanitarian aid may help counter authoritarian propaganda in highly polarised middle-income countries with widespread anti-Western attitudes. My findings indicate that when donors openly acknowledge strategic motivations, propaganda messaging may lose its effectiveness among conservative, nationalist and Eurosceptic constituencies in recipient countries, whose attitudes are often hard to shift. Transparent communication may reduce conspiracism among this group, increase their trust in Europe and their support for international trade, while their support for the incumbent government may decline. Winning over these constituencies would be critical to democracy protection initiatives, as they often lend normative and systemic support to autocrats.
- **However, donors must strike a careful balance and adopt a dual approach.** While strategic messaging can persuade Eurosceptics, it may also alienate pro-EU, cosmopolitan citizens who value unconditional solidarity. They may grow disillusioned with European donors if humanitarian aid appears too self-interested or transactional. Donors should communicate strategic interests with transparency but still remain anchored in humanitarian values.
- **Further research is needed to fully explore the implications of geopolitical shifts in aid,** especially in middle-income autocracies with widespread anti-Western attitudes. In particular, more research is required to fully calibrate transparent messaging and mitigate negative unintended consequences.

Geopolitical shifts in international assistance

Humanitarian aid is increasingly shaped by geostrategic priorities. While donors are distributing humanitarian aid with its strategic value in mind, this shift from international solidarity to strategic instrumentality demonstrates broader ongoing trends in international assistance. In a recent speech, EU Commissioner Sikela underlined this shift: “We should not become the donor of last resort. We cannot afford it. [...] We need a focus on our real strategic interests.” For example, in 2022, a significant portion of bilateral aid – €3.4 billion or 11% – was channelled, mostly through tied or partly tied ODA, towards Europe’s strategic interests.

With debt levels at record highs, donor governments are under political pressure to cut back on international assistance. By 2025, the OECD ratio of public debt to GDP is set to hit 85% (\$59 trillion), nearly twice the level of 2007. Amid budgetary pressures, different European governments have already announced plans to reduce international assistance. This includes the UK, which plans to cut aid to 0.3% of GNI by 2027 – the lowest share since 1999 – to redirect funds toward increased defence spending.

The changing international security environment also shifts policy priorities for international assistance. The “return of geopolitics”, from the erosion of the liberal order to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, and increased rivalry with China, is reinforcing the trend toward justifying public spending through a strategic lens. Striking a balance between values-based and instrumental assistance is likely to become more difficult for European leaders, moving forward.

National security is becoming the dominant frame in public debates in OECD donor countries to justify international assistance. Rising nativist and anti-elitist sentiments are chipping away at support for international solidarity and cosmopolitan values. Even though it often constitutes a tiny fraction of donor countries’ government budget, international assistance is

under growing scrutiny as an unfair financial burden. That is why pundits and practitioners often cite geostrategic priorities when trying to gain public support for aid disbursements.

Autocrats exploit these geopolitical trends for propaganda

Autocrats exploit this return of geopolitics to stoke nationalist sentiments. They cite previous victimisation at the hands of foreign powers to drive public support and spur national pride. By highlighting the strategic motives behind humanitarian aid, they aim to discredit international assistance as sinister and duplicitous, rather than as a token of goodwill and international solidarity. The objective is to exacerbate scepticism of foreign countries and international organisations by presenting them as selfish, hypocritical and biased (see Box 1).

Box 1: The main propaganda messages conveyed in Turkey

Western countries use humanitarian aid to conceal their real intentions.

“Humanitarian aid” is a cover for intelligence gathering and diplomacy. Western countries give much less to the rest of the world than they take from it. The resources of poorer countries are exploited, and the support the West provides is used as a tool in their massive propaganda machine.

The West does not see support in times of crisis from a humanitarian perspective.

The West is concerned with how to stop refugees so they don’t end up on their doorstep. Didn’t we witness the same thing in Bosnia and Herzegovina? In Palestine, Kashmir, Crimea, and Myanmar?

The support we need is not provided.

When we say, “the projects are ready, let’s do this immediately”, the world’s giants, those with the most money, just smile at us. When it comes to actual support, unfortunately, there is none.

Autocrats politicise humanitarian assistance and use national security as an excuse to crack down on humanitarian agencies. They typically deploy propaganda to discredit international humanitarian assistance, claiming that the donors are motivated by strategic incentives. In 2008, Mugabe suspended humanitarian aid agencies' operations in Zimbabwe, accusing them of working for the opposition. In 2017, the Turkish government purged several humanitarian INGOs operating in southeastern Turkey to aid Syrian refugees, citing national security concerns. In 2019, Maduro blocked the entry of humanitarian aid to Venezuela. He justified this action by asserting that the aid was "a Trojan horse", used by Western infiltrators to undermine his government.

Autocrats aim to downplay international humanitarian aid even when they receive it. Their purpose is to prevent the receipt of international assistance from undermining their legitimacy. Donor organisations brand their aid to take credit for projects and relief aids, and deploy personnel on the ground for humanitarian assistance. Such clear branding and presence of personnel improve general perceptions of the donor country. In response, autocrats amplify their own relief efforts, accusing Western donors of underdelivering and presenting their aid as hollow PR. Budgetary downward pressures on humanitarian assistance do not also help against such authoritarian propaganda.

Authoritarian propaganda is quite effective among conservative and religious voters, especially in countries with prevalent anti-Western attitudes. For instance, in the Middle East and North Africa, Western aid is widely seen as self-interested, as a means by which the West exerts control. This fuels distrust and disapproval of foreign-funded programmes. In Georgia, ruling party officials promote a conspiracy that there is a shadow force secretly controlling Western governments to sabotage Georgia's interests. Exposed to such propaganda, pro-government voters are more likely to

adopt these conspiracy theories and, in turn, embrace anti-Western narratives. In Turkey, more Turks view the EU unfavourably than favourably. The government has exploited Europe's credibility gap by pointing to its selective enforcement of democratic standards and to how European governments act only when their core interests are threatened.

Europe's entanglements with authoritarian regimes may exacerbate these negative perceptions even among pro-EU constituents. European leaders strike deals with strongmen to serve their own short-term interests. But such deals come at a cost. They involve bankrolling autocrats and turning a blind eye to repression, which opens Western governments up to criticism, such as that levelled at the EU's recent migration and development deal with Tunisia. Such strategic engagements may tarnish Europe's reputation and cast doubt on its role in the liberal world order. The pro-democracy and pro-EU opposition in the autocratic countries may withdraw their support for engagement (such as international trade) with Europe, on the grounds that Europe is "taking sides" with the autocrat and ensuring the durability of the autocratic regime.

Findings from experimental research in Turkey

I conducted a survey experiment in Turkey to assess the effect of different types of humanitarian aid following the deadly earthquakes in 2023. I tested whether transparency about the realpolitik behind aid reduces the impact of state propaganda. Findings from the Turkish context are very relevant for overall German and European development cooperation. As an ODA-eligible country with one of the highest numbers of refugee population, Turkey, with its extensive government propaganda apparatus, its deeply entrenched identity cleavages and prevalent anti-Western public sentiments presents a good case study on which to test how effective international assistance is at shifting attitudes.

The results suggest that transparency in public communication about strategic intent behind humanitarian aid can help sway public attitudes among one of the hardest groups to reach: conservative, nationalist and Eurosceptic voters. When the strategic motives behind why humanitarian aid is given are transparently communicated to the recipient public (in this experimental setup: humanitarian assistance provided for Syrian refugees to prevent irregular migration to Europe), however transactional or self-interested the reason may be, it helps shift attitudes. When these audiences see the honesty in making *realpolitik* behind international assistance explicit, they become less suspicious of foreign donors and more sceptical of their own government's nationalist propaganda. In fact, their trust in the incumbent government as defender of national interests declines, while trust in European organisations and support for economic engagement with Europe increases.

Transparency about motives reduces conspiracism among authoritarian government supporters. The findings show that being honest and transparent about the self-interest and strategic motivations behind humanitarian aid mitigates conspiratorial thinking among pro-authoritarian voters in Turkey. By conspiracism, I mean considerations and perceptions that there are coordinated efforts among powerful countries to prevent Turkey from becoming a strong nation, and Turkey is alone in the world and cannot rely on another country for genuine support. The results indicate that strategic humanitarian aid, communicated as such, reduces cynicism about European assistance, as it creates the impression that it is not the Europeans but the government itself not being transparent in its dealings. It also evokes positive feelings among this particular group, whose attitudes tend to be entrenched and are hard to shift, and they feel touched by this international solidarity. In turn, they become more likely to embrace cooperation with European countries, including further international economic engagement.

Shifting attitudes among these conservative, nationalist and Eurosceptic voters could be a huge win. In the Turkish context, this voter group often expresses normative and consistent support for autocratic regimes, through thick and thin. They do not withdraw their support from strongmen, even during major economic and political crises, partly as a result of high levels of political polarisation that is used by autocrats as a political tactic to consolidate their support base. Changing their minds will go a long way toward protecting democracy. It is also helpful for improving public support for international trade amidst tariff wars and economic nationalism, as increased trust in Europe also translates into further willingness for economic engagement with donor countries.

For European leaders, it would be electorally less costly to make a case for strategic humanitarian aid. Around nine in ten Europeans already believe that it is important that the EU funds humanitarian aid activities. That is why, despite budgetary pressures, European leaders would find it easy to convince their voters that this is money well spent.

However, this transparency may come at a cost. The findings of my research also show that strategic aid communicated as such exacerbates trade scepticism among opposition voters and also reduces their willingness to engage with foreign media outlets. These voters often tend to be more supportive of international engagement and trusting of European organisations. Such a strategic approach may result in losing natural allies who may be more cosmopolitan and are more receptive to the international community.

What to do?

A dual strategy should be adopted. On the one hand, European donors could be open and transparent about the strategic motives behind humanitarian aid allocations in order to reduce conspiracism among conservative, nationalist Eurosceptics in contexts like that of Turkey: middle-income countries with extensive auto-

cratic counterpropaganda, high polarisation and widespread anti-Western attitudes. However, they should also pair this strategic transparency with strong signals of principled, unconditional humanitarian aid as an act of international solidarity and goodwill that ensures Europe's long-term legitimacy across different ideological groups.

Further research is required. To fully understand the ramifications of these geopolitical trends on public attitudes toward donors, further research is required, especially in middle-income ODA-eligible autocracies with prevalent anti-Western attitudes. In particular, further evidence is necessary for calibrating public communication around humanitarian aid in order to mitigate unintended negative consequences. Donor agencies should also allocate resources for impact assessments on their credibility and public perception in these recipient countries, especially following these geopolitical shifts in aid allocations.

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The German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) is institutionally financed by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), based on a resolution of the German Bundestag, and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) as a member of the Johannes-Rau-Forschungsgemeinschaft (JRF).

Suggested citation:

Sinanoglu, S. (2025). *Communicating strategic interests in humanitarian aid may help counter authoritarian propaganda and build trust in Europe* (IDOS Policy Brief 16/2025). Bonn: IDOS. <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb16.2025>

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IDOS Policy Brief / German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

ISSN (Print) 2751-4455

ISSN (Online) 2751-4463

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23661/ipb16.2025>

© German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) gGmbH

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Printed on eco-friendly, certified paper.

